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Missing the Target: Emotion, Stoic Psychology and the Actor

Cormac Power

This essay offers a reflection upon acting and Stoic psychology. In keeping with the theme of this collected edition, I wish to consider the relation between acting and Stoicism in terms of failure. Failure in this essay will encompass the notion of “playing emotion” in acting, and the central position concerning failure will concern ideas about self-mastery and agency, for both actor and Stoic practitioner. The essay will therefore propose a relation between Stoicism as a practice, and the practice of acting. The central point of reference for my discussion on acting will be Declan Donnellan’s practical acting textbook *The Actor and the Target* (2005). My first task is to offer the reader some thoughts on the ancient philosophy of Stoicism, and in doing so, to outline a specific conception of failure that will inform a discussion about acting and emotion.

Stoicism was one amongst a number of schools of philosophy operating in the ancient Greek world. It was founded by Zeno of Citium around 300 BCE, and apparently drew its name from the *Stoa*, or painted colonnade in ancient Athens, where the school was originally founded. Stoicism was subsequently developed by philosophers who led the school in Athens, including Cleanthes and Chryssipus, but the large corpus of work produced in the period of the early Stoa (Chryssipus alone was said to have written over 300 books), is lost to history and only exists in fragmentary form or within later commentaries and biographies.¹ Stoicism continued to flourish in the Roman imperial period, and important works still extant, or largely extant, were produced by Epictetus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Musonius Rufus.² Although Stoic philosophers have not enjoyed the enduring prestige of Plato and Aristotle for example, Stoicism continues to attract interest within philosophy and a number

¹ See for a discussion on the distinctions between Hellenistic Stoicism and Roman Stoicism, C. Gill “The School in the Roman Imperial Period” in Inwood (ed.) (2003), pages 33-59.

² Musonius Rufus has left us various *Discourses*, writings collated rather than directly produced by Musonius. From Seneca we have various letters and essays. From Epictetus we have *Discourses*, the *Enchiridion* as well as *Fragments* compiled by his pupil Arrian. Marcus Aurelius has left us his remarkable work which has become known as *Meditations*.

of important texts have been produced on the Stoics in recent years.³ Moreover, an expanding body of work on the Stoics has been produced to appeal to a wider audience, bringing Stoicism increasingly into the public domain.⁴ What emerges from this literature is a complex set of philosophical ideas, particularly relevant to ethics and moral psychology, which is capable of having a great bearing on debates in actor-training.

Sharli Anne Paphitis summarises a commonly held conception of Stoicism, and one that is very useful as a means of establishing different readings of this philosophical tradition in relation to failure. In the context of an essay on Nietzsche and Nussbaum (who both engage with Stoic thought) Paphitis contends:

For the Stoics, cultivating the capacity for self-control is an attempt to escape the contingency and vulnerability of a life lived in the physical world, which must be done through a kind of transcendence. This transcendence involves, for the Stoic, a rejection or a denial of the importance of those aspects of our lives which are deeply vulnerable to [...] ‘contingencies and reversals’ (Paphitis 2013: 83).

In this reading, the Stoics set out to construct, to use Marcus Aurelius’ phrase, an “inner citadel” in which to remain immune and unmoved by chaotic flux of existence. A Stoic sees herself surrounded by a hostile and threatening world, living in a body that is subject to ageing and disease, and caught up in a network of causality over which she has no real control. The Stoic, in this account, is a heroic figure. Embattled against a world that must be endured, the Stoic seeks to “transcend” - in Paphitis’ terms - that “physical world” in favour of an inviolable mental space. Stoicism, then, is conceived of as an anti-failure philosophy of life. From this perspective, the Stoic goal is to maintain constancy amidst change and vulnerability, and to hold a position which is immune to failure. As Marcus Aurelius puts it:

³ See for example: Sellars, J. (2006). *Stoicism* (Vol. 1). University of California Press; Becker, L. C. (1999). *A new stoicism*. Princeton University Press; and Graver, M. R. (2007). *Stoicism and emotion*. University of Chicago Press.

⁴ For example: Irvine, W. B. (2009). *A guide to the good life: the ancient art of Stoic joy*. OUP USA; Seddon, K. (2007). *Stoic Serenity: A Practical Course on Finding Inner Peace*. Lulu. Com; and Evans, J. (2012). *Philosophy for Life: And other dangerous situations*. Ebury Digital.

“You must compose your life action by action, and be satisfied if each action achieves its end as best can be: and no one can prevent you from that achievement” (8. 32). In other words, even though the results of actions are not for us to control, we can control our sense of being “satisfied” by maintaining a state of rational equanimity. From this removed position of unperturbable calm, the Stoic has overcome failure in both a commonplace sense (things that go well or go badly are treated with equal indifference), and in a more fundamental sense (agency is entirely directed towards the inner goal of maintaining equanimity, and external events cannot prevent the Stoic from attaining this objective).

