

Beauty as harmony of the soul: the aesthetic of the Stoics

Jennifer A. McMahon

Aesthetics is not an area to which the Stoics are normally understood to have contributed. I adopt a broad description of the purview of Aesthetics according to which Aesthetics pertains to the study of those preferences and values that ground what is considered worthy of attention. According to this approach, we find that the Stoics exhibit an Aesthetic that reveals a direct line of development between Plato, the Stoics, Thomas Aquinas and the eighteenth century, specifically Kant's aesthetics. I will reveal an interpretation of the aesthetic of the Stoics which has more explanatory power for the history of aesthetic theory than a history of aesthetic theory which leaves out the Stoics.

1. Introduction: the Stoic conception of a human being

In this paper I set myself two tasks. The first is to identify what I take to be the Stoic aesthetic. The second task is to argue that this aesthetic influenced Kant's notion of disinterested pleasure through Cicero's adoption in *On Duties* of Panaetius' theory of decorum. As Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is indisputably the most influential aesthetic theory there is, in achieving this I will have shown the important role of the Stoic aesthetic to the history of aesthetic theory.

The Stoic attitude to emotion has been rehabilitated by Nancy Sherman as she uncovers textual evidence in Diogenes Laertius that they did not promote lack of feeling but rather emphasised the importance of good feeling in habituating one to a state of virtue (Sherman, 1997:117). This paper builds upon this view by identifying in Cicero's adoption of Panaetius' notion of moral beauty, an aesthetic underpinning to Stoic ethics, an orientation which can be understood to inform Kant's aesthetics and certain strands in twentieth century aesthetics. The standard view is that the Stoics believed that the good life was built upon the exercise of reason alone and the total extirpation of the passions (Gill, 2003:51). In contrast, in the light of Panaetius' notion of decorum and the cognitive aspect to emotion taken by the Stoics according to Diogenes Laertius, the expelling of the passions, the nature of ethical development

and the nature of rationality are not as straight forward in the Stoics as the standard view suggests.

1.1. Freedom from the passions

The Stoics implicitly treat the passions not as irreducible aspects of experience but as responses built upon certain beliefs or interpretations of events. The Stoics (in particular Chrysippus, Panaetius, Seneca and Epictetus) saw passions as resting on an evaluation of external events. When they taught that passions should be expurgated or extirpated, they did not mean that we do this through some kind of expression, such as venting emotions with the purpose of a kind of catharsis. Nor did they believe that one should suppress or bottle up emotions and passions. Instead, as reflected in Seneca's essay "On Anger", the Stoic typically thought we could eradicate our disposition to passion (Seneca, Essays, bk 1).

To eradicate our disposition to passion is only possible if passions are somehow mediated by beliefs. The orthodox Stoic view of emotions was that they depend on the rational assent of the person involved but that, once formed, they can outrun rational control (Inwood, 2004:88). For the Stoics, passions are not unavoidable or

inevitable responses to external stimuli. Instead they involve a certain interpretation or construal of events. This is where one exercises control. And one does this in such a way that no passions are aroused. For the Stoic, passion refers to feelings or emotions that are out of one's control. However, eradicating passion does not necessarily mean that all feeling is to be eradicated as is sometimes rather hastily assumed to be the Stoic orientation to life. There is still room for a notion of good feeling as Sherman argues (Sherman, 1997:117). I will return to this possibility later. In any case, eradicating passions entirely from the soul (and cultivating good feeling for that matter)



Plato, Seneca, and Aristotle in an illustration from a medieval manuscript

required developing a certain kind of orientation to the events of life. This brings us to the second point:

1.2. Moral Development

In order to extirpate passion from the soul one would develop a certain orientation to the world. This might be achieved by either of two ways, only one of which the Stoics endorsed. According to the first alternative, one might develop the appropriate orientation through habit and training. For example, a child's carers would model the correct orientation to the events of the world through their behaviour and would reward a similar orientation when observed in the behaviour of the child. This would promote the internalisation of the acceptable patterns of behaviour in the child to such a degree that eventually adopting what was considered the appropriate behaviour would occur without conscious reflection or decision making. The required disposition or orientation would take root and could be understood as the endorsement and entrenchment of a value system. In this case, extirpating passion from the soul would be a no-brainer!

