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Claremont McKenna College

**Implications of the Stoic Theory of Emotions**

submitted to  
Professor Suzanne Obdrzalek

by  
Mustafa Hourani

for  
Senior Thesis  
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## **Abstract**

After exploring Stoicism through the works of Epictetus, I was particularly intrigued by its implications on the role of emotions in human life. Although I saw benefits to living a Stoic life, I was concerned about how the Stoic theory of emotions could potentially cause negative effects on the wellness of humans. The purpose of my thesis was to conduct a study of this theory and explore the objections against it, evaluating if they are able to successfully demonstrate the contradictions in Stoicism. I do this by arguing and paraphrasing various credible primary and secondary sources which I cite in my bibliography.

I begin my thesis by contextualizing Stoicism, describing the Hellenistic age, and introducing renowned philosophers such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Then, I introduce the core doctrines that govern Stoicism such as the notion of separating objects into externals vs. internals, and establishing reason as the governing faculty of the soul. This allows me to introduce impulses and why the Stoics believe that they necessarily invoke truth values. In my section on passions, I introduce false impulses and their properties. Afterwards, in my section on good feelings, I present true impulses and their properties. The first objection I raise about Stoicism is its potential for ostracizing followers by restricting good feelings only to sages. The Stoics respond that a consistent set of beliefs is necessary in order to experience good feelings. The second objection raised is the claim that certain good feelings contradict core Stoic doctrine by inciting passion. The Stoics handle this claim by introducing selections which are reserved impulses guiding action. The final objection against Stoicism is that it fails to account for irrational behavior in the soul. However, the Stoics respond to this claim by suggesting that such behavior occurs only in the body and not the soul. I conclude by determining that these objections ultimately fail to present unaddressable contradictions against Stoicism.

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# **1 Introduction**

In this section of the paper, I will provide a brief overview on the emergence of Stoicism during the Hellenistic period, and provide short biographies on Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, two of the most instrumental Stoic philosophers. Furthermore, I will showcase Stoicism's influence on modern day society through the story of James Stockdale. This section will provide the necessary context to properly understand the arguments I will be making in my thesis.

## **1.1 Background on Stoicism**

Stoicism first emerged in 300 B.C.E during the Hellenistic Age in Athens, Greece. This was the period of time between the death of Alexander the Great and the conquest of Greece by the Romans. A time rich in scientific and philosophic advancement, the Hellenistic Age witnessed the birth of multiple new schools of philosophy such as Stoicism, Skepticism, and Epicureanism<sup>1</sup>. The founder of the Stoic school of thought was the renowned philosopher Zeno of Citium. A large inspiration for his Stoic beliefs was actually a tragedy that saw his ship get wrecked and lose all its cargo along with it. As part of overcoming this awful event, Zeno leaned towards many ideologies for managing loss, most of which became core Stoic principles. Unfortunately, none of Zeno's original writings have survived to the modern day. Instead, most of the information that we have about him comes from later philosophers such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius who both incorporated his core ideologies and beliefs into their work<sup>2</sup>.

## **1.2 Epictetus**

Epictetus was a Greek philosopher who lived around the time of 100 AD in the region that is now modern day Greece. Epictetus was born into slavery under a cruel master who

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<sup>1</sup>"Hellenistic Age." Britannica, [www.britannica.com/event/Hellenistic-Age/The-coming-of-Rome-225-133](http://www.britannica.com/event/Hellenistic-Age/The-coming-of-Rome-225-133). Accessed 31 Mar. 2023.

<sup>2</sup>"Zeno of Citium." World History, 15 Feb. 2011, [www.worldhistory.org/Zeno\\_of\\_Citium/](http://www.worldhistory.org/Zeno_of_Citium/). Accessed 31 Mar. 2023.

consistently abused him, eventually breaking his legs and crippling him for life<sup>3</sup>. Eventually, Epictetus gained his freedom and finally established his own school of Stoic philosophy in Greece. Among Epictetus' greatest influences were Zeno, Seneca, and Socrates. Throughout his lifetime, Epictetus' work and teachings were compiled into several influential books including *Discourses* and *Enchiridion*. Unfortunately, Epictetus did not actually write these books himself. Rather, *Discourses* was compiled and recorded by one of his students named Arrian<sup>4</sup>, while *Enchiridion* was compiled by an unknown editor. This means that there might be some discrepancies and minor inconsistencies between what Epictetus himself actually lectured about and what his students were able to capture. Nevertheless, these two books are considered the most reliable accounts of Epictetus' teachings and have been studied by many for centuries.

### **1.3 Marcus Aurelius**

Marcus Aurelius was a Roman emperor who lived around the time of 100-200 AD, close to the time of Epictetus' death. He came into power during a time of relative peace and prosperity for the empire<sup>5</sup>. Aurelius was not a power-hungry ruler, and instead preferred spending his time reading books and studying philosophy<sup>6</sup>—he was particularly interested in Stoicism and teachings of Epictetus. Although he preferred to maintain peace for his people, his enemies forced him into war in the later years of his reign<sup>7</sup>. During this time, he was famous for leaning towards his Stoic beliefs in order to power through a turbulent time for the Roman empire. It is fascinating to witness how two of the most influential Stoic figures come from such

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<sup>3</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Introduction." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. viii–ix.

<sup>4</sup> Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Introduction." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. vii-vii.

<sup>5</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Introduction". *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. vii-vii.

<sup>6</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Introduction". *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. xx-xx.

<sup>7</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Introduction". *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. xiv-xiv.

different backgrounds, one being a slave at the lowest rank in society, while the other being an emperor at the highest rank of society. It is a tribute to the universal appeal of Stoicism.

Philosophically, Aurelius is most famous for his book titled *Meditations*. It is a collection of his Stoic thoughts, beliefs, and feelings which provides scholars with a great window into his mindset during the difficult times he faced as an emperor. In many ways, *Meditations* is more like a personal diary than a literary work<sup>8</sup>, and it is likely that Aurelius never intended for it to be read by anyone other than himself.

#### **1.4 Modern Day Influence of Stoicism**

Thousands of years after the emergence of Stoicism, it remains an influential philosophy for many people in today's world. A modern day example of the influence of Stoicism can be seen in the story of James Stockdale, a US Navy pilot who was shot down and captured during the Vietnam war in 1965. Stockdale spent more than seven years as a prisoner of war in a Vietnamese prison. During this time, he was brutally tortured by his captors, yet he was able to remain strong, composed, and committed to his country and to other prisoners in the camp. He emerged as a leader in prison and created a method of communication using tapping. A core reason why Stockdale was able to remain resilient during his captivity was due to his commitment to Stoicism and its teachings. It taught him self-control and enabled him to maintain his sanity and strength during a very difficult period of his life. When Stockdale was finally released from imprisonment, he returned to the US as a hero who was (and still is) an inspiration to many in the country<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Introduction". *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. xxiii-xxiii.

<sup>9</sup>Hill, Brian. "Stockdale Stoicism Event Provides Lessons for Fort Leonard Wood Senior Leaders." *Www.army.mil*, 4 Nov. 2020, [https://www.army.mil/article/240570/stockdale\\_stoicism\\_event\\_provides\\_lessons\\_for\\_fort\\_leonard\\_wood\\_senior\\_leaders](https://www.army.mil/article/240570/stockdale_stoicism_event_provides_lessons_for_fort_leonard_wood_senior_leaders).



## 2 Core Stoic Principles

Before diving deeper and understanding the role of emotions in Stoicism, I will spend some time examining Stoicism, at its core, in terms of its guiding principles. Doing this will enable a more accurate evaluation of emotions from the perspective of what Stoics believe the fundamentals of life are.

