

# Ten

## CAN A STOIC LOVE?

William O. Stephens

While much excellent work has been done on the Stoic doctrine of the emotions in general, and some recent work on the Stoic concept of friendship, no systematic study of the Stoic account of that spectrum of emotional dispositions covered by our term “love” exists (Ioppolo, 1972; Lloyd, 1978; Frede, 1986; Nussbaum, 1987; Lesses, 1993). Of what kind of love, if any, is the Stoic Sage (*phronimos*) capable? Does the Stoic really love in our sense at all? Cicero’s Cato declares, “even the passion of love when pure is not thought incompatible with the character of the Stoic Sage” (*De Finibus* 3.68, trans. Rackham, 1983, p. 289). Seneca reports:

I think *Panaetius* gave a charming answer to the youth who asked whether the wise man would fall in love: “As to the wise man, we shall see. What concerns you and me, who are still a great distance from the wise man, is to ensure that we do not fall into a state of affairs which is disturbed, powerless, subservient to another and worthless to oneself.” (Long and Sedley, 1987, p. 423, translating *Ep.* 116. 5)

Here I reconstruct an account of how the Stoic Sage loves from the best extended source for this purpose, the late Stoic Epictetus. In Epictetus, the constellation of Greek terms that comprises the concept of Stoic love includes the verbs *στέργειν* (to love, be fond of, show affection for), *φιλείν* (to love, to cherish), and *χαίρειν* (to rejoice, be glad, take pleasure in), and the nouns *φιλοστοργία* (tender love, affection) and *τὸ φιλόστοργον* (adjectival form of *φιλοστοργία*, here used as a substantive, as in English “the rich,” meaning affection, often as in family).

Though most of the Stoics envisaged the paragon of wisdom to be a man, I see no reason for us to think that Stoic sageness need be gender specific. Thus I merely follow the ancient Stoics’ own usage when I refer to “the wise man.” On Epictetus’ view, (1) the wise man genuinely loves (*stergein*) and is affectionate (*philostorgos*) to his family and friends, (2) the Stoic wise man loves in a robustly rational way that excludes passionate “erotic” love (*eramai*), and (3) only the Stoic wise man, properly speaking, actually has the power to love (to *philein*). The upshot is that while Epictetus’ conception excludes the irrational and heart-rending aspects of what we typically conceive of as love, by emphasizing the joyful, positive aspects of our concept, Epictetus’ Stoic conception deserves to be called “love.”

Epictetus explains that the Stoic defines his own good as one and the same as the noble, the honorable, and the just. Because of this, the preservation of the Stoic's natural and acquired relations becomes necessary for keeping his volition (*prohairesis*) in a healthy state, i.e. in a state in accord with nature's norm. Thus virtuous conduct toward others is required for his own intellectual self-preservation and happiness (*eudaimonia*). Moreover, Epictetus holds that the Stoic ought not to be unfeeling like a statue since he is by nature affectionate, gentle, faithful, helpful, and loving, and so is and ought to be naturally drawn to fulfill all his social, familial, and civic roles as a healthy, mentally attuned human being (Epictetus, *Diss.*, iii 2.4. Throughout I will for the most part follow Oldfather's translation in his (1925) and (1928). Nonetheless, he does not let his feelings for others disrupt his mental serenity (*Diss.*, ii 14.8). But how can the Stoic maintain his relationships with other people without being unfeeling on the one hand, and yet without becoming upset on the other when those whom he cares about suffer or are lost? Epictetus says not only that tender affection (*philostorgia*) for our own children is natural, but that once we have children, it is not in our power not to love (*stergein*) them (*Diss.*, i 23.3; *Diss.*, i 23.5. Here Epictetus is emphasizing the compelling power of the social *oikeiôsis* that parents feel toward their children; cf. *SVF*, iii 179, ii 724). Yet how can the Stoic love his children in our sense of "love," without also suffering emotional distress when they are hurt?

