

## ANGER, PRESENT INJUSTICE AND FUTURE REVENGE IN SENECA'S *DE IRA*

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*De ira* is, as Seneca states in the beginning, a treatise on how to alleviate anger.\* While other emotions may still have something calm about them, anger, according to Seneca, is all excitement, raging towards vengeance (1.1.1). The idea that we should aim at getting rid of anger is tied to the theoretical discussion of anger: once we understand what we actively do when we experience anger, we can stop short of getting angry. *De ira* stands within a Stoic tradition of discussing the therapy of the emotions.<sup>1</sup> Seneca's concern with anger is not only in line with the general Stoic conviction that emotions are irrational, but also with a more widespread ancient interest in anger as a particularly violent emotion. However, in spite of the particular attention that is devoted to anger, it seems that, of all emotions, anger is surprisingly difficult to understand within the Stoic framework.

The violent anger which is at stake in ancient discussions has an element of pain and an element of desire; the agent feels unjustly harmed and desires revenge. But according to the Stoic framework, an emotion can either be a kind of pain (*lupê*)<sup>2</sup> or a kind of desire

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<sup>1</sup> "Emotions" here translates the Greek *pathê* and the Latin *adfectus*. There are good reasons for translating both terms with "affections," which highlights that both are technical notions. However, "affection" emphasizes the passive element of emotion, and it is precisely the Stoic theory which claims that *pathê* depend on our active assent. For this reason I will stay with the seemingly less technical translation "emotion." But it should be kept in mind that this term, in the following discussion, figures as a translation of the Stoic technical terms.

<sup>2</sup> "Distress" better captures the scope of painful experiences which count, according to the Stoics, as emotions; physical pain is not considered a *pathos* (cf. Cooper 1999, 454 n. 13). But since I want to compare Stoic theory with other ancient accounts, I will for the purposes of this paper translate *lupê* as "pain." On the role of pain and pleasure in Stoic ethics compare also Vogt 2004a, 71–75.

(*epithumia*),<sup>3</sup> but not a complex phenomenon incorporating both. The early Stoics classify anger as a desire, and—in agreement with this classification—Seneca accepts a Posidonian definition which calls anger a “burning desire (*cupiditas*) to punish him by whom you think yourself to have been unfairly harmed.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Stoics opt for describing anger as a kind of desire, not as a kind of pain. However, while other ancient philosophers can describe anger as a desire and still mention its painful element, the Stoic classification of emotions states that every *pathos* either is a kind of desire, or a kind of pain.

Further, according to Posidonius’ as well as other Stoic definitions (see below), anger is a desire to *punish* or *take revenge*. To be angry means to desire an action which will bring about retaliation—the emotion of anger is partly defined through the action that the agent desires. We may think that this is due to a concept of anger which is different from our own; for the ancients, anger may have been a more violent state, a state which cannot consist in solitary brooding or silent indignation.<sup>5</sup> But independently of such historical changes, what interests me here is a general feature of the Stoic theory of the emotions. It is not only with respect to anger that the Stoics suggest a fundamental link between emotion and action. Anger seems to highlight a general aspect of the Stoic theory of emotion: emotions are defined as excessive impulses, and, according to the Stoic theory of action, an impulse (*hormê*) standardly sets off an action. It is a striking feature of the Stoic theory of emotion that indeed *every* emotion—as *impulse*—causes a bodily movement (which, however, may be obstructed or delayed). Therefore, the action which results from an emotion plays a role in *defining* the emotion: as impulse, an emotion is characterised by the kind of action that

<sup>3</sup> It should be kept in mind that what the Stoics mean is *appetitive* desire (Long and Sedley 1987, Vol. 1, Ch. 65 translate “appetite”). Since I will have to refer constantly to *what the agent does*, “desire” is preferable to “appetite”—there is no verb corresponding in a similarly obvious way to “appetite” as “to desire” corresponds to “desire.” The early Stoics define *epithumia* as an irrational desire (*orexis*), or pursuit of an expected good (Ps.-Andronicus, *On Passions* 1 = *SVF* 3.391 part = LS 65B).

