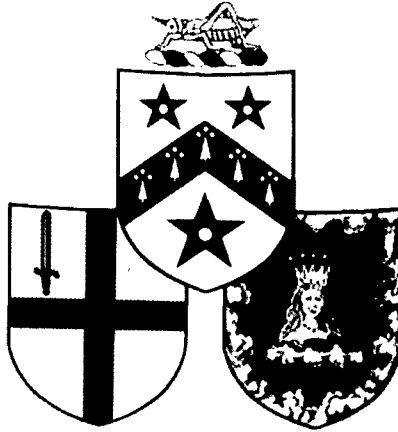


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**MIND, MORALS AND THE ORIGIN OF OUR  
IDEAS**

Lecture 2

**EMOTION AND PEACE OF MIND**

by

**PROFESSOR RICHARD SORABJI CBE FBA**  
**Gresham Professor of Rhetoric**

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Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH  
Tel: 020 7831 0575 Fax: 020 7831 5208  
e-mail: [enquiries@gresham.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@gresham.ac.uk)

# EMOTION AND PEACE OF MIND

**Professor Richard Sorabji CBE FBA**

Do you think that emotions are judgements for things that are good or bad or do you think they are physiological processes? Another view is that they involve not only rational judgements, but also irrational psychic forces. These views are found both in ancient and in modern times.

## 1. Chrysippus

In the 3rd century BC., the third head of the Stoic school, Chrysippus, held that there were four main emotions and all of them were judgements. Appetite was the judgement that something good, lies in the future, and that it is appropriate to reach for it. Fear was the judgement that there is something bad in the future and that it is appropriate to avoid it. Pleasure was the judgement that there is something good in the present and that it is appropriate to feel an expansion. Distress was the judgement that there is something harmful in the present and that it is appropriate to feel contraction.

What are these contractions and expansions? There is another text which reveals this, but it has not been very much noticed. It is a text by the doctor Galen who lived in 200 AD long after Chrysippus, but Galen reports Chrysippus' views. A contraction is a sinking of the physical soul -because the Stoics had a physical view of the soul- which is felt in the chest. Expansion is also an expansion of the physical soul felt in the chest. We are all familiar with the expansive feelings one has when one is rather pleased and the sinking feelings one has when distressed. Chrysippus merely interpreted these as literal contractions and expansions of the soul. But it is important to notice that, unlike his predecessors, Chrysippus thought of these expansions and contractions as merely accompanying emotions. They were inevitable accompaniments, but they were not the emotion itself. The emotion itself was a pair of judgements, although some of the relevant judgements were about expansions and contractions.

Another thing to notice is that each emotion, for Chrysippus, consists of two judgements. Appetite for example is the judgement that there is good in the future and the judgement that it is appropriate to reach for it.

Chrysippus uses the word judgement advisingly. He distinguishes a judgement from a mere appearance. One cannot help having the appearance that things are good or bad, but one can give or withhold the assent of one's reason to that appearance. If one does not bother to assess the appearance and assents to it automatically, then one is responsible for assenting to the appearance without assessing it. Judgement, according to Chrysippus, is the assent of reason to an appearance. And so, in Chrysippus' view, judgements are voluntary. And since emotions are judgements emotions too are voluntary. Or at least where the emotion is misguided because the judgement that things are good or bad is mistaken, there at least you are responsible for having the emotion, because you are responsible for not assessing more carefully the appearance that things are good or bad.

In modern times, there is a therapy called cognitive therapy which holds very much the same view as the Stoic, Chrysippus. Cognitive therapists believe that emotions are judgements and that you can calm them by reconsidering the judgements involved.

I believe that sometimes emotions are to be celebrated. But the Stoics concentrate on unwanted emotions that need therapy and calming. It is for this reason that I shall speak in what follows of peace of mind rather than of celebration.