I set forth the above by way of offering a brief sketch of a critical reading of Stoicism. Although this critical reading is limited in its conception of Stoicism, it usefully brings forth the notion that failure can be positioned in relation to agency. The Stoic realises her agency by attaining and maintaining an inner disposition that transcends the possibility of failure. I see Stoicism not so much as a philosophy that seeks to transcend the possibility of failure by cultivating a passive indifference to the world, but as a philosophy that promotes an active engagement with the ever present conditions of failure. As Paphitis’ overview implies, failure for Stoics is a failure of agency. Unlike that of Paphitis, my reading of Stoicism finds a dynamic and constant attempt to shape and transform our relation to the world. My position is informed by a number of “neo-Stoic” authors. John Sellars for instance finds an affinity between Stoicism and Deleuzian philosophy. For both Deleuze and for the Stoics, philosophy is a practice whose aim is “a transformation of one’s mode of existence or way of life” (Sellars 2006: 159). For Deleuze, Sellars, argues, the Stoics stand at the “beginning of a tradition of immanence within Western philosophy” (2006: 158). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to develop this neo-Stoic position in great detail, but we can at least note that an “immanent” reading of Stoicism offers a very different interpretation of this philosophy than the more standard critical position, of which Paphitis stands as an example. Stoicism is not about transcending the physical world of contingencies; it is the attention to and confrontation with contingency – and failure - that energises the Stoic practice of philosophy.

With respect to agency, one of the great problems that the Stoics address is that of dealing with emotions. One of the key challenges to living a Stoic life is the maintenance of

tranquillity in the midst of emotional affectivity. From the perspective of the actor and the actor's work, one of the most important factors to consider in relation to failure is the playing of emotion on the stage. It is an age-old question. Should actors seek to experience emotions onstage? Many practitioners speak of the pitfalls of "playing emotion." There is also a considerable amount of academic writing which considers this issue, both from a technical point of view (the different approaches to playing - or to not playing - emotion in performance) to wider discussions on what constitutes emotion in the context of acting. Many of the ideas developed by the Stoics seem remarkably prescient when considered in the context of performance. For the actor, as for the Stoic, the handling of emotion is a delicate business, in which there is the ever-present possibility of failure in the enactment of identity.

My main point of focus is the post-Stanislovskian tradition of acting and actor-training. What I term a "tradition" here is of course very diverse. Between Sanford Meisner and Mike Alfreds, Lee Strasberg and Bella Merlin, there are considerable divergences of approach. These differences come into sharp relief when it comes to the issue of emotion in acting. What is common to various post-Stanislovskian approaches is that the question of emotion is one of central importance to the actor. Furthermore, this problem is deeply connected to the artistic agency of the actor in performance. Is the actor in control of her performance at each given moment? Is the actor fully "in-the moment" onstage, or is he preoccupied with trying to revive an emotional experience in order to fulfil the requirements of a scene? While it is certainly of great interest to compare and contrast different practitioners on these questions, my main example for analysis will be the British director Declan Donnellan and his book *The Actor and the Target* (2005). Donnellan is particularly interesting, because while he identifies very familiar problems concerning emotion in acting, his suggestion as to how the actor ought to deal with emotion is very original, and will reward close attention.

It is true that the Stoics were famously suspicious of the emotions. According to a clichéd view (and indeed, the standard dictionary definition of the term), a Stoic is someone who is completely divorced from emotion, maintaining a sense of almost divine detachment from the turbulences of the world around them. While there is a hint of truth in such a characterisation, which is implicit in the adjectival sense of the word “stoic,” Stoic psychology offers a rich and complex account of what constitutes emotion, and the relation between emotion, subjectivity and action. Before examining their position on emotion, let us first note the basic ways in which emotion was problematic for the Stoics. As a post-Socratic philosophy, the Stoics considered self-knowledge and self-understanding to be a primary task of philosophy. They also believed, like Socrates, that a key aim of philosophy was to assist the philosopher/student to attain a state of *eudaimonia*, crudely translatable as happiness, though actually meaning something closer to a flourishing life, lived in harmony with one’s circumstances. Moreover, in keeping with the Socratic tradition, the Stoics believed that *eudaimonia* needed to be pursued through reason and a life lived in conformity with reason. In this regard, emotions could be the cause of impediments to attaining *eudaimonia*. Particularly in the case of emotions concerning desire and aversion, where the individual’s psyche is pulled this way and that by attachments to fame, status, possessions, and aversions to misfortune, ridicule, a fear of death, and so forth. In this sense, emotions can be problematic to the extent that they can interfere with the controlled exercise of the rational mind.

The problem of emotion within the context of acting and performance hinges on a related principle. While actors are probably not concerned with *eudaimonia*, one of the problems the actor faces in handling emotions is that they are not easily controlled by the will. The actor and the Stoic philosopher share a commonality in that both are engaged in shaping an identity which is created self-consciously and willingly. An often cited source on acting and emotion is an essay called “Le Paradoxe sur le comédien” (1773), by Denis Diderot. Diderot famously referred to a “paradox” at the heart of the art of acting. His argument, which is of course a well-known one, is that for the actor to successfully convey emotion (of the character) to the

audience, the actor him/herself must necessarily be detached from those emotions. The actor must not experience the emotions of the character in performance.⁵ When David Garrick plays Hamlet, it is inconceivable to Diderot, considering the array of extreme emotions which the character undergoes in so compressed a period (at least in “real time” terms onstage), that Garrick could be experiencing those emotions himself in performance. For the purpose of this discussion, Diderot articulates a key question in relation to the actor and the playing of emotion. Since emotions cannot be controlled and tamed by the will, an actor who actually experiences the emotions of the character onstage is liable to produce an inarticulate performance. Joseph Roach in *The Player's Passion* (1985) demonstrates that Diderot's central idea had also been anticipated by others of the period, set against a context of scientific thought as well as under the influence of Cartesian philosophy. An even earlier reference point for considering the problematic nature of emotion for the performer, is the Platonic dialogue *Ion*. This short text presents to us Ion, a rhapsode, in dialogue with Socrates. Socrates asks Ion various questions about his particular art. Ion's specialism, indeed only specialism, is the performative recital of Homeric poetry, of which he is a famed exponent. Socrates asks Ion if he is aware of the emotive effect that he has on audiences. Ion replies:

Only too well; for I look down upon them from the stage, and behold the various emotions of pity, wonder, sternness stamped upon their countenances when I am speaking: and I am obliged to give my very best attention to them; for if I make them cry I myself shall laugh, and if I make them laugh I myself shall cry when the time of payment arrives (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/ion.html>).

