



## Thoughts and Experience

*Ancient philosophers' views on emotions*

### Carolyn Price

I'm Carolyn Price. I met Professor Sorabji in Oxford in May 2004 and I began by asking him why the emotions provoked such disagreement among ancient philosophers.

### Richard Sorabji

There came to be a big controversy about whether we should get rid of all our emotions or whether it was better to have emotions. This was the biggest controversy of all and once this controversy had got going everybody, all the philosophical schools, had to address it. Aristotle held that in order to have good character you've got to be angry sometimes but only to the right extent as called for by that particular occasion. In the generation after Aristotle the stoic school was founded in the same city of Athens and the stoics took an alternative view that to have good character you've really got to get rid of virtually all emotions all together and once these two big schools in Athens had put forward this issue all the other schools thereafter had to take sides and decide what they thought.

### Carolyn Price

What exactly did Aristotle think that an emotion was?

### Richard Sorabji

Well, he thought that an emotion was always accompanied by pleasure or pain and he thought that it was due to a belief, or sometimes he used a different word, appearance that things were good in some way for you or bad in some way for you. There is a place where he emphasises this notion of due to, the emotion is due to these beliefs or appearances. Anger is due to the belief or appearance that you've been wronged, hope is due to the belief that there might be some good in the future. But the pleasure and pain is always there. Pleasure and pain are not themselves just brute movements because he describes pleasure and pain as a matter of perceiving something as good or perceiving it as bad. Another point he's very insistent on is that all emotions are embedded in a physiological process, anger involves a boiling of the fluids around the heart for example. He makes these points in different works because sometimes he's talking about the natural sciences and there he tends to emphasise the physiological accompaniment, but in another place he's advising orators how to speak in public in politics or in the law courts and then he's much more interested in the beliefs and the appearances, because you've got to stir up emotions in the law courts. So he seems to be aware of all these different factors, the pleasure and the pain, the other beliefs and appearances and the physiology, but he'll emphasise different ones in different treatises because of the different subject matter.

### Carolyn Price

So would it be right then to say that Aristotle regarded emotions as complex events?

### Richard Sorabji

Absolutely right. And that creates an interesting contrast with some of the stoics because some of the stoics tried to whittle down emotions as we'll see later, so that they weren't complex in that way.

### Carolyn Price

You've mentioned that Aristotle thinks that we should experience emotions in a good life, what did Aristotle think was the value of emotions?

### Richard Sorabji

Well, imagine the person who can read about what the Nazis did to people and feel no anger or indignation or shame. It's quite reasonable to think there's

something wrong with such a person. It's interesting that the stoics don't agree but the most obvious reaction is to think that there's something wrong with a person who doesn't feel anything when they read that. So I think that at first glance Aristotle's view looks very compelling that there's something wrong with a person who doesn't feel any emotion at all. Of course he's equally concerned with a person who feels too much emotion and I agree with him on that. Emotion is often most destructive to the person who feels it, the person who's always too angry they're usually damaging themselves, they're probably also damaging other people at the same time. So it's a very commonsensical view and he's a very commonsensical philosopher.

**Carolyn Price**

There's another thread of thought about emotion that treats emotion as somehow in opposition to reason, but what did Aristotle think was the relationship between emotion and reason?

**Richard Sorabji**

Aristotle takes a quite subtle view because he says that emotions are not totally unconnected with reason because they can listen to reason so that it's not like having a cold. If you have a cold it's no good somebody reasoning with you, you've still got a cold, it makes no difference but if you have an emotion in principle somebody might be able to reason you out of it, that's what he means by saying emotions have some connection with reason because people can be reasoned out of them and that connects with the point that emotions are due to beliefs and in cases where those beliefs are mistaken in principle it ought to be possible to reason people out of misguided emotions. So he's not taking a straight forward opposition, but neither is he going to anticipate the later stoic view that emotions are simply an exercise of reason.

**Carolyn Price**

So how would Aristotle have responded to the idea that there might be a rational person who had no emotions at all?

**Richard Sorabji**

Well, he or she could not be a good person, because the good person does need to feel emotions to the right extent and the right place. Now, could there be any being for Aristotle who lacked emotions? I think Aristotle's God might come fairly close to that. Aristotle thinks of God as a super philosopher who's always thinking philosophical thoughts. Now you might say, ah yes but when we think philosophical thoughts we at least have to have desires because we have to want to find the answer to our question but God doesn't have to look for answers to questions, god understands everything already and just contemplates it. So I'm not quite clear that Aristotle's God even has to desire to find answers, he's very intellectual. So perhaps Aristotle thinks there could be a conscious being that didn't have emotions but that being wouldn't be human.