In contrast, according to the second alternative and the one that the Stoics did endorse, the required orientation involved an intellectual process. According to the Stoic view, one engaged in a conscious reasoning about the world and its events such that no passions or emotions were aroused. The Stoic alternative was grounded in a conception of the human being according to which in our true state we are not creatures of habit or simply creatures of a kind whose behaviour and instincts could be trained by rewards. Instead, we are beings whose psychology is unified by rationality.

It is important to note that this approach does not rule out a role for good feeling. For example, over the course of one's life, by endorsing certain interpretations over others due to the harmony or order that ensues, one is cultivating a good feeling towards certain interpretations and reinforcing a good feeling towards order and harmony. In this case, the good feeling is so defined due to its link to reason and principle. The possibility that good feeling could motivate reasonable beliefs and actions would not be incompatible with the Stoic view that ethical development was brought about through rational means. That is, giving feeling or certain kinds of emotion a role in ethical development need not be incompatible with the Stoic's intellectual concept of the human being.

2. A Stoic Aesthetic

2.1. The Stoics on pleasure

The Stoic rejection of passion did not mean the rejection of happiness or joy. It was simply that the only lasting satisfaction for a human being was the satisfaction of holding in one's mind a conception of one's life as good and well lived. According to

Seneca: “[T]he happy life is to have ... a mind that is placed beyond the reach of fear, beyond the reach of desire, that counts virtue the only good”. And a little later: “A man thus grounded must, whether he wills or not, necessarily be attended by constant cheerfulness and a joy that is deep and issues from deep within, since he finds delight in his own resources, and desires no joys greater than his inner joys” (Seneca, *Essays*, bk.7, iv. 1-3-v.2).

On the other hand, the Stoics did regard “pleasure” with contempt because they associated it with the sensuous. For example, Seneca: “Pleasure is a poor and petty thing. No value should be set on it: it’s something we share with dumb animals” (Seneca, *Letters*, CXXIII). Yet, we should not take this to mean they were promoting a dull and joyless life. On the contrary, to direct our actions towards a happy life implicitly motivated their position regarding the pre-eminence of virtue. The Stoic believed that only by pursuing virtue for its own sake could we achieve a happy and fulfilling life. Seneca again:

[O]nce we have driven away all that excites or affrights us, there ensues unbroken *tranquillity* and *enduring freedom*; for when pleasures and fears have been banished, then, in place of all that is trivial and fragile and harmful just because of the evil it works, there comes upon us first a *boundless joy* that is firm and unalterable, then *peace and harmony of the soul* (Seneca, *Essays*, bk 7, iii. 2–4) [author’s italics].

The Stoics were contemptuous of pleasure but only what we would now consider a very narrow set of pleasures. In fact, Monroe Beardsley finds two kinds of pleasure in the Stoics: the pleasure (hedone) that “is an irrational movement of the soul” and the pleasure (chara) which is “a rational elevation of the soul” (Beardsley, 1975: 70–71).

2.2. Panaetius and Cicero on decorum and beauty of the soul

Panaetius was the Stoic whose conception of decorum and beauty of the soul was adopted by Cicero in his *On Duties* and through that book has arguably influenced aesthetic theory up to the present. Panaetius belonged to the second period of Stoicism. As one would expect of a school that promoted the exercise of reason, the Stoics continued to develop their ideas over the centuries. This development reflected both the individual Stoic’s interests and also reflected the historical conditions within which the Stoic found himself such as the emphasis on the good life of the third period of Stoicism, known as Roman Stoicism.

Panaetius contributed to the transition of Stoicism into a form which would eventually become amenable to the Romans. He held that the concept of the person as an individual was at least as important an aspect of one’s freedom and identity as belonging to a community. As such Panaetius did not adopt his Stoic predecessors approach to the absolute nature of virtue. Whereas the first wave of Stoicism (Zeno, Cleanthes and Chryssipus) treated virtue as an absolute quality which was possessed by the sage, Panaetius taught that virtue could be cultivated by the individual and

achieved in degrees (Edwards, 2008:89–90). Most significantly, he also emphasized that one should cultivate virtue in a way that was compatible not only with human nature generally and the conventions of the particular community in which one found oneself but also with one's own personal disposition and character.