### 2.2 Externals vs. Internals

The first guiding principle for the Stoics is to divide objects and experiences in life into two categories: those that are inside of our control which are referred to as internals, and those that are outside of our control which are referred to as externals. Examples of externals include death, our reputation, wealth, poverty<sup>10</sup>, and our bodies<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, examples of internals include our perception, thoughts, and evaluation of things like death, our reputation, wealth, poverty, and our bodies. What the Stoics mean when they say that something is within our control, is that we have within us the total power to decide how to think about it or respond to it. For example, humans do not have the power to control death because we all eventually die, whether by facing an incurable disease, being attacked, or by old age. However, what is in our control is our ability to not let the thought of death consume the way we live life or act. A particularly odd external according to the Stoics is the notion that our body is not in our control—this is especially controversial given that people typically grow up believing that they are entitled to do what they please with their bodies. However, the Stoics object and say that this is not the case. If someone stronger than us kidnaps and tortures us, then our body appears to no longer be in our control. Additionally, we do not have the power to control what diseases affect or plague

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<sup>10</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Book 2." *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 14–14.

<sup>11</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 6–6.

our body. Some might object to this and argue that we do have some degree of control over our body by doing things like taking supplements and eating healthy. However, this is not total control, for there are many cases where even those who try their best to live a healthy life get affected by disease, and there are also many diseases that are incurable. The primary reason that the Stoics encourage people to renounce placing value in externals and only derive it from internals is because they believe that humans are bound to become slaves to a master who gains possession over the objects that we either desire or despise<sup>12</sup>. For example, if you place value in money, then you are bound to become enslaved to those who help you earn money such as your boss, customers, investors, etc. It is only when a person solely places value in internals that they are able to find freedom because their happiness is solely dependent on themselves and their own thoughts.

It is important to note that Stoicism is frequently misunderstood for promoting a complete detachment from external objects in life. When the Stoics urge us to focus on deriving value solely from internals, they are not telling us to ignore externals entirely. Although the essence of good and evil is found in our internal condition and externals are indeed indifferent, Stoics can still use externals in the right way in order to obtain objects that are good or avoid objects that are evil<sup>13</sup>. For example, if a Stoic is faced with a challenging situation in life such as a divorce, they might lean towards an external person such as a therapist or friend to navigate this challenge and overcome it. Such a person might remind the Stoic that loved ones are not in our control, and we should not be sad about losing them. Furthermore, our judgments about externals also have an impact on our character and determines if we are behaving in a good or

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<sup>12</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 2." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 83–83.

<sup>13</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 69–69.

bad way<sup>14</sup>. If we are correctly treating and assigning external objects/experiences as indifferent, then the Stoics would say that we are behaving in a virtuous manner. It makes sense that Stoics treat externals in this nuanced way because different people are gifted with access to different externals in life (wealth, loved ones, health), and it takes skill to be able to use them in a virtuous manner while not growing overly attached to them. That is why the Stoics urge humans to work with the external materials they are given and to use them with skill<sup>15</sup>.

## **2.2 Reason**

A second guiding Stoic principle is the importance of a role reason plays in the lives of human beings. The Stoics believe that reason serves a crucial function in our understanding of the world. This is because it enables us to ascertain truth, eliminate falsehood, and withhold judgment regarding matters that are uncertain<sup>16</sup>. This is not necessarily a breakthrough or revolutionary idea, and the Stoics acknowledge this. Although they admit that everyone shares the notion that pursuing what is good and true is desirable, conflict and disagreement appears when this idea is then applied to specific situations<sup>17</sup>. This is because people have different beliefs for what particular things are good and true. The Stoics did not attribute truth and goodness merely to that which is factually true, rather, they believed that truth was what nature decided. The decisions of nature are any event that unfolds in life ranging from winning a sports match to losing a family member—if it happens, it is true. By assigning truth in this manner, reason functions as a means of aligning our conceptions of what is good or bad with the

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<sup>14</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 69–69.

<sup>15</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 2." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 87–87.

<sup>16</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 20–20.

<sup>17</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 53–53.

workings of nature<sup>18</sup>. As a result, reason is not capable of doing any harm or being harmed, since it is in line with the inherent goodness of nature<sup>19</sup>. It is important to note that the Stoics do not believe that possessing good reason is an innate power that we are born with. Rather, they emphasize that it is a skill that we must put in effort to learn and develop in order to become knowers of the truth and lead a life free from falsehood<sup>20</sup>.

The Stoics believe that a human's soul is solely guided by reason. Unlike Plato's tripartite division of the soul, the Stoics believed that the soul was singularly divided. They argued that if the soul was instead divided into multiple parts, then it would become much harder to say that a human being is responsible for all of their actions. It opens up too much room for criticism, allowing people to say that a person who committed something wrong was potentially overcome by a non-rational part of their soul which is not entirely in their control. This allows wrongdoers to defend themselves and suggest that they are not responsible for certain bad actions that they take. However, if reason governs the entire soul, then a human being is always responsible for all their actions, and they can therefore always act in a way that is reasonable and maximizes their happiness by adjusting their thoughts to what nature wills. It is common for many people to mix Stoicism with the tripartite theory of the soul, however people who do this are conflating two different schools of philosophy<sup>21</sup>.

### **2.3 Fate**

When the Stoics report that truth is the will of nature, a common response by critics is to ask what determines the will of nature. Epictetus believed that nature is theological and is a

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<sup>18</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 8–8.

<sup>19</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Book 6." *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 49–49.

<sup>20</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 31–31.

<sup>21</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 141–141.

reflection of the decisions of God<sup>22</sup>. This view was central to his teachings as it emphasized the importance of aligning oneself with God. However, it is common for many scholars to interpret Stoicism through the lens of fate instead. Under this view, the natural world is that which is governed by a divine force (not necessarily a God) that determines the course of events. This force is often referred to as fate or providence and is an expression of the underlying order of the universe. Through this interpretation, humans are not necessarily subjects to the decisions of a god, but are instead subjects to the workings of a cosmic force outside of our control. In this paper, I will focus on the interpretation of Stoicism through the cosmic force of fate rather than god in order to expand the applications of my arguments to a wider audience.

#### **2.4 Present**

A fourth guiding principle for Stoicism is to focus on living life in the present moment and avoid being preoccupied with stress about the future or hung up about the past<sup>23</sup>. The Stoics believed that it is only possible to control the present moment—control our outlook towards the present—and that dwelling over regrets of the past or worries about the future will lead to suffering. Therefore, this then a lack of freedom because he who is truly free does not suffer. It is essential to accept the present moment for what it is and to live in accordance with nature.

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<sup>22</sup>Epicetetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 6–6.

<sup>23</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Book 3." *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 22–22.

### **3 Impulses**

In this section of the paper, I will dive into the Stoic theory of emotions by defining impulses and highlighting the necessary and sufficient components of the definition. Then, I will explain why Stoics believe it is possible for impulses to be false, while also discussing potential biases that cloud our impulses. Finally, I will mention how imagination plays a role in the generation of impulses.

#### **3.1 What are Impulses?**

In order to understand what impulses are, we must first understand what impressions are, since they are closely related to the generation of impulses. The Stoics believed that impressions are formed through sensory experiences and are the initial perceptions that humans form about objects in the world that surrounds them<sup>24</sup>. The use of impressions does not depend on reason as it is possible for both animals and humans to use an impression. For example, hearing a loud bang is an impression that is perceivable by both humans and animals alike. Since there is no component of reason associated with the use of an impression, and reason is the faculty that determines virtue, impressions are not inherently good or bad.

Although impressions are value-neutral, our responses to impressions are not. Epictetus frequently mentions this in his teachings when he discusses how interactions with impressions is not a special power, as animals are also capable of doing it. Instead, it is our power to reflect on impressions and distinguish between them which determines our moral virtue as humans<sup>25</sup>. When a human is presented with an impression, they can choose to either assent to evaluate the impression or reject to evaluate the impression. When an agent assents to an impression, a mental event takes place in the mind of the agent which is referred to as an impulse. Therefore,

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<sup>24</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 87-88.

<sup>25</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 2." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 92–92.

there is a strong relationship between impressions and impulses. Since impulses contain a component of evaluation, impulses can say a lot about a person's beliefs and their value system based on how they respond to the impression. Although an impulse is similar to an emotion by containing a person's reaction to impressions in its definition, it also contains additional features which make it different from an emotion in our everyday use of the word. For example, an impulse is considered to be action-guiding in the sense that the Stoics believe it is the driving force behind human action, based on a person's system of beliefs<sup>26</sup>. Most people would not normally define emotions based on them being action-guided.