Although it is problematic to read *Ion* as straightforward reportage, given the position of poetry and performance in Plato's wider philosophical project, it is nevertheless striking how *Ion/Ion* seeks to problematise the relation between the actor and the emotions that are presented in performance. Ion's main interest, we are given to understand, is the (emotional)

⁵ For a detailed treatment of Diderot's essay, see Elly Konijn's *Acting and Emotions: Shaping emotions on stage* (2000).

effect his performance has on the audience. He continually monitors this effect during performance (“I am obliged to give my very best attention to them”), and points to a polarity between his personal feelings, and those aroused in the audience. Ion’s posture towards emotion has much in common with what Diderot noted with actors in the eighteenth century, and indeed bears some similarities to what Bertolt Brecht proposed in the twentieth century.⁶ In his essay “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction” (1935) Brecht articulates a disjuncture between the feelings evoked in the audience, and those presented on the stage in epic theatre:

The dramatic theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too ... I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it ... I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh (Brecht 1978: 71).

The comparison with *Ion* is striking; albeit that Brecht shifts the focus from that of performer over to the audience. While Stanislavski affirmed the importance of the actor locating him/herself as firmly as possible within the inner life of the character, Brecht in contrast prioritised a concern for representing the external aspects of the character, and thus suggests a form of acting which comes closer to Diderot’s model of the actor, or indeed to *Ion*. In these cases, the aim of the actor is to have a pre-defined effect on the audience. Whether it be the stirring up of powerful feeling in the audience as reported by Diderot and Plato, or the more complex ideological awakening effects that Brecht sought in epic theatre. A common feature across these examples is the need for the actor to maintain a careful relation to emotive experience in performance.

⁶ Also see Konijn (2000), as well as Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe *Theatre and Consciousness: Explanatory Scope and Future Potential* (2005).

Yet even within the broadly Stanislavskian theatrical mode of performing, in which the actor embodies the character as a psychologically coherent unity, the problem of emotion remains a live issue. Scholars such as Sharon Carnicke and Bella Merlin offer a detailed consideration of the trajectory in Stanislavski's work from an exploration of "emotion memory" in which actors attempt to graft their own emotional biographies onto the situations confronting the character they are playing, to a more physical and spontaneous approach found the "method of physical actions" and "active analysis." The actor's relation to emotion remained a problem that Stanislavski continually worked on; on the one hand Stanislavski stated "There is no genuine art where there is no experiencing" (Stanislavski 2008: 28), while on the other hand "Don't follow the line of inner, emotional impulses that know better than you what should be done. Follow the line of the life of the human body" (2008: 79).

We can find, then, a general commonality between Stoicism and the western tradition of acting with regards emotion. Emotions and their expression require careful consideration and handling. Many individual instances of theatre practitioners giving careful regard to emotional expression in performance could be given. British director Mike Alfreds, in his book *Different Every Night* which draws largely on Stanislavski, insists that emotion in itself is unplayable (Alfreds 2007: 92). American playwright David Mamet is very critical of the self-obsessed actor that he (controversially) takes to be Stanislavski's legacy: "Nothing in the world is less interesting than an actor on the stage involved in his or her own emotions" (Mamet 1997: 10-11).⁷ Mamet is particularly taking issue with actors from the Method school for whom authentic emotional connectedness with character is paramount. Mamet's point is that the actor should be concerned less with their own feelings, and be more focused on the other actors on the stage, while bearing in mind their primary purpose: to communicate the play to the audience. As Mamet, Alfreds and Merlin all affirm, the primary task of the actor is to play actions; "The actor's art is the art of action." (Alfreds 2007: 64). Both Mamet and Alfreds are at pains to point out that actions are playable and emotions are not.

⁷ For a critique of Mamet's interpretation of Stanislavski, see Bella Merlin (2000).

What of emotions for the Stoics? While as already noted, emotions were in some ways highly problematic phenomena for Stoics, it is highly misleading to think that their propositions were to attempt to suppress or deny emotional states. As Margaret Graver, in her study on Stoicism and emotion points out:

The founders of the stoic school did not set out to suppress or deny our natural feelings; rather it was their endeavour, in psychology as in ethics, to determine what the natural feelings of humans really are ... their aim [...] was not to eliminate feelings as such from human life, but to understand what sorts of affective responses a person would have who was free of false belief. (Graver 2009: 2)

There is much to consider in this short passage above, including what is meant by the concept of affectivity in this context, and the relationship between emotion and belief. Before we do so, it will be useful to offer a brief definition of the inter-related terms, “feeling,” “affect” and “emotion” in this context. Affect is a broad register of experience which includes feeling and emotion. Affectivity is also, Graver argues, “an essential part of human nature” (2009: 7; our experience of life is always coloured by our sensing of that experience, with all of the textures, nuances and moods that accompany the experiencing of experience. Feeling is a more pointed form of affectivity. Feeling is shaped by impulse. If I have “a bad feeling” about a given situation, then my impulse may be to change that situation or to avoid it. A feeling such as this may remain vague, an unsettling background affectivity, perhaps, that I do not act upon or pay any great attention to. However, if I fully commit my assessment of the situation based on this feeling (that this *really is* “a bad situation”), then the result may be an emotion such as fear. Emotion, then, is feeling, supported by belief. So while both feeling and emotion are species of affectivity, the distinction between emotion and feeling becomes very important. For Graver:

The distinction between emotions and feelings therefore serves to open up an interpretative space around a central dictum of Stoic ethics” (35).