In order to resolve this dilemma we must first distinguish between the natural feelings which the Stoic has, affection, gentleness, helpfulness, etc., which are entirely positive, and the feelings that disrupt his mental serenity. For example, one would think that, from the Stoic's perspective, when one's child dies, grief, which is a passion that destroys peace of mind, is not "natural" in the sense of being appropriate. Rather, such passionate grief is only "natural" in the sense of being an affective response typical of non-Stoics. Epictetus has said that family affection (*philostorgos*) and fondness (*sterktikon*) are natural human feelings which are compatible with what is reasonable, and so Epictetus does not consider them to be "passions" (*pathê*) (*Diss.*, i 11.17–19; cf. ii 10.22–23). The Stoic is not supposed to be devoid of these natural, positive feelings, which Epictetus evidently would include among the classic "good feelings" (*eupatheiai*) of orthodox Stoicism (joy or delight (*khara*), caution (*eulabeia*), and wishing (*boulêsis*)), but should only be devoid of the overly intense passions that destroy his imperturbability (*ataraxia*, *euroia*) and *apatheia*. Frede makes this same point by observing that the Stoics reject the Aristotelian view of the *pathê* because they also think it is grossly misleading to think of the affections of the soul as *pathê* in the sense of passive affections. They rather are *pathê* in the sense of illnesses, diseases. They are the diseases of the mind which we have to cure" (Frede, 1986, p. 99). We could say, then, that the Stoic is passionless but not unfeeling.

Epictetus holds that only (Stoic) philosophy, in fact, can produce in us peace of mind by eliminating *erôs*, sorrow, envy, and other passions (*Diss.*, iii

13.10). Thus, as Adolf Bonhöffer correctly observes, Epictetus agrees with the early Stoa that since *erôs* is a pathos, it must be rejected: “*Erôs* is therefore here interpreted as an emotion disturbing inner peace and true happiness” (1894, p. 66). A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley write: “the term pathos includes not only the obviously turbulent emotions of sexual desire, ambition, jealousy etc., but also such states of mind as hesitancy, malice and pity, all classified under one of the four primary passions, appetite, pleasure, fear and distress” (1987, pp. 419–420). So even though they add, “passion is . . . an unhealthy state of mind, not synonymous with emotion in ordinary language,” Long and Sedley appear to agree with Bonhöffer that *erôs*, that is, sexual desire, is a “turbulent emotion” which, as such, the Stoic wise man must reject. Epictetus criticizes the person who appeals to his “being in erotic love” as an excuse for being incontinent (*Diss.*, ii 21.7).

Part of maintaining one’s natural and acquired relations involves easing the pain of others by providing emotional support and comfort. For example, Epictetus cites such deeds as faithfully nursing one’s sick daughter (*Diss.*, i 11.19–26; *Diss.*, iii 7.3) and bravely accompanying one’s son on a dangerous sea voyage as acts of love (*philostorgon*). Often enough our family members or friends are troubled, mourn, or grieve, and it would be callously unfeeling of us to ignore their distress. But what is the Stoic supposed to do, for example, when his mother misses him?

But my mother mourns because she does not see me.—Yes, but why did she not learn the meaning of these words of the philosophers? And I am not saying that you ought to take no pains to keep her from lamenting, but only that a person ought not to want at all costs what is not his own. Now another’s grief is no concern of mine, but my own grief is. Therefore, I will put an end at all costs to what is my own concern, for it is under my control, and that which is another’s concern I will endeavor to check to the best of my ability, but my effort to do so will not be made at all costs. Otherwise I shall be fighting against god, I shall be setting myself in opposition to Zeus, I shall be arraying myself against him in regard to his administration of the universe. (*Diss.*, iii 24.22–24)

Since the lamenting of my mother is an external and is not under my control, I should try my best to ease her pain and comfort her since this much I can attempt and is required of me as her son. Yet I should not want her to stop grieving at all costs because this is not under my control. My mother’s grief is her own concern, not mine, because it is the result of her own judgments about external events. If I wish to have the power to end her suffering, then I am wishing for the nature of the universe to be different than it is. I would be wishing to control my own judgments and hers as well, but this is simply not how Zeus has established the nature of things. I can and certainly should attempt to relieve her distress since the attempt is within my power.

The result of my attempt to console her, however, lies beyond my prohairesis and so is properly speaking not my concern. If I am to be a rational Stoic, then I must not sacrifice my own mental serenity to a desire to end my mother's grief. Ultimately she will determine whether she can bear her troubles or whether she will continue to feel grief. Her grief, then, is up to her, not me.

Here the behavior of the Stoic who endeavors to comfort someone in sorrow appears to be identical to the kind non-Stoic who not only tries to relieve another's sorrow but also shares in it. The crucial difference between the Stoic and the kind non-Stoic in this case is not that the non-Stoic is sincere in wanting the griever's sorrow to end whereas the Stoic is not really sincere. They both truly want the other person's suffering to cease, but the difference is that the Stoic does not "want it at all costs," that is, he does not sacrifice his own imperturbability in the consoling. The well intentioned but misguided non-Stoic, on the other hand, takes on and shares in the sorrow of the other person. The Stoic shows sympathy to the unfortunate wretch who, because he incorrectly judges some happening to be evil, makes himself sorrowful, but the Stoic does not feel sympathy for him because this would be to subject his own soul to a pathos on account of the mistaken judgment of another. So the Stoic empathizes by means of his words of comfort and external behavior while not making the mistake of succumbing to the pathological state of another by allowing himself to suffer internally (See *Ench.*, 16).