Although impulses are heavily concerned with assigning a judgment of value onto things, that is not their sole component. When an agent generates an impulse, in addition to evaluating whether an impression is desirable or undesirable, they also internalize that it is appropriate to feel the way that they are feeling. In other words, the agent must feel that their response to the impression is suitable and fitting based on their evaluation of it. Individually, it is necessary for each of an evaluation and a belief of appropriateness to occur when experiencing an impulse, but it is the combination of both that is the sufficient condition for an impulse to occur<sup>27</sup>.

### **3.2 False Impulses**

Given the guiding principles of Stoicism discussed earlier in the paper—specifically the divisions of externals and internals—it now becomes possible for people to have false or incorrect impulses. This is another way in which impulses are different from emotions because we do not normally attribute a truth value to emotions (i.e we do not call sadness or happiness false or true). Impulses are not false in the sense that an agent has a mistaken belief of how certain events unfolded, rather they are false when the agent mistakes their value judgment about an

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<sup>26</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 86-86.

<sup>27</sup>Graver, Margaret. *Stoicism & Emotion*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 43-43.

impression<sup>28</sup>. For example, if an agent has a mistaken belief that her friend died, but it turns out they were alive all along, that is considered a mistaken belief of how events unfolded. An example of a mistaken impulse would be that an agent finds out that her friend died and then proceeds to feel grief which is not an appropriate impulse response according to the Stoics (I will talk more about this in the section on Passions). Therefore, the truthhood of impulses, refers to the evaluative aspect of the impulse rather than the factual accuracy of our beliefs about events. The reason that the impulse is incorrect or false is because an agent is placing value in an object/experience that is indifferent (an external) rather than placing value in an internal good. Given the rules for reason and the divisions of externals and internals, if an individual gives their assent to a mistaken notion, it means they have confused something false for being true<sup>29</sup>.

When interacting with impressions, it is crucial for people to evaluate these impressions objectively without allowing pre-existing biases to cloud their judgment about the individual impressions. Failing to do this would produce a false impulse. In order to do so, humans must focus purely on the content they are perceiving without clouding it with any external influence. Specifically, Marcus Auerlius tells us to become better observes and to listen every word being said, and pay attention to every action being taken in order to know what impulses are being directed at<sup>30</sup>. An example of a biased evaluation of an impression is when someone hears that another has spoken negatively about them, and from this concludes that they have been harmed or treated unjustly<sup>31</sup>. Others' opinions and beliefs about us play no role in achieving our own

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<sup>28</sup>Nussbaum, M. (2004). Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance. In R. C. Solomon (Ed.), *Thinking about feeling: Contemporary philosophers on emotions* (pp. 183–199). Oxford University Press, pp. 46–47.

<sup>29</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 66–66.

<sup>30</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Book 7." *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 61–62.

<sup>31</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Book 8." *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 83–83.



personal happiness according to the Stoics because we cannot control other peoples' opinions about us. By behaving in a strict objective manner, humans can ground their impulses in true reason based on rational assessment of the situation rather than being swayed by personal biases.

### **3.3 Imagination**

Having seen how pre-existing biases can play an influential role in impacting our impulses about impressions, it is also worth noting that imagination can also play a big role in impacting our impulses. It is often the case that our impulses are generated by stimuli that exceed the impressions presented to us, as humans frequently use their imagination to augment content and add additional elements to an experience. In doing this, humans can intensify an impulse response by using mental images that can enhance the impact of stimuli<sup>32</sup>. For example, a person in Europe might initially have a minor impulse of grief when hearing about a deadly earthquake in China. However, when that person uses their imagination to create vivid mental images of the destruction, damage, and death caused by the earthquake, they might then experience an intensified reaction of grief in response to the event. Therefore, it is possible for imagination to enhance an impulse, but the Stoics would still urge us to limit this effect because impressions must be evaluated as they appear to us and not have external content added to them.

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<sup>32</sup>Nussbaum, M. (2004). Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance. In R. C. Solomon (Ed.), *Thinking about feeling: Contemporary philosophers on emotions* (pp. 183–199). Oxford University Press, pp. 65-65.

## 4 Passions

Having defined impulses in the last section, I will now spend some time covering negative impulses in more depth. I will start by providing the Stoic definition on what a passion is, and then proceed to outline the four different types of passions. Afterwards, I will dig deeper into the attribute of freshness and show how it relates to the Stoic theory of passions.

### 4.1 What are Passions?

A passion is a type of mental impulse in which an agent either reacts positively to an external object that they mistakenly evaluate as good, or reacts negatively to an external object that they mistakenly evaluate as bad<sup>33</sup>. For example, an agent exhibits passion when they mistakenly attribute goodness to fame, or when they mistakenly attribute badness to poverty. The Stoics disapprove of this and believe that impulses should not be determined by external factors, but by our own internal conditioning instead. That is why the Stoics categorize passions as mistaken impulses. According to Epictetus, passions are caused by errors in judgment, particularly in a person's internal value system<sup>34</sup>. This occurs when they treat factors that are outside their control as absolutely good or absolutely bad, thereby becoming overly attached (or opposed) to them. By treating these indifferent objects/experiences as essential to their wellbeing, humans use them as justification to react excessively in various situations. For example, by treating reputation as essential to one's well being, a person might mistakenly believe that it is justified to react angrily, and therefore physically attack an enemy who insults them.

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<sup>33</sup>Long, A. A., 'Epictetus on Understanding and Managing Emotions ', From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy (Oxford, 2006; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Jan. 2007), pp. 379-380.

<sup>34</sup>Long, A. A., 'Epictetus on Understanding and Managing Emotions ', From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy (Oxford, 2006; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Jan. 2007), pp. 380-380.

The Stoics believe that only people who live life without fear or anxiety are truly living life freely<sup>35</sup>. The reason for this is that every passion will, to some degree, enslave us to something or someone because a passion necessarily arises from attributing value to an external beyond our control. Therefore, true freedom can only be achieved by eliminating any and all passions. With this mindset, our thoughts are the only things that can genuinely oppress or intimidate us<sup>36</sup>. However, we must remember that we have control over our thoughts. That is why Epictetus believed that it not death and pain that makes humans scared, but rather, it is our opinions about death and pain that scares us<sup>37</sup>. This makes sense because death and pain are natural bodily processes that affect every living creature on the planet. There is nothing inherently scary about death and pain. However, when people begin attributing value to externals such as health, only then do death and pain become scary because it is our flawed reasoning that mistakenly attributed value to them and generated the fear and anxiety. In order to become totally free, humans must learn to control their thoughts and eliminate passions.

In our discussion of the elimination of passions, it is important to note that a common misconception for Stoicism is that it encourages emotionlessness, but this is not what Stoicism is actually promoting. On the contrary, Stoicism recognizes the importance of certain emotions, but advocates for managing emotions in a state known as *apatheia*. *Apatheia* is not a state that is devoid of emotions, but it is a state that is only devoid of negative impulses or passions. The Stoics call *apatheia* a rational state of mind that is unperturbed by passions, where an individual

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<sup>35</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 2." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 79–79.

<sup>36</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 2." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 114–114.

<sup>37</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 33–33.

can remain calm even in the face of very difficult situations in life such as exile or death<sup>38</sup>. In this sense, supporters of Stoicism believe that Stoicism is actually promoting the management of emotions in a healthy and productive manner.

## 4.2 Types of Passions

There are many different kinds of negative impulses that can plague a person's reasoning, but the Stoics group them into four different categories of passions. These four categories are the following: desire, fear, pleasure, and pain.