## 2. Posidonius

My second Stoic, Posidonius, lived around 100 BC, a hundred and fifty years after Chrysippus. He thought that Chrysippus' account of emotion as rational judgement was far too intellectualistic. Moreover he considered it very important to get our views about emotion right, because he thought that emotion was central to education and ethics. He believed that

the Stoics ought to go back to Plato's irrational forces in the soul. Plato in his *Phaedrus* had compared the three parts which he postulated in the soul to a charioteer and to horses. The charioteer corresponded to reason. The horses were the irrational forces. Posidonius reminds us that Plato is very concerned about the kind of training that is needed by the irrational part of the soul. In his *Republic*, Plato insists that the training of the child must begin even in the womb. The mother must be careful to take sedate walks to the temples. The motion is good for the unborn infant. When the infant is born, it must be exposed to the right music, gymnastics, and artistic surroundings. Plato talks, and Posidonius follows him, of the tug (*holkê*), exerted by the charioteer and horses on each other. We may be reminded of the psychodynamics of Freud's irrational forces. Posidonius thinks that if we omit this kind of training we will never bring up the next generation to be ethical.

Posidonius provides some very telling examples against the idea that emotions are simply judgements, even though he agrees that typically judgements are involved somewhere in emotions. Judgements are not, however, sufficient for emotion, and Posidonius gives two examples to show that they are not. First I may be exhausted emotionally. I still judge that something bad is present to me and that it would be appropriate if I were to continue to have sinking feelings. But I am too exhausted to feel distress any more. I would add the well-known case of emergencies. Suppose a fire breaks out in the lecture room. A member of the staff guides us all safely to the door. She makes the two relevant judgements that there is something very bad on the horizon and that it is appropriate to avoid it. But she is so intent on leading all us to safety that she does not have the time to feel fear. It is only afterwards, when she has got everybody safely out of the building that she feels the horror of what might have happened. I am suggesting that not only exhaustion but also the diversion of attention can preclude or delay emotion. Chrysippus had, to his credit, foreseen this type of objection. He discussed the case in which exhaustion makes emotion fade. But he claims that his account of emotion as judgement is still secure, because, so he claims, the second of the two judgements is missing in the case of emotional exhaustion, namely the judgement that it is appropriate, in the case of distress, to have sinking feelings.

Posidonius provides a second example to show that the two judgements are not sufficient to produce emotion. We need imagination as well. You may read in the newspaper that thousands have drowned in floods in Bangladesh. You judge that this is something very bad and you judge that it would be appropriate to have sinking feelings. But if you know nothing about Bangladesh, perhaps not even where it is, you may find to your own dismay that you do not feel the distress. The imagination is missing. Another example is provided by the attitude of some Britains to Hitler before the second World War. They judged that Hitler was a very bad thing, and they judged that it would be appropriate to take avoiding action. But it was too hard to imagine Hitler actually invading England. And so they do not feel the fear that would be appropriate. As Prime Minister, Chamberlain said at the time that Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, "Czechoslovakia is a distant country of which we know little". He was expressing the difficulty of imagining things. So far, the moral is that Chrysippus' judgements are not sufficient for emotion without alertness, attention, and imagination.

But Posidonius also provides examples to show that the two judgements are not necessary for emotions. One can for example disown the judgements and yet feel the emotion. You say to yourself, "There is nothing to cry about. Nothing bad has happened". And yet you find yourself crying, and not only crying, but actually distressed. Chrysippus himself had again foreseen this objection. He denied that it was a case of distress without the relevant judgements, for in his view, such cases involve rapid oscillation between the judgement that there is something bad at hand and the judgement is not. The distress is present because of the judgement that there is something bad.

A second example provided by Posidonius of emotion without the relevant judgements is that of animals. Animals according to the Stoics, do not make judgements. And yet, Posidonius insists, surely they do have emotions. I think Poseidonius is right that they have emotions. Personally, I believe that they also make judgements. But do they make judgements of the relevant type? Does an animal ever judge that it is appropriate to avoid something for example? I can imagine a sophisticated animal doing so. For example, a guide dog for the blind waiting to cross the road may hear traffic approaching. Its blind master or mistress says, "Go on, good dog, let's cross". But the dog judges that it is not appropriate to cross. It is appropriate to avoid the traffic that it hears. Even in this case, however, I doubt that the dog goes through the double process of making a Stoic judgment,

of first having the appearance that there is danger or harm at hand and then assenting to that appearance. So I would be ready to agree with Posidonius that here in a dog or other animal we can have emotion without having the relevant judgements.

