Bad Romance: A View of Stoic Love in Response to Inwood's "Why Do Fools Fall in Love"

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In classical Stoicism, becoming a Sage is the highest achievement. Stoic Sages are epistemologically perfect actors: all their beliefs are true.[1] This quality distinguishes them from those who are not Sages: 'fools' (i.e. everyone else in the world). The Stoics believed that emotions (*pathe*), as they are experienced by most, are simply false beliefs. Emotions, in the Stoic view, are an epistemological disease–a disease that Sages are immune from.[2] When a fool becomes ill with an emotion, it is because they mistake things which are neutral (here on called 'indifferents') as good or bad. Since the Stoics believed only virtue can be good and only vice can be bad, most things in the world are merely indifferents.

However, the Stoics were criticized by their contemporaries for valorizing apathy. A Stoic Sage then seems rather empty at first glance, devoid of much of what

1. Brennan, *The Stoic Life: EMotions, Duties, and Fate.* Reprinted. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010. 37.
2. Brennan, *The Stoic Life*, 109-110,

makes a good life: happiness at seeing a sunrise, sadness at having a friend lost, and most importantly to the ancients[3]: Love. The Stoics argued that Sages did indeed have the capacity to love. But what is love without passion, without desire? What would such a thing look like?

In the following essay, we will examine one scholar's attempt to sketch the Stoic's account of fool-love—including the three dangers of love ("Why Do Fools Fall in Love"). Then, we will propose an alternative account of what makes love dangerous to the Stoics ("I Want to Know What Love Is"). After that, we will ask whether it's permissible for a Stoic Sage to love ("If You're Not the One"). Lastly, we try to parse how a Stoic is to virtuously choose a romantic partner ("You Belong with Me"). Through this process, outline a complete theory of Stoic love.

It is worth noting, that the author of this essay does not endorse Stoic standards of love (the Stoics lived in a very different time and habitually promote pederasty, radical objectification of women, relational power dynamics, etc.). However, it is still worth investigating how the Stoics'

3. By ancients, I'm mainly thinking of the intellectual sphere post-Plato and post-Aristotle. Plato's (or Socrates', if you prefer) thoughts on love remained a hot topic well into the Roman Empire.

radical commitments to the claim that passions were evil interact with their theory of love.

Why Do Fools Fall in Love?

The scholar Brad Inwood, in his essay "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," argues the Stoics' picture of love went something like the following: silly fools fall into love due to mistaking beauty as something "good" in-itself, while Stoic Sages experience love as an impersonal drive to cultivate virtue in fellow Sages and potential-Sages.[4]

Love, as regular people (that is, fools) experience it, is just another affliction, like the other emotions. The Stoics recognized four base emotions. **1) Desire** is the false belief that something in the future will be good. **2) Pleasure** is the false belief that something in the present is good. **3) Fear** is the false belief that something in the future will be bad. **4) Pain** is the false belief that something in the present is bad. Romantic attraction fits neatly into the genus of desire: it is a desire that stems from the false belief that a person will be good. The historian Diogenes Laertius wrote that the Stoics believed that eros of the non-virtuous type (i.e. lust) is "a

4. Inwood, Brad. "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement*, no. 68, 1997, pp. 55–69. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43768010.

craving from which good men are free; for it is an effort to win affection due to the visible presence of beauty"[5] Silly fools make a classic mistake, confusing something that looks good with something that is, in fact, *good*. The unwise lover, upon seeing worldly beauty, assents to the belief that the object of affection is irreplaceable. Reason has been dethroned, and in reason's absence, many false beliefs can sneak in.

Inwood borrows two cautionary tales from the Stoics, those of Artemisia and Medea. According to Cicero's account in the *Tusculan Dissertations*, when Artemisia's husband, King Mausolus died, grief consumed Artemisia so completely that she spent the entirety of her life mourning him instead of living.[6] Medea loved Jason (the same Jason that is known for being on a quest for a certain Golden Fleece) so much that she on his behalf (her own family members) and then, later, after he abandoned her, killed even more people in an act of vengeance.[7] Both demonstrate the other destructive emotions love might lead to. If one loves deeply, one becomes vulnerable to grief and anger. In

5. Diogenes Laertius 7.113

6. Inwood, 61.

7. Inwood, 61-62; it is worth noting that who exactly Medea murders differs from account to account.

other words, once love slips past reason's defenses, other emotions are sure to follow.