The first passion, desire, is the opinion that an object/experience that we currently do not possess is good and worth pursuing. It is an irrational reaching out for objects/experiences that we mistakenly perceive as good<sup>39</sup>. Since it is oriented to future affairs, desire is less of a feeling (in our modern day use of what feeling means) per se and more of a longing to obtain something<sup>40</sup>. Inherent in this definition, desire makes the implicit promise that the person desiring an object will succeed in getting what they desire. However, since desire seeks external objects, this promise turns out to be false because such objects are outside of our control. Therefore, the Stoics believe that it is important for humans to counter this false promise and remind themselves that the future is uncertain, and there is no guarantee that our desires will be fulfilled. This is one of the reasons that Stoicism urges us to focus solely on the present. According to Stobaeus, a hellenistic writer, some examples of impulses that are desires include sexual desire, craving, love of money, and love of honorable positions<sup>41</sup>. These impulses all fit the description for a desire because they are all irrational reaching outs for things that are

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<sup>38</sup>Long, A. A., 'Epictetus on Understanding and Managing Emotions ', From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy (Oxford, 2006; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Jan. 2007), pp. 380-381.

<sup>39</sup>Brennan, Tad. The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 93-94.

<sup>40</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 143-143.

<sup>41</sup>Long, A. A., and D. N. Sedley. The Hellenistic Philosophers. Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp.412-412.

mistakenly perceived as good, but are actually indifferent because they are outside of our control. Sex, money, and honorable positions are all objects/experiences that humans must rely on the help of others (at least to some degree) in order to achieve.

The second passion, fear, is the opinion that an object/experience that we currently do not possess is bad and should be avoided. It is an irrational avoidance of objects/experiences that we mistakenly perceive as bad<sup>42</sup>. Similar to desire, since it is oriented to future affairs, fear is less of a feeling and more of a wanting to avoid something<sup>43</sup>. Additionally, inherent in this definition, fear makes the implicit promise that the person fearing an object will succeed in avoiding what they fear. However, since fear seeks to avoid external objects, this promise turns out to be false because such objects are outside of our control to avoid. The Stoics urge us to counter this false promise and remember that the future is uncertain, and there is no guarantee that our fears will be avoided. According to Stobaeus, some examples of impulses that are fears include hesitancy, superstition, and terror<sup>44</sup>. These are all impulses that fit the description for a fear because they are all irrational avoidances of things that we mistakenly perceive as bad, but are actually indifferent because they invoke fear about things outside of our control.

The third passion, pleasure, is the opinion that a present experience or object we possess is good. It is an irrational elation for objects/experiences that we mistakenly perceive as good<sup>45</sup>. Unlike desire and fear, pleasure is present-oriented and is therefore more akin to a feeling we have when we get what we desire or avoid what we fear<sup>46</sup>. In addition to a feeling of elation, pleasure also has the feature of appropriateness attached to the feeling of elation. This means that when an agent feels pleasure and is elated, they also feel that elation is the appropriate response

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<sup>42</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 93-94.

<sup>43</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 143-143.

<sup>44</sup>Long, A. A., and D. N. Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp.412-412.

<sup>45</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 93-94.

<sup>46</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 143-144.

to be feeling. Some examples of impulses that are pleasures are happiness for another person's misfortune and self-gratification<sup>47</sup>. Self-gratification is when a person feels elation through selfish actions they take that bring no benefit to others around them, or even actions that are at the expense of the well-being of others. Additionally, being happy for another person's misfortune is a mistaken elation because it makes a person's happiness conditional on an external object (someone else failing in their endeavors) .

The fourth and final passion, pain, is the opinion that a present experience or object we possess is bad. It is an irrational depression for objects/experiences that we mistakenly perceive as bad<sup>48</sup>. Also unlike desire and fear, pain is present-oriented and is therefore more akin to a feeling we have when we do not get what we desire or do not avoid what we fear<sup>49</sup>. In addition to a feeling of depression, pain also has the feature of appropriateness attached to the feeling of depression. This means that when an agent feels pain and is depressed, they also feel that the depression is the appropriate response to be feeling. Stobaeus gives us some examples of impulses that are pain including jealousy, grief, and annoyance<sup>50</sup>. The reason these impulses are classified under pain is because they invoke irrational feelings of depression for objects/experiences that are mistakenly perceived as bad because they are outside of our control. Another person's success, the death of a loved one, and an agitating event are all things that are not in our total control to prevent.

Having covered all four categories of passions, one can start to notice patterns and similarities between these different passions. The first two passions, desire and fear, are categorized as primary passions as they are oriented towards the pursuit of perceived goods or

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<sup>47</sup>Long, A. A., and D. N. Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp.412-412.

<sup>48</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 93-94.

<sup>49</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 143-144.

<sup>50</sup>Long, A. A., and D. N. Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp.412-412.

the avoidance of perceived bad objects<sup>51</sup>. They are considered primary because they are the initial motivators for our actions. On the other hand, the last two passions, pleasure and pain are classified as secondary passions since they represent the inner responses we experience in reaction to the outcomes of our efforts, such as obtaining desired objects or evading feared objects<sup>52</sup>. The reason they are subordinate is because they are consequences of our initial motivations to act.

### **4.3 Freshness**

Fresh opinion refers to a judgment that only applies to the subordinate passions pleasure and pain. It does not necessarily refer to the temporal recentness of an object causing pain/pleasure being present, rather, a fresh opinion is one that still has a force and is affecting an agent. Freshness specifically refers to the feeling of appropriateness that an agent has about the passions of pain and pleasure<sup>53</sup>. Since Stoic philosophers believe that the root cause of all passions is an agent possessing a mistaken set of beliefs about goodness and badness, curing freshness is not sufficient to eliminate pain or pleasure from reemerging because the mistaken set of beliefs has not changed, only the freshness has been eliminated<sup>54</sup>. The reason this is the case is because it is possible for passions to fade away with the passage of time, even if the original belief that caused this passion to emerge did not change. In other words, it is possible for an agent to feel elation/depression, but not necessarily also feel the appropriateness of those feelings at a given moment in time. For example, an agent could undergo pain due to the grief of losing a close friend. The reason this passion emerges is because the agent has a mistaken belief that death is bad. However, as years pass by, that same agent might eventually overcome their feeling

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<sup>51</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 145–145.

<sup>52</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 145–145.

<sup>53</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 146–147.

<sup>54</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 153–153.

of grief about their lost friend, even though the mistaken belief that death is bad is still present. The freshness has disappeared, but the error in belief persists. If this agent loses another close friend or family member, then the freshness of grief will likely reappear and make the agent feel that it is appropriate to be in pain once again.

Although the passage of time appears to be the obvious answer for why freshness fades, a deeper analysis of what occurs with the passage of time gives us a more specific and clearer understanding. In her research paper titled *Emotions as Judgments of Value*, Martha Nussbaum believes there are four main reasons why freshness fades with time.

Nussbaum argues that the first reason why freshness fades with the passage of time is the feeling of grief becomes more of a background judgment than a situational judgment<sup>55</sup>. A background judgment is an evaluative assessment that endures across various types of situations<sup>56</sup>. It represents a person's core beliefs regardless of the setting or situation they find themselves in. Since it is a consistent judgment that a person feels most of the time, it is not as intense or fiery of a judgment. For example, a mother's love for her child might be considered a background judgment because it is a belief she holds in various settings or situations. She loves the child at work, at home, when the child listens to her, and even when the child fails to listen. In this case, her love would be deemed a background judgment that persists through numerous situations. On the other hand, a situational judgment is an evaluative assessment that emerges solely within the framework of a specific situation<sup>57</sup>. It represents a person's immediate reaction

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<sup>55</sup> Nussbaum, M. (2004). *Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance*. In R. C. Solomon (Ed.), *Thinking about feeling: Contemporary philosophers on emotions* (pp. 183–199). Oxford University Press, pp. 80–80.

<sup>56</sup> Nussbaum, M. (2004). *Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance*. In R. C. Solomon (Ed.), *Thinking about feeling: Contemporary philosophers on emotions* (pp. 183–199). Oxford University Press, pp. 69–69.

<sup>57</sup> Nussbaum, M. (2004). *Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance*. In R. C. Solomon (Ed.), *Thinking about feeling: Contemporary philosophers on emotions* (pp. 183–199). Oxford University Press, pp. 69–69.



to a particular setting or situation. Since it only emerges in certain settings for a short period of time, it is usually intense and consuming. For example, a respectful and friendly soccer player might react in an angry way when an opponent slide tackles them and hurts them. However, they will likely soon come to their senses and realize that the opponent did not intend to hurt them, and the anger might soon fade away. In this case, the anger would be deemed a situational judgment that only arose in a particular situation. The reason why a passion like grief becomes a background judgment with time (and becomes less fresh) is because fewer situations will remind a person of their lost loved one. Although people might still feel grief, the intensity and freshness eventually fades as people start putting away reminders of their lost one like the body, old clothes, etc.

