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Targeting Emotion in Early Stoicism

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The Stoic sage is a cold, heartless being who would not grieve over the loss of a beloved companion or child. Unmoved, unemotional, uncaring, the sage is an ethical and emotional monstrosity hiding behind the pretension of the so-called virtues of detachment and austerity. That, at least, is how many who study Stoic ethics perceive the sage in regard to his/her emotional life.¹ In this paper I will argue that this conception of the Stoic theory of emotion and passion is misleading; emotions, in fact, are central to Stoic ethics and *apatheia* should not be confused with the contemporary idea of apathy or emotional flatness.

I must begin with a concession. It would be foolish to deny that Stoic ethics are unconventional and often disturbing to modern readers. Stoicism offers a radical ethic; the extreme nature of the ethical system is one of the main reasons for its appeal and its power in coping with extreme circumstances. Stoic life is not amenable to many of our contemporary values and ideals. Its solutions to life's woes are foreign to us and often shocking. All this I grant.

I emphasize this point because in this paper I will be arguing against a common conception of Stoicism, namely that being free of emotion is a Stoic ideal. My objective is not to attempt to make Stoicism more acceptable to contemporary society. I would be doing a disservice to this great philosophical system if I whitewashed or softened the key doctrines. Rather, I present this thesis because I believe that the idea of the heartless sage is the result of misreading key texts and misunderstanding several key terms and concepts. The Stoic term *apatheia* does not mean the same thing as its English cognate apathy. Emotional well-being is not emotional blankness for the Stoics; rather it is targeting the emotions properly. I will argue that without emotions Stoicism is inconsistent and internally untenable. In short, I will endeavor to show that emotions are central to Stoicism and should be celebrated as an indispensable element of the sage's life.

My strategy is as follows: First, I will examine the language of emotion in both ancient Stoicism and contemporary speech; I will argue that it is misleading to conflate the contemporary idea of emotion with any single term or concept used by the Stoics. Secondly I will attempt to identify how emotion relates to the Stoic concepts of impulse [*hormê*] and passion [*pathos*] in the context of Stoic psychology and action theory. Third, as the result of contrasting emotion with passion I will show that the Stoic rejection of the passions will not make sense if we also deny a significant role to legitimate emotions such as the *eupatheiai*. Indeed, we shall see that a significant motive for rejecting or extirpating the passions is the desire for emotional well-being.

¹ This is a common concern expressed by students after reading Epictetus. Also see Irwin 1998, Frede 1986, Nussbaum 1994. Irwin and Frede likewise identify this as a common misunderstanding of Stoic ethics but attempt to correct the misunderstanding in different ways than that undertaken in this paper. Irwin reconsiders the values of the "indifferents" in Stoic ethics and Frede emphasizes more the relationship between *pathos* and logical and propositional structure of the belief. Other have also acknowledged that certain emotions (the *eupatheiai*) have a role in Stoic ethics, but too often these are presented apologetically; e.g. Nussbaum speaks of the moral agent being "permitted to keep three so-called affective responses" (1994, 398-99). It is as if the *eupatheiai* are consolation prizes for having been deprived a genuine emotive life. This paper moves beyond these limited concessions by arguing the *centrality* of emotion in terms of the Stoic *telos* and by articulating the relationship between emotion, *pathê*, *eupatheia*, and *hormê*.

Understanding Passions and Impulses

One reason for the misconception that Stoicism denies any genuine role for emotion is that scholars and commentators frequently confuse passion [*pathos*] and emotion.² It is clear that the Stoics argued, forcefully, that passions [*pathê*] need to be extirpated from one's life; they literally need to be "ripped out by the roots."³ All *pathê* must go and the sage seeks a state of *apatheia*. Hence if indeed the Stoic idea of *pathos* is cognitively equivalent (intensionally and extensionally) to the contemporary concept of emotion, then those who portray Stoicism as emotionally cold and heartless are correct. The concepts (*pathos* and emotion) have some extensional overlap, but intensionally they are different. Consequently, the conflation of emotion and passion is disastrous to a correct understanding of Stoicism.

The difficulty arises chiefly because there exists no term in Greek philosophical thought that covers the same ground as the English word "emotion." The Greek term *pathos* comes close but it is not a direct hit and in studying ancient philosophy the near misses can be the most dangerous. Since the success or failure of my argument rests on my ability to disentangle and distinguish emotion from two closely related concepts, passion and impulse, it is important to evaluate how the latter terms are used generally in the Greek language and specifically in Stoic texts.

