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Knowledge is Happiness: is The End—An Inquiry Concerning Stoic Philosophy

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Abstract

I argue that the validity of the Stoic conception of the singular soul, empirically and psychologically, creates a view that is paradoxical: if being happy is *the end* for the sake of which everything is done, and if this consists in living according to virtue, using only right reasoning, *one cannot obtain happiness*. Why? Because selecting using right reasoning is the only virtue leading to *the end*, obtaining things that right reasoning is aimed at is ethically insignificant. I reconstruct fragments of text written by the outlaw Stoic philosopher, Posidonius, and interpret them to show how one can obtain *the end* while preserving Stoic ethics, through a radical connection between the soul consisting as parts and *the passions*. In this paper, I quote and try to interpret passages drawn from Plato's *Republic IV* and connect them to the Stoics.

The Stoics are legendary for their treatment of emotions in human cognitive psychology. In fact, according to the Stoics in order for a person to live a good life, referred to as *the end*, one must be completely dissolute of *the passions*. Although all Stoic figures were in agreement about the utility of emotions, there was controversy of how *the passions* could be explained both psychologically and physiologically. Debates gave rise to the question of whether emotions are direct causes of faulty judgments, or are overpowering physical dispositions of the soul. This essay will detail the differences surrounding the two most contentious treatments of *the passions*, between Chrysippus and Posidonius, with an eye towards explaining how these opposing positions effect how a *good life* may be achieved.

To understand the treatment of *the passions*, the soul must first be investigated. According to most Stoic philosophers, the soul is a body that can act or be acted upon; it is a physiological combination of what is referred to as *pneuma*, a physical entity, consisting of air and fire spread throughout the body. In rational animals, the soul is the

reasoning faculty that is sustained by a power existing between air and fire; this power, referred to as *tension*, provides stability and substantiality to the soul; that is, balance. The soul is responsible for guiding us to live in accordance to our natural dispositions in the world; some of us, by practicing philosophy, are living according to our nature (Long and Sedley 1987, 282, 313).

The generally accepted understanding of *the passions*, equivocal to the term *emotions*, is that they are excessive impulses that are experienced in the soul by the impressions that are received from perceptions of objects in the world. The commanding faculty of the soul is believed to move towards or away from objects, in accordance to what appears good or bad. These movements are referred to as primary and secondary emotions: appetite and fear, pleasure and distress, respectfully. For example, appetite arises when things appear to be good or desirable; fear from objects that appear bad. Moreover, pleasure results from obtaining those things that appear good and retreating from those things that appear bad. Distress results from either not obtaining what appear good, or experiencing things that appear bad (Long and Sedley 1987, 410, 411).

Chrysippus, known as the leading Stoic philosopher, adopted this general view of *the passions*. He regarded the soul as an *inclusive and unified whole* and argued that it is solely responsible for the false beliefs that result in excessive impulses. Excessive impulses, he argued, are *the passions*. Furthermore, when rational humans experience *the passions*, they have made faulty judgments of what is *truly* good or bad. For example, death was not considered to be truly bad according to Stoic doctrines, but having the belief that death is to be feared, is a false judgment. False judgments cause excessive impulses that pull the soul in opposing directions, towards good and bad (Long and Sedley 1987, 410, 412, 413,).

Chrysippus describes the movement of the soul as a fluttering; a swift motion that changes rapidly. When a rational animal has excessive impulses, the fluttering in different directions towards good and bad, cause the tension in the soul to weaken and the soul is thrust into a state of constant and rapid vice. Chrysippus describes this state as: “[...] [P]eople overstep the proper and natural proportion of their impulses. [...] When someone walks in accordance with his impulse, the movement of his legs is not excessive but commensurate with the impulse, so that he can stop or change whenever he wants to. But when people run in accordance with their impulse, this sort of thing no longer happens. The movement of their legs exceeds their impulse, so that they are carried away and unable to change obediently [...]” Thus, when a person judges something incorrectly, impulses towards or away from that object take over and inhibits the soul’s power to deliberate and correct the judgment of whether something is truly good or bad (Long and Sedley 1987, 414).