**Carolyn Price**

Well you've already mentioned the stoics. Can we go on and talk a little bit about the stoic philosopher Seneca? What did Seneca think that Aristotle got wrong about the emotions?

**Richard Sorabji**

Let me explain that the stoic school was founded 22 years after Aristotle's death, in the very same city of Athens, not much more than 1,000m away from Aristotle's school, which was still continuing. Seneca was not one of the first stoics, Aristotle died in 322BC, the stoic school was founded in 300BC, we've got to move more than 300 years before we get to the birth of Seneca, because he lived in the first century AD. Seneca had benefited from many years of debate between Aristotelians and Stoics and so he was refining the stoic view. He disagreed with Aristotle both about what emotions were and about whether they were desirable. He accepted the stoic view that almost all emotions should be got rid of. But he also accepted the stoic view that emotions were not complex in quite the way that Aristotle said. Emotions were just judgements.

**Carolyn Price**

So how did that idea arise?

### **Richard Sorabji**

This view had first been crystallised by the third head of the Stoic school who lived about 300 years earlier in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. His name was Chrysippus and he very much sharpened up stoic philosophy. Chrysippus seems to have decided that emotions were just judgements, or as Aristotle would have said beliefs. Furthermore Chrysippus told us exactly which two beliefs were involved in every emotion. There was the belief that there was good or bad in the present or in the future and there was the belief, the judgement that it was appropriate to react accordingly. Emotions were never purely about the past. Of course, admittedly, if you're angry you may be making the judgement that something bad was done to you in the past but you wouldn't feel angry he thought if it was all over and done with. The anger involves the thought that you are still in a bad position now because of what was done in the past. Its present harm, present bad, or future bad that's involved in all emotions.

### **Carolyn Price**

You mentioned the second judgement, the judgement that it's appropriate to react in a particular way, what reactions were judged to be appropriate?

### **Richard Sorabji**

Well, in two cases it was behavioural reactions, in the case of fear you judge appropriate to avoid the bad thing. In the case of desire you judge it appropriate to reach for the good things they say. But in the case of pleasure and distress what you judge appropriate is not a piece of behaviour, what you judge appropriate is the sinkings that you feel in your chest. I think this is familiar to most people, when they're distressed they can have a sinking feeling in the chest and they may further judge, yes and how appropriate this sinking feeling is to my dreadful situation. So there are your judgements, always a pair, and the emotions just are these judgements, according to Chrysippus the third head. Well, what's happened to Aristotle's physiological process, have they forgotten it? No, they have not. Seneca says something very interesting about physiological effects involved in emotion. I think this is something that Seneca had worked out, or at any rate it was later stoics who worked this part out. Sometimes you have an initial appearance that things are good or bad. Now according to the stoics we can't help having an initial appearance that things are good or bad, for example you say good morning to somebody and they walk right past you, somebody you know perfectly well. You have an initial appearance, that's really bad, then you reflect, of course it isn't bad they're short-sighted, so a moment's reflection corrects it but you can't help having the initial appearance that there's something bad in that case. Now, that's not an emotion yet and you see it was so quickly corrected that nothing you could really call an emotion had started. Nonetheless it might be enough to set up a sort of physical tingling, or some other little shock, you might find yourself getting a little bit hot or sweaty, there can be mental shocks too, I mean those sinking feelings that I talked about, if they're very small and preliminary sinking feelings they might be just felt by the mind but not have a physiological manifestation. There can be an initial shock; a first movement Seneca calls it. Now, this isn't yet the emotion, this wasn't yet made clear by Chrysippus the early third head of the stoic school. It is made beautifully clear by Seneca. This to my mind is the clearest passage in all of the stoics about the emotions. I'm talking about Book 2 of his Treaties on Anger. The opening of Book 2, just the first three or four pages of it, explain these various steps, the initial appearance that there's bad around because your greeting wasn't returned, the first movement that that sets up which might be physiological, might be sweating a bit, but it doesn't add up to emotion because it's immediately corrected, it's not endorsed. Now we get emotion when people endorse that first appearance, but once you have that you have the emotion because you'll also have the second judgement that it's appropriate to react in such and such a way and then you may be carried away to yet further violent judgements. Now, I could say a lot more at this point because this conception of what emotions are has enormous consequences for how you're going to control them and Seneca says in this passage that that is why it's so important to know what emotions are because now we can see that they're things not like a cold that you can't correct, or that you'd have to correct by medicine or something like that, they are the sort of thing that more careful reasoning might correct because they are judgements and so that opens the door to that whole stoic programme of how by intellectual means you could get rid of the emotions they disapprove of, which in their case is almost all emotions. Well, you can see it's very different from Aristotle. Aristotle