Why are we susceptible to such folly as love? The Stoics, after all, consider men rational animals. Inwood considers three reasons: 1) to reiterate the above, it's easy to mistake a pretty body for a virtuous mind. The Stoics actually believed in a correlation between the bodily appearance of virtue—that is being beautiful—and actual virtue. However, they did not believe there are necessarily a causal relationship 100% of the time (i.e. that beauty can be a reliable indicator of virtue). So, then, love would be a mistake consisting of judging another human to be good because they're beautiful.[8] 2) society, has corrupted us, it's eros obsessed and has encouraged our descent into irrationality.[9] 3) no one, except for a Sage, is epistemically perfect, so other false beliefs (e.g. being attractive is good, being fit is good, being kind is good, etc.) may lead us to overestimate the value of one individual.[10]

Whereas the Stoic Sage, when he does eros, does it right. Stoic Sages are epistemically perfect agents, so they

8. Inwood, 66.
9. Inwood, 66
10. Inwood, 66.

too have beliefs about what is good and bad, but their beliefs are correct. Ergo, unlike the rest of us poor unfortunate souls afflicted with *pathe*, they possess the correct beliefs and so have anti-emotions: *eupatheia*. The Stoics Sages have three *eupatheia*: volition (*boulêsis*)—knowing a thing in the future is good, the counterpart to desire; joy (*chara*)—knowing a thing in the present is good, the counterpart to pleasure; caution (*eulabeia*)—knowing a thing in the future is bad, the counterpart to fear.[11] They have no counterpart to pain, the Stoic Sage has perfect epistemological powers, therefore no vice can befall them.

Thus, Stoic Sage loves nothing but virtue. This type of love can be classified as volition, that is, the epistemically valid equivalent of desire. Particularly, Sagely love can be defined as, "an effort toward friendliness due to visible beauty appearing, its sole end being friendship, not bodily enjoyment" where "beauty is the flower of virtue."[12] Inwood deduces that because in the Stoic canon all virtuous people are equally good, love among Sages will be more comradery-focused and less all-consuming. Stoic ideal love is oriented toward fraternal community building and has

11. Brennan, "Stoic Moral Psychology," 270-71.
12. Diogenes Laertius 7.130

none of the passionate parts of normal love. The Sage would not debase himself by swearing allegiance to one whom he gives himself to in body and soul. That would be folly, says Inwood, because it would be to assent to the belief that one person is "non-fungibly important."[13]

I Want to Know What Love Is: The Centrality of Appearance

Inwood overcomplicates Stoic love. He points to three dangerous facets of love, when the Stoics only believed in one. Love is like any other emotion: a tragic case of epistemic folly. He uses the Artemisia passage to corroborate his warnings regarding love, but Cicero clearly writes "[i]n talking about the various meanings there are those who, with Cleanthes, think it the sole duty of the comforter to show that the object of sorrow was not at all an evil."[14] Signaling that sorrow is the problematic emotion for Artemisia. Love is not mentioned as an actual problem, the goal of the comforter is not to remove Artemisia's love for her husband, but rather to reveal that his death is not an evil. The goal is acceptance, Artemisia's mistake does not seem to be her affection for her husband, but in feeling

13. Inwood, "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" pg.62

14. Cicero, Cicero's Tusculan Disputations, "On Grief," sect. 31, pg. 188.

prolonged sorrow for his death.

Inwood utilizes the Medea passage as an example of why moderation in love is important, but the passage itself warns more about the folly of appearance. Right after introducing Medea as a case study, Epictetus preaches:

> If anything, will you not rather pity, as we pity the blind and the lame, those that are blinded and lamed in the chiefest of their faculties?
>
> ——"So that all these great and dreadful deeds have this same origin in the appearance of the thing?"
>
> The same, and no other.[15]

This means Medea's error, once more, was *not the intensity* of her passion, but rather, her inability to think clearly. She had a false belief, namely, that Jason was essential to her happiness. This belief "blinded and lamed" her.[16] This tale does not caution against the excess of love, it warns against believing things (in this case, a person) to be good which are simply indifferent.