A second reason why freshness fades with the passage of time is because the way in which grief first enters into our lives is usually very disruptive. Finding out about the death of a loved one is usually a jarring experience that disrupts one's expectations for the future which might have been formulated with the loved one in mind<sup>58</sup>. For example, a person who loses a partner might have had plans to travel with their partner and get married. However, after learning about death, these plans and expectations get torn apart and a person needs time to adjust and modify their expectations for the future. With the passage of time, people eventually reorganize their beliefs and expectations for the future in light of death. This reorganization process is a way of adapting to a new reality and new future without the loved one. Although painful, it is a process that takes away from the freshness of the grief.

A third potential reason for why freshness might fade with the passage of time is that people's identities are often largely intertwined with and influenced by the loved ones in their

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<sup>58</sup>Nussbaum, M. (2004). Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance. In R. C. Solomon (Ed.), *Thinking about feeling: Contemporary philosophers on emotions* (pp. 183–199). Oxford University Press, pp. 80-81.

lives. Therefore, death and grief are likely to impact and change a person's identity<sup>59</sup>. By losing an inspirational figure in one's life, a person is also losing the presence of that figure pushing them to be or act in a certain way. Although there are some people who are able to persist and remain steadfast in wake of death, there are many others who are shaken to their foundations and core by this, that they begin to change based on their newly evaluated beliefs and values. Once a person has gone through enough change and readjusted their identity to loss, the freshness of the grief is likely to have also faded.

A fourth reason why freshness might fade with time is due to the role imagination plays on influencing impulses and inciting passion. As we have already discussed, imagination can play a big role in strengthening the effect of a passion by introducing new stimuli into the evaluation of an impression. When a loved one dies, one of the strongest bonds upholding the grief is often a person's imagination of their loved ones face and their behavior. However, with the passage of time these mental images might start to fade and become more difficult to summon<sup>60</sup>. With diminishing imagination about lost loved ones, the intensity of the grief is likely to also subside and thereby reduce the freshness of the impulses.

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<sup>59</sup>Nussbaum, M. (2004). Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance. In R. C. Solomon (Ed.), *Thinking about feeling: Contemporary philosophers on emotions* (pp. 183–199). Oxford University Press, pp. 83-83.

<sup>60</sup> Nussbaum, M. (2004). Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance. In R. C. Solomon (Ed.), *Thinking about feeling: Contemporary philosophers on emotions* (pp. 183–199). Oxford University Press, pp. 84-84.

## **5 Eupatheiai (Good Feelings)**

In this section of the paper, I will introduce the Stoic concept of eupatheiai (which are known as good feelings) by explaining what they are and mention their different types. Then, I will proceed to explore the role that pity plays in Stoicism, and how it can be used to escape passions and maintain good feelings.

### **5.1 What are Good Feelings?**

Whereas passions are bad impulses, good feelings are their counterpart and are known to be virtuous and good impulses. Even more than that, good feelings are also defined as the knowledge of what is good or bad<sup>61</sup>. Since impulses represent a person's evaluations, good feelings are accurate attributions of what is truly good or truly bad, and they are not mistaken evaluations. By placing such a high bar for good feelings (labeling them as total knowledge), they are only accessible by a very small portion of people. Specifically, only sages who are individuals that have achieved a state of Stoic wisdom and understanding of the universe can feel good feelings since only they have the knowledge to distinguish between the good, bad, and indifferent without mistake<sup>62</sup>. The same way a regular human being can possess knowledge of objective things like math to make claims such as  $2+2=4$ , Stoic sages possess knowledge of differentiating between objects in the world in terms of their moral value. That is to say that Stoic sages will always uphold this knowledge of good/bad/indifferent regardless of the situation or setting you place them in, including torture. To think about it in terms of an example, if a person tried torturing you into believing that  $2+2=5$ , it would never change your knowledge of the answer to that equation. They might get you to verbally admit that the answer is 5, but they can never truly alter your belief because you know that the answer is 4. Similarly, if a person

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<sup>61</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 97-97.

<sup>62</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 98-98.

tried torturing a Stoic sage into altering their belief of goodness to act in a bad way, they will never succeed in doing this because the sage is willing to sacrifice his body (an external) before foregoing his Stoic principles to act badly.

Stoicism does not encourage emotionlessness and recognizes that emotions are an important part of the human experience. The goal of Stoicism is not to eliminate emotions and live a detached life. As Epictetus notes in his teachings, we must find the right balance between giving up and living an apathetic life, and becoming overly superficial by developing passions chasing indifferent objects<sup>63</sup>. Part of finding this balance is cultivating the right kind of impulses (good feelings) and eliminating the wrong kind of impulses (passions). By striking this balance between apathy and passion, humans will be on the right path towards finding inner peace and living a happy life.

## **5.2 Types of Good Feelings**

There are several different good impulses that a sage can experience, but the Stoics group them into three distinct categories of good feelings. These three categories are the following: volition, caution, and joy.

The first good feeling, volition, is the knowledge that an object/experience that is not currently in possession is good and should be pursued<sup>64</sup>. It is oriented towards future affairs. Additionally, it is an understanding for the sage that they should wish for and actively look to seek out things that are truly beneficial and good. In that sense, it is a rational and deliberate reaching out for good objects and experiences. Some impulses that are volitions include good intent, wish for good things for others, and a welcoming disposition<sup>65</sup>. For example, when a Stoic

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<sup>63</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 2." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 89–89.

<sup>64</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 98-98.

<sup>65</sup>Graver, Margaret. *Stoicism & Emotion*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 58-58.

sage wishes good things for their friend, rather than wish that they stay healthy, a Stoic sage would wish for them the ability to not be overcome by passion and be troubled if they are ill. Additionally, a Stoic sage is always friendly and warm to other people because Stoicism encourages us to live a social life where we are not detached from others. Therefore, a sage is always interacting with others in a positive and friendly manner.

The second good feeling, caution, is the knowledge that an object/experience that is not currently in possession is bad and should be avoided<sup>66</sup>. It is oriented towards future affairs. Additionally, it is an understanding for the sage that they should actively avoid things that are truly harmful and bad. In that sense, it is a rational and deliberate avoidance of bad objects and experiences. Some impulses that are under the category of caution include moral shame and caution against correct censure<sup>67</sup>. An example of moral shame would be a Stoic sage feeling ashamed for behaving in a manner that goes against the principles of Stoicism. If they tell a lie to a friend in order to avoid hurting their feelings, the sage might upon reflection realize that it was not the correct way to act. The reason it was not correct is because they should instead tell their friend the truth, but teach them to approach it from a Stoic perspective and not be bogged down by externals. Moral shame is a good feeling because it demonstrates that a person is willing to recognize a mistake and correct it.

The third and final good feeling, joy, is the knowledge that an object/experience currently in possession is good and that a person should be elated about it<sup>68</sup>. It is oriented towards present affairs. Additionally, it is an understanding for the sage that they should actively be elated about present things that are truly beneficial and good. In that sense, it is a rational and deliberate elation for good objects and experiences. Some impulses that are considered joys by the Stoics

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<sup>66</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 98-98.

<sup>67</sup>Graver, Margaret. *Stoicism & Emotion*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 58-58.

<sup>68</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 98-98.

include cheerfulness, good spirits, and enjoyment<sup>69</sup>. An example of cheerfulness would be a sage who is able to maintain a positive attitude even in the face of adversity. If a Stoic sage loses their job unexpectedly and experiences financial hardship, they are still able to maintain a positive attitude and not take out their frustration on others. The reason they are able to do this is because they understand that this adversity is not really a true adversity because their job was never an internal that was in their control. Their happiness is not dependent on their job. Furthermore, an example of enjoyment would be a sage who enjoys spending time building fond memories and experiences with their loved ones. It is always good for them to act in a social manner and be loving towards others, but if they were to lose a friend to death at any point, it would not bring them to a state of continuous grief and they would maintain their composure and attitude of goodness, for death is a natural process that is in nobody's control.