actually discusses in the first chapter of his book on the soul how sometimes the physiology can almost force you into an emotion, even though there's nothing appropriate to make you angry. Now, what Seneca is saying is the physiology is always there, there's always going to be a physiological accompaniment necessarily so, but it isn't part of the emotion and that's not what you've got to address in order to get rid of an emotion and indeed it's rather important to see that the physiology is unimportant. You know how often people can say to themselves, look I'm crying, I must have been maltreated, but say the stoics that doesn't follow at all. You're crying, so you're crying, but the important question is, have you been maltreated? And that is a completely different question.

**Carolyn Price**

Did Seneca think that we were completely capable of controlling our emotions?

**Richard Sorabji**

Well, he didn't think we would ever be capable of controlling those first movements that I spoke of, the shivering, the knees knocking, the face growing pale and so on. He rather tellingly says that even the most experienced public speaker still feels his fingers stiffen before he speaks but that doesn't matter because those aren't the emotion but he does think that in principle it would be possible to get rid of all the bad emotions which is most of the emotions and that the stoic wise person would do so. But has there ever been a stoic wise person? There's no clear example of a stoic wise person who was actually successful, so it's more like an ideal and the later stoics like Seneca thought it was an ideal towards which you can progress regardless of whether you or anybody will ever succeed.

**Carolyn Price**

What kinds of objections to this view of the emotions can be found in the ancient literature?

**Richard Sorabji**

The most striking objection of all came not from the Aristotelians as you might expect but it actually came from the great doctor Galen, who lived after Seneca, again. He was working shortly before 200AD whereas Seneca was in the early and middle 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Galen had some sympathy with stoic attitudes about controlling emotion, like the stoics Galen was particularly anxious about anger. Because of the existence of slavery anger was a real problem. If you were irritated with your slave you could poke his eyes out or her eyes out and that was simply damaging your own property, it was nobody else's business. So, slavery made anger a real problem and he is sympathetic to the stoic idea that there are intellectualistic techniques for calming anger and other emotions, he writes a whole treatise on that but more interesting to me is another treatise he writes, it's called That States of Mind Follow the Blends of the Body. And what he says is that if you want to control your emotions you must come to me first, the doctor Galen and I will change your diet. In other words his idea was that you've got to get the diet right because you've got to get the physiology right before you do anything else. Now, he's perfectly happy with the idea that after that you might try these intellectualistic techniques but you've got to start by getting the body right. This debate is still going on nowadays, it's a debate between those who treat emotions with drugs and say look it's all to do with the body and those who treat emotions with cognitive therapy.

**Carolyn Price**

Well, you say in your recent book that in some ways the ancient debate about the emotions is more interesting than the modern one, why did you say that?

**Richard Sorabji**

I don't know whether I thought it was more interesting but I thought it was more thorough and more exact and that was because the third head of the stoic school specified precisely which two judgements were involved in every emotion. Now this enormously raised the standard of debate because it meant that very smart counter-examples could be targeted on these claims and they were by one of the stoics Posidonius who didn't agree.

**Carolyn Price**

So, what kinds of counter-example did Posidonius come up with?

**Richard Sorabji**

He said, first of all, wordless music can give you emotions. But surely they don't give you any particular thoughts, he said. Wordless music can arouse a sort of longing in you. But what is the judgement involved here? In this case he thought there wasn't any judgement involved, it's an emotion without a judgement so he argues. Here's another case. The stoics had a view which I don't share about animals that animals have no reason and therefore never make judgements and yet surely animals have emotions. So isn't this another case of emotions without judgements? Now, here's an example of the opposite situation, the relevant judgements without the emotion. Sometimes you judge that something very bad is being suffered by you and you judge that it would be appropriate to react accordingly but you're just emotionally exhausted and you find you feel nothing. Or another very important example he gives is that you may just lack the imagination, imagination may be very important. I think these are incredibly clever counter-examples. Now, certainly some of them had been foreseen by the very clever Chrysippus and he attempted answers but they are quite difficult to answer and the standard of this debate, the standard of the counter-examples has been made possible by the precision by which Chrysippus specified exactly which two judgements are involved in every emotion. Without that precision you can't offer precise counter-examples, so you can't have a debate at the same standard.