The term *pathos* comes from the verb *paskhein*, meaning to suffer or to undergo or experience something. Although in ordinary usage the term may refer to either good or bad events, those producing pain or sickness are more prevalent. In Stoic ethics, however, the term *pathos* was used almost exclusively in a technical and derogatory sense.⁴ Passions by definition are bad in Stoicism and closely linked to the idea of illness.⁵

The Stoics defined passion in several ways, each emphasizing a different facet of the term. The four most common accounts or definitions of passions to have come down to us are:

- (1) an excessive impulse;
- (2) an impulse disobedient to (the dictates of) reason;
- (3) a false judgment or opinion;
- (4) a fluttering [*ptoia*] of the soul.⁶

From the first two definitions (an excessive impulse and an impulse disobedient to reason) we learn that a passion is a species or kind of impulse. Two attributes seem to characterize impulses as passion: excess and disobedience. Some texts also emphasize that there is a temporal dimension to passion. The fresher the passion, the stronger the impulse; passions usually weaken over time.

An impulse [*hormê*] is one of the major corporeal powers of the commanding faculty [*hêgemonikon*] of the soul. The basic function of impulse is to initiate motion. The object of the motion is the content of what the Stoics call the *hormetic phantasia* or impulse-generating impression. When we perceive an object or event in the physical world, a *phantasia* or impression is produced in the commanding faculty

² Nussbaum and Annas for example use the terms passion and emotion interchangeably. Nussbaum (1987) states in a footnote that she intends to use the terms emotion and passion "more or less interchangeably... Making no salient distinction between them" (p. 130, note 2). Annas (1995) translates *pathos* as "emotion" in spite of her caveat in a footnote wherein she states "*Pathos* is not emotion." Her position seems to be that *pathos* is a broader term and since the basic *pathê* upon which the Stoics focus correspond to our emotions of fear, desire, pleasure, and pain there should not be a problem translating the term as emotion. I also acknowledge that *pathos* is a very general term but that the Stoics use it in a technical sense. Consequently translating the term as emotion begs the question from the outset. Translators find themselves in the difficult position of having to find an English term for the Greek term *pathos*. Hick's translation of Diogenes Laertius uses the English "emotion" for the Greek term *pathos* that most certainly contributes to confusion regarding the Stoic theory.

³ SVF III.443-444, 447. See Nussbaum 1987, 161-62; 1994, 389-90.

⁴ The following are classified under appetite: anger and its species . . . intense sexual desires, cravings and yearnings, love of pleasures and riches and honors, and the like. Under pleasure: rejoicing at another's misfortunes, self-gratification, trickery, and the like. Under fear: hesitancy, anguish, astonishment, shame, confusion, superstition, dread, and terror. Under distress: malice, envy, jealousy, pity, grief, worry, sorrow, annoyance, mental pain, vexation. Arius Didymus fragment in Stobaeus II.90, 19-91,9 [= SVF III.394].

⁵ Frede, 1986, 99.

⁶ SVF I.206. This description of passion did not seem to carry the same doctrinal weight as the other descriptions. Unfortunately, there is not enough commentary available in the Stoic corpus to say much beyond sheer speculation as to what Zeno was trying to convey by using this colorful term. A. A. Long commented that the fluttering may refer to a passion's "volatility" (Long & Sedley, 1987, 422.) though the term may also refer to its characteristic oscillation as described by Plutarch (*On moral virtue* 446F [SVF III.459]).

that is then evaluated by the faculty of reason (a subfaculty of the *hêgemonikon*). Depending on the content of the impression and the individual's conception of what is good, the object of perception may be classified as good, evil, or morally indifferent.⁷ The faculty of assent in conjunction with reason will accept, reject, or withhold judgment on the value of the object. If the object is deemed good, an impulse is initiated as a kind of motion in the soul substratum. If the object is bad, repulsion [*aphormê*] is produced, and the agent withdraws from the object under consideration.⁸

Since an impulse is a kind of motion in soul, we should expect for there to be potential problems in both (1) force or degree of motion and (2) vector or targeting of the motion. Like a good archer who must both aim correctly and send the arrow with the appropriate force so as not to overshoot the target, the moral agent likewise must produce an impulse toward the right object with the appropriate force. The most common error in the force of the impulse is that of being carried away by it. Such an excessive impulse is easily recognized as a passion. Plutarch described the excessive impulse in the following terms:

It [the soul] is called irrational whenever an excessive impulse that has become strong and dominant carries it off toward something wrong [*pros ti tôn atopôn*] and contrary to the dictates of reason. For passion is vicious and uncontrolled reason which acquires vehemence and strength from bad and erroneous judgment.⁹

The soul is carried away by the sheer force and strength of the impulse. Passions often develop an inertia that cannot easily be stopped.¹⁰ Chrysippus in the fragments of his work *The Cure of the Passions* compared passion to a runner who cannot easily stop:

Such states [*katastaseis*] as these are the sort that are out of control, as if the men had no power over themselves but were carried away [*ekpheromenôn*], just as those who run hard are carried along [*prosekpherontai*] and have no control over that sort of movement. But those who move with reason as their guide and steer their course by it, no matter what the nature of the reasoning, have control over, or are not subject to, that kind of movement and conations.¹¹

When someone is in an uncontrolled state, they are carried away, just as a runner is carried forward, by being in the state [*katastasis*] of running. In this state, moral agents no longer have immediate power over their own actions.

Both the Plutarch and Chrysippus (Galen) texts also associate excessive impulses with vectoring or targeting problems. Plutarch emphasized that passions aim at an object inappropriate [*pros ti tôn atopôn*] and against the dictates of reason. Chrysippus claimed that one could prevent impulses from running away by using reason as one's guide. Whereas impulses should be toward what is good, those of us who are not sages and who have not trained our perceptions (to use Epictetus' phrase) often mistake things that are not truly good as if they were good. Most things that people call good (such as health, wealth, life, pleasure) are not truly good, for the same things can cause harm as well. Good and evil, virtue and vice reside in our choice, our response to, and even our interpretation of external things. Hence the good is defined as what is "up to us" or "under our control" [*eph' hêmin*]. Things outside of moral choice are neither good nor evil; the Stoics call these the "morally indifferent" [*adiaphora*]. Our moral domain lies within, as does our power to find excellence and happiness. Since goods are within, always in our power, and rest in our internal response to any situation, the Stoic sage can therefore say that he is invincible.

When one misidentifies the good and believes that something bad or something indifferent is a good, we then have made a false judgment. Our targeting is off and the impulse is sent out to something that is not a good, as if it was a good. Passions are such mistaken judgments or false opinions. In fact the traditional Stoic passions can be broken down into four different kinds of errors in correctly targeting

⁷ Among indifferent objects, some are still considered choiceworthy, though not good.

⁸ For more on the physiological story of impulse and its relation to Aristotle's physiology see Sakezles 1998.

⁹ Plutarch, *On moral virtue* 441c [SVF I.202].

¹⁰ The inertia of the impulse is also used to distinguish passion from other false beliefs. According to Stobaeus the Stoics claimed that even when the false content of the belief responsible for the passion is corrected, the agent remains under the influence of the force of the passion and does not immediately remedy himself (Stobaeus II.90,6, SVF III.389).

¹¹ Galen, *On Hippocrates' and Plato's doctrines* 4.4.141 [SVF III.476]. p.256 De Lacy.

the good. These errors concern the normative character of the object (good or bad), and the temporal setting (present or future):

<i>Pathê</i>	Present	Future
Good	Pleasure	Appetite
Bad	Distress	Fear

When one identifies something as good in the present when, in fact it is not truly a good, we have the passion called pleasure and its subspecies. When we do the same in the future, we have appetite. Likewise when we misidentify something as bad in the present, we experience the passion called "distress;" regarding something future we call it "fear."

It should be noted that this second definition of passion as false judgment is perfectly consistent with the former definition as excessive impulse. For attributing any value to something that merits no value or merits withdrawal is both a false judgment and an excessive impulse. The appropriate impulse toward such objects should be zero and or negative.¹²

The third account of passion as a disobedient impulse is more complicated. It is difficult to correlate the idea of a disobedient impulse into the early Stoic model of the unified soul. How is an impulse disobedient? In the Platonic model, a disobedient impulse comes from the part of the soul that is naturally inclined toward what is base, namely, from the appetitive soul, that is, the wild steed of the Phaedrus.¹³ The early Stoics, however, rejected the idea that we have internal faculties that compete or fight against each other. There is no naturally flawed appetitive faculty in early Stoicism. The motivational force comes from the structure of the impression [*phantasia*], the conceptions of the nature of the good held by the agent, and the rational faculty. The later so-called Middle Stoics (Posidonius) reverted to the Platonic idea of an appetitive soul that is in conflict with the rational. This may be the source of the variation: passion as a disobedient impulse.