Panaetius allowed himself to be influenced to some degree by Epicurean influences in his *On Peace of Mind*. For example he adopts the notion of an aesthetic appreciation of one's own virtue. However, his view should be distinguished from the role that Epicurus gives this appreciation. In *On the Ends of Good and Evil*, Cicero criticises Epicurus for treating virtue as a means to pleasure. According to Epicurus, acting virtuously is pleasant in itself but its value is in the pleasure it affords rather than constituting an independent good (Sharples, 1996:93). In contrast, for Panaetius, virtue is an independent good, the highest good, but its goodness is manifested as moral beauty. According to Gill, the idea that *decorum* "can confer a kind of moral 'beauty' on one's life is widely recognized as being a central element in Panaetius' ethical theory" (Gill, 1993:343).

I quote Seneca again in order to draw out the difference between the Epicurean and the Stoic notion of the grounds of virtue's goodness. This distinction is particularly important in understanding the peculiarly Stoic heritage of Kant's notion of disinterested pleasure:

in the first place, even though virtue is sure to bestow pleasure, it is not for this reason that virtue is sought; for it is not this, but something more than this that she bestows, ... pleasure is neither the cause nor the reward of virtue, but its by-product, and we do not accept virtue because she delights us, but if we accept her, she also delights us (Seneca, *Essays*, bk.7, viii. 5–ix.2).

When I say to you, "The highest good is the inflexibility of an unyielding mind, its foresight, its sublimity, its soundness, its freedom, its harmony, its beauty"; ... Why do you mention to me pleasure? It is the good of man that I am searching for, not that of his belly — the belly of cattle and wild beasts is more roomy! (Seneca, *Essays*, bk.7, ix. 3–x. 2).

Seneca's words echo those of Cicero in *On Duties* with which Seneca was well versed. Cicero writes:

And it is no mean manifestation of Nature and Reason that man is the only animal that has a feeling for order, for propriety, for moderation in word and deed. And so no other animal has a sense of beauty, loveliness, harmony in the visible world; ... *It is from these elements that is forged and fashioned that moral goodness which is the subject of this inquiry* (Cicero, bk.1, iv) [author's italics].

These elements to which Cicero refers constitute what Panaetius would have called "decorum". Panaetius' notion of moral beauty or decorum attributes to all objects of virtue a formal similarity; they exhibit proportion, harmony and in virtue of this perhaps we might say as did Thomas Aquinas, a radiance or clarity. These characteristics were found in nature, according to Panaetius. This apprehension of the natural world which can be transferred across to perceptions of behaviour, dispositions and human

artefacts incorporates decorum into the notion of the aesthetic. Perhaps a better way of putting this is to say that the notion of the aesthetic adopted by later schools just is what a Stoic would think of as an expression of decorum.

Given that the relevant books by Panaetius no longer exist, we rely on textual evidence across and between those texts which comment on Panaetius such as Diogenes Laertius, Galen and Cicero to support the view that for Panaetius, rationality was manifested in right actions and objects as beauty. Panaetius treated beauty as a natural drive, along with the drive towards community, knowledge and ambition (Ferguson, 2003:361). This drive towards beauty can be understood in the light of the Stoic perspective generally as a manifestation of rationality in behaviour which the Stoics called decorum. It is in this sense that good feeling, a feeling for harmony, proportion and order, is a key part of one's ethical life or virtue. As such an aesthetical ethics is compatible with an essentially rational soul.

3. The influence of Stoicism on eighteenth century aesthetics

Cicero incorporates the notion of decorum from Panaetius' books *On Peace of Mind* and *On Proper Function* into his own *On Duties*. The evidence for the influence of Cicero's *On Duties* on Renaissance England and eighteenth century Germany is manifold from the numerous copies made of it before the advent of printing to the various commentaries, interpretations and Christian versions of it. The British Library holds many more editions and translations of *On Duties* dating back to before 1600 than any of the other classics from Virgil to Plato. According to Michael Grant (1960:28) Cicero's *On Duties* was the first classical text ever printed by Germans (printed at the Monastery of Subiaco, near Rome in 1465).