On the other hand, Posidonius draws account of the soul from Plato's *Republic IV*; wherein Plato argues that the soul is not one *whole*, but must consist as tripartite. Whereas Plato named the parts of the soul: logical, high spirited, and appetite, Posidonius defined the soul's parts: rationality, competitive, and appetite. These parts, he argued, are physical dispositions and movements that happen within the entire space of the body. The competitive part of the soul resides in the chest of a person; those who have higher body temperatures and wider chests are disposed more towards anger, such as jealousy or an attitude towards injustice. Appetite is located in the belly, which is attracted and pulled towards things that appear to be desirable, such as being thirsty and hungry. Rationality, which is located within the head, always and consistently maintains its full virtuous rational powers; when it is properly developed, it regulates the balance in the soul (Long and Sedley 1987, 415(65M)).

Posidonius attributes *the passions* having risen as a result of the mixture of the souls parts. Posidonius details this inner struggle: “[Some people] do not know that having pleasure and dominating one's neighbours are the objects desired by the brutish part of the soul, but wisdom and everything good and honourable are the objects desired by the part which is rational and divine.” Posidonius argues that when a person experiences *the passions* there is a physiological struggle happening between the rational soul and the brutish parts of the soul; what results is the rational part being overpowered and conquered. Thus, according to Posidonius, the rational part of the soul is dismissed of any responsibly of directly giving rise to *the passions* (Long and Sedley 1987, 414,415,416(65KMP)).

On the other hand, Chrysippus's treatment of *the passions* places full ethical responsibility on the single, mature, rational soul. He believed that once a human infant passes outside of the womb, it is capable of possessing a soul, then at the age of seven, develops beliefs that form right reasoning. He further argued that *the passions* are false beliefs that lead to excessive impulses towards obtaining things that appear desirable. Thus, because the single soul gives rise to *the passions*, it is responsible for controlling its emotions. However, many philosophers object to this view, most notably Plato; he states: “[Isn't] the expression “self-control” ridiculous? The stronger self that does the controlling is the same as the weaker self that gets controlled, so that only one person is referred to in all such expressions.” Plato seems to indicate that it puzzling how one singular soul can overpower itself. What is more, Posidonius objected to Chrysippus's view through empirical observations that children under the age of seven, as well as some non-human animals, seem to experience emotions. Thus, a fully rational soul is not necessary for some non-human animals and children to experience *the passions* (Graver 2007, 75-76) (Cohen, Curd and Reeve 2011, 467).

Plato wrote in *Republic IV*, “It is obvious that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same

time.” It is contradictory for a singular soul to have opposing beliefs. Yet, Posidonius argues that if beliefs and emotions are in a singular soul, they should not be at odds. However, he argues that beliefs and emotions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. He argued that a person could have a false belief about something but fail to experience emotions. For example: a person may have a corrupt opinion that a terrorist attack is likely, but not experience fear. Also, some humans can have an emotion with no explanation of having a belief; such as when a person experiences a sudden onset of tears while listening to a symphony or while standing in front of a astounding piece of artwork, but has no causal explanation for the emotion. Furthermore, according to Chrysippus’s argument, an unchanging belief should produce an unchanging subsequent emotion. However, Posidonius points out that some rational beings can have a belief, but experience significantly decreased emotions over time; for example: a person may hold a false belief throughout their life that the death of their son is bad, but experience deteriorating emotions as time passes. Thus, according to Posidonius, it seems likely that *the passions* are not exclusively attached to beliefs; rather they are only in relation to the part of the soul that contains the power of belief (Graver 2007, 78) (Cohen, Curd and Reeve 2011, 472).