<sup>4</sup> Seneca quotes Posidonius’ and two further definitions at a passage from *De ira* which is lost (between 1.1.3 and 1.1.4), but can be reconstructed from Lactantius.

<sup>5</sup> Harris 2001, 25 discusses how the study of ancient ideas about emotions needs to acknowledge that there may be no exact correspondences between the relevant Greek and Latin terms on the one hand, and terms in the modern languages of today’s scholars on the other. He argues that the Greek term *orgê* refers to a more violent emotion than “anger” in modern English. On this point, see also generally Ch.s 1, 2 and 3.

goes along with it. This aspect of the Stoic theory, however, raises several intricate questions about anger. Anger, like other desires, is accompanied by an action towards a perceived good (retaliation), but, unlike other desires, it arises from the impression of something bad in the present (the injustice), not something good and therefore desirable in the future.

Seneca, who devotes a full treatise to the complexities of anger, may explain some aspects of the early theory which he finds himself in agreement with, and which we don't see sufficiently clearly due to the scarcity of our sources.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I am suggesting turning to Seneca's *De ira*, asking whether he clarifies how, according to Stoic theory, the present harm of a perceived injustice and the desire for revenge relate in anger.

While I cannot argue for this in any detail here, I will be reading Seneca as essentially in agreement with orthodox Stoic thought about the emotions.<sup>7</sup> Once we understand, following the interpretations of John Cooper and Teun Tieleman,<sup>8</sup> that Posidonius is unlikely to have disagreed with Chrysippus on the emotions in the fundamental ways which are suggested by Galen, we have less reason to expect an unorthodox position in Seneca: he does not face the need to side either with Chrysippus or Posidonius. Apart from this consideration, three very general aspects of *De ira* speak for Seneca's orthodoxy: (i) Seneca nowhere in *De ira* implies or argues for a dualist or tripartite psychology, which would explain anger through an irrational part of the soul; (ii) he pays considerable attention to the central, orthodox

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<sup>6</sup> I am assuming that Seneca is, while an orthodox Stoic, a philosopher in his own right. On Seneca as a Stoic philosopher, cf. John Cooper's paper in this volume. For a detailed argument for this view see Inwood 1993, esp. 150–156. Cf. also Williams 2003, 7 and Veyne 2003, ix. Inwood critically examines interpretations of Seneca which focus on finding the philosophical ancestry of different parts of Seneca's work, and argues in favour of reading *De ira* as *one* treatise (156). An important contribution to the literature which adopts the former perspective is Fillion-Lahille 1984.

<sup>7</sup> More specifically, I am assuming either of two scenarios, or, perhaps even more likely, a mix of both: (i) Seneca may further work out some aspects of the theory, while regarding these elaborations as being in line with orthodox Stoicism; (ii) he may discuss ideas which have been presented in earlier Stoic writings, but are not, or are not sufficiently clearly, transmitted. That Seneca may improve some aspects of the Stoic theory of emotion is argued along different lines by Sorabji 1998. Sorabji suggests that Posidonius confronts the Chrysippean theory with objections and counter-examples. He argues that Seneca provides answers to the problems that Posidonius raises, and is thus able to go back to the Chrysippean theory.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper 1999; Tieleman 2003.

idea that anger is set off by assent as a voluntary movement of the soul; (iii) his interest in a first, involuntary movement need not be taken as evidence that he presents a Posidonian *rather than* an orthodox position; as Graver and Stevens have argued,<sup>9</sup> it is likely that the conception of such initial reactive movements of the soul, which do not result from assent and therefore are not *pathê*, was part of Stoic thought already before Posidonius.

Scholarly debate, for the most part, has taken Seneca's analysis of anger to be an exemplary analysis of *one* emotion which can be extended to a general theory of *all* emotions. I too will assume that we can generalize from Seneca's account of anger to his overall conception of the emotions, and part of my argument depends on this premise. But part of what I hope to show addresses the specifics of anger: anger, which is related to a present (perceived) injustice and a future (perceived) good, does not share its complex structure with other desires. While in other desires the agent relates to something good in the future, and rushes towards it, so as to attain it, in anger the agent relates to something good in the future, the revenge, and rushes towards it, but at the same time she relates to something bad in the present—the perceived injustice. Thus, anger doesn't seem to have only one "direction of fit"; the agent relates to something bad in the present *and* to something good in the future. Anger, therefore, might seem to point to a limitation of a classificatory system which suggests that each kind of emotion is characterized by precisely *one* such direction.