It is possible, however, to make the account agree with the orthodox, early Stoic position. Part of moral development in Stoicism is training our perceptions. The habituation of our epistemological faculties produces a higher mental tone and more consistent recognition of the true nature of the good. We can train our perceptions, says Epictetus, by constantly reminding ourselves of the true nature of things. For example, he suggests that we remind ourselves daily of the mortality of our loved ones. After a while, presumably, we will see our loved ones as transient beings who may be snatched away at any time – a fact of nature, however unpleasant to imagine. With such a realization we are less likely to be misled or deceived by our perceptions and make a false judgment that an evil has occurred when they are taken away, which is in fact a natural part of being human. Since the term translated as "disobedient" [*apeithê*] can also be translated as unpersuaded or not believing,¹⁴ the idea of passion as impulse unpersuaded by reason may be consistent with the early Stoic concept of targeting impulses suggested above.

What would cause an impulse to disregard, disobey, or not be persuaded by that which reason selects? We have already seen a possible answer above: when an impulse becomes excessive, a sort of inertia builds that results in a state in which the agent is out of control. Being out of control means that it no longer is able to follow the controlled dictates of reason.

We should not however limit the question of obedience to reason to correctly identifying the object of passion. For reason should also play a role in determining the force of the impulse. Hence, the difference between the definitions is that disobedience to reason is a broader description, encompassing the former. To obey reason we must consider the strength and target together. As we have seen, the nature of the target is a necessary consideration for making the determination that an impulse is excessive or deficient. As a matter of fact an impulse of any strength toward an improper goal is excessive. Thus the apparent inconsistency vanishes on closer introspection.

Our final definition of passion, a fluttering in the soul, will now easily fall into place. Since impulses are motions of the soul whose object and intensity are determined by reason, we should expect that failure in reason would present motions that are inconsistent and unpredictable in strength and direction. As a physical analogy fluttering would be in place. Phenomenologically this makes sense too.

¹² The Stoics did permit a qualified impulse toward so-called "preferred" indifferents; this is a topic outside the scope of the present discussion.

¹³ Stobaeus also uses the horse analogy in describing the Stoic theory of *pathê* without supposing a tripartite soul. Stobaeus' horse is simply disobedient in the sense of the second definition of *pathos*. See Stobaeus II.88 ff. [SVF III.378].

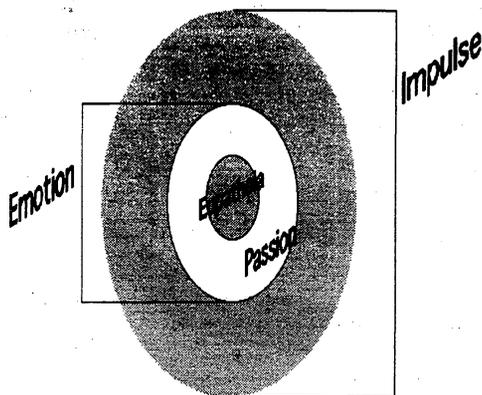
¹⁴ Nonnos, *Dionysiaca* VIII.306.

For passions cause a wide range of mood swings and internal dissention. Medea was the popular example utilized by the Stoics. In Euripides, Apollodorus, and especially Seneca we see her tormented and assaulted by competing opinions and ideas. Her mind is literally in a flutter.¹⁵ As a physical phenomenon, given the fact that the faculty of impulse is a corporeal substance localized in the heart region, we should not be surprised that when we are overwhelmed by a passion we often experience a rapid fluttering sensation in the chest. Thus even physiology is incorporated in the analysis.¹⁶

Distinguishing Passion and Emotion

Having reconciled the four basic definitions of passion we must now figure out where emotion fits in. From this analysis it should be clear that emotion cannot be the same thing as a passion. Whereas a passion is by definition an impulse excessive and disobedient to reason, as well as an incorrect judgment, emotions do not need to be such. If an impulse can be excessive, the implication is that it can also be appropriate or even deficient.¹⁷ If an impulse can be disobedient, then it can also be obedient. If a judgment can be incorrect, it can also be right.