**Carolyn Price**

You said at the beginning that at the very heart of the debate was the question about whether we should eradicate our emotions. Why did the stoics take the view that emotions were experiences that we'd be better off without?

**Richard Sorabji**

They took this view for a reason that I don't agree with. I think there's an enormous amount to be learned from the stoics. I'm very impressed with them even though there is very much that I don't agree with. I think what's very valuable about them is that they tell us a lot about how you and each one of us and I, can get rid of those emotions we want to get rid of by intellectual means with a bit of luck, there may be obstacles, we may not be able to but at least it's worth trying. Now what I don't agree with is that idea that it's almost all emotions we should be trying to get rid of, that's the part I don't agree with, why did they think it? They had a very radical view about what matters in life, their view was that in the end what really matters is your character and also your rationality. But these were rather the same thing because as they were so intellectualistic they thought of your character as a matter of what judgements you had made so character was treated in a very intellectualistic way. The only thing that matters in the end is your character and your rationality.

Now, other things do matter in a certain way but in a very restricted way. It matters for example to be just and justice may involve your taking other things seriously. Perhaps some people are starving because they don't have enough money. Alright, you must take that money question seriously. You must try to send them food parcels or whatever you're able to do, but the reason why it's important to send them food parcels is that it's important for you to do the just thing. Whether those food parcels reach them or whether they've been contaminated through no fault of yours and all these people die of poisoning doesn't in the end matter. What matters at their end is that if they're dying they should die with courage because with them too it's their character that really matters not whether they live or die. The stoics even use the word indifferent. It is in the end indifferent whether or when we live or die, what matters is the character with which we do so.

Now, given this very radical view you can see that most emotions are not only identified with judgements but most of them are identified with mistaken judgements. Judgements that this is frightfully bad, that is frightfully good. I have been snubbed. My book has been turned down. I have got the most dreadful migraine. Mistaken judgements that these things are really bad. And so most emotions involve a mistaken judgement. I say most, there are exceptions. For example, supposing a stoic is full of joy at God's good governance of the universe, there's no mistake there. God is good. God does govern the universe rightly. This is a proper subject for joy. The two judgements involved in this would be it is very good that God governs the universe so well. And it is appropriate to have expansive feelings in my chest when I think about it. There's nothing wrong with these two judgements they are

absolutely right. So this could be called an emotion which it's good to have. But to show that it's so different from the other emotions they don't call it by the standard word for an emotion at all, they call it a goodemotion (all in one word) to remind you that most emotions are undesirable. They're undesirable usually because they involve mistakenly putting the wrong sort of value on health or wealth of life or death or whatever it may be.

### **Carolyn Price**

It seems very natural to reply to the stoics that there are at least some emotions, love for example, that play an absolutely central and very valuable role in our lives. How would the stoics respond to that kind of objection?

### **Richard Sorabji**

I entirely agree with you, but nonetheless there is a very striking stoic answer which shows how radical they were. For this stoic answer we've got to go to a contemporary of Seneca, slightly younger than him, who was at the opposite end of the social scale. Because Seneca was a very wealthy man who was the tutor of the Roman Emperor Nero. At the opposite end was his younger contemporary Epictetus who was a slave. Now Epictetus writes a much fiercer set of discussions than Seneca. And what he says about love is this, you say you love your daughter, you love your son, you love your parents, you love your family, that's what you say, but you're wrong. You're wrong as you would soon find when the slightest friction occurs, alright you say you love your brother but let a woman come between you and you'll hate each other. There are stories in which a necklace, a mere necklace, became the cause of two lovers hating each other. Love can turn to hate just like that through the merest triviality. This so called love isn't love; jealousy is waiting at every moment to replace it. You can't call that true love. Now let me tell you, says Epictetus, what true love is like. The person who truly loves his wife says, each time he kisses her, I am kissing a mortal. Now, that is something incredibly shocking to us but he doesn't apologise for one moment. He says that because he takes this view which seems to us so detached his love for his wife will never fail. Jealousy is an absolute impossibility because he attaches no importance to necklaces, he attaches no importance to whether somebody else is trying to talk her up or she is attracted by somebody else, he is not subject to jealousy, this is true love. This which seems to us so excessively detached is the guarantee of true love. This is the most radical stoic answer and it's said without apology. I don't agree with it.

### **Carolyn Price**

Professor Richard Sorabji, thank you very much.