Having examined the good feelings closely, one might notice that they are all analogous to their passion counterparts. Volition is analogous to desire, caution to fear, and joy to pleasure. According to the Stoics, there is no good feeling equivalent to pain, as a wise person would never perceive any unfavorable situation as a harmful occurrence<sup>70</sup>. If something typically perceived as bad would present itself to the sage, he would lean towards his reason and adjust his internal attitude to not let that object (which is external) determine his happiness. For example, if a sage was starving or being tortured, he would not experience these conditions as harmful in themselves, but as neutral and indifferent. Furthermore, since a Stoic sage possesses the true knowledge of goodness/badness, he could never have a badness negatively affect his attitude unknowingly as well.

### **5.3 Pity**

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<sup>69</sup>Graver, Margaret. *Stoicism & Emotion*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 58-58.

<sup>70</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 98-98.

Stoicism highlights that the gift of reason is the greatest gift humans possess because it is what allows us to form moral judgments and distinguish between objects that are good, bad, and indifferent. With this in mind, if someone threatens to injure or harm us in any way, then we can deduce that such a person is deprived of their correct moral bearings and has not cultivated their reason to correctly distinguish between vice, virtue, and indifferents. If they had cultivated their reason, they would never have tried to injure us in the first place because correct reason guides us to achieve good feelings and eliminate passions. Based on all these facts, we should choose to show such a person pity rather than contempt, because they are deprived of the greatest and most important moral strength, while we are still in possession of it and can respond accordingly<sup>71</sup>. This is not to say that we should allow them to continue to harm us unchecked, but rather, that we should try and educate them regarding the correct way to act, which is in a social manner rather than in a destructive manner.

It is also important to consider the fact that humans will naturally seek what they perceive as good, and avoid what they perceive as bad. The issue lies not in our ability to react to positive or negative situations, but rather in our ability to use this capacity correctly, which can sometimes be problematic<sup>72</sup>. Therefore, when a person chooses to injure us, they are not inherently evil. Instead, they are using their normal capacity for seeking goodness, but they are mistaken in their ability to do it correctly. They have evaluated the wrong action as good. This understanding of human nature will also help us feel pity rather than contempt for such individuals.

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<sup>71</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 46–46.

<sup>72</sup>Graver, Margaret. *Stoicism & Emotion*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 36-36.

## **6 Objection (Restrictiveness of Good Feelings)**

In this section of the paper, I will make my first objection to the Stoic theory of emotions. Specifically, I will question the Stoic claim that it is only possible for sages to have good feelings. I will then present a possible response by the Stoics to this criticism, and evaluate the strength of that response.

### **6.1 Criticism: Non-Sages**

After diving deeper into the concept of true impulses known as good feelings, a noteworthy implication that emerges about Stoicism is that only sages and individuals who possess total knowledge about virtue and vice are capable of experiencing good feelings. This is an odd outcome as it suggests that unless you possess total knowledge of morality, you are unable to experience positive impulses such as the one discussed in the last section.

The first problem with this is that it paints a very restricted and exclusive image about Stoicism. As a philosophy that was shared by both slaves and emperors alike, one of the main attractions of Stoicism was its universal appeal. The Stoics continually discussed the power of reason as a skill that could be continually improved and developed. It was never regarded as an innate power that only a subset of humans had access to. However, suggesting that good feelings could only be felt by those who have total knowledge about morality might lead to followers of Stoicism justifiably feeling ostracized. Morality is a complex and elaborate topic that people have debated about and disagreed on since the beginning of time. It is extremely unlikely that anyone could possibly have the answers to and total knowledge about such a divisive topic. By creating such an unreasonably high standard for people to aim for, people could end up spending their entire lives striving to reach such a goal and never get there. This could potentially lead to a



life of frustration and a continuous feeling of unworthiness, all of which are outcomes that go against the fundamental goal of Stoicism: to lead a happy and fulfilling life.

The second problem with the restrictiveness of good feelings is that it overlooks the fact that many ordinary people are capable of experiencing positive emotions such as good wishes for others, moral shame, enjoyment, and cheerfulness. While it might be true that sages have achieved a much higher level of impulse mastery and moral excellence, it is misleading to then suggest that they are the only humans capable of experiencing these impulses which appear to be universal. I will present an example of a non-sage who simultaneously experiences a passion and a good feeling at the same time to demonstrate that it is possible for a non-sage to experience good feelings.

Agent A, is a non-sage who is a wealthy individual that is overly concerned with his reputation and how others view him. According to the guiding Stoic principles, agent A possesses mistaken beliefs of vice and virtue because he evaluates an indifferent as good. If someone were to spread a false rumor about agent A and damage his reputation, then agent A would likely react with anger and frustration, both of which are examples of passions. At the same time, agent A is also a big philanthropist and loves to support less fortunate individuals. Therefore, agent A has a strong concern for other humans and wishes them well. Since it is possible to conceive of a person existing in the real world who is similar to agent A, then it is possible for a non-sage person to experience good feelings.

## **6.2 Response: Inconsistent Beliefs**

After considering the push back against the Stoic theory of emotions, supporters of Stoicism would argue that this doesn't necessarily show contradictions or limitations in the philosophy. Stoics believe that good feelings can only be felt by sages and that non-sages who

think they are experiencing good feelings, are not actually experiencing what Stoicism has defined as true good feelings. The reason for this is that a person can only know how to distinguish between good/bad/indifferent after they have fixed their entire system of beliefs and brought it in tune with nature and proper reason. That is to say that if a person is to correctly distinguish between good and bad, and treat externals as indifferent, then they need to be able to do this for every object in the world, and not just for a select few. If they cannot uphold this standard for every object, then they risk placing themselves in situations where they might contradict themselves due to possessing beliefs that might go against one another, and this could offset a good feeling like joy, and thereby prove that it was never true joy all along.

For example, in the case of agent A who cares about his reputation and loves to help others at the same time, he might find himself in a situation where helping others comes at the expense of his reputation. For example, in a work setting, agent A might want to wish well for his coworkers and help them when they are struggling to complete a project on time. However, helping his coworkers could result in agent A neglecting his own work and thereby damage his own reputation at the office. In this situation, agent A's beliefs contradict and he might end up choosing not to help his coworkers. If this turns out to be the outcome, then the good feeling of wishing well for others was never a true good feeling in the first place. This is why Stoics believe that true joy is undisturbed by passion. Only a sage who has fixed their entire system of beliefs can experience it because they do not risk contradictions in their behavior emerging .

When Stoics evaluate the moral behavior of humans, they seek to do it on a person's entire disposition and not just a singular incident in order to prevent inconsistencies and contradictions (like the example above) from emerging<sup>73</sup>. Although it might be tempting to think of Stoic impulses as a perfect substitute for our modern day use of the word emotions, the idea

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<sup>73</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 174–174.

that Stoics believe impulses provide an insight into a person's entire disposition shows that this direct substitution is not as perfect as it might seem. When we use emotions in our everyday language, we are typically referring to a person's reaction to a particular incident or to their feelings at a certain point in time. This appears to be different from the Stoic's use of the word impulse which can be an indicator of a person's entire soul, disposition, and their set of beliefs.

Returning to the example of agent A, defenders of Stoicism would likely have an additional argument to refute their opponents. Where the critics suggest that agent A is able to experience good feelings due to his volition and concern for the wellbeing of others, Stoics would argue that this concern for the wellbeing of others is ill-founded because it refers to their wellbeing with regards to external objects such as money and food. As we have already discussed, the Stoics do not believe that living poverty-free is an inherent good, rather, it is an indifferent external because the condition of living poverty-free is not inside of our total control. If agent A truly felt the Stoic version of good feelings and cared for the well-being of others, he would seek to care for them by teaching them to alter their mindset and to not allow external conditions affect their happiness and wellbeing. According to Stoic principles, that would be a true good that agent A can provide to others.

