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On Anger and Vengeance

The Stoic school of thought sought to achieve, as other Hellenistic teachings did, the state of being of *eudaimonia*, or the highest good for human life, that is, a completely good human life. Yet Stoicism differed from other codes of personal ethics in its approach to achieving it. This difference emerged, in part, from the unique perspective on the soul: Stoics believed in a single-part soul, standing in sharp contradistinction to the tripartite soul preferred in Platonic teachings. Stoicism posited that this unique part to the soul was the rational part, and as such everything must emerge from this interpretation. Particularly, they note that one may differentiate between emotions and feelings. Seneca, a Roman Stoic, expounded upon this distinction in his book *De ira* (*On Anger*), making a case that vengeance—the emotion—provides sufficient motivational impetus towards justice, and that anger—the feeling—should not only be secondary to vengeance, but rather, that it should be eschewed all together.

Seneca begins by describing a hypothetical tragedy that befalls an ideal “good man,” that is, a man that has achieved or is in pursuit of *eudaimonia* through Stoic ideals. How would this good man react, Seneca asks rhetorically, to seeing his “father slaughtered, his mother raped?” As a Stoic, the answer comes naturally: “…he will not be angry; but he will avenge them.” Seneca is careful to make this distinction to separate the emotion from the feeling so as to understand how a good soul—with its rational single-part—would respond. Seneca makes the case that it follows that a good man will pursue justice, not because of some secondary motivation (in this case, anger) that may serendipitously align with what is just, but rather pursue justice because that goal is itself a worthy goal, a good goal.

Why, moreover, are you afraid that *pietas* [piety] is too slight a motivation without anger? … The good man will fulfill his duties undisturbed and unafraid; and he will do what is worthy of a good man in such a way so to do nothing that is unworthy of a man.

In explicitly noting that the good man will avoid doing anything “that is unworthy of a man,” Seneca makes clear his position that being motivated by anger would be precisely that, an “unworthy” motivation. So, when he asks if “*pietas* is too slight a motivation without anger,” the answer becomes clear: not only is *pietas* sufficient; the intermingling with the feeling of anger would tarnish the purity of the emotion.

While Seneca’s argument is wholly consistent with the Stoic code of personal ethics, I find such arguments to be cold-blooded and, rather than the pinnacle of human conduct, if I may be so bold, inhuman. In suppressing basic human instincts in the name of rationality, the Stoics undermine natural human feelings. While I find the goal of a purer justness to be a virtuous goal, worthy of a good man, and while I furthermore agree that being purely reliant on the mercurial passions would be ill-advised, to go so far so as to reject anger is too inhuman. As such, I find the argument toward suppression of anger to be fundamentally incompatible with my perspective of the meaning of being human, and as such ultimately unpersuasive.

Nevertheless, the distinction between vengeance and anger is a fair one. Vengeance has the reliability of law: as Nussbaum writes, it is “secure, constant, reliable, passionless” (392). And, since vengeance is related simply to the necessary justice arising from the action, it exists in a plane independent of feelings. Similarly, anger or “pain”, in its fluctuating passion, lacks the security, constancy, and reliability of vengeance. Thus, while anger and pain may direct a man towards justness, it may also prove to be unaligned with justice. This possibility, unworthy of a good man, is why vengeance and vengeance alone is necessary for the pursuit of justice. After all, vengeance, to a good man, is precisely the emotion aligned with “appropriateness,” or “justice.” Accordingly, the distinction between the two is logical and important, thus creating a more ethical practice of justness.

However, I contend that Seneca’s Stoic approach is ultimately too excessive, and that when he calls for the passions to be rejected and that they are unworthy of a good man, Seneca would be driving the good man away from the essence of humanity. Rather, the good man should acknowledge the anger, and not try to suppress the feeling itself; rather, he should merely suppress the actions arising from anger, especially if unaligned with justness, and act according to those inspired by vengeance alone.

Seneca’s and exploration of *eudaimonia* is important, revealing important distinctions between emotions and feelings, ultimately creating a useful approach to justness. Yet in pursuit of the Stoic ideal, the subversion of the passions, including anger, in favor of a monolithic rationality ultimately serves, in my view, to distance the good man from the paragon of humanity. While, as intended, the Stoic approach to the ethical practice of justness does indeed elevate justness by relying on the constancy of emotions such as vengeance, it does so with an inflexibility reminiscent of the law. Ultimately, perhaps, in trying to achieve a “good man” by elevating that which is “good,” Seneca has done at the cost of “man.”