On Epictetus' account, consequently, one should rejoice with others and share in their happiness but not share in their misery, which stems from misjudging an external to be evil (See *Diss.*, iii 24.1–2; cf. iii 24.63). Each person's misfortune and unhappiness is self-imposed, on Epictetus' view, and results from making the wrong judgments about things, namely, judgments contrary to nature. For example, since "it is impossible for one human being always to live with another," Epictetus reasons that to wish never to be separated from a loved one, and to weep and lament when one is so separated, is foolish and slavish (*Diss.*, iii 24.20). It is to forget how things are and irrationally to wish for the impossible. "Yes, but I want my little children and my wife to be with me.—Are they yours? Do they not belong to him who gave them? To him who made you? Will you not, therefore, give up what is not your own?" (*Diss.*, iv 1.107). Everything extra-*prohairesis* belongs to Zeus, since he is the one who gives and takes away in exercising his control over them. But only *prohairesis* things truly belong to the individual, so one is entitled to claim only them.

A person's own family members should not be claimed as one's own possessions because, since Zeus controls the external circumstances of life, a person's life belongs to no one but the god. For this reason Epictetus believes one should not speak of losing something that one never truly owned in the first place. "Never say about anything, 'I have lost it,' but only 'I have given it back' (*Ench.*, 11). Is your child dead? It has been given back. Is your wife dead? She has been given back." One's loved ones are not part of one's true

self; they lie outside one's prohairesis (moral character). Like all externals, then, they should be enjoyed if and as long as one has them, yet they should be taken care of as things that are not one's own, like travelers treat their inn (*Diss.*, i 24.14–15 and ii 23.36–38, *Ench.*, 11). “And if you wish by all means your children to live, or your wife, or your brother, or your friends, is the matter under your control?—No” (*Diss.*, iv 1.67). To remember that the lives of others are not under one's own control should suffice to prevent the sensible person from desperately wishing them to live no matter what. The death of every person is inevitable because Zeus has made death the natural end to life (See *Ench.*, 14.1). To wish that one's loved ones were immune from death is ridiculous because it is to wish that mortals were immortal (See *Diss.*, iii 24.27–28). Death ought not to be the cause of misery, Epictetus seems to reason, because it is a necessary part of the natural course of events. Therefore, the death of a loved one should never be viewed as a tragically sad surprise or a cause of alarm because it is completely understandable.

But if the Stoic really loves his wife, children, and friends, then how can he help but be distressed when they die? After all, the death of a loved one is not merely the death of a mortal. It is the permanent end of a specific, flesh and blood, irreplaceable person who is the object of one's fondest adoration. Does not loving such people necessarily entail always wanting them to be healthy, to flourish, to fare well, and above all, to live, and thus does not it also necessarily entail being greatly upset when they fall ill, flounder in misery, fare poorly, and die? Once again Epictetus insists that the proper Stoic attitude must be exclusively positive: to enjoy those who are with us while they are with us, but not to grieve when they go. Quite prosaically he states that the nature of the universe is such that “some must remain with each other, while others must depart, and that though we must rejoice (*chairontas*) in those who dwell with us, yet we must not grieve at those who depart” (*Diss.*, iii 24.11). The object of the Stoic's love should be enjoyed as long as it is present. Its absence should not be allowed to transform that joy into sadness. The Stoic is supposed to rejoice in the associates that Zeus has seen fit to give him for the period of time he determines. Yet when those people depart, as they eventually must, for the Stoic then to feel bitter would be contrary to his nature as a rational being, according to Epictetus, because it would be to fail to recognize and accept the nature of things.