To explore this ethical dimension further, let us sketch the mechanism of emotional affectivity according to the Stoics. The Stoics held that our engagement with - or consciousness of - the world is mediated by “impressions.” An impression is something akin to the modern concept of “perception,” ultimately understood as a physical occurrence whereby objects are “imprinted” upon consciousness.⁸ What we perceive are not objects themselves but “impressions” of them. These objects can include material phenomena in the external world, but also memories and feelings that arise from within consciousness. Once an impression is detected by an individual, a feeling is formed about that impression – something like an emotion – and then the individual may choose whether or not to “assent” to (or “go with”) that feeling, and act accordingly. For the Stoics, it is not simply that we are bombarded with impressions – thoughts, feelings and perceptions – of which we are the passive recipients. They wished to emphasise that we have a measure of autonomy in how to evaluate and respond to these impressions. Indeed, for the Stoics, human freedom consists precisely in realising our power of evaluating impressions.

In reading the Stoics, it is important to understand that many of the experiences that we would commonly think of as “feelings” and “emotions” in a more or less interchangeable way, are distinguished from one another. This passage from Seneca helps to illustrate:

Emotion does not consist in being moved by the impressions that are presented to the mind, but in surrendering to these and following up such a chance movement. For if any one supposes that pallor, falling tears, sexual excitement or a deep sigh, a sudden brightening of the eyes, and the like, are evidence of an emotion and a manifestation of the mind, he is mistaken and fails to understand that these are just disturbances of the body (On Anger: 2.3.1-2).

As this passage implies, Stoicism does not count all affectivity as emotion – far from it. Stoics recognise that affective experience is not something that is under our control; “impressions [...] are presented to the mind” on a continual basis, and we have little choice in this matter. What can we control? We can control the “use” we make of affective experience. Perhaps the most striking idea that Graver develops in *Stoicism and Emotions* is that of

⁸ For an overview of “impressions” and their relation to other aspects of Stoic psychology, see Tad Brennan “Stoic Moral Psychology” in Inwood (ed.) (2003), pages 260-265.

“*propatheia*” or “pre-emotion.” Graver defines pre-emotion as: “an involuntary feeling which is not counted as emotion because assent is not given to the relevant impression” (2009: 87). We experience a range of affective feelings over which we may have no control *in the moment of their arising*, but we do have a capacity to evaluate these feelings and to choose whether or not to “assent” to them. Developing and cultivating this power of assent forms a crucial part of Stoic practice. Assent is an important concept in Stoic ethical practice, but it is not simply a psychological description of how most people relate to their affective experience. As Lawrence Becker argues in his work, *A New Stoicism* (1999) Stoic psychological practice might be likened to physical fitness, agency is like a muscle that must be exercised:

Psychological fitness is analogous, [to physical fitness] and fitness in the case of agency proper is the result of increasing the scope, strength, speed, accuracy, stability, control, and effectiveness of one’s powers of deliberation and choice” (Becket 1999: 105).

For most of us non-Stoics, and indeed for Stoics – for none of the authors of extant Stoic texts claimed to have attained perfection in their practice – this gap between feeling, assent and emotion is very difficult to maintain. The process of assent is usually automatic for most of us. We are, in Marcus Aurelius’ terms, like puppets pulled this way and that by the “strings of impulse” (*Meditations* VI.16). The concept of “assent,” then, is foundational to Stoic ethics. It is a concept that intercedes between feeling and emotion. For it is only after a feeling has been *assented to*, accepted not just as a “bodily disturbance” (in Seneca’s terms) but that the feeling is fully aligned with our understanding and interpretation of the world, that it becomes – in the strict Stoic sense - an emotion.

The Stoics are suggesting that emotions are ultimately “up to us” and hence are under the control of the will. Diderot, as we have heard, maintained that emotions are by their nature resistant to the control of the will, and for this very reason it is preferable for the actor to avoid indulging in emotional experience onstage. However, one of the consequences of the Stoics’ psychological model of affect-assent-emotion, is that a range of affective feelings, which we would normally think of as emotions, are *merely* affective feelings prior to assent. Impressions are not subject to the will, but emotions *can be* subject to our control. The

second-century Roman philosopher Epictetus offers some examples of how this mechanism works in practice:

Impressions, striking a person's mind as soon as he perceives something within range of his senses, are not voluntary or subject to his will, they impose themselves on people's attention almost without a will of their own. But the act of assent which endorses these impressions *is* voluntary and a function of the human will.