Frederick the Great thought so highly of the book that he asked the scholar Christian Garve to do a new translation of it, even though there had already been two German translations since 1756. Garve's translation went into five editions during his lifetime; three or four more were published after he died (van der Zande, 1998:75, 78–9). Kant owned a copy of Garve's translation of 1783 which was published two years before Kant published his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in 1785.

Gregory Des Jardins argues that both Hume (who explicitly refers to Cicero's work in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*) and Kant reasoned their moral philosophies in terms of *On Duties'* discussion on whether ethical behaviour is based on reason or based on sentiment, a discussion that continues today. While Cicero upheld rationality as the arbiter of moral goodness, he found a place for moral sensibility when he dismissed the Cynics rejection of convention on the grounds that it was inimical to moral sensibility.

However, while the influences of Cicero's *On Duties* have been identified in both Hume and Kant's moral philosophies (Des Jardins, 1967:237–42), I am not aware of its influence being traced through their work on aesthetics. However, one can argue

that the Stoic ideas on decorum influenced their aesthetic theories. According to the aesthetic theories of both Hume and Kant, as well as the aesthetic theory of their predecessor Francis Hutcheson who influenced them, aesthetic pleasure is understood as a guide to a moral orientation. Des Jardins writes that “Hume regarded as a Ciceronian maneuver his thesis that some antecedent natural ‘Motive or impelling Passion’ is necessary to interest us in virtue” (Des Jardins, 1967:237). According to Panaetius, this impelling passion (read “good feeling”) is the beauty we find in virtue.

The aesthetic component to this concept of decorum is developed into a full blown aesthetic in its own right in medieval, eighteenth century and many later philosophical schools. In Thomas Aquinas we find beauty characterised as integrity, proportion and clarity. Immanuel Kant thought that through the orientation to the sensuous world engendered through beauty and the sublime, we are alerted to our moral vocation. For Kant, beauty was an object of disinterested pleasure, a pleasure to be distinguished from the pleasure of the agreeable or the pleasure of personal benefit or the useful. In Kant’s notion of disinterested pleasure, we recognise similar features to those addressed by Panaetius’ notion of the satisfaction of moral beauty or decorum.¹ For an example of the way this idea has informed certain twentieth century concepts of the aesthetic, consider this extract from John Dewey’s *Art As Experience*:

There is an element of passion in all esthetic perception. Yet when we are overwhelmed by passion, as in extreme rage, fear, jealousy, the experience is definitely non-esthetic. There is no relationship felt to the qualities of the activity that has generated the passion. Consequently, the material of the experience lacks elements of balance and proportion. For these can be present only when, as in the conduct that has grace or dignity, the act is controlled by an exquisite sense of the relations which the act sustains — its fitness to the occasion and to the situation (Dewey, 1934:49).

4. Conclusion

By acknowledging the Stoic notion of decorum in the concept of the aesthetic in Thomas Aquinas, and eighteenth century philosophers like Kant, we are better placed to understand certain strands in twentieth century aesthetic theory from John Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetic theory to Monroe Beardsley’s formalism. In such strands of aesthetic theory, beauty is never simply a matter of pleasing sights and sounds. It is always associated with intellectual constructs of harmony, balance and radiance, associated with intelligence and temperance. It is important to understand the Stoic’s contribution to aesthetic theory because without it, the intentions of many authors are

¹ This notion can also be traced back to Aristotle’s virtue ethics. That is, virtue is praiseworthy because it is beautiful rather than beautiful because it is praiseworthy. See Kelly Rogers (1993) and John M. Cooper (1999). Nancy Sherman also reveals evidence of an aesthetic underpinning to notions of moral judgment in a line of thought originating in Aristotle, developed through the Stoics and culminating in the work of Kant’s moral philosophy (the latter recognised by Sherman as a fact not universally acknowledged). See Sherman (1997).