The Stoics, by tracing the lineage of all folly back to one source–the source being false beliefs—gave

15. Epictetus, *The Teachings of Epictetus*, Chapter XVI, sect 229-31.

16. Epictetus obviously lived in a different time; the abelist language is not endorsed by the author.

their theory of passions parsimony. If the only cause of negative disturbances in the soul is false beliefs caused by appearances, then the Stoic student has a clear challenge to surmount, and almost all of ethics becomes epistemology. Thus, the other two reasons not to fall in love are extraneous, all misbehavior, fool love included, is due to the bad influence of appearances.

Only the Stoic can recognize the kind of beauty that correlates to virtue, and fool love is caused by the duplicity of appearances. The Stoic Sage could, in fact, as Inwood alludes to, theoretically be as intense as normal love, it is differentiated only in being correct. There would be no disadvantage to having a more dramatic movement of the soul nor having a more intense phenomenological experience of the Sage because *there is zero chance of the belief being false or causing false beliefs*. The problem with love is thus not the intensity of feeling, rather it is, like any other emotion, a potential epistemic error.

If You're Not the One: Fungibility

Additionally, Inwoods claims that Stoic Sage love, unlike fool love, could not be directed at a singular individual because all good individuals possess equal

virtue. However, this conception ignores two key pieces of evidence 1) that Stoic love seems to be directed at the flowering of virtue, and 2) Stoic ethics are quintessentially role-based.

Stoic love's telos, or purpose, seems to be directed at the actualization of virtue, not just virtue itself. The Diogenes Laertius passage by using the phrasing "bloom or flower" implies that the virtue one loves is something developing but not yet mature, suggesting that what the Stoic loves in another is not virtue, but rather the *potential* for virtue. This supposition seems odd, because of the Stoic claim that the only good is virtue and the only virtuous people are Sages. Why don't the Sages just reserve their love for eachother? They are perfect and virtuous, so why do they extend their love to those who are still learning? Their love for imperfect disciples becomes less odd when one examines the following possibility: love exists to nurture virtue.

Although even in the realm of Stoic love, there seem to be two different types of love, nurturing two different types of virtue: 1) seems to be recognizing the fungibility of fellow man and deeply impersonal, while 2) seems to be

role-based and particular.

Inwood's essay focuses on the former and draws from the chapter "City of Love" in *The Stoic Idea of the City*, which compiles and analyzes evidence regarding how Zeno conceptualized love as the glue that would hold an ideal Stoic Republic together.[17] This Republic would be entirely full of Sages. Love serves a critical bonding function between good men, bringing about "friendship and freedom, and again concord, but nothing else" in order to solidify the "safety of the city."[18] Zeno's city, composed of good men, would also be completely lacking in terms of sexual and paternal private property, with all partners and children in common with all others.[19] His is a kingdom ruled completely by non-fungible love.

The Stoic tradition placed great emphasis on the city as something morally good, one of the few things in a world of indifferents. A recount from Clementes of Alexandria implies the Stoics thought of the cosmos as a glorious city and regarded the microcosmic imposters on earth as poor imitations, meaning that if one achieved a genuine city, one

17. Schofield, Malcolm. "City of Love." In *The Stoic Idea of the City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
18. Schoefield, "City of Love," pg. 25-26.
19. Schoefield, pg. 26.

in line with the will of Zeus/nature, and therefore virtue, the importance would be utmost.[20] It would be a utopia, there would be a city without fools. Although, Inwood deduces that love for the Stoics would have to be a type of volition (i.e. good-desire) it seems like in Zeno's city love would have to be a joy rather than a volition. Volition seems bent on achieving a *future* good, but Zeno's love has the function of protecting *the status quo* in the city. It can not be volition because the good end (i.e. concord) has already been achieved. All that is left to do is protect the utopia.

So, in such a place, there is no need for gardeners because all the flowers have already bloomed of their own accord. There is no cultivation of virtue, for all are good men already and need not be taught anything, therefore it would make no sense for a type of love bent on *teaching* virtue to be present because everyone would already possess it. But the Stoic doctrine clearly makes room for such cultivation, and thus we must have love in other areas.