Consequently, when a frightening noise comes from heaven or in consequence of some accident, if an abrupt alarm sounds danger, or if anything else of the kind happens, the mind even of a wise man is inevitably shaken a little, blanches and recoils – not from any preconceived idea that anything bad is going to happen, but because certain irrational reflexes forestall the action of the rational mind. Instead of automatically assenting to these impressions ... our wise man spurns and rejects them, because there is nothing there that need cause *him* any fear. And this, they say, is how the mind of the wise man differs from the fool's: the latter believes that the impressions apparently portending pain and hardship when they strike his mind really are as they seem, so he approves ... but the wise man, soon regaining his colour and composure reaffirms the support he's always had about such impressions – that they are not in the least to be feared, but are only superficially or speciously frightening (Epictetus *Fragment 9*).

The above account of affectivity generally accords with contemporary accounts based on neurological research, which suggest that neurological and chemical processes occur in the brain producing a range of affective responses before these states can be represented in consciousness.⁹ We are subject to a range of affective responses to multiple stimuli which register, or as Epictetus says “impose themselves on people's attention,” first and foremost as physical experiences. These experiences occur in the body before they are conceptualised or transformed into mental representations. Furthermore, the Stoics realised that, for the vast majority of people, no reflection on these affective feelings takes place, and as a result we

⁹ See for example Antonio Damasio (2000).

tend to “believe [] that the impressions ... when they strike [the] mind really are as they seem.” Hence, affective feeling, in the majority of cases, graduates to the status of emotion without having passed any kind of critical examination. For the Stoics, that critical examination takes the form of “assent.” Is this feeling which has arisen, on reflection, an accurate or fair and objective assessment of reality?¹⁰

One might think, in relation to the above examples hinted at by Epictetus, that the feeling of fear at the sound of “danger” or the “consequence of some accident” would be a feeling that is entirely natural and correct. Yet this is not the Stoic position. Physical harm or even death are not in themselves to be feared because things of this kind are, after all, a part of nature. So one might initially blanch at the prospect of physical danger, but instead of automatically “assenting” to the immediate and involuntary physical response to the situation, the Stoic would “regain [...] his colour and composure” as Epictetus suggests (Fragment 9), and calmly face the consequences of the situation, rather than surrender one’s entire being to a state of abject fear and panic. That is not to say, of course, that a Stoic would blithely walk into moving traffic, calmly surrendering themselves to the consequences. While it is perfectly reasonable to avoid danger where possible and to seek safety, all else being equal, the Stoic would not fear physical harm or death *per se*.¹¹ In this sense, Stoics aim to distance themselves from negative emotions and instead cultivate positive emotions. As William Irvine notes:

[T]he tranquillity the Stoics sought is not the kind of tranquillity that might be brought on by the ingestion of a tranquilizer; it is not, in other words, a zombie-like state. It is instead a state marked by the absence of negative emotions such as anger, grief,

¹⁰ For instance, in Marcus Aurelius we find the following advice: “Constantly test your mental impressions – each one individually, if you can: investigate the cause, identify the emotion, apply the analysis of logic” (*Meditations* VIII. 13).

¹¹ Stoics distinguished between things that are good, bad and indifferent. “Good” broadly equates with virtue, and with activities associated with virtue and its cultivation, whereas “bad” equates to vice and its cultivation. All else, including possessions, health and even one’s life, are strictly classed as “indifferents.” However, Stoics further distinguished between indifferents that are to be “preferred” as opposed to those indifferents that are “non-preferred.” Health is reasonably to be “preferred” over ill-health, even though it is not an absolute good. See Sellars (2006), 110-114.

anxiety, and fear, and the presence of positive emotions – in particular, joy (Irvine 2009: 10).

For the Stoic, realising one's potential as a human being depends entirely on developing one's ability to transform and adapt our mental life into conformity with nature as a universal whole. As Epictetus affirms in his *Discourses*, the most important attribute of humanity is the "ability to make good use of impressions" (I.i.7). Note that what counts here for a Stoic is not any sense of external achievement such as fame, glory or the accumulation of wealth or power; the *only* thing that ultimately matters is the use we make of impressions. We find an excellent analogy, again in Epictetus. Life is likened to a card game in which we are dealt a certain hand; what counts is not the cards we are given (which is down to mere chance), but the skill and judgement with which we deploy them. The card player does not think so much about winning, but of playing the cards she has been given as astutely as possible (Epictetus *Discourses* II.v.1-6). As a consequence, an outwardly successful life may be deemed a complete failure in Stoic terms, while a successful cultivation of Stoic practice may go completely unrecognised by our peers who may deem that individual to have lived a relatively meaningless life. In this sense, even a slave (as Epictetus himself was as a young man), can achieve a pinnacle of human achievement, while an Emperor might be no more than a slave to his sensual drives, ego and desire to please his associates. We can see, therefore, how important emotion and the use of emotion are to the Stoic in terms of how success or failure in life may broadly be measured.

A Stoic viewpoint on emotion opens up a different perspective on the age-old question of how actors deal with emotion in performance. From a Stoic perspective, it is not so much a question of having or not having feelings, or ignoring the feelings that we experience, but rather of how to use feelings in order to develop and strengthen a capacity for agency. The actor develops a facility for working with a range of emotional affectivity but must also be able to recognise that affectivity for what it is – free floating sensation divorced from her actual beliefs about the world. In other words, actors can work with the kinds of feelings generated by fictitious characters without having to identify personally with those feelings, much as the Stoic practitioner sees feelings as physical occurrences that the individual may or

may not choose to make their own through the act of assent. The actor therefore, works not with emotion, but with pre-emotional affect.

