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Happiness is Not Hap: The Stoic Telos and Virtue as a Mode of Being

Section I. Introduction and Definitions

The idea for this paper came to me while I was on my daily walk with my trusted dog Padme. In the face of a clear night sky with that Maine frigid temperature starting to bite at my fingertips, I began to reflect on the readings I had done during the day: Epictetus's *Discourses*. It isn't always that you find yourself just smiling in the face of absurdity (Albert Camus certainly taught me that), but for some reason staring up at the vast Universe which was my sky I felt *happy*.

It is no secret that Stoicism has begun to resurface in the 21st century as a therapeutic philosophy. One which teaches us how to 'control what we can control' and 'to not wish for things how we want them to be, but instead to wish for them as they actually will be.'

This paper however is not one to determine how correct the adoption of this philosophy is, but rather it is a paper to determine what happiness means when structured beneath views of a Stoic. A Stoic bound to be void of extraneous passion and emotion; focused on the maintaining of appropriate action and leaving us somewhere where grief and pain appear to disappear. Is this a sufficient practice to lead to 'happiness?'After all, the term happiness is derived from the word *hap* which means fortune or chance. The latter portion of the term *-ness* is the element of an abstract noun which denotes action, quality, or state typically attached to an adjective or past participle. Finally, *-y* means 'full of' and so to say someone is happy is really to say someone is 'full of fortune.' Now the real question is how do we disagree on something that is defined in the simple etymology of a word? Is happiness when butterflies fill my stomach, when a smile crosses my face, or is it something much more profound? Is happiness truly virtue? And if so, what kind of virtue is it?

Happiness, properly understood through a Stoic lens, is not about feeling good—such as the Epicurean may believe—or lucky circumstances but about virtue as a mode of being, and this redefinition is more philosophically defensible than the common understanding.

Prior to having any substantive discussion about the kind of perspective Epictetus, Seneca, Aurelius, and modern scholars may have about the term happiness it is important to define our terms. By *Telos* this paper refers to the Stoic conception of living life in accordance with nature. By happiness I refer to the virtue ethicist commitment to *eudaimonia* which in parsimonious terms is the pursuit of human flourishing (Aristotle 1098a16). Further we may understand the usage of *eudaimonia* in Epictetus's *Discourses* from Book 2.5 where the English translation includes the term "happiness" when in fact the original Greek uses the term *eudaimonia* (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.5). By the Stoic conception of ethics I mean the view of virtue as the sole good and everything else remaining 'indifferent.' For the purposes of this paper I derive my viewpoint of the Stoic perspective of ethics from the discourses of Epictetus with latter references to the Letters of Seneca and the practice which Marcus Aurelius exemplifies in his *Meditations*.

This paper will first examine what the Stoic sources themselves say about happiness. Following this I will provide an analysis of the ongoing debate between the misreading of the terms passion and emotion. Finally I will argue that Stoic happiness or flourishing is best understood as a mode of being rather than a state dependent on fortune.

Section II. Stoic Sources of 'Happiness'

The Stoic account of happiness begins with a deceptively simple question: what is actually within our power? Epictetus, born into slavery sometime around 55AD during the reign of Nero and later freed, built his entire ethical framework around this exact question. At the opening of the *Enchiridion*, he draws a sharp distinction between what is *eph'hēmin*, up to us, and what is *ouk eph' hēmin*, not up to us. Our judgements, desires, and impulses fall on one side; our bodies, reputations, and material circumstances fall on the other (Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 1). What we can infer from this distinction is that happiness can only be derived from those things which we can control. But, is it really happiness to merely distinguish that I don't have control over things like other people's impulses as Epictetus describes that you can only shape how you receive and act, you can not shape how others act in comparison and in conflict with you (Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.15).

For Epictetus, unhappiness arises when we invest our sense of wellbeing in things that do not belong to us. We suffer not because things go wrong but because we have judged that things which are not in our control are nevertheless essential to our flourishing. If happiness depends on wealth, health, or the approval of others, then happiness is hostage to fortune, to *hap* in the very etymological sense raised in my introduction. But if happiness depends on the condition of our rational character, on the quality of our judgements and the alignment of our will with nature, then happiness is something no external force can remove. This is what Epictetus means when he speaks of our inner freedom: not a withdrawal from life, but a reorientation of concern toward the one domain where we are genuinely sovereign (Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1).