The Stoic prevents himself from being saddened and distressed by the absence of something or someone he loves by simply constantly reminding himself of the impermanent, transitory nature of every external to which he could grow attached. In this way Epictetus seems to think the Stoic will not allow that attachment to become a chain that would eventually drag him down into misery and grief when the object of the attachment departs or is destroyed. Epictetus believes that if one remembers the fragility of the things one loves, one can then restrain one's natural affection and stop the feeling of love from intensifying into an uncontrollable pathos. The rational considera-

tions of the temporariness of the liaison, the inevitable separations from the loved one, and her eventual death, function to prevent the Stoic from being overpowered by his emotions and foolishly desiring his loved one “out of season” (*Diss.*, iii 24.84–87; cf. *Ench.*, 3). If the Stoic has the mental strength and discipline to “hold back his exuberant spirits,” and can stop them from mutating into a pathos, then he will safeguard himself from the frustration and misery of wanting grapes in winter or wishing his deceased wife were still with him. Missing one’s deceased spouse is a much greater anguish than having an insatiable craving for grapes in winter, but the difference between these two desires is only quantitative—it is only a difference in degree. For Epictetus these two desires are qualitatively the same because they are equally irrational, and so equally avoidable.

The Stoic loves other people in a very free, giving way. His love is not conditional upon its being reciprocated by the person loved. The Stoic does not compromise his own moral integrity or mental serenity in his love for others, nor is his love impaired by his knowledge of the mortality of his loved ones. Rather, the Stoic’s love and natural affection is tempered by reason. His love and affection serve only to enrich his humanity, never to subject him to psychic torment.

How, then, shall I become affectionate [*philostorgos*]? —As one of noble spirit, as one who is fortunate; for it is against all reason to be abject, or broken in spirit, or to depend on something other than yourself, or even to blame either god or human. I would have you become affectionate in such a way as to maintain at the same time all these rules; if, however, by virtue of this natural affection [*philostorgian*], whatever it is you call by that name, you are going to be a slave and miserable, it does not profit you to be affectionate. And what keeps you from loving [*philein*] someone as a mortal, as one who may leave you? Did not Socrates love [*epi-  
lei*] his own children? But in a free spirit, as one who remembers that it was his first duty to be a friend to the gods. (*Diss.*, iii 24.58–60)

The Stoic loves freely in the sense that he does not allow his love to enslave his happiness. The Sage does not permit his love of others to become such that his happiness depends upon always having his loved ones with him. This is because the Stoic does not allow his love ever to be a cause of loneliness, bitterness, or sorrow. Rather, having someone to love is always and only a joyous gift for which he should be grateful. Yet it is a gift that he should not expect to receive or count on keeping once he has it. Life promises no such gifts, nor are they necessary for him to enjoy a happy, that is, virtuous, life. Loved ones are simply added bonuses over and beyond his self-secured happiness. Losing those bonuses, however, in no way detracts from his happiness since it in no way compromises his virtue, which is the sole necessary and sufficient condition of his *eudaimonia*.

The passionate, erotic love (*eramai*) that permits sacrifice of one's freedom of will and dignity to one's beloved in order to appease her demands Epictetus considers to be a terrible form of emotional servitude.

Were you never in love with [*êrasthês*] anyone, a pretty girl, or pretty boy, a slave, a freedman? —What, then, has that to do with being either slave or free? —Were you never commanded by your sweetheart to do something you didn't wish to do? Did you never cozen your pet slave? Did you never kiss his feet? Yet if someone should compel you to kiss the feet of Caesar, you would regard that as insolence and most extravagant tyranny. What else, then, is slavery? (*Diss.*, iv 1.15–18)

This type of love enslaves one's reason and better judgment to the passionate desire to gratify one's beloved; it results in a state of emotional bondage. The Stoic values his personal dignity and self-respect too much to let his affection take his prohairesis hostage in this way. Consequently, he takes deliberate steps to prevent his love of others from degenerating into this debilitating erotic love which, as an irrational pathos, overpowers his reason and throws him into the described psychic slavery.

The difficulty of regulating one's loving affection so that it provides only positive, joyful feelings without making one emotionally dependent upon loved ones should by now be clearly manifest. Epictetus' awareness of this difficulty is evident in his fascinating argument that in fact only the phronimos really has the power to love (*philein*). I will conclude with a brief examination of this bold and fascinating argument.

Whatever one is earnest about [*espoudaken*] one naturally loves. And therefore are people earnest about things evil? Not at all. But are they earnest about things which do not respect them? No, not about these either. It remains, therefore, that they are earnest only about good things; and if they are earnest about them, they also love [*philein*] them. Whoever, then, has knowledge of good things, would know how to love [*philein*] them too; but if one is unable to distinguish good things from evil things, and what is neither good nor evil from both the others, how would this one still be able to love? Accordingly, the power to love [*to philein*] belongs to the wise one [*tou phronimou*] and to him alone/ (*Diss.*, ii 22.1–3)

The logic of this argument can be analyzed as follows:

(1) People are earnest about evil things, or things that in no respect concern them, or good things.

