

Chapter 2.4: Attachment to Outcomes

*Do not become attached to the things you like;
do not maintain aversion to the things you dislike.
Sorrow, fear, and bondage come from one's likes and dislikes.
—Buddha*

If you don't get what you want you are disappointed, but if you don't get what you need you will die. Food, water, and oxygen are examples of *needs*, while respect, love, and being right are examples of *wants*.

The *fight-or-flight reaction* is an exquisite orchestration of biological processes, which makes an organism physically stronger so that it will be able to fight powerfully or flee quickly when its life depends on it. If you ever encounter such a situation, you will be glad you have it. This power, however, comes at a price; during a fight-or-flight reaction the body is sacrificing everything else—including digestion, immune response, and higher cognitive faculties—to be physically strong now. But some people react to trivial stressors as though they were life and death. This costly error exhausts the body, making it vulnerable to disease, and exhausts the cognitive resources needed to override the influence of local stressors and temptations.

Rational Emotive Therapy

Dr. Albert Ellis¹ described a useful way to defuse excessive emotionality: When you experience a fight-or-flight reaction, ask yourself, “Is this about something I want or about something I need?” If you don't get what you want, it is disappointing but not a matter of life and death. Indeed, it is often advantageous to be cool and calm in the midst of a crisis. Sadly, some people destroy what is genuinely important to them because of their fight-or-flight reactions to trivial slights.

According to Dr. Ellis, traps of emotional over-reaction result from attachment to outcomes that are not of vital importance.

Stoicism

If your boss falsely accuses you of some sin you did not commit, it is indeed frustrating but it is not a matter of life or death. Even if you lose your job over it, it is still not a matter of life and death. The Stoic, Epictetus, observed: “A beggar doesn't have a job, but he is alive.”

Epictetus preceded Dr. Ellis by about two thousand years, and his philosophy produced heroes. Consider an archer who strives to shoot excellently and will not be disappointed if he shoots well, even if he doesn't win the competition. Winning is desirable, but there will be times when an excellent archer shoots well and still—for reasons beyond his

¹ Pioneer of Cognitive Behavior Therapy and called his version: Rational Emotive Therapy

control, such as a sudden gust of wind or an extraordinary performance by an opponent—is not awarded first place. A non-stoic archer views this as a failure because he did not achieve the intended outcome; whereas, a stoic archer views it as a success because he shot well. The stoic is focused on performing well, not on the outcome of the performance.

In Epictetus' words:

On the one hand, there are things that are in our power, whereas other things are not in our power. In our power are opinion, impulse, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is our own doing. Things not in our power include our body, our possessions, our reputations, our status, and, in a word, whatever is not our own doing.

Straightaway then, train yourself to say to every unpleasant impression, 'You are an impression, and by no means what you appear to be.' Then examine it and test it by asking whether it concerns things that are in your power or things that are not in your power, and if it concerns something not in your power, have ready to hand the answer, 'This is nothing to me.'

Remember that, on the one hand, desires command you to obtain what you long for, and on the other, aversions command you to avoid what you dislike. Those who fail to gain what they desire are unfortunate, whilst those who fall into what they seek to avoid are miserable.

A person's master is the one who has power over that which is wished for or not wished for, so as to secure it or take it away. Therefore, anyone who wishes to be free should neither wish for anything nor avoid anything that depends on others; those who do not observe this rule will of necessity be the slaves of others.

When you are about to undertake some task, remind yourself what sort of business it is. If you are going out to bathe, bring to mind what happens at the baths: there will be those who splash you, those who will jostle you, some will be abusive to you, and others will steal from you. And thus you will undertake the affair more securely if you say to yourself from the start, 'I wish to take a bath, but also to keep my moral character in accordance with nature.' Do likewise with every undertaking. For thus, if anything should happen that interferes with your bathing, be ready to say, 'Oh well, it was not only this that I wanted, but also to keep my moral character in accordance with nature, and I cannot do that if I am irritated by things that happen.' Say to yourself, 'This is the price for peace of mind, and this is the price for being free of troubles. Nothing can be had without paying the price.'

Remember that the insult does not come from the person who abuses you or hits you, but from your judgment that such people are insulting you. Therefore, whenever someone provokes you, be aware that it is your own opinion that provokes you. Try, therefore, in the first place, not to be carried away by your

impressions, for if you can gain time and delay, you will more easily control yourself.

According to Epictetus, the traps of emotional over-reaction result from attachment to outcomes that you do not control.

Taoism

About 500 years before the Stoics were the Tao poets. Consider the following by Chaing Tsu:

The Need to Win

*When an archer shoots for nothing he has all his skill.
When he shoots for a brass buckle he is already nervous.
When he shoots for a prize of gold
He goes blind, or sees two targets.
His skill has not changed, but the prize divides him.
He cares.
He thinks more of winning than of shooting,
And the need to win drains him of power.*

Attachment to outcomes hinders ongoing performance:

Emotionality: If the archer *needs* to win, the prospect of failure is threatening and produces a biological reaction, nervousness, which undermines the steady hand required of the task.

Distraction: The archer will perform best when his attention is *focused on shooting* to the complete exclusion of everything else. To the extent the archer thinks of winning rather than shooting, the prize divides him, and the need to win drains him of power.

According to Chaing Tsu, the traps of emotional over-reaction result from attachment to outcomes.