The type of love bent on cultivation would have to be somewhat non-fungible. The Stoics recognized some level of role or rank, part of what one is required to do as being

20. Clementes, Stromata, IV 26, selected from Schoefield, "City of Love," pg. 24.

based on internal character and part being based on external side constraints. Epictetus demonstrates the importance of rank with a tale about Priscus Helvidius, a senator whom emperor Vespasian forbids from going into the senate.[21] Helvidius answers that Vespasian can easily relieve him from his position, but as long as he's constrained by such a role, he will fulfill that role's duties.[22] Another example exists in the same text, an athlete chooses to die rather than have his genitals removed. His philosopher brother finds this unadvisable, but it was the proper action for the athlete to take given his nature.[23] Particularly, Epictetus recognizes relational roles that guide behavior, deeming it right for all to pay attention to "all the relations, natural and acquired; as son or father, or brother or citizen, or husband or wife, or neighbor or fellow-traveler, or prince or subject."[24] Epictetus was thus concerned with not just ideal roles, but the kind of roles that are socially constructed.

Thus, although all virtuous people are equally virtuous, some may have different duties to each other depending on their place in the world. In terms of love, age

21. Epictetus, *Discourses,* sect. 1.1-2.
22. Epictetus, *Discourses,* sect. 1.2.
23. Epictetus, *Discourses*, sect. 1.2
24. Epictetus, *Teachings of Epictetus,* bk. VI sect. 53

sure seems to be one of those factors. Another definition of Stoic love, appearing in Arius Didymus' writings, says that "Love is an attempt to make friends, on account of beauty being apparent, with *young* persons in bloom."[25] This conception of love is, again, heuristic. It's based on a flowering of virtue, rather than virtue that has already manifested.[26]

Clearly, this definition is in contrast with the egalitarian love that glues together Zeno's utopia, because it is directed at specific individuals—individuals with the attributes "young" and "in bloom"—not a whole. Additionally, since the Stoics recognized duties based upon proximity and similitude in all other cases, it would be unsurprising for them to do so in the matter of love. To elaborate, a certain Stoic Sage may love a young man because (1) he is close to him at the moment (he has the potential to love others, but proximity is important for the duties of teaching in the same way proximity is important for the duties of neighbor) and (2) the lover's nature is such

25. Strobaeus, II 115.1-2, selected from Schoefield, "City of Love," pg. 29. Italics added by author.

26. The reader may note that this definition sounds weird and uncomfortable. That's because the Stoics were pro-pederasty. I.e. it sounds weird because it is weird.

that he could teach the beloved. It's possible all Stoic Sages are equally capable by nature of teaching any youth, but that seems unlikely, given such a strong attention to variegated natures (e.g. the philosopher and the athlete) above. One must think that a Stoic Sage embodies all natures, but that seems to run contrary to the advice that Epictetus gives:

> In every affair consider what precedes and follows, and then undertake it…don't, like children, be one while a philosopher, then a publican, then an orator, and then one of Caesar's officers. These things are not consistent. You must be one man, either good or bad. You must cultivate either your own ruling faculty or externals, and apply yourself either to things within or without you; that is, be either a philosopher, or one of the vulgar.[27]

It seems as if the Stoic suggests finding a place in society via examining one's own qualities, picking a pathway based on one's own qualities, and then adhering to the social expectations of said pathway.

It's thus reasonable, given that the Stoics exhort men to find an activity fitting for their nature, for them to find

27. Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, sect. 29 pg. 4. Ellipses signal a part in the middle removed by the author.

a spouse fitting to their nature in much the same way. Eros can retain its status as a desire-like-feeling for the Sage as well as the fool, as one has the persisting desire to cultivate virtue within the youth they love. Thus, the Stoic Sage has at least two forms of love, one fungible and one non-fungible.

You Belong with Me: The Selection of Partners

Although in Zeno's city, one might have evolved beyond the social realities of the ancient world, the Stoics still recognized they had to fulfill the duties of their day-to-day life. Some of the duties were specific (i.e. roles) based on a relationship that one might have (father-son) or based on the duties of a particular job. However, there also seem to be duties that apply to all human beings, based on what type of being they are (i.e. their nature). Perhaps love is such a duty.