Chrysippus may have responded to Posidonius’s critiques by maintaining a position that non-human animals and infant portrayal of emotions are not genuine. Rather, they may be what was referred to by some Stoics as *pre-emotions*. Pre-emotions may also affect mature humans with fully rational souls. For example: a woman may be startled from what sounds to be a gunshot and experiences fear. However, her soul can deliberate and is able to correct her faulty judgment and form a correct belief that it was not a gunshot, but a vehicle that backfired (being neither bad nor something to be feared). Pre-emotions in rational animals are subject to delayed, corrected judgments, whereas non-rational animals and infants only experience the pre-emotion state of the soul (Graver 2007, 77,78).

Furthermore, Chrysippus may have addressed the claim against diminished emotions, by attributing time as a factor affecting *fresh* beliefs and emotions. Chrysippus states: “For the [impression] printing [on the soul] should not be taken to be like that of a signet-ring, since it is impossible for there to be many such prints at the same time affecting the same subject.” According to Chrysippus impressions experienced in the world are imprinted upon the soul, with a particular time stamp, and those impressions that are most near to the present soul are *fresh*. As a person ages, their belief may remain constant, but other impressions and emotions are continually stamped upon the soul, and prior beliefs lose their *fresh* position nearest to the present soul. As a result the subsequent impulses of emotions can be significantly reduced, but never eradicated as long as the belief remains the same (Graver 2007, 78) (Long and Sedley 1987, 236(39A3)).

Perhaps the most significant difference between Chrysippus and Posidonius, is how the treatment of *the passions* affects how a person obtains what is the most important end in life; *happiness*. In order for a person to be happy, the Stoics argued that a rational person must exercise right reasoning in accordance with nature. In general, the Stoics believed that the act of selecting using right reasoning is the only true good in life; actually obtaining the targets of reasoning is of no real importance. For instance, what is most important for happiness, for an archer, is performing appropriately, utilizing their power to the best of their ability to shoot a bow; whether one actually strikes a bulls-eye is not important. Chrysippus accepted this treatment of *happiness*; whereas Posidonius presented an inconsistency arising from this position. He argued that obtaining the target is logically as significant as the power of selecting using right reasoning (Long and Sedley 1987, 401(64A)).

Posidonius argued against Chrysippus's treatment of happiness because the act of reasoning does not logically seem to be of any significant value without the targets that provide the soul its power to select. Posidonius states, "If someone were to say that an archer does everything in his power not for the sake of hitting the target but for the sake of doing everything in his power, one would suppose him to be speaking in a riddling and fantastic way." For example: without a target with a bulls-eye, there would be no use of a bow and arrow, and the archer would have no awareness of an intended purpose to use their aiming skills. According to Posidonius, it seems that reasoning necessarily came into existence for the sake of desiring targets, since without targets there would be no object for the soul to apply right reasoning upon. Thus, reasoning seems dependent on targets, indicating a direct relationship, whereas the target must be valued, at the least, as beneficial as selecting using right reasoning. Therefore, it seems logical that the end goal in life is two-fold, both obtaining the target and selecting using right reasoning (Long and Sedley 1987, 402(64E7,8,9,10,11)).

Posidonius indicates that according to Chrysippus's doctrine, using reasoning to act according to what one desires, without actually obtaining the target, destroys the act of reasoning, "since it does everything for the sake of getting what is not important [...]." Yet, Chrysippus and Posidonius, as well as all other Stoic philosophers, are unwilling to assent to obtaining targets because this would destroy the Stoic doctrines of ethics. That is, if obtaining targets were important, physical benefits such as health and wealth, would be just as valuable as the soul's virtue. The Stoics believed that only the soul survives after the physical body and is born again and again in cosmic cycles. Thus, it does not seem appropriate that equivocal value could be placed on physical or targeted benefits, since they are not eternal. Thus, the Stoics had a strong metaphysical discipline, focusing on the virtue of rationality (Long and Sedley 1987, 402).