(2) People are earnest neither about evil things nor about things that in no respect concern them.

(3) Hence, people are earnest only about good things. [From (1) and (2)]

(4) If one is earnest about a thing, then one loves that thing.

(5) Hence, people love good things. [From (3) and (4)]

(6) If one has knowledge of good things, then one knows how to love (good things).

(7) If one is unable to distinguish good things from evil things or from things that are neither, then one does not know how to love (good things).

(8) The wise one has knowledge of good things, evil things, and things that are neither.

(9) Hence, the wise one knows how to love (good things). [From (6) and (8)]

(10) The nonwise are unable to distinguish good things from evil things or from things that are neither.

(11) Hence, the nonwise do not know how to love (good things). [From (7) and (10)]

(12) Therefore, only the wise one knows how to love (good things). [From (9) and (11). The suppressed premise is the exclusive disjunction that one is either wise or not wise.]

It seems that the intermediate conclusion in step 5, that people love good things, should be construed to mean that people want to be able to love good things, or that people try to love good things. But Epictetus is arguing that if one succeeds in loving good things, then one must know what things really are good, and what things really are not. If one cannot discriminate between good, evil, and indifferent things, however, then this ignorance will make one incapable of successfully loving what one wants to be able to love. Since nonwise people do not know that only the virtues are good things, they will not have the power to love them, and so will not have the power to love at all, properly speaking.

Now it might appear that an unwelcome corollary of this argument would be that only the wise man is earnest about things. But if this is a corollary of Epictetus' argument, then it would, in fact, be welcome for the following reason. The verb I translate "be earnest about" throughout Epictetus' argument is *spoudazô*. Oldfather's translation, "take an interest in," weakens the force of this verb here. *Spoudazô* has the stronger sense of "be serious" or "pursue earnestly." In this sense, the Stoics would certainly be comfortable with the proposition that only the Stoic wise man pursues things earnestly, with the correct attitude. After all, only the wise man has knowledge of what is truly good, i.e. the virtues, what is truly evil, i.e. the vices, and what is indifferent, i.e. extra-*prohairesis* things. This leads the wise man to be really serious about what is noble, just, and honorable, and to pursue the virtues with the proper zeal. Understanding that these are the things to be taken seriously empowers the phronimos with the power to love. The certainty of disposition enjoyed by the phronimos stems from a firm grasp of the knowledge of good, evil, and what is neither, not from a mere belief in the apparent good. The Stoic wise man commits himself to loving others without expect-



ing that his love be reciprocated since, if the people he loves are not wise, then, they do not even have the power to return his love. As non-Stoics they fail to recognize what they ought to be serious about. In contrast, the Stoic sage (*phronimos*) or wise man (*ho sophos*) is *spoudaios*. He alone is both “serious” and “excellent” (*Stobaeus* 2. 99. 3–8). The sage has an expertise in living and loving that non-Stoics lack.

In conclusion, I suggest that the love of the *phronimos* for others manifests itself not primarily in his striving to improve their material, economic conditions of living, but rather in the transmission to them of his inner wealth, i.e. his wisdom. It seems reasonable to think that beyond the minimal necessities of water, food, clothing and shelter, which are arguably necessary conditions for striving for virtue at all, the Stoic wise man could perhaps better offer his humanitarian aid by educating, assuming he possessed the talent to teach (Bonhöffer, 1894, p. 95; *Diss.*, iii 22.83; cf. i 10.1). This is because although economic aid provides basic subsistence, it does not really contribute to what Epictetus conceives of as true happiness. True happiness consists in internal goods, i.e. the virtues of character and mental freedom that come from wise judgments. Happiness can thus be seen as the fruit of Stoic education.

Accordingly, Epictetus, who was himself a teacher, was committed to doing all he could to eliminate the mental and spiritual poverty that is the source of the misery of non-Stoics. As Bonhöffer observes, this is why the activity of the wise Cynic, the king of the *kosmos*, is so much more important than political activity pertaining to taxes and revenue. Bonhöffer observes that Epictetus regards the Cynic as the greatest benefactor of the human race because of the moral improving and ennobling influence he has on his fellow-beings (1894 p. 105). The Stoic sage, the *phronimos*, thus loves in an eminently practical way by trying to teach Stoicism to others and encouraging them to achieve his own hard-won Stoic wisdom.

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