I will start with a brief sketch of the early Stoic classification of anger, as well as with a selective account of Seneca's analysis of anger, focusing on the impressions which figure in anger. On this basis I will first explain in more detail, and then discuss, four closely related questions: (i) Why is anger, without any qualifications or reference to pain, classified as a desire? (ii) and (iii) address what I will call the "anomalies of anger": (ii) How can anger be classified as a desire, if it does not arise from a judgment about a perceived good in the future?

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<sup>9</sup> Graver 1999. See also Stevens 2000, who argues that the early Stoics distinguished between impulse and a preliminary impulse. The latter notion was, according to Stevens, later worked out into the conception of *propathêia* (initial *reactive* movements in the soul which are, due to testimony on Posidonius' discussion of them, often associated with the Stoicism of Posidonius). As Inwood 1993, 175 points out, Seneca is distinguishing between two kinds of impulse: the first *impetus* arises involuntarily, and it is not an impulse proper, i.e., an impulse which leads to action. The second impulse involves assent, while the first, preliminary impulse does not.

(iii) How does assent to an impression like “I have been wronged” set off movement towards the apparent good of revenge? (iv), finally, takes up a question that arises with respect to all emotions: How can we account for the fact that, according to Stoic theory, the impressions we assent to in an emotion do not present a *specific* course of action? Seneca’s analysis of the different movements (*motus*) of anger can, as I will argue, help to shed light on these four questions. It adds to our understanding of how, according to the Stoics, an emotion is an excessive impulse, an idea that up to now has been mostly explored with respect to questions about Stoic psychological monism, not with respect to the link between emotion and action.<sup>10</sup> Seneca’s analysis of anger contributes to our understanding of how not only the emotion itself, but also the action that goes along with it, is irrational.

According to early Stoic theory, the emotions fall into four classes depending on whether they are directed towards what appears good or bad, and on whether the presumably good or bad object is only expected, and thus in the future, or already present:

Since emotion is of this kind, one must suppose that some emotions are primary and dominant, while others have these as their reference. The generically primary ones are these four: desire, fear, pain, pleasure. Desire and fear come first, the former in relation to what appears good, and the latter in relation to what appears bad. Pleasure and pain result from there: pleasure, whenever we get the object of our desire or avoid the object of our fear; pain, whenever we fail to get the objects of our desire or experience the objects of our fear. (Stob. 2.88.8–90.6 = *SVF* 3.378, 389, part = LS 65A)<sup>11</sup>

In pleasure we relate to what appears good in the present, in desire to what appears good in the future, in pain to what appears bad in the present, and in fear to what appears bad in the future:

<sup>10</sup> Cooper 1999, 453–461 explains how, according to Chrysippus’ theory of the emotions, emotions are impulses, and, as such, “psychic movements of the kind that directly cause voluntary bodily movements.” However, he does not engage with the question how an emotion can cause a *specific* action, given that it only seems to propel us into a “direction” like “getting away,” or “getting revenge.”

<sup>11</sup> While I do not follow Long and Sedley’s translation in all respects, I provide large portions of the text in their translation. I have consulted their English translation for all passages which are contained in their collection. Even though I sometimes diverge from it substantially, I am very much indebted to their translation. Throughout this paper I am citing Stobaeus from the edition of Wachsmuth 1884.

|                      | <i>present</i> | <i>future</i>      |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| <i>apparent good</i> | pleasure       | desire             |
| <i>apparent bad</i>  | pain           | fear <sup>12</sup> |

Anger (*orgê*) “and its species” are classified as desires:

The following are classified under desire: anger (*orgê*) and its species, *thumos*, *cholos*, *mênis*, *kotos*, *pikriai*, and the like, intense sexual desires, cravings and yearnings, love of pleasures and riches and honours, and the like. Under pleasure: rejoicing at another’s misfortunes, self-gratifications, trickery, and the like. Under fear: hesitancy, anguish, astonishment, shame, confusion, superstition, dread, and terror. Under pain: malice, envy, jealousy, pity, worry, sorrow, annoyance, mental pain, vexation. (Stob. 2.90.19–91.9 = *SVF* 3.394, part = LS 65E).

