

Vacillation in Stoicism

— Experience Paper #2

I. Theory Discussion

Is a man destined to one specific career and identity? Modern people may disagree without hesitation, since most people's life is about experiencing diversity in life and wandering among culture. Stoicism, however, indicates another consideration: in *The Enchiridion* #17, representative stoics Epictetus says that “Remember that you are an actor in a drama, of such a kind as the author pleases to make it...For this is your business, to act well the character assigned you; to choose it is another's.”¹ Clearly, Stoicism believes that people should not oscillate among different passions. By comparing people as actors in a drama, Epictetus wants people to focus on one particular mission that was assigned, instead of hesitating among the choices.

There are two major explanations in stoicism.

The first one concerns the tranquility of mind. In *On Tranquility of Mind*, Seneca describes the state of mind with a focused purpose as followed: “What we are seeking, then, is how the mind may always pursue a steady, unruffled course, may be pleased with itself, and look with pleasure upon its surroundings, and experience no interruption of this joy, but abide in a peaceful condition without being ever either elated or depressed: this will be “peace of mind.””² Reading carefully, we can find two main benefits in ‘a steady, unruffled course’: pleasure and no interruption. People may disagree that it denies people's freedom of choices and characterizes people as tools, but Seneca argues that “so that shame rather than their own free will forces them to keep up the pretence.”³ Hence, stoicism is emphasizing that no vacillation actually brings freedom and tranquility instead of depriving freedom.

The second supporting idea is that vacillation brings external things that are not in our control. According to Seneca in *On Tranquility of Mind*, “Hence arises that weariness and dissatisfaction with oneself, that tossing to and fro of a mind which can nowhere

¹ Epictetus, *The Enchiridion* #17, page 4

² Seneca, *On Tranquility of Mind*, page 3

³ Seneca, *On Tranquility of Mind*, page 4

find rest, that unhappy and unwilling endurance of enforced leisure.”⁴ Specifically, ‘weariness’ and ‘dissatisfaction’ are the external things that are clarified by Epictetus in *The Enchiridion #1* that “Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions.”⁵ Thus, we can reasonably deduce that Stoicism believes that vacillation happens in things that are not in our control, so people should not worry about anything that they fail to make decision.

In general, stoicism emphasizes that oscillation is contradict to tranquility and good life. Hence people should stick to their destined intrinsic identity.

II. Personal Application

I am drunk.

Not I was, nor I will, but currently I am overwhelmingly drunk, after taking two bottles of wine in a feast with two friends.

It is a magical feeling. Each movement I take is about one second later than I expect to be. Even the typing of this passage has the delaying effect. The world is shadowing vision and sound on me — unreal, distracting, but enchanting. And soon I realize it was just like Epi said: there are external things that are not in our control. Indeed, this feeling now is exactly how I lose my control.

At this moment, I find the world become unprecedentedly clear: I return to my original state, and all the external things, such as my body, command, and desires, fade away while my internal consciousness dominates: without those vain phenomenon, who am I?

Soon I realize it is the experience day, and I begin to see myself in the stoic way. I used to consider wandering as my mission, as if I am a tune wandering among different chord progressions in order to create dynamic and colorful vitality. However, stoicism reminds me that there is one dreadful possibility that I may have never considered: what if, I am just the slave of my desires and shame, and such oscillation is a waste of my virtue and life?

⁴ Seneca, *On Tranquility of Mind*, page 4

⁵ Epictetus, *The Enchiridion #1*, page 1

Closing my eyes, with only consciousness possessed, I focus on my inner self. I could prosperously live with only basic food supply, then what is the goal of my life? The urge of vacillation among different career such as musician and philosopher soon emerges, but this time I suppress it.

How to find my destiny? No such way. It is already assigned, and all I need to do is to take my way at present with no regret.

Thus I open my computer and write this essay, without click the Logic Pro X and compose a tune that was in my head half an hour ago, nor open the Zhihu on my phone and randomly glancing things that are not specifically of my interest.

Thanks drinking, I return to my internal being; thanks my internal being, I realize the stoic way to focus without vacillation.

III. Reflection

Vacillation used to be my way to expose myself to a variety of things, but it also drags me back from being an expert in any field. Stoicism illuminates me that the key issue is to distinguish things that are not in my control, and then suppress the vain desire of confronting all the possibilities which leads to negative vacillation. Luckily, drinking helped me return to my internal tranquility, and I learned to stop my vacillation in a stoic way.