> Cicero suggests that is what Chrsippus believed:
>
> But just as the communal nature of a theatre is compatible with the correctness of saying that the place each person occupies is his, so in the city or world which they share no right is infringed by each man's possessing what belongs to him. Furthermore, since we see that man is created with a

> view to protecting and preserving his fellows, it is in agreement with this nature that the wise man should want to play a part in governing the state and, in order to live the natural way, take a wife and want children by her. Even the passion of love when pure is not thought incompatible with the character of the Stoic Sage.[28]

This view seems, at first glance, to be neither of the types of love isolated above! Chrsysippus seems to ignore Zeno's communal love and does not even take into account the love a Sage can have for a youth. More baffling still, the prior forms of love we've seen have been mostly homosexual, but the relations suggested above clearly have to be heterosexual in nature.[29]

What are we to make of the inclusion of the word 'want'? We can only assume, given the Stoic position on want in general, that even though Cicero uses the latin word "*velle*" he can't mean it in terms of desire as a form of vice (i.e. mistaking the wanted thing for something genuinely good), so what other possibilities are there?

28. Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, sect. 3.67-69 pg. 287-89. Italics added by author.

29. Unless a case like Iphis and Ianthe occurs, the Stoics certainly didn't count on such unlikely conditionals.

The simplest solution may be to direct the wanting toward the act of taking a wife and having children. Perhaps, since the Stoic Sage only has volition toward virtue, and Cicero has already told us that the act of wife-taking is in accordance with Zeus' (*Iove's*) will, that the '*velle*' in the statement originates from the drive to live in accordance with nature.

Oddly, the "by her" (*ab ea*) is causing some difficulties. Again, like with the case with youths above, the language seems to apply that there is a specific her, that there is something non-fungible about this agreement. Cicero's usage of "his" (*eum and eius*) and 'possession' (*occuparit*) likewise implies there are specific unions between people that are important, and the wife in question is not just chosen by lot.

Another option is that, for the Stoic Sage, a love for youth should parallel a love for the wife. The Sage could love the flowering of virtue, both in the potential for virtue that the wife would have in herself, and perhaps the potential to produce virtuous children.[30] Inwood points out that there seems to have been a predecessor that is very close to the

30. If so, I wonder how one tells the latter, likely also through physical beauty.

loving-based-on-flowering-virtue model the Stoics hold: the cynic power couple Hipparchia and Crates.[31] She fell in love with him due to his powers of argumentation and the couple seemed to encourage each other to live virtuously.

However, if love is ill-advised and the fool remains perpetually unaware of virtue, how are they supposed to choose a wife to be in accordance with? In the absence of love and absence of a way to pick up on virtue, what is advisable? Perhaps just the generic Stoic suggestion to enact a selection applies to both Sage and fool in this case. Selection (*ekloge*) is the process in which indifferents are considered as *indifferent*, but then through reflection, some are deemed to have positive value as preferred indifferents and some are subscribed as dispreferred indifferents.[32] These attributes are distinct from good or evil (to give any indifferent a label of good or evil would be to commit an epistemic vice) but some indifferents are helpful to achieving certain ends or actualizing certain duties, and others are not. One means of selection, as briefly touched on above, is considering one's rank, determining an action appropriate to one's role, and selecting indifferents to prioritize in accord with the

31. Inwood, "Why do Fools Fall in Love," pg. 68-69.
32. White, "Stoic Selection: Objects, Actions, and Agents." pg. 111-112.

conclusion of the prior two questions.[33] That could easily be done with a spouse: an athletic man can select a partner who would support him in his athletics, a political man can select a partner capable of giving advantageous counsel, or an agricultural man can select a partner who can be a useful farmhand.

This conclusion seems most likely, that spousal selection and love are entirely different matters. One's end is children, the other's virtue. In the Stoic's world, one selects a wife via the mandates of reason, not passion. There is no randomness, arbitration, or love.

Thus, in the Stoic view, the Sage is the only one who can love truly without vice, via the ability to identify virtue. The rest of the world stumbles about and blindly devotes themselves to those who seem most pleasing to the eye. The best that those who are not yet sages can do is to try and select an adequate partner, by considering them as indifferent, unclouded by lust or fool love. The Stoics, then, do make some room for love and marriage, even if they rail against passions.

33. White, pg. 124-26.

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