Although Stoicism sets a really high standard for sageness and gaining the ability to experience good impulses, it does not necessarily mean that followers of Stoicism should feel stressed and anxious about getting to that stage. As we have repeatedly seen from the the teachings of Stoic philosophers such as Marcus Auerelius, it is okay to make occasional mistakes and fail to act in accordance with nature, but we should not give up, and we should rebound from our failure instead<sup>74</sup>. Becoming a sage requires a lot of perseverance and making mistakes is an

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<sup>74</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Book 5." *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 40–40.

inevitable part of the journey. The Stoics urge us not to get discouraged by them. However, we should also try our best to correct them as soon as possible. According to Epictetus, if we are consumed by a particular passion such as anger on a certain occasion, we should use our reason to relieve our mind from the passion quickly or else we risk succumbing quicker to it again in the future<sup>75</sup>. The key is to correct our mistakes as soon as possible so we are able to recover and get back on track of the path towards becoming a sage.

It is important to note that while the Stoics believe it is normal to make occasional mistakes, that is not the same thing as frequently changing your core beliefs and flip-flopping with regards to core Stoic principles. The Stoics advise followers against hedging and agreeing to follow some of the core Stoic principles without fully committing to that position. The decision of choosing to follow Stoicism should be made without hesitation or reservation<sup>76</sup>. In order for a person to call themselves a Stoic, they must commit to the Stoic mindset in its entirety to avoid contradictions in our character from emerging as seen by the example of agent A. For if these contradictions begin to emerge in a person's behavior, then what follows is that such a person was never a true Stoic to begin with.

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<sup>75</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 2." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 121–122.

<sup>76</sup>Epictetus, and Robert F. Dobbin. "Book 1." *Discourses and Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 2008, pp. 82–82.

## 7 **Objection (Dubious Good Feelings)**

In this section, I will start by presenting an objection against the good feeling of wishing well for others. Then, I will respond to this objection using Stoic doctrine. Finally, I will introduce selections and demonstrate what they add and how they relate to this particular discussion.

### 7.1 **Criticism: Wishing Good**

When the Stoics introduce examples of impulses that they categorize under good feelings, it appears that some of those impulses might have problematic implications that do not align with core Stoic doctrine. One specifically problematic volition is the impulse of wishing well for others. Critics would think that it is odd to be concerned with the goods of others which appears contradictory to the notion of restricting one's concerns only with objects under our own control<sup>77</sup>. Abiding by strict Stoicism, the philosophy suggests that only things and objects within our own control can be considered truly good (or bad). However, in virtue of wishing goodness for other human beings, people would be wishing for something that is outside of their immediate and total control. If it is not in our power to control the actions, thoughts, or circumstances of other people, then it follows that it is not in our power to control whether or not they experience good fortune. This focus on the well-being of others can risk making humans attached to things outside of their control and therefore increase their likelihood of experiencing passion. This appears to be counterintuitive to the objectives of Stoicism.

An example of how wishing well for others could lead to the emergence of passion is the case of a mother who consistently wishes wellness and happiness for her adult son. While it is natural for a parent to do everything in her power to raise and protect her children, she might no longer have control over this ability after their child reaches a certain age. Once her son moves

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<sup>77</sup>Graver, Margaret. *Stoicism & Emotion*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 59-59.

out of the house and becomes independent, the mother has no real control over his outcomes and wellbeing. This concern with the wellbeing of an external person can make the mother constantly feel anxious about her son's happiness and success. This need not even be material or mistaken wellbeing such as health either. Even if the mother was solely concerned for her son's well being in a Stoic sense, that is, he can successfully characterize goods, bads, and indifferents, she still has no total control over ensuring that outcome. He remains free to choose to either follow Stoic doctrine or abandon it. Despite the mother's good intentions and desire to see her son thrive, she might end up generating passions such as worry and depression through her behavior. This is clearly a suboptimal outcome according to Stoicism.

## **7.2 Response: Control Attitude**

The Stoics would respond to the presented objection by agreeing that humans are not in control over the circumstances of others. Afterall, if humans do not even have control over their own external circumstances, it would be naive to think that they can control the outcomes of other peoples' happiness. However, being concerned with the outcome and well-being of another person's happiness is not the same as controlling our own thoughts about the outcomes and well-being of another person's happiness. When the Stoics categorize wellness wishing for others as a volition, they urge us to focus on our outlook towards another person's well-being rather than on another person's well-being in of itself.

As I have already demonstrated, Stoicism is not a philosophy that pushes us to seek happiness at the expense of others or without taking others' considerations into mind. A sense of detachment from others is not what the Stoics had in mind with the notion of apatheia. On the contrary, philosophers like Marcus Aurelius continuously emphasized that reason is a social

power and that the nature of man is social<sup>78</sup>. With this in mind, we can infer that reason is not only a power designed to help us understand how to categorize objects in the world, but it is also there to help us understand how to interact with other human beings in a manner that is beneficial and productive. The Stoics believed that the elimination of passions and the cultivation of good feelings would lead to a society where individuals could interact without anger, resentment, and hatred and instead interact with cheerfulness, good intentions, and enjoyment. It would not be possible to have any of these impulses (passions or good feelings) without interacting with other human beings. If the Stoics genuinely consider humans as naturally social beings, then leading a fulfilling life must necessitate caring for others beyond mere indifference or detachment<sup>79</sup>.

### **7.3 Selections**

The conversation surrounding wishing well for others brings up an important consideration for the Stoic theory of emotions. As we have already established, there are things such as poverty and ill-health that the Stoics explicitly regarded as indifferents. There are also things such as healthiness and caring for the outcome of the well-being of others that are also regarded as indifferent, yet our intuition might tell us that there is something distinct about the first set of objects compared to the second set of objects. While Stoicism tells us that there is no difference between them in terms of their virtue (they are all indifferent), many people—including sages—will generally choose certain indifferents as opposed to others. This is where the concept of selections emerges in Stoicism.

A selection is not an attribution of goodness or badness concerning an object. Rather, a selection is the judgment of an object not currently in possession as indifferent, but still giving a

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<sup>78</sup>Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, and Georges M. Grube. "Book 10." *The Meditations*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 97–97.

<sup>79</sup>Graver, Margaret. *Stoicism & Emotion*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 59-59.

reason to seek it<sup>80</sup>. A disselection is the opposite: it is the judgment of an object not currently in possession as indifferent, but still giving a reason to avoid it<sup>81</sup>. The Stoics believed that there are some actions and objects in the world that are indifferent, but that a human (including a sage) might still have to make a decision about whether to pursue it or avoid it. Although the Stoics believed that we often take action towards or away from things based on our attributions of goodness or badness to them, there will also be actions that humans have to take not based on an attribution of goodness or badness. The reason this happens is because we are constantly surrounded by various types of indifferent objects in the world, and at some point we are forced to select interacting with some of them but not others. This is an unavoidable fact because selections are part of the human experience. For example, even a Stoic sage might choose to eat food even though she does not necessarily believe that food is an inherent good. The reason this happens is because eating food is a part of the human experience.

Like I mentioned, selections and disselections have no inherent value to them. However, in order to make it easier to refer to certain externals rather than others, some Stoics have identified selections and disselections as possessing significant planning-value, which is crucial when formulating plans for the future<sup>82</sup>. Nevertheless, this planning-value loses its significance once the future becomes the present. The term planning-value makes no moral judgment about the object, but the reason they use this particular term is because selections and disselections can be used for setting up plans for the future. For example, pursuing healthy measures in life has more planning-value than pursuing sickness<sup>83</sup>, and the reason for this is being healthy allows us to be more social and treat others better as opposed to being stuck alone in a hospital bed.

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<sup>80</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 99-99.

<sup>81</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 99-99.

<sup>82</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 101-101.

<sup>83</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 101-101.



However, once this future arrives, the planning-value of the selection disappears and we must alter our mindsight to be in tune with the present.