Seneca aids in the development of this idea from a different register, offering what is perhaps the most psychologically precise account of Stoic happiness among Roman Stoics. In Letter 23 of his *Letters to Lucilius*, Seneca draws a distinction between *gaudium* and *voluptas*. *Voluptas* is the pleasure in the ordinary sense, that butterfly in my stomach, the smile creeping on my face when I am presented with a new watch; in other words it is the fleeting response which rises and falls with fortune. *Gaudium*, by contrast, is a deep and stable joy that arises from within, rooted in the awareness of one's own moral progress and rational integrity (Seneca, *Letters* 23.4-6). Seneca is emphatic that *gaudium* is not the absence of feeling. It is the presence of the right kind of feeling. The Stoic who has cultivated virtue does not walk through life unmoved. Rather, that person experiences a form of joy that is durable precisely because it does not depend on anything external (such as luxury, praise, or pleasure).

This distinction matters enormously for the question of 'happiness.' If we equate happiness with *voluptas*, then the critics of Stoicism are right to worry: the Stoic demand that we treat external goods as indifferent would indeed strip happiness away. However, if happiness is closer to *gaudium,*—referring to joy as a grounding in virtue—then the Stoic framework does not eliminate happiness. Rather it relocates back to our original position: one of rational flourishing and not exploited pleasure.

Marcus Verus Aurelius offers a third perspective, not as a theorist but as a practitioner. In truth, the *Meditations* were never meant for an audience. They were private notes of a Roman emperor under extraordinary pressure, reminding himself daily to live in accordance with Stoic principles and virtue—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. What makes Marcus so instructive is that his writings are full of feelings which many critics aim to say the Stoics are void of. In Book 2, he prepares himself each morning for encounters with "difficult" people, the ungrateful, the arrogant, the dishonest, and resolves to meet them with patience and understanding, not because he feels nothing but because he recognizes their shared rational nature (Marcus Aurelius 2.1).

Marcus does not read like a man who has eliminated emotion. He reads like a man who has learned to inhabit his emotions differently, letting them inform his engagement with the world rather than dictate it. This is a crucial observation for our purposes, because it suggests that the Stoic *telos*, far from producing emotional flatness, produces something closer to emotional depth. The kind of depth which harbors that term we have circled all over this paper: happiness.

Section III. The Confusion Between Passion and Emotion

If the Stoic sources themselves present such an emotionally engaged picture of the good life, why does the charge of emotional emptiness persist? The answer, as Scott Rubarth has persuasively argued, lies in a persistent confusion between two concepts that the Stoics were careful to distinguish: passion and emotion.

In contemporary English, we tend to use these words more or less interchangeably, or at least we tend to use the phrase "I am passionate about something" as a means to express emotion, evoking a synonymous usage of the two distinct terms. But for the Stoic, *pathos* (passion) is a technical term with a very specific meaning. A *pathos* is not simply a feeling (like how we want to say happiness is). It is an excessive impulse rooted in a false judgement about what is good or bad (Rubarth 2). When the Stoics say that the *pathē* must be extirpated, they are not saying that all feeling must be eliminated. They are saying that those specific irrational responses which arise from mistaken evaluations of the world need to be uprooted, Rubarth emphasizes that this distinction is routinely overlooked by both scholars and students, who read the Stoic call for *apatheia* and assume it is equivalent to the modern English word apathy (Rubarth 1-2). It is not. *Apatheia* means freedom from the *pathē*, from those particular distortions of judgement. It does not mean freedom from all affective experience.

This matters because the Stoics do not leave a void where the passions once stood. They replace the *pathē* with the *eupatheiai*, a set of rational affective states that arise from correct judgements about the world. And now I have engaged in a dangerous game we philosophers like to play: claiming something is correct or true about the world. But regardless for the sake of argumentation let us continue that method of thinking. The *eupatheiai* includes *chara* (joy), *boulēsis* (rational wish or goodwill), and *eulabeia* (appropriate caution). These are not pale imitations of real emotion. Rubarth argues that the Stoic rejection of the passions does not even make sense unless we grant a significant and substantive role to the *eupatheiai*—which conveniently the Stoics do! Without legitimate emotional responses, the entire Stoic ethical framework would be incoherent, not merely unattractive (Rubarth 3-4). The sage (The Stoic ideal) is not a person who feels nothing. The sage is a person whose feelings are aligned with reality rather than distorted by false beliefs.