Chrysippus's doctrine of living a good and virtuous life is described as one's unified soul that selects, using right reasoning, towards obtaining happiness. Selecting can be in

the form of using a power, such as an archer selects their power in shooting a bow, or selecting whether a drink is good or bad. Virtuous selecting is believed to make a person happy. However, virtue is in selecting, not obtaining, as detailed above. Yet, Chrysippus's argument seems to create a paradox; how can one *be happy* without actually obtaining *happiness*? It is even more unclear how one could have knowledge of right reasoning, without comparing it to a successful attempt of obtaining a target. For example: how would an archer know that they are performing to the best of their ability without comparing their efforts, at least once, towards actually hitting their target (Long and Sedley 1987, 402(64C10))?

Chrysippus argued that in order to live a good life one must be happy, whereas Posidonius argues that to live a good life one must be *free from the passions*. Although happiness and freedom from the passions infer the same thing, there are important differentiations that set them apart. Both Stoic figures believed that virtue was created and perpetuated by right reasoning; and, right reasoning must necessarily be free from false judgments. Subsequently, false judgments are considered to be *the passions*. Accordingly, the target for leading a good life, according to Posidonius, is ultimately *freedom from the passions*. If Posidonius's account is correct, then Chrysippus's argument will not provide a salient way to accomplish a virtuous soul, since not obtaining the target of *freedom from the passions* would contradict selecting using right reasoning. Chrysippus may respond that if one were to exercise right reasoning in all cases, then *freedom from the passions* would be entailed in the selecting. Still, it is undeniable that if this were the case, the target would necessarily always be obtained, which as detailed above, seems to indicate an equivocal and contingent significance. And, no Stoic was willing to assent to the significance of obtaining targets. What is more, if the target is always obtained in the selecting, it could be said that right reasoning produces *freedom from the passions*. Furthermore, it can be empirically observed that right reasoning does not always produce or entail its targets (Long and Sedley 1987, 405).

Posidonius observed that some targets are not necessarily obtained, despite using right reasoning. For example: one might have right reasoning selecting healthy things, but never obtain healthiness. If the soul were one in the same, then it should not be at odds with itself; that is, a soul cannot be both healthy and ill. Where I see clarification of this point is through Plato *Republic IV*, in which he states, "Knowledge of health or disease isn't healthy or diseased, and knowledge of good and bad doesn't itself become good or bad." Plato seems to indicate that right reasoning does not become *freedom from the passions*, but rather right reasoning is a particular knowledge about *the passions*, only made possible when the soul is treated in parts. Posidonius states: "Once the cause of the emotions was seen, it resolved this absurdity. It revealed the origins of the maladjustment in what should be sought and avoided, defined the procedures of training, and solved the difficulties regarding the impulse that arises from emotion.

Living as a student of the truth and order of the whole, and helping to promote this as far as possible, completely uninfluenced by the irrational part of the soul.” What Posidonius indicates is that the virtuous rational part of the soul does not seek to obtain separation from *the passion* parts of the soul, since it is already, at the onset, treated as such. Being *free from the passions* is knowledge in the rational part of the soul about what gives rise to emotions and impulses in the brutish parts of the soul, and it being made stronger through that knowledge in order to overpower and regain tensile balance. This approach appears to fulfill both Chrysippus and Posidonius’s ethical doctrines that eternal virtue is in right reasoning, and not in obtaining targets (Long and Sedley 1987, 405(64I6)) (Cohen, Curd and Reeve 2011, 475).

Through Posidonius’s method, with support from Plato, it has been shown how actually obtaining the target is of no real significance, than using right reasoning; honoring the ethical positions of all Stoic philosophers. By separating the soul into parts, Posidonius’s argument escapes the dilemmas faced by Chrysippus; the problem of overpowering one’s own self, the necessary contingency of obtaining targets, and the empirical observations that beliefs and emotions are not mutually exclusive. Right reasoning is then a particular knowledge about the target, and knowledge is power. A rationality that has been trained by education and experience can correct faulty judgments through understanding what is truly good, or what is not to be feared. Being happy through recognizing what is truly good is what the Stoics meant by living in accordance to nature. Despite the paths that led them in different directions, both Chrysippus and Posidonius arrive at the same reachable destination, *happy is: the end*.

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