

Stoic Eudaimonia: Can Mental Health Rightfully be Considered an ‘Indifferent’?

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Abstract: According to Stoic philosophy, to live the *eudemon*, or happy, life, is to live virtuously. To live virtuously is to live a life of perfected rationality. Unlike the Aristotelian conception of eudaimonia, the Stoics do not believe that any external fortunes or goods are required for virtue, and therefore happiness. This is because, regardless of one’s fortunes, social status, or even health, one is always thought to have control over their reason. Unhappy individuals are unhappy not because they may lack certain material comforts, but because they suffer from an ‘illness’ of the soul, the seat of their rationality. The Stoic comparison of aberrant reason to illness invites questions about health and its impact on one’s capacity to attain virtue and *eudaimonia*. Ultimately, I will argue that the Stoic consideration of health, particularly mental health, as ‘indifferent’ to one’s happiness is not only incorrect, but harmful to our conception and treatment of individuals with mental illness.

Modern usages of the word “Stoic” are typically used to describe someone who exhibits little to no emotion when it would otherwise be appropriate to respond emotionally. The use of the term in this way, however, represents a misinformed understanding of the Stoic doctrine of *passions*. To be Stoic is not to suppress or to subdue the feeling of emotions. Rather, it is about being fully in control of one’s reason and therefore fully in control of one’s passions. Certainly, the Stoic system of ethics grants a tremendous amount of power to the individual. The moral agent in Stoic philosophy, insofar as they are a rational being, i.e., they are human, has complete control over their ability to attain virtue and, consequently, happiness. Unlike Platonism, which is confined to the intellectual elite, or Aristotelianism, which requires that individuals have some material as well as intellectual goods, Stoicism outlines a theory of virtue and happiness which is heralded as being accessible to *all*, regardless of one’s status or resources. However, I will challenge this idea: the Stoic comparison of aberrant reason to illness invites questions about health and its impact on one’s capacity to attain virtue and happiness. Specifically, I will explore the particular difficulty that mental illness poses to the Stoic idea of health as ‘indifferent’ to happiness and virtue. To do this, I will first explain Stoic *eudaimonia*, or happiness, and its connection with virtue. Then, I will discuss Stoic passions, or *pathos*, in relation to Stoic virtue and *eudaimonia*. With an understanding of Stoic reason, virtue, and happiness, I will show that Stoic *eudaimonia*¹ is not accessible to individuals with mental illness. Finally, I will respond to a few possible objections to my argument, before exploring my argument’s implications and how we might appropriately respond.

¹ Happiness is a rather poor translation of the Greek, eudaimonia, which is more accurately understood as “living excellently.” For the sake of facility, however, I will use happiness for eudaimonia in this essay.

First, the relationship between happiness, or *eudaimonia*, and virtue must be clarified. For the Stoics, to live virtuously is to live the *eudemon* life. That is, Stoic happiness “consists in virtue,” with virtue being both necessary and sufficient for happiness.² Accordingly, when I discuss the ability of an individual to live virtuously, by implication, I will also be discussing their ability to attain *eudaimonia*, a connection that is crucial to my argument.

Stoics are committed to the idea that virtue, and therefore happiness, are available to an individual regardless of their external goods and conditions. The only true “good,” that which is good in and of itself and worth pursuing for its own sake, is virtue.³ All other things, those external fortunes and conditions such as “life, health, pleasure beauty, strength, wealth, reputation,”⁴ etc., are termed “indifferent,” for they ultimately do not affect one’s ability to attain *eudaimonia*.⁵ However, because indifferents are usually “the explicit and immediate objects of most human concern and striving” Stoics recognize that they play an important role in moral formation and education.⁶ Indeed, “most actions and moral choices deal directly with things which would be called indifferent,” making them of “fundamental importance to the moral agent.”⁷ The reason for this is twofold: (1) the exercise of choice in accordance with nature is fundamental to the Stoic conception of virtue and (2) nature would have us assign “values” to indifferents as either ‘preferred’ or ‘dispreferred,’ making it possible to exercise virtuous choice among them.⁸ The challenge, then, becomes teaching individuals to make decisions about indifferents in such a way that “will bring them closer to virtue,”⁹ for “some indifferents will tend to promote the acquisition of virtue and some will (at least sometimes) tend to hinder it; keeping in mind the ultimate importance of the good will aid with such choices.”¹⁰ Understanding the supreme importance of virtue — and the worthlessness of all other external fortunes — enables one to better exercise virtuous choices among indifferents. “Any ‘choice’ in the technical sense,” however, “is also a selection of some appropriate action, as assent to what is fitting for the agent in the circumstances.”¹¹ The selection of appropriate action relies on *rational decision making* and one’s ability to accurately assess their situation and the value of all objects of choice involved. “Assent and practical decision are central to Stoic ethics,” though “most agents fail to use their rationality properly.”¹² Failure to exercise perfect rationality is precisely what occurs when one is carried away by their impulses, that is, when one is overcome by *passions*.