Martha Nussbaum, in her influential work *The Therapy of Desire*, raises what is perhaps the strongest version of the objection. She argues that emotions like grief, love, and fear are not irrational disturbances but cognitive appraisals that reflect how deeply we value things beyond our control. To grieve the death of a friend, on her reading, is to acknowledge that the friend genuinely mattered (Nussbaum 359-61). The Stoic attempt to eliminate this grief, Nussbaum contends, does not liberate us. It impoverishes us, severing the connection between our emotional lives and the things we care about (Nussbaum 398-400).

Nussbaum is partially correct. The Stoics do hold that the kind of devastating, consuming grief that overtakes a person reflects a false judgment, the judgement that something external constituted a true good rather than a preferred indifferent. But what Nussbaum's critique misses is exactly the distinction Rubarth highlights. The Stoic who loses a friend does not feel nothing.

That Stoic may feel *chara* at having known them, *boulēsis* toward honoring their memory, and a sober recognition that loss is woven into the fabric of the natural order. Seneca's own consolation writings demonstrate this: he does not instruct the bereaved to stop feeling but to feel in a way that acknowledges loss without being annihilated by it (Seneca, *Consolation to Marcia* 1.1-2). The Stoic alternative to grief is not numbness, instead it is a transformed relationship with loss, one mediated by reason rather than overwhelmed by false judgement.

Margaret Graver's work on Stoic emotion reinforces this reading. Graver argues that the chief demand of Stoic ethics is not that we should suppress or deny our feelings but that we should perfect the rational mind at the core of every human being. The *eupatheiai*, on Graver's account, are not diminished versions of ordinary human feelings but corrected versions, more stable and more clear-sighted, like the powerful and easy movements of a trained athlete compared to the clumsy efforts of a beginner (Graver 52). The Stoic emotional life, properly understood, is not impoverished, but refined.

IV. Happiness as a Mode of Being

If the argument of the previous section holds, that *gaudium* being a genuine form of joy and *eupatheiai* constituting a real affective life, then we are in a position to say something positive about what Stoic happiness actually is. And here I want to suggest something that I believe is implicit in the Stoic sources but worth making explicit: Stoic happiness is best understood not as a state we achieve but a mode of being we inhabit.

This section will focus on the following syllogism:

- Premise 1: Stoics identify happiness with virtue.
- Premise 2: Virtue is an ongoing rational activity.
- Premise 3: Activities are modes rather than states.
- Therefore: Stoic happiness = mode of being.

For the sake of this argument I claim that the definition of a state is something that happens to us. We are happy or we are not, depending on whether our circumstances align with our desires. Happiness understood as a state is precisely what the etymology of *hap* suggests: it is a matter of fortune, of chance, of things falling our way. But a mode is something we do. It is a way of engaging with whatever circumstances arise, favorable or catastrophic, trivial or extraordinary. The Stoic *telos* of living in accordance with nature is, at its root, a description of a mode: the mode of meeting each moment with rational virtue. If happiness is a state, then I will echo once again the idea that the critics may be right to have skepticism about this framework. A philosophy that asks us to treat health, family, and freedom as indifferent seems to strip away the conditions under which happiness as a state could arise. But if happiness is a mode, then the Stoic position becomes not only defensible but genuinely compelling. The question is no longer "do I have the right circumstances to be happy?" but "am I engaging with my circumstances virtuously?" And that question as Epictetus insists, is always within our power to answer (Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 1).

Consider what this means in practice. The parent who loses a child and grieves with the full weight of that loss can still, on the Stoic view, grieve virtuously, with courage, with honesty, without allowing grief to become self-destruction or bitterness. The person facing illness can meet it with temperance and clear-sightedness. The person confronting injustice can respond with justice and wisdom. In each case, the mode of engagement is what constitutes happiness, not the presence or absence of suffering. Stoic happiness is not happiness despite difficulty but happiness through it: the recognition that one's rational character remains intact, that one can meet even the worst of life with moral clarity.