The point of convergence between Stoicism and those actors and theorists who grapple with the problem of the actor's experience of affectivity, is how to experience feelings without becoming attached to them. Diderot's model of the actor who remains coolly detached from the emotional maelstrom of what is happening onstage, might seem superficially to be quite "stoical," but this model is limited in terms of the more complex ways in which the Stoics thought about affectivity and emotion. A Stoic-informed approach is to maintain a kind of constructive and non-reductive bifurcation between the emotion of the character and the experience of the actor.

To further explain this relation between actor, character and emotion, I shall turn to contemporary British director Declan Donnellan and his influential book *The Actor and the Target* (2005). Firstly, it is useful to briefly summarise Donnellan's concept of "the target." In place of more well-trodden Stanislavskian concepts such as the "objective" or the "intention," Donnellan argues that the actor's attention needs to be placed on a "target." The main difference between a target and an objective or an intention is that the target is external to the actor, rather than an impulse or impetus to action that arises from within. Initially the distinction seems very subtle. Donnellan's working examples are mainly drawn from a fictitious rehearsal process for *Romeo and Juliet*, and presuppose the perspective of the actor playing Juliet whom he names Irina. Examples he gives of the target in operation include the following: *I warn Romeo, I deceive Lady Capulet, I open the window*. While the verbs "warn," "deceive" and "open" might well be conceived as objectives which connect the actor to the object and provide the basis of inner impulse to action, for Donnellan it is the object (or target) which is primary: "Romeo," "Lady Capulet," or "window." The objectives/motivations are an outcome of the character's relation to the target. The target can be "real or imaginary, concrete or abstract" (2005: 17), and is constantly transforming and leading the actor in different directions. What differs in Donnellan's approach from more commonly understood practices based on intentions and objectives, is that whereas the

objective serves as an inner motivation to act, the target is outside of the actor and does not come from within.

As Donnellan explains, the actor's energy:

does not come from within, from some concentrated internal centre; it comes only from the outside world that Juliet perceives: the breeze that caresses her cheek, the marriage she dreads, the lips she desires. The target is all (2005: 25).

The point is that the actor always has her attention on a target: "The target is the master" (2005: 27). Furthermore, the target is always "there" waiting to be discovered. Donnellan insists that "[t]he actor abdicates all power to the target ... The actor can only act in relation to that thing that is outside, the target" (2005: 22).

This focus on externality prompts Donnellan to develop a particularly interesting, if rather briefly articulated view on acting and emotion. Donnellan agrees with the orthodox view that the actor cannot directly play emotion, suggesting instead that "our emotions only express themselves through what we do" (2005: 160). For Donnellan, emotion introduces the possibility of failure into performance in three senses. Firstly, emotion can reduce clarity of purpose: "What we feel always makes what we do more difficult" (2005: 169). Emotion impedes our actions. The second problem is that emotion cannot be artificially generated "Any attempt to generate feeling independently of the target will paralyse the actor" (2005: 163). If the actor gets too caught up in the attempt to generate emotion, they are liable to miss the target and fall out of the present moment onstage. The third problem that Donnellan points to is perhaps the most interesting in terms of psychological observation. The attempt to express or embody emotion is always, in a sense, a failure of representation. This is because the expression of emotion, for Donnellan, is not the emotion itself; the expression of emotion is, in a certain way, *less* than the emotion. Expressions of emotion therefore fail to embody the fullness of emotional affectivity. In fact, Donnellan goes even further than this: "We

cannot express emotion. Ever. Emotion, however, expresses itself in us whether we like it or not” (2005: 160). Donnellan develops this idea with the following illustrations:

Even when people appear to express intense emotion, what we actually see is not that person expressing feeling but rather their desperate controlling of it. The Arab mother keening over her dead son is controlling and shaping her grief into a ritual form so that it might express itself. The father appealing on television for news of his missing child must control his tears in order to make his plea articulate to be heard. The child who jumps in delight to see her soldier father return is controlling her joy in her leap; nothing can perfectly express her wild joy, so she just leaps. It’s the best she can do, she feels more, but this gesture will have to do. The gesture is always smaller than the feeling that precipitates it. (2005: 171)

There are two important points to be clear about in our summary of Donnellan. Firstly, Donnellan recommends that actors focus on a target, rather than on objectives. The target is what the character sees. The target is dynamic and ever-changing. Juliet may see many different Romeos at different moments in the play; a Romeo that will protect her, a Romeo that will destroy her, a Romeo that she must look after, and so forth. In playing Juliet, Irina cannot expect to feel what Juliet feels, but she can try to see what Juliet sees. The target, then, determines how Irina will play the character, moment-to-moment, on the stage. The second point for Donnellan is that the emotion of the character complicates the actor’s relation to the target. What does Irina do in relation to the emotions that Juliet experiences when she sees these various Romeos (targets)? Before assessing Donnellan’s suggestion, it is worth pausing to note that the “target” is also an important concept for the Stoic philosopher. Cicero relates an analogy concerning an archer. The question is about what the aim of the archer should be; should the archer’s success be measured purely in terms hitting the target? Can the archer fail to hit the target and yet be a successful exponent of his craft? As Lawrence Becker explains, in addressing these questions, Stoics make a crucial distinction between a “goal” and a “target.” The archer must attempt to “make a perfect shot” but even in doing so there is

always the chance that an unfortunate gust of wind will take the arrow's course away from the target. However, if the archer's goal was to execute his craft perfectly then he can be satisfied to have succeeded in this endeavour, even if the arrow fails to hit the target. Becker expands upon this scenario to differentiate between the "goal" and the "target:"