² A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 377.

³ Brad Inwood. *Stoicism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 65.

⁴ A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 354.

⁵ Brad Inwood and Pierluigi Donini, “Stoic Ethics,” in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 692.

⁶ *Ibid*, 691.

⁷ *Ibid*, 691-692.

⁸ *Ibid*, 693.

⁹ *Ibid*, 693.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 695.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 698.

¹² *Ibid*, 699.

The language of health pervades the Stoic discussion of virtue and passions, and it is assigned a normative value. Passions are described as perversions, aberrations, illnesses, and contrary to nature. Stoic passions are “revealed as... *unhealthy* state[s] of mind, not synonymous with emotion in ordinary language.”¹³ As Stobaeus puts it, “passion is impulse which is excessive and disobedient to the dictates of reason, or a movement of soul which is *irrational* and contrary to nature.”¹⁴ Impulses, however, are not bad in and of themselves. On the contrary, there are “normal, healthy impulses.”¹⁵ In fact, impulses “are that activity of the soul’s commanding-faculty which converts its judgements of what it should pursue or avoid into purposive bodily movements.”¹⁶ What distinguishes passions from other, healthy, impulses are *faulty judgments* about indifferents that result in excessive, or inappropriate responses to particular objects or situations. One only gives in to excessive impulse when their soul’s commanding faculty is in a state of “‘perverted’ reason assenting to impressions that trigger off impulses inconsistent with a well-reasoned understanding of what their objects are worth.”¹⁷ Chrysippus and Stobaeus are quick to liken this state of perverted reason to a body or soul that is weak and prone to sickness.¹⁸

The health of the soul, the seat of one’s rationality, is crucially important for one hoping to attain virtue and *eudaimonia*. Stoics reject the typical Greek conception of a divided soul, arguing that the soul cannot consist of two distinct parts, one irrational and another rational.¹⁹ Rather, Plutarch explains that the Stoics “suppose that the... irrational part is not distinguished from the rational by any distinction within the soul’s nature, but the same part of the soul... becomes virtue and vice as it wholly turns around and changes in passions and alterations of tenor or character.”²⁰ In this view, irrationality is simply “an aberrant state of the unitary reason,” in which “a person’s reasoning faculty,” i.e., their soul, “is conceived as being either consistent or inconsistent,” perfect or imperfect, healthy or unhealthy.²¹

Despite the language of health, which is *not* always within an individual’s control, Stoics believe that it is always within the power of the individual to control their reason. Consequently, “because we are responsible for the state of our reason, we are responsible for our passions.”²² Epictetus puts it simply, saying “it is not things themselves that disturb men, but their judgements about things.”²³ Because Stoic virtue depends on perfected reason — and perfected reason means that one will never misjudge the value or goodness of any particular thing — it follows that a Stoic sage will live a life free from the

¹³ A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 420.

To be clear, Stoic passions are distinct from the contemporary understanding of emotions. Emotions may be described as fleeting or temporary mental states, and their experience is neither intrinsically good nor bad.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 410.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 420.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 420.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 420-421.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 417-418.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 383.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 378.

²¹ *Ibid*, 383.

²² *Ibid*, 421.

²³ *Ibid*, 418.

disturbance and distress of passions. Posidonius is reported as having said that “the mind of the wise man is immune to infection.”²⁴ The analogy of health here is interesting, if not ironic, given that health itself is considered an indifferent external condition by Stoics. However, I argue that health is *wrongly* considered an indifferent, particularly in the light of mental illness. Consequently, the Stoic conception of happiness is *not* universally accessible and does require some external goods.