The third example provided by Posidonius of the emotion without the judgements is that of the effect of wordless music. He tells the story of some youths. We know from elsewhere that they were harassing a young woman who was playing the oboe. Fortunately there was a Pythagorean philosopher close by and he recommended the young woman, "Change your playing to the Dorian mode". The Dorian mode was a severe mode. The young woman changed the mode of the music and the young men immediately stopped harassing her. Their emotion changed without any change of judgement since after all the music included no words. Posidonius has then given us three examples of emotion without the relevant judgements; the case of disowned judgements, the case of animals and the case of wordless music.

I am struck by the precision of this debate. It was because Chrysippus provided such a precise account of which judgements are relevant to which emotion that Posidonius was able to lodge such powerful counter-examples. There has been a debate in modern philosophy as to whether emotions are judgements, but I believe the level of precision has not been so high.

### 3. Seneca

Seneca is the third Stoic philosopher in this area. He lived in the 1st century AD and was the mentor of the tyrannical emperor Nero, whose anger he sought to control. In his treatise *On Anger*, without mentioning Posidonius, he discusses all the last three of Posidonius' examples. In each case, the case of disowned tears, of animals, and of music, he argues that no genuine emotion occurs. All we have is what he calls a first movement or shock. This would be a very relevant reply to Posidonius, because Posidonius was trying to supply examples of genuine emotion in the absence of the relevant judgements. On Seneca's view none of the three cases involves genuine emotion after all, but only first movements.

In Book 2 of *On Anger*, Seneca distinguishes first movements of body and of mind. Examples of bodily first movements are going pale or trembling. Even the most experienced speaker, he says, feels the fingers stiffen before he speaks. This is another physical first movement. It is not made so clear what would be an example of a mental first movement. But we can make a guess by looking at a passage from Cicero in the preceding century. Cicero, discussing the Stoics, in his *Tusculan Disputations*, 3.83, says that there are little contractions of the mind, also called 'bites', which are independent of judgement and of distress. These surely are perfectly designed to play the role of mental first movements which are not emotions, but which happen before any emotion has yet arisen. Seneca's view is that these mental or physical shocks are due to the appearance that there is good or bad at hand. They are not emotions, because they occur before there has been any assent of reason to the appearance.

These first movements or preliminary shocks are important not only because they can be used in an attempt to answer Posidonius, but also because of their relevance to calming the emotions. The point Seneca is making is that we can, by taking thought, calm our emotions. But we could not do so, if emotions were involuntary shocks. That is why it is important to Seneca to maintain that the involuntary shocks are mere side-effects, mere first movements, not the emotion itself. It can also be very helpful for calming the emotions to look at one's tears or trembling and saying to one's self, "This is merely a first movement". This can be steadying for William James' reason. William James famously said, "We do not cry because we are sad, we are sad because we cry". This is not entirely true, but there is some truth in it. When people notice that they are crying they are tempted to think, "I must have been suffering something very bad -look, I am even crying". But in fact the crying is neither here nor there. The question that matters is whether you are really in a bad position. It is important to discount the crying, because that does not prove you whether the position is really bad or not.

There is another importance in Seneca's first movements. It enables Seneca to play down the emotional effect of the theatre. There has been a puzzle why the Stoics, who were so interested in theatre, never discussed the brilliant theory of theatre propounded by their predecessor, Aristotle. Aristotle was in turn defending Greek tragedy from the criticism of his own teacher, Plato. Plato had said that tragedy would not be allowed in the ideal society because tragedians stirred up emotion. Aristotle replies with his famous theory of catharsis. It is a good thing to stir-up emotion in theatre because that gives us catharsis of the emotions. Although there is controversy as to what catharsis means, I think this much is clear, that Aristotle means the audience is relieved of such emotions as distress, fear, or pity. Why did the Stoics not discuss Aristotle's view? Here in Seneca I believe we find an answer as to why the later Stoics did not think the view deserved the discussion. For catharsis works by stirring-up genuine emotions in the audience and so supplying relief from them. But Seneca is saying that the theatre does not stir-up genuine emotion. It stirs-up only first movements. In fact Seneca generalizes to all the arts. He speaks in Book 2, chapter 2 of *On Anger* of the theatre, historical narrative, singing, the trumpet, painting and staged shipwrecks and he says of all these arts that they arouse only first movements not genuine emotions.