There is a striking conformity between different ancient texts which deal with anger<sup>13</sup>: anger arises when we see ourselves slighted, offended, or unjustly harmed, and it is directed at revenge or punishment. In fifth-century and Hellenistic Greek, *orgê* and *thumos* seem to be the most frequent terms: while both words are notoriously difficult, they clearly are both used to refer to violent anger which is prone to action. *Cholos* literally mean bile, and seems to refer to a bitter form of anger. *Mênis* is often translated as “wrath,” and is famously associated with the anger of Achilles. *Kotos* is a form of anger which goes along with resentfulness, and *pikria* refers again to bitterness. But in spite of the differences, all these forms of anger have an active component: the angry person seeks revenge or punishment. Seneca’s picture of raging anger, which lacks whatever element of calm other emotions have, shows that his use of *ira* agrees with this understanding of the Greek terms.

According to Diogenes Laertius, the Stoics define anger (*orgê*) as the desire for retribution against one who seems to have done one an undeserved injustice (7.113). A similar definition is transmitted in Stobaeus: anger is “the desire to retaliate against one who seems to have committed an injustice contrary to one’s deserts” (Stob. 2.91.10 = *SVF* 3.395). In spite of mentioning the apparent injustice, these definitions do not speak of pain. Annoyance, mental pain, and vexation—*ania*, *odunê*, and *asê*—are grouped under pain. This may seem surprising: why are emo-

<sup>12</sup> Similar outlines have been presented at various places in the literature, most recently by Tieleman 2003, 114.

<sup>13</sup> For this brief summary, I am relying importantly on Harris 2001, Chapters 2 and 3, as well as the translation and comments in Long and Sedley 1987, 1.412; 2.406–407.

tions that could be described as milder forms of anger classified as belonging to a different *genus*, implying that anger on the one hand, and annoyance, mental pain, and vexation on the other are of a different *kind*?<sup>14</sup> If we suppose, in line with what I hope to show, that the Stoic classification pays important tribute to the kinds of *action* which go along with emotion, this seems only plausible. The Stoics could think of annoyance, mental pain, and vexation as fundamentally different kinds of emotion because of the “general direction” of the actions they set off: while they arise, like anger, from a perceived slight or offense, annoyance, mental pain and vexation may go along with a “contraction” in the face of pain, instead of a rush towards retaliation.

While the Stoic classification of the emotions is attractive by bringing the intentionality of the emotions into full view, it may seem to fall back behind the subtlety of Plato’s and Aristotle’s ideas on how pain and pleasure figure in emotion.<sup>15</sup> In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines anger as “a desire (*orexis*), accompanied by pain, for what appears to one to be punishment for what appears to one to be belittlement by people for whom it was not proper to belittle oneself or someone close to one” (2.2.1378a31–33).<sup>16</sup> For Aristotle, as for the Stoics, anger primarily *is* a desire; but for him this desire *goes along* with pain. His definition of anger seems to acknowledge that, while we feel the excitement of envisaging revenge, we also suffer from the pain that a perceived injustice brings. If we allow for the idea that pain and pleasure can be “secondary emotions,” accompanying other emotions, we can explain the complexity of anger.<sup>17</sup> But this route is not open to the Stoics: pain and pleasure, within the Stoic account, are primary emo-

<sup>14</sup> It seems that the early Stoics understand *thumos* as a milder form of anger—it is defined as anger in its beginnings (Stob. 2.91.11–12).

<sup>15</sup> The following brief comments on Plato and Aristotle in no way do justice to this subtlety, or the scholarly debate on the relevant texts by Plato and Aristotle. They are included here in order to give a rough idea of two theoretical options that are closed off for the Stoics: (i) that pain and pleasure *go along* with other emotions, and (ii) that a single *pathos* could be explained as having both a painful and a pleasurable component.