With the idea of selections in mind, it is important to keep consideration of the fact that selections are always indifferent externals and that humans should be wary about how to approach them. The Stoics believe that the safest approach to take when dealing with selections is to use caution and reservation. The reason a wise and virtuous sage is able to make non-moral decisions without becoming attached to external outcomes is because the sage uses caution and reservation before making non-moral decisions. The Stoics refer to this as a reserved impulse<sup>84</sup>. For example, a sage would never have the desire to become the president of the United States of America, but she might have the desire to do her best at achieving this feat. However, if the sage fails to become president, she would not feel any disappointment because her impulse towards winning the election was a reserved impulse (selection) and not an excessive impulse (passion).

While the non-sage is able to experience selections and passions, a sage is only able to experience selections and good feelings. Furthermore, since becoming a sage is one of the goals of Stoicism, the Stoics believe that one way to progress closer towards sageness is to replace passions with selections<sup>85</sup>. However, this is not a perfect solution and will not work for all passions. For instance, there are no real selection impulses to replace passions such as pleasure and pain, so they should be replaced with genuine indifference and eliminated entirely. On the other hand, it is possible for people to replace desire and fear with selections and disselections because doing so will eliminate strong impulse attachments that often lead to suffering, and will instead allow humans to cultivate a sense of genuine indifference towards external events, attributing only planning-value towards them.

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<sup>84</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 165–166.

<sup>85</sup>Brennan, Tad. *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate*. Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 100-100.

## **8 Objection (Irrational Impulses)**

In this section of the paper, I will introduce an objection against Stoicism's claim that the soul is only composed of reason by proposing a multipartite theory for the soul. Then, I will respond to this objection by introducing pre-emotions which the Stoics believe can account for irrational human behavior.

### **8.1 Criticism: Multipartite Soul**

As a reminder of a core Stoic principle I discussed earlier in the paper, the Stoics believed that the human soul was solely composed of reason. The main reason that the Stoics held this to be true was because it aligned with their belief that human beings are in total control of their happiness by being able to use reason to align themselves with nature. With this in mind, a potential area of attack against Stoicism would be to suggest that this is not the case, and that the human soul is composed of multiple parts beyond just reason. The reason why many philosophers such as Plato believed in the composition of multiple parts of the soul was because reason alone often failed to account for many irrational reactions in the human experience. The reason why I am calling these reactions irrational is because I am referring to reactions that occur automatically without our conscious thought about them. That is to say that they are reactions that are not caused by reason.

An example of an irrational reaction would be a human jumping out of their seat and feeling started after hearing a loud noise that unexpectedly shocks them. In this case, we can clearly tell that the human being was motivated to act by the loud noise, but because they act instantly and without thought or reason guiding their decision to jump, it opens up room for critics of Stoicism to propose an alternative theory of the soul where reason is not the sole governing force. This example appears to suggest that the human soul could potentially be

composed of multiple parts, including both reason and other irrational parts. It is evident that reason alone cannot fully account for this complexity in human behavior.

By proposing the possibility of there being multiple parts to the human soul, I do not mean to suggest that these additional irrational parts are necessarily stronger or weaker than reason. In fact, for this particular discussion, I do not believe the hierarchy of strength matters because the Stoics believed that the sole part comprising the soul was reason. Based on this premise, the mere demonstration of an existence of an additional part to the soul beyond reason—even if that part is weaker than reason—is sufficient to falsify the premise upon which the Stoic theory of emotions is based upon. All it would take is one example of an irrational reaction guiding human action to achieve this, and based on the example mentioned above, critics of Stoicism would argue that they have sufficiently falsified the premise.

## **8.2 Response: Pre-emotions**

The central argument that the Stoics use to counter the objection about irrational impulses is to create a new category of reactions which they call pre-emotions. A pre-emotion emerges in the preliminary stage before giving assent to an impulse, where a reaction occurs within the agent that can either be invalidated or validated through reasoned evaluation<sup>86</sup>. Rather than labeling them as impulses, the Stoics instead believe that they are more akin to impulsive bodily reactions that occur before a conscious decision to assent to a stimulus is made.

The Stoic belief that pre-emotions are not passions is rooted in the definition they provide of what constitutes a passion. Specifically, they believe that a passion is the result of a human consciously assenting to an impression, whereas pre-emotions do not meet that criteria. That being said, if they are failed to be quashed by reason, the Stoics believe that pre-emotions can

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<sup>86</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 175–175.

turn into full-blown passions<sup>87</sup>. The reason this happens is because they are involuntary bodily reactions that occur rapidly through unreflective movements. In that sense, they are closer to impressions than to impulses because after experiencing a pre-emotion and perceiving it, we must then evaluate it with our reason and decide whether to attribute indifference to it or assign it value. If we treat it as indifferent, then we have acted correctly. However, if we allow it to consume us by attributing value to it (either goodness or badness), then we risk turning the pre-emotion into a passion. This might lead to future cases where humans might either start desiring objects that generate that pre-emotion and be elated when they obtain them, or start avoiding objects that generate that pre-emotion and feel depressed when they are in possession of them.

Returning to the example of the person feeling startled when they heard a loud noise, the Stoics would say that this initial shock that the agent felt was a pre-emotion and not an irrational impulse. After experiencing the pre-emotion, the agent would act correctly by choosing to quash it because they should not attribute badness to loud noises which are objects that are outside our control, and are therefore indifferent. However, if the agent assents to the pre-emotion, and begins to associate badness to loud noises, he might start to avoid situations where loud noises are common because they cause him fear and panic, both of which are passions. Furthermore, the Stoics even suggest that it is possible for sages to experience pre-emotions such as getting startled. In the situation of a loud noise, the sage might be startled by it, but he would then proceed to immediately reject it after noticing that it was a pre-emotion.

While I have taken time to distinguish passions from pre-emotions, critics of Stoicism might agree that they are different, but still feel as though it is odd that a class of non-reason driven reactions can guide human behavior, even if momentarily. This is especially worrying

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<sup>87</sup>Inwood, Brad. "Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism." Clarendon Press, 1987, pp. 178–178.

considering the fact that Stoics do not believe in a multipartite theory for souls. The Stoics would double down on their response and argue that such reactions are instinctive and purely bodily responses which have nothing to do with the soul. It is true that the Stoics argue that the human soul is solely composed of reason, but it is also true that they believe that the soul and the body are separate. After all, they insisted from the beginning that our body is an external that is not in our control, and therefore cannot be the same as our soul. They would argue that pre-emotions are the workings of the human body and not the workings of the human soul. The same way in which a virus can infect a human body and make it sick, an instinctive reaction can also occur in a human body causing the generation of a pre-emotion. If we are able to categorize illness as indifferent, then we should also be able to categorize pre-emotions as indifferent under the same light. What is not indifferent about both illnesses and pre-emotions is our judgments about them and how we respond to them. That is why the Stoics urge us to quash pre-emotions and prevent them from turning into passions.

## 9 Conclusion

Although critics of Stoicism bring up valid concerns and objections regarding the Stoic theory of emotions, the Stoics ultimately have strong counter-arguments to each of these concerns. With regards to the objection that the philosophy's restriction of good feelings to sages leads to ostracization of non-sage Stoics, they refute this concern by emphasizing that Stoicism does not seek to ostracize, but to inspire people to lead a virtuous life. They acknowledge that making mistakes are inevitable on this journey and that people should not be too harsh on themselves when they fail, but should recover with strong will instead. Furthermore, with regards to the objection that an emphasis on wishing well for other people makes our happiness dependent on external factors beyond our control, the Stoics respond by saying that we should not attempt to control the wellness of others, but rather control our outlook towards the wellness of others. Lastly, in response to the objection that Stoicism fails to account for irrational impulses in the human soul, the Stoics counter this by saying that alleged irrational impulses which people believe to be the workings of the soul, are in fact the workings of the body instead.

Stoicism as a philosophy imposes a massive influence on modern day society. However, as more people begin to lean towards it in order to live a happy and fulfilling life, it is important for them to dispel the many myths and misunderstandings about the philosophy. One such myth is that Stoicism causes people to become emotionless and detached from the social world. As we have already seen throughout this paper, Stoicism does not promote emotionlessness, but rather urges humans to practice cultivating the right way of handling emotions. Through this process of personal improvement, Stoicism aims to prepare humans to live a more meaningful and social life where they can work together rather than against each other.

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