#### 4. The arts

Is Seneca right about theatre and music for example? There may be some cases in which the theatre audience experiences only first movements. And we should not disagree with Seneca because of those cases in which the theatre moves us to feel genuine emotions about ourselves. The question is whether our emotions about the characters in the play are genuine emotions. I once found myself in floods of tears while watching the movie *Shadowlands*. My first reaction was to wonder whether this refuted Seneca's theory, since there I was experiencing genuine emotion in the theatre. But then I realised I was making the judgement, "This could happen to *me*". In other words, my emotion was genuine emotion but was about myself. The question remains whether the theatre can provoke genuine emotion about the characters. I believe that Seneca is wrong and that the theatre can provoke genuine emotion about the characters in the play. I can think it is appropriate for me to have sinking feelings. I can also think (and this is a point made by my colleague Paul Woodruff) it would be appropriate for others in the play to prevent the harm. But Seneca would complain that that is a puzzle, "How can I make these judgements of appropriateness if I know that this is only a play, and a fictitious play at that, or at least a play about something that happened some time ago?". I think the answer concerns our attention. If we attended to the fact that the harm is at hand only in the play, or was at hand only once-upon-a time, then we would not feel genuine emotion. But the play may lead us not to attend to this and insofar as we do not attend to "it's only in the play", or "it was only once-upon-a time", then we are capable of feeling emotions and making judgements very similar to those we make about real people in the present.

What about the case of music? One way of defending Chrysippus from Posidonius' example of the oboe player is precisely Seneca's way: admittedly the youths in their story did not have their judgements changed. But then they did not have their *emotions* changed either, on Seneca's view. All they experienced were first movements. There would be an alternative way of defending Chrysippus in relation to this story. It might instead be considered that the young men were experiencing a real emotion, namely lust. And equally they were making genuine judgements about the oboe player that there was something good at hand and that it was appropriate to reach for it. If we are therefore to defend Posidonius against Chrysippus we should look for a different example. But an example can be found within the realm of music. We often long for the music to resolve itself and this longing is a genuine emotion. So far, there is no problem for Chrysippus because the longing involves the appropriate judgements. We think it would be good if the music resolved itself and further that expansive feelings would then be appropriate. But sometimes the longing for the music to resolve itself can produce further nameless longings for we know not what. With such nameless longings, it is not very plausible that we can find appropriate judgements corresponding to them. Are we judging that there might be something very good in the offing and that expansive feeling would be appropriate if only it came about? Surely we are not judging anything so specific. I think therefore that the nameless longings which music can induce do provide an example of emotion without the relevant judgements.

## 5. Galen

I have already mentioned the brilliant doctor Galen from around 200AD. He was not a Stoic. He followed Plato more than anybody else, but made up his own mind independently. He believed that the soul was a physical state of the body and he wrote a treatise with the title *That Capacities of the Soul Follow the Blends of the Body*. Here he speaks as a medical doctor, and he says, "... come to me and learn what *diet* you should follow, to give yourselves the right emotions and to improve your intelligence, memory, reason and ability in ethical philosophy". Galen here speaks of Posidonius with admiration but he goes beyond him. For whereas Posidonius had allowed that physiology was relevant to emotion, he never suggested that physiology and diet could exert an influence on *reason*.

## 6. The role of philosophy

Insofar as emotions do involve judgements, philosophy can play a role in calming them. First, the philosophical analysis shows that it is worth trying to use thought to calm one's emotions because emotions do not consist wholly of involuntary shocks or physiological movements. Secondly, the philosophical account of Chrysippus shows which two propositions it is typically necessary to think about, if one wishes to calm one's emotions; the propositions that there is good or bad at hand and that it is appropriate to react in the ways he specifies. Thirdly, philosophy helps over the calming of the emotions because it shows us that first movements like crying can be discounted. They do not in themselves show that we are in a bad condition. Of course there are many other ways also in which the philosophy can be relevant to the calming of emotion. I have been speaking only of the philosophical analysis what the emotions are. But last week we considered philosophical conceptions of the self. And we saw that these philosophical accounts were also relevant to withstanding or improving emotion.