If this sounds merely theoretical, consider the case of Vice Admiral James Stockdale. In September of 1965, Stockdale was shot down over North Vietnam and spent over seven years as a prisoner of war. He was tortured repeatedly, held in solitary confinement for years, and had his leg shattered during capture. By any measure of happiness as a state, Stockdale's circumstances offered nothing. And yet, as he parachuted toward the village where he would be captured, Stockdale whispered to himself: "Five years down there, at least. I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus" (Stockdale 420). In that moment, before he had even reached the ground, Stockdale was not experiencing happiness in any conventional sense. He was choosing a mode of engagement. He was orienting his will toward Stoic virtue at precisely the point where every external condition of happiness had been stripped away.

What Stockdale found over the years that followed was not comfort, not pleasure, not tranquility, but something he recognized as genuinely meaningful: the exercise of moral purpose under conditions designed to destroy it. He describes the experience through a passage from Solzhenitsyn, who discovered in his own imprisonment that "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties, but right through every human heart" (Stockdale 420). Stockdale understood this insight long before he encountered it in print. Good and evil, flourishing and degradation, are not determined by what happens to you. They are determined by what you do with your will. This is Epictetus's teaching in its most radical form, and Stockdale's survival confirmed it: if happiness is located within the will, within the domain of what is "up to us," then no torturer and no prison can take it away.

This is what separates the Stoic conception of happiness from both the Epicurean and the common modern understanding. The Epicurean locates happiness in the achievement of ataraxia, a tranquility achieved primarily through the avoidance of pain and the cultivation of measured pleasure. The modern understanding, broadly speaking, locates happiness in subjective satisfaction, in the feeling that things are going well. Both of these are essentially descriptions of states. The Stoic contribution is to relocate happiness entirely: it is not something that happens to you but something you do. It is not the absence of pain or the presence of pleasure. It is the active, ongoing exercise of virtue in response to whatever the world presents.

The Stoic sage may be an ideal that no human being fully achieves. Epictetus knew this. Marcus Aurelius, writing in his private journal, was clearly working at it, constantly reminding himself, still falling short and returning to the practice. Stockdale, by his account, did not float serenely above his suffering. He wrestled with fear and guilt daily, devising methods to keep them in check, chanting to himself on the way to interrogation: "control fear, control guilt" (Stockdale 423). But that is precisely the point. If happiness is a mode rather than a state, then the practice itself, the daily effort to align one's will with reason and to meet the world with virtue, is not merely a path toward happiness. It is happiness, already underway. The Stoic telos is not a distant destination. It is available in every moment of rational, virtuous engagement with life.

V. Concluding Thoughts

The charge that Stoicism demands emotional emptiness as the price of happiness rests on a confusion, one that mistakes the Stoic rejection of irrational passion for a rejection of feeling altogether. As Rubarth demonstrates, the distinction between *pathos* and emotion is essential to understanding what the Stoics actually claim. As Graver argues, the Stoic ideal is not a life devoid of affect but one in which affect has been corrected and refined. And as the Stoic sources themselves make clear, from Epictetus's account of inner freedom to Seneca's description of

gaudium to Marcus Aurelius's private wrestlings with grief and duty, the Stoic life is one of genuine emotional engagement with the world.

What the Stoics offer is a redefinition of happiness that removes it from the domain of chance. Happiness is no longer *hap*. It is no longer a matter of fortune or favorable circumstances or that feeling we get when we are spoiled with presents. It instead is a mode of being, a way of meeting life with rational virtue, available to anyone willing to undertake the practice. This redefinition is more philosophically defensible than the common understanding because it locates happiness in the one thing that is genuinely within our power: how we choose to engage with the world.

On that cold Maine night, with Padme trotting beside me and the stars overhead, I did not need anything to change about my circumstances to feel that life was worth engaging with fully. The Stoics would say that this recognition, this orientation toward the world, is not merely a necessary or sufficient condition for happiness. It is happiness itself.

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