Mental illnesses, insofar as they interfere with individuals’ ability to interpret the world around themselves rationally, cannot be considered an ‘indifferent’ to *eudaimonia* as the Stoics conceive of it. Suppose one suffers from a localized anxiety disorder, for example, and frequently suffers panic attacks. It is fundamental to the disorder that an individual’s fears about the object(s) of their anxiety are not rational. Stoics would agree here. However, whereas the Stoics would suggest that it is the responsibility — and within the power of the individual — to correct their ‘perverted’ judgment about the object concerned, it is *not* the case that anxiety can simply be ‘rationalized’ on one’s own and subsequently ‘cured’. Often, external goods such as therapy or medication are required to adequately deal with the distortions in thought related to mental illnesses.

One might object and suggest that the Stoic practice of correcting one’s distorted judgments about indifferents closely resembles the practices of cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, and therefore may be *more* inclusive of individuals dealing with mental disorders. The Stoics readily admit that very few people will ever achieve perfect reason or virtue. At least Stoic thought provides useful ways of dealing with distorted thoughts or anxious thinking. This objection fails, however, because Stoic ideas of virtue and happiness depend, at least theoretically, on their universal accessibility, regardless of one’s external goods and fortunes, *including* mental health. For individuals with mental illness, however, it is not even theoretically possible to achieve virtue or *eudaimonia*, for though it is hard to deny the similarities between Stoic thought and CBT, CBT is not a *cure* for mental disorders.

Apart from CBT, sometimes medication is required to correct chemical imbalances within the brain to alleviate symptoms of anxiety (the same applies to depression, bipolar disorder, etc.). At a minimum, a doctor’s visit and a prescription would be required to attain such medication, assuming one could then afford to *pay* for their prescription. All of that may require access to transportation, a medical facility, health insurance, and/or a certain level of wealth. The point is that effectively treating mental illness requires the kinds of external goods that the Stoics assert are indifferent to one’s happiness; As I have shown, however, the Stoics are wrong in classifying health, particularly mental health, as an indifferent.

There are grave consequences for treating mental health as ‘indifferent’ to one’s happiness. The belief that one could, and therefore that one *should*, be able to resolve anxiety, for example, on their own, borders on blaming the individual with anxiety for their inability to take charge of their ‘rational commanding faculty’. Such thinking misunderstands the nature of mental illnesses like anxiety, which often require treatment. What’s more, it is also uncomfortably reminiscent of the problematic tendency to attach moral judgments to an individual based on circumstances which, in reality, are beyond their control. The ultimate consequence is to permanently disenfranchise those with any

²⁴ Ibid, 417-418.

kind of mental illness, rendering them incapable of attaining virtue or *eudaimonia* within the Stoic system of ethics.

One might simply concede the argument — that the Stoic system of ethics denies the potential for virtue and *eudaimonia* to individuals with mental illness — and stop there. This is a lazy approach, however. No small part of Stoicism's popularity is the sense of empowerment it grants to disenfranchised populations. Though one may not be able to control their circumstances, they can control how they *respond* to them. One can live virtuously and happily regardless of externalities. This is a powerful and encouraging thought, and there is truth to it. As I mentioned earlier, such thinking resembles the strategies of cognitive behavioral therapy. How can it be, then, that Stoic ethics ultimately ends up excluding a large swathe of the population from even *theoretically* attaining virtue or *eudaimonia*? Maybe the issue is that Stoic philosophers simply did not understand the modern psychology or physiology of mental illness; mental illness was probably not considered a health issue at all. This is a completely fair argument to make: we are still learning about mental illness today.

Rather than opt to concede that Stoicism is destined to be exclusionary, however, perhaps it is possible to rethink the Stoic conception of *eudaimonia*. One need not abandon Stoic thought towards indifferents altogether, granting that all the external goods Aristotle or Plato require to be necessary for virtue; they may very well remain indifferent. However, one must concede the importance of health — especially mental health — for true *eudaimonia*. Staying to true Stoic thought, one can assert that the power of one's own thinking is all a person needs for happiness, while still acknowledging that sometimes medication or therapy is needed for one to take better control over one's thoughts. To concede that fact is not to diminish the Stoic emphasis on the power of the individual's agency over their own thoughts, but rather, to more fully and realistically recognize the care that must be taken to maintain the health of those very thoughts.

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