easily distorted. For example, without an understanding of the Stoic origins of these ideas, aesthetic pragmatism can fall into pure sensuousness as in Richard Shusterman's recent work (1999), and formalism can become a mindless response to sights and sounds as in Nick Zangwill's recent work (2001). In both cases the very point of identifying an aesthetic category is lost or at best replaced with a very thin conception of the aesthetic. In contrast, both Dewey's pragmatism and Beardsley's formalism develop concepts of the aesthetic which exhibit the hallmarks of the Stoic notion of decorum. They involve a cognitive construction, judged for its order and harmony and related to a good life.

Those philosophers who hold that aesthetic judgment relates the moral and cognitive realms in interesting and nuanced ways, need not be aware that their concepts of the aesthetic have been inherited through or influenced by the Stoic tradition. It is probably more likely that they acknowledge Kant as the relevant precursor. However, I have argued that the dominant strands in philosophical aesthetic theory of the preceding two centuries owe to the Stoic notion of decorum their concept of the aesthetic when it combines the pleasure of certain intellectual configurations with a concern for their behavioural manifestations. With the Ancient Greek Stoic contribution to aesthetic theory acknowledged, the history of aesthetic theory provides the resources to better understand the nature of the aesthetic.²

² I would like to thank George Couvalis for coordinating the philosophy stream. The conference participants and attendees at the philosophy sessions were helpful and convivial. It was both enlightening and enjoyable to take part. I would also like to thank George for his helpful suggestions on this paper and for the references he sent me. The range of topics and areas that his interest and knowledge extends across demonstrates once again the extraordinary breadth and depth of his philosophical expertise.

Bibliography

- Beardsley, 1975
Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: a short history*. The University of Alabama Press.
- Cicero
Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Duties (DE OFFICIIS)*, Translated by Walter Miller. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913.
- Cooper, 1999
John M. Cooper, *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Des Jardins, 1967
Gregory Des Jardins, "Terms of *De Officiis* in Hume and Kant", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28: 237–42.
- Dewey, 1934
John Dewey, *Art As Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1958.
- Diogenes Laertius
Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. Trans. C. D. Yonge. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853.
- Edwards, 2008
Catharine Edwards, "Self-scrutiny and self-transformation in Seneca's Letters". In *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Seneca*, ed. John Fitch: 84–101, Oxford University Press.
- Ferguson, 2003
Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. Third Edition.
- Galen
Galen, *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*. Edition, translation and commentary by Phillip de Lacy. First Part: Books i–v. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1978.
- Gill, 2003
Christopher Gill. "The School in the Roman Imperial Period". In *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood: 33–58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gill, 1993
Christopher Gill, "Panaetius on the virtue of being yourself". In *Images and Ideologies: Self-definition in the Hellenistic World*, eds Anthony Bulloch, Erich S. Gruen, A. A. Long, and Andrew Stewart: 330–48. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Grant, 1960
Michael Grant, *Cicero: Selected Works*. Penguin Classics.
- Inwood, 2004
Brad Inwood, "Moral judgment in Seneca". In *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations*, eds Steven K. Strange and Jack Zupko: 76–94. Cambridge University Press.
- Rogers, 1993
Kelly Rogers. "Aristotle's conception of τὸ Καλόν", *Ancient Philosophy*, 13, 2:355–71.
- Seneca, Essays
Seneca, *Moral Epistles*. Translated by Richard M. Gummere. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, three volumes, 1917–25.

Seneca, Letters

Seneca, *Seneca. Letters From a Stoic*. Edited by Robin Campbell. Penguin Classics, 1969.

Sharples, 1996

R. W. Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics: An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy*. London & New York: Routledge.

Sherman, 1997

Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on the Virtues*. Cambridge University Press.

Shusterman, 1999

Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics: a disciplinary proposal" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, 3:299–313.

van der Zande, 1998

Johan van der Zande, "The microscope of experience: Christian Garve's translation of Cicero's *De Officiis* (1783)" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, 1:75–94.

Zangwill, 2001

Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.