In the case of medicine, the physician can have practiced his art perfectly even though he fails to restore the patient to health. Should he therefore have tried to practice imperfectly? Surely not ... the physician's goal must be different from – more complicated than – simply restoring the patient to health. The latter is the 'target' in every instance of practising medicine, and in the long run success at hitting those targets determines what will count as safe and effective medicine, but the physician's *controlling goal* in each case is evidently as much to act appropriately as a physician ... as it is to get a good result in that case ... *The activity of acting appropriately is itself the controlling aim, even though it may not be the target* (Becker 1999: 133 original emphasis).

While the target determines what the individual will do in a given situation, hitting the target is not in itself the ultimate criterion of success. It is possible for the archer to hit the target by pure luck, at the same time as having failed to execute the craft in a technically secure way. In these terms, the Stoics problematise the success/failure binary in a very interesting way. Failure for the Stoic is always a failure of agency. Our agency is thwarted at every turn; the things we try to do often go wrong and the unpredictable upsurge of the world comes back to us in the form of complex and involuntary registers of affectivity that can send us off course. Epictetus is instructive on this point:

Show me the person who cares *how* they act, someone for whom success is less important than the manner in which it is achieved. While out walking, who gives any thought to the act of walking itself? Who pays attention to the process of planning, not just the outcome? If the plan works, of course, a person is overjoyed and says 'How well we planned it! Didn't I tell you, with brains like ours it couldn't possibly fail? But a different result leaves the person devastated, incapable of even finding words to explain what happened (II.16.15).

We put too much attention onto the outcomes (targets) of our projects, when what is more important is the manner in which we set about these projects. The manner in which we set about things is more significant for the Stoics than the outcome of our projects, because the former can be controlled through an exercise of agency whereas the latter is always to some degree left to chance and is therefore outside of our agency. The only ethical point of concern is not whether I successfully complete the journey on which I have set out, but in the considered manner by which I undertake that journey. Success then, involves an awareness of our oneness with the world, a continual recognition of this oneness, and a refusal to see the world purely in terms of personal success and self-preservation. The failure of our projects, and indeed our failure to live up to our (Stoic?) ideals, is a constant invitation to exercise self-examination. Failure is the fuel that energises Stoic practice.

On the surface there appears to be a fundamental difference between the Stoic conception of the target, and that of Donnellan. While for Donnellan, the target is the master, the Stoic insists that the “controlling goal” is far more important than hitting the target, which in the ultimate sense is really a matter of indifference to the Stoic. However, Donnellan’s idea of the target is distinct from that of the Stoic. The Stoic archer’s target is static, but between the archer and the target there is a zone of movement and indeterminacy. In the context of the earlier example, the archer’s shot will take place within specific meteorological and atmospheric conditions. The archer, therefore, cannot ultimately control whether the arrow hits the target, so the Stoic’s advice is to look after only that which can be controlled – the correct execution of the task of firing the arrow *at* the target. Donnellan’s conception on the other hand envisages a target which is moving and transforming; all of the actor’s actions are reactions to the movements of the target (Donnellan 2005: 66). The target is likened by Donnellan to Orlando in *As You Like It*. Rosalind must see “a specific Orlando.” However, “that specific Orlando will change into another specific Orlando ... a desperate young braggart who takes on the Duke’s wrestler” or a “romantic David who defeats his Goliath, then perhaps she sees a lost young man” (23). There are countless Orlandos, and as such the target to which Rosalind is playing (leaving aside many other targets besides that embodied by the character of Orlando), is a constantly moving one. On another level however,

Donnellan's actor and the Stoic philosopher share a fundamental similarity in terms of the task which they face: to modulate one's subjectivity in relation to the capricious nature of circumstances without losing control of one's sense of agency – artistic agency in the case of the actor.

Donnellan's proposal is that the actor attempt to deal with emotion as though it were an adversary to contend with. Emotion intercedes between the actor and her attempts to change the target. The target, let us remember, is what the character is seeing at a given moment. As Donnellan is primarily interested in the actor's relation to the target, he is not so interested in looking at emotion as either a precondition for action (in the form of motivation), or on the later Stanislavkian idea that actions can produce emotion for the actor. For Donnellan, emotion is conceived as one of the obstacles the actor faces in addressing the target:

an actor can play as if impeded by emotion. In fact it is impossible for an actor to act anything without emotion obstructing it. Love for Romeo makes it more difficult for Juliet to express her love towards him (2005: 170).

To understand this passage, we must remember that Donnellan refuses equate emotions with their physical expression. Emotions always exceed their expression. In every expression of emotion is a failure to capture the full affective force of the emotion. The character's attempts to control the target is complicated by emotional experience because emotion adds a layer of difficulty for the character to contend with. Envisaging emotion as an impediment or an obstruction to the individual is, at first glance at least, a view that accords with Stoic psychology. Of course, Donnellan is not speaking of emotion in the very particular way that Stoic philosophy does – of a feeling that has been assented to. However, as we have already seen, Stoics do agree that affective feeling produces an impediment to our agency. To *go with* each and every impulse and feeling that we experience is to be exposed to a failure to exercise a discriminating agency, to be at the mercy of uncontrolled and unconditioned affectivity.