If an emotion is not the same as a *pathos* or passion, then perhaps it corresponds to the broader conception of impulse [*hormê*]. For according to the Stoics a *pathos* is a kind of *hormê* or impulse, much as we consider a passionate feeling as a kind of emotion. Unfortunately this will not work either. Whereas *pathos* was too narrow, impulse is too broad. Impulse is a general feature of the Stoic philosophy of action and a necessary element of any physical response. Any sort of attraction or impetus toward something is an impulse. Impulse therefore must govern both conscious and unconscious activities.¹⁸ Our innate drive toward self-protection, hardly an emotion, is called our "first impulse." Animals likewise are attributed impulse but denied passions, presumably for the same reason that they are denied beliefs.¹⁹ Finally, impulse is sometimes equated solely with a physiological event, distinct from the accompanying belief. Involuntary bodily responses such as blushing or turning pale seem to be manifestations or effects of impulse. The sage reportedly can reject the belief but may nevertheless undergo the physiological response.²⁰ Consequently, impulse is the broadest category of intentional drives, which includes animal impulses, natural (unconscious/involuntary) responses, first impulses attributed to newborn infants, and finally conscious human impulses. The latter (impulses accompanying evaluative beliefs) include two categories of conscious impulses, namely, those that correctly identify what is truly good and bad and respond appropriately (*eupatheiai*) and those that misidentify what is good and bad and whose motions are inappropriate to the object (*pathê*).



It seems then we have a bull's-eye teleology upon which to evaluate the Stoic theory of impulses, one in which success or failure rests on a single faculty, the reason. The analogy of a target or bull's-

¹⁵ See Gill, 1983.

¹⁶ The Stoics developed a rich and interesting physiological account of the passions that, unfortunately, is outside the scope of this paper.

¹⁷ Arius seems to have applied Aristotle's doctrine of the mean to the Stoic theory passion with some interesting results (Stobaeus II.38-39). See Inwood 1985, 141-2.

¹⁸ My use of the term "unconscious" does not imply that the Stoics had a view of unconscious mind comparable to Freud's theory. It need only suggest that impulses are present from birth and do not necessarily require volitional or reflexive awareness.

¹⁹ Galen, PHP V.6,34-37; Clement, Strom. II. P.47 [SVF II.714].

²⁰ Aulus Gellius 19.1.17-18

eye helps explain why the early Stoics did not feel compelled to follow Plato in attributing an irrational faculty to the soul. Hitting the target is hard enough. We do not need a faculty of error to explain failure to reach a difficult target or govern the force of the impulse.

What then do we call the bull's-eye itself and where do we place emotions according to this analogy? The Stoics called these positive emotions: *eupatheia* or good passions.²¹ Since *pathos* as a technical term is by definition bad, the term *eupatheia* should be seen as a playful neologism. By calling positive emotions "good-passions" when passions have been defined as intrinsically bad is provocative. It seems to be an attempt to rectify the misrepresentation of their school as being void of emotion. Examples of the *eupatheia* are joy [*khara*], caution [*eulabeia*], and reasonable wishing [*boulêsis*]. Joy is said to be the opposite of pleasure, namely a rational swelling or elevation [*heparsis*]. Caution is contrasted to fear, and is defined as a rational disinclination [*ekklisis*]. Finally reasonable wishing is said to be a rational stretching forth [*orexis*], and is contrasted with appetite. These represent the basic kinds of positive emotions and the general characteristic of the sage's life. Other appropriate emotions are variations of these.

<i>Eupatheiai</i> ²²	Present	Future
Good	Joy	Wishing
Bad	Watchfulness	[None]

Notice that there are only three categories for the *eupatheia* in contrast to the four for *pathê*. This is due to the Stoic conception of moral invincibility. There is no true evil in the future, for the moral domain is always up to us; so the good is always possible!

If this model is correct, then we see that proper emotions are at the center of Stoic philosophy. While others commentators may acknowledge the *eupatheiai* in passing or as an interesting constraint on the central doctrine of the Stoic theory of passion, my thesis is that emotion is central to understanding successful ethics and healthy psychology. For proper emotions are inseparable from good action just as passion is inseparable from false judgment and moral failure. But there is more. Passion and emotion are not only associated with the intellectual activity, they also partially determine future moral action and are essential to one of the key *telos* formulae in Stoic ethics: the "smooth-flowing soul."