Admittedly Chrysippus' ideas about what emotion is will not on their own enable us to calm our emotions. He and his followers, and other schools of philosophy too, provided lots of techniques to help us change our judgements. The judgement that something bad is at hand may be tackled by the technique of thinking, "You are not the only one to suffer". Another Stoic, Epictetus, advises us, if stuck in a crowd or traffic jam, to think of it as a festival. We are also advised to ask ourselves whether what has happened is really bad or merely unexpected. Recently, somebody committed suicide because he thought he had won the lottery and then found he hadn't. Why? What was so bad about not winning the lottery? The previous week he had not committed suicide. The only new element was the unexpectedness. This week his not winning was *unexpected*. It was not really *bad*. These thoughts, "you are not the only one", "The crowd is a festival", "Is it bad or merely unexpected?" can be used to question the first judgement that something bad is at hand, but we can also question the second judgement, that it is appropriate to react. Seneca says to someone mourning her child, "You are neglecting the grandchildren". This reminder attacks the second judgement that it is appropriate to continue indulging sinking feelings. Similarly with anger we are advised to think, "I too have in the past insulted people in this same way". Once again we are thinking to ourselves (not that we have not suffered any harm, but) that it is not appropriate for us to react. Admittedly we need techniques like this, if we are to change our emotions by changing our judgements. But this does not make the philosophical analysis of what emotions are irrelevant. On the contrary, the techniques and the philosophical analysis form a package. The techniques on their own would lack a focus. The philosophical analysis shows us how to target the techniques.

I will finish with one more example of technique. It concerns the much earlier Greek philosopher from the fifth century BC, Democritus. It is said that the king of Persia asked Democritus to bring his wife back to life. "Certainly", said Democritus, "if your majesty will first do something in return. I ask you to find three citizens in this great kingdom of yours who can certify upon your wife's tomb that they have never suffered anything similar". The king of Persia was unable to find three citizens who could testify to this. Democritus' technique was designed to show, "You are not the only one". This in turn was designed to alter the judgement that something exceptionally bad had happened.

## 7. Brain science

Why have we found that Chrysippus' account of emotion as judgement is not entirely right? Why too do attempts to change our judgements sometimes fail to calm our emotions? I have mentioned that sometimes we need to take into account not only Chrysippus' judgements, but also imagination and attention. But this does not account of all the problems we face. I was ready to give up the attempt to answer these questions when a very a very interesting book came out by Joseph LeDoux called *The Emotional Brain*. It was published in New York in 1996 and in London in 1998. ledoux found that, at least in the case of fear and in the case of rats, warnings enter the brain by two different routes, one fast and one slow. The fast route goes to a part of the brain called the amygdala. This sets the body in a state characteristic of fear long before any thoughts could have been induced via the longer route to the higher cortex. It may be that relevant thoughts and judgements are never induced. Suppose you were in a car smash and at that time the horn of the car was jammed on. Now you hear that sound again and immediately through the amygdala your heart rate goes up, you freeze, you are pale, you are sweating. But you may not know why. You may not even have noticed on the original occasion that a horn was sounding at all. There were many more important things to notice. So you may not know now why you are in this physical state. This is one of the abnormal cases in which the physical side plays a major role and the judgmental side has effectively disappeared.

LeDoux is also able to explain the cases of shell-shock that we know of so graphically from the First World War and from the novel and the film, *Regeneration*. The soldier suffering from shell-shock may say to himself, "It is only a door slamming.". But nonetheless he cannot control the physical symptoms of fear, he has dived under his bed, he is trembling and pale. LeDoux explains that the judgements are not able to send their messages down from the higher cortex to the amygdala in order to calm the physical reactions, because the pathways from the higher cortex to the amygdala have been damaged. Here is a case in which the techniques of cognitive therapy, the technique of changing your judgement about things is not going to work. So we must not overrate the role of judgement and the power of cognitive therapy. Nonetheless in healthy and favourable cases, it is worth taking thought to see whether things are really as bad as they appear, and this can, at least in some cases, have a calming effect on unwanted emotion.

As with the previous lecture so today I think that modern science can help us. I have wanted to see to what extent philosophy, music and the theatre might be relevant, as some of the Greeks supposed it was, to affecting or calming emotion. I have argued that they can all play a role and I have tried to say something about the limits of that role. There will undoubtedly be other cases in which the diet of the doctor Galen and drugs would be more relevant.