At the same time, it is not just a case of recognising emotion as obstruction, as though it were a problem to be avoided, or a negative influence to be suffered. Playing emotion as though it obstructs action can, in Donnellan's terms, add colour and detail to a performance, and is therefore material the actor works with. If we imagine that the actor is working on an exercise of trying to find a lost passport on the morning of an important flight, then the building of frustration and desperation will quickly become an obstacle to a clear-headed and thorough search. The actor can work with this. How do we control frustration and panic? The question may prompt the actor to try "stop her hands shaking," to "control her breathing," to "scream, breathe and then return to the task of searching." Perhaps it is not true that emotion always impedes action; fear is surely helpful in generating an impetus to flee from danger. But combining Donnellan's casting of emotion-as-obstacle with his observation that any expression of emotion is not the emotion itself, but rather the attempt to control the emotional feeling, reveals a nuanced psychological position which is a very rich territory for the actor to work with. What we see as anger is not the raw emotional state *itself* but the person's attempts to filter and control this state. These attempts bring about a potential range of physical actions and possibilities for the actor. Donnellan's advice therefore can be seen as both psychologically illuminating as well as liberating for the actor, because it releases the actor from questions about how to and whether to play emotion, and instead the actor addresses their focus on externals.

Stoic distinctions between affective feeling and emotions can become very useful for the actor, and particularly for clarifying aspects of Donnellan's approach. As we have seen in Epictetus Fragment 9 quoted earlier, affective feeling is not really subject to the control of the individual; fear, anger and all manner of excitation can take over the body, sometimes entirely unbidden by the will of the individual. Emotion, on the other hand, is more difficult to talk about in these terms. We think of emotions as being a part of who we are, but the key point is not to confuse emotions with (pre-emotional) affective feeling. Viewed through the lens of Stoicism, actors principally work with affective feeling, and much confusion arises out of a false conflation of affective feeling with emotion. Emotion suggests a connection between that affective state and the self; to be in an "emotional state" implies that one's entire

being is thinking, feeling and reacting in the register of the emotional. Diderot's longstanding question remains as to how an actor can apply her trade within this emotional register of experience without losing her artistic agency within the process of performance.

Understanding Donnellan through Stoicism reveals a position that finds a point of reconciliation with Diderot's dichotomy between the actor who emotes and the actor who does not. Feelings are not ignored or held in abeyance but are externalised, and treated as affective material to contend with in the generating of actions.

There is an ethical relation between the Stoic practitioner and the actor. Here we must distinguish between actor and character. In the *Discourses* (I. 28), Epictetus suggests that all of classical Greek drama, depends for its dramatic quality and very existence as drama, on the characters' failure to "use impressions" correctly. In other words, characters in drama will usually lack the agency sought by the Stoic. Had Oedipus, Clytemnestra and Medea practiced Stoicism then they might have controlled the impulses which drove them to make destructive - and dramatically interesting - choices. For the actor it is different. As we have seen from a range of examples, the actor must find a way of maintaining agency even if the character they are playing is carried away with desire-driven or vengeful impulse. The actor and the Stoic face a world full of events, people and movements that cannot be control. The most famous lines from Epictetus are found at the beginning of the *Enchiridion* (Handbook), where Epictetus asks us to distinguish between the things that we can control as opposed to the things we cannot. The key to learning to control what we can control is firstly to recognise how little control we really have. Too many of us attach our identities to externalities, such as status and material possessions. When we do so, we sacrifice our freedom, nailing our agency to the mast and allowing the winds to take us wither they will. A natural consequence is the feelings of regret, disappointment and alienation that arise when things don't go as we had hoped, or when we lose the things that we felt belonged to us or we were entitled to. Stoics point out that the only thing we really own is our capacity for agency. Emotion, which colours so much of human experience, stands at the cusp of what we can and cannot control. Stoics insist that emotion can be controlled through a rigorous self-analysis and investigation of our belief structure, but affective feeling cannot be controlled. Neither can we control much of what constitute our identities; including our bodies, certain propensities and externals such as the time and place we happen to be born into. Donnellan's advice to actors is consistent with this broad point. We

“can never directly control character or feeling,” the actor ought to “walk away from the twin delusions that we decide who we are and that we decide what we feel” (2005: 162).

For both Donnellan and the Stoics, failure is the point at which agency becomes lost through the attempt to control that which is outside of our control. For the Stoic, that which lies outside of our control includes the external markers of an outwardly “successful” life, including wealth and status. The only thing with which we should identify is our capacity for seeing the world in the way that we choose; “I must be exiled; but is there anything to keep me from going with a smile, calm and self-composed?” asks Epictetus (*Discourses* I.i.21). While the question is a rhetorical one, it is also written as a challenge to the reader. To accept and indeed to embrace failure cannot be achieved by reading texts or by understanding concepts, but only in the confrontation with situations that demand Stoic attention. Stoicism, like acting, is an art of action. We are advised to attend to what is at hand in the present moment, to see things for what they are in isolation and in and of themselves, and not to get too caught up in anxieties about the unfolding of what might happen in the future. Each action leads to a result, one way or another, and another action follows. Good advice for actors perhaps. Donnellan’s words at the close of his book come close to this:

We are not here to get things either right or wrong. We are here to do our best. What constitutes this best we decide as individuals, having seen the ambivalence of the world as clearly and unsentimentally as possible (2005: 272).

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