Just as a passionate soul is a fluttering, the well-disposed soul is smooth-flowing and is in a better condition to make correct judgments and hence avoid further passions than the fluttering soul. Likewise the passionate person will most likely make further errors in judgment due to the disruptive nature of his soul. It's hard to think correctly with all that fluttering going on! Fans of Plato's *Timaeus* may see a connection here.

Emotion is key both as an indicator of correct activity and a facilitator of future correct activity. Thus the Stoic does not seek an emotion-less life, rather a well-disposed emotional life; one that is active and has a healthy faculty of impulse, as well as one whose impulse is appropriate to and consistent with the nature of things, both regarding the truth of the judgment and the degree of the response.

It is not an accident that the smooth-flowing life is one of the formulations of the Stoic *telos* or end. Like Aristotle, the Stoics were eudaimonists. Happiness is the goal of human activity. Whereas Aristotle's idea of happiness was functional virtue culminating in a life of contemplation, the Stoic idea of happiness is identified variously as a life in agreement with nature, virtue, and the "smooth-flow of life [*euroia biou*]."²³ The metaphor of smooth-flowing contrasts sharply with the fluttering of passion. Seneca puts it this way, "What is a happy life? Peacefulness and constant tranquility. Loftiness of mind will bestow this, and consistency which holds fast to good judgment."²⁴

Given this reading of the Stoic theory of emotion, it is necessary to rethink the role of austerity and detachment. Austerity is not the psychological disposition entailing emotional flatness but a behavioral disposition based on the correct targeting of emotions toward the only genuine goods, the

²¹ DL VII.116.

²² Each of the *eupatheiai* also has subspecies: Joy [*khara*] includes delight [*terpsis*], sociability [*euphrosunê*], and cheerfulness [*euthumia*]; under wishing [*boulêsis*], we find kindness [*eunoia*], generosity [*eimeneia*], warmth [*aspasmon*], affection [*agapêsis*]; finally, under watchfulness [*eulabeia*], there is respect [*aidôs*] and cleanness [*agneia*].

²³ "They [the Stoics] say that being happy is the end, for the sake of which everything is done, but which is not itself done for the sake of anything. This consists in living in accordance with virtue, in living in agreement, or what is the same, in living in accordance with nature. Zeno defined happiness this way: 'Happiness is a good flow of life.'" (Stobaeus II.77; Long and Sedley Translation).

²⁴ *Ep.* 92.3; Long and Sedley trans.

virtues. The rigor entailed in an austere life requires an appropriate emotional foundation based upon a rational relation to true goods. The same goes for detachment. Stoics detach themselves from things morally indifferent, but not from virtues. For a moral agent to live in accordance with the radical and extreme demands of Stoic ethics, that agent will need to have a deep and rationally based emotional commitment to the goodness of virtue; otherwise there would be insufficient impetus for the tasks at hand. Whereas in our archery analogy passion was overshooting the target as the result of too much force, emotional flatness or apathy when dealing with virtue would be undershooting it.

Conclusion

In this paper we have seen that emotions and passions are not to be conflated. I have presented a model that accounts for the connection between *hormê*, *pathos*, *eupatheia*, and finally emotion in general -- despite the fact that the Stoics did not have a single term that covered the same conceptual ground as the contemporary idea of emotion. We can conclude then that those impulses that disrupt our emotional and moral well-being, namely the passions, must be extirpated; proper emotions, on the other hand, must be celebrated and emphasized in Stoic thought. Once having removed those impulses destructive to emotional balance and harmony, we are not left with apathy or heartlessness, but a rich and emotionally satisfying way of life, a way of life though still radical in many ways, certainly not void of emotion.

It is clear then that representations of the Stoic sage as being emotionless are misleading and pernicious. A state of deficient or deadened impulse is apathy and inactivity. Apathy in its modern and non-literal sense is not a Stoic virtue and is inconsistent with the life of activity and duty that characterizes a Stoic. Not all impulses are emotionally satisfying or conducive toward emotion stability. But impulses of appropriate strength and those directed toward the appropriate objects are essential for a healthy Stoic life; not having a strong emotive reaction toward virtue would be paralyzing for the Stoic. Virtue, being a true good of immense value, merits a commensurate emotive response. The Stoic must be excited and enthusiastic about virtue and austerity!

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