<sup>16</sup> I am following Cooper’s translation (apart from rendering *lupê* throughout this paper as “pain,” not “distress”) and his commentary on the passage (1999, 419 n. 23). In *De anima* 1.1.403a29–31 Aristotle differentiates between how the dialectician and the natural scientist deal with anger, providing an interesting way in which the former would explain it—as the desire to pay back pain for pain (*orexis antilypêsêos*). This captures, in the shortest possible way, that anger is *about* pain, but *is* a desire.

<sup>17</sup> In *Rhet.* 2.1378a20–23 Aristotle describes emotions as being accompanied by pain and pleasure. As Cooper 1999, 414–415 points out, he also defines some emotions that involve pain as *kinds* of pain; there is weaker evidence that he would make the

tions.<sup>18</sup> They are two of the four *kinds* of emotion; the four primary emotions straightforwardly divide the range of emotions into distinct groups.

Although fear and desire are said to “come first,” the generic emotions are on a par: pain and pleasure only come second insofar as whatever the agent deems good or bad is present, while in fear and desire it is still in the future. Desire can turn into pleasure when the perceived good has been attained, and fear into pain when the perceived bad thing has become a reality in the present. Pain and pleasure are not components of other emotions—no emotion can be explained by how it is composed of both pain and pleasure. The idea of such a mix could offer another way of capturing the complexity of anger. It seems that Plato, even though he talks about desires (*epithumiai*) like hunger and thirst in the relevant section of the *Philebus* (34e–36b), provides the framework for such an account. Plato describes desire as a mix of pleasure and pain: the man who desires something enjoys the prospect of having it, and is at the same time in pain because he experiences the lack of what he wants.<sup>19</sup> Both pain and pleasure are referred to in the explanation of a desire. Along these lines, one could explain anger as pleasurable with respect to the prospect of revenge, and painful with respect to the perceived injury. But just as the Stoics cannot accommodate the idea that a desire would be accompanied by pain, they cannot explain it as a mix of pain and pleasure. With the earlier, ancient discussion in mind, we may ask (i) whether Seneca’s analysis of anger can explain whether the Stoics are able to capture the painful element in anger, even though they unqualifiedly classify it as a desire.

When Seneca introduces his definition of anger in *De ira* 1.3.3, he writes that Aristotle’s definition is not far from “ours,” i.e., the Stoics’. Aristotle, in Seneca’s account, says that “anger is a burning desire to

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corresponding assumptions about pleasure. On the question how Aristotle relates pain and pleasure to the emotions see also Rapp 2002, 2.546–550 on *Rhet.* 2.2–11.

<sup>18</sup> One could object that if desire envisages a future pleasure, and fear a future pain, then desire and fear indeed are (while not being themselves the emotions of pleasure and pain) not devoid of pleasure and pain. But this is not entirely correct: while desire relates to future pleasure, it is not supposed to be itself pleasurable, and while fear relates to something bad in the future, it is not supposed to be painful. What we *experience* is desire or fear, and these are supposed to be distinct emotions from pleasure and pain.

<sup>19</sup> The discussion in the *Philebus* proceeds on the model of depletion and replenishment: the agent, who remembers how it was to be “full” enjoys the prospect of replenishment, and is at the same time in pain because now she is “empty.”



pay back pain.” The gist of this definition is that anger is a desire, but refers to pain. At the very beginning of *De ira* Seneca points out how anger is characterized by the onstorm of pain (*dolor*), and rages in desire (*cupiditas*) for revenge (1.1.1). Nevertheless, Seneca remains within the early Stoic framework; he does not explain how anger is a desire which is accompanied by pain, but rather how it is a desire in response to a perceived wrong. The part of *De ira* where Seneca gives definitions of anger (between 1.2.3 and 1.2.4) is lost, but Lactantius seems to have quoted precisely this passage. According to his testimony, Seneca cites the following definitions: anger is “a burning desire (*cupiditas*) to avenge a wrong,” “a burning desire to punish him by whom you think yourself to have been unfairly harmed,” and “an incitement of the mind (*incitatio animi*) to damage him who has done damage or wished to do damage” (Lactant. *De ira dei* 17.13).<sup>20</sup>

We can get a clearer picture of how Seneca relates the present injustice and the future good of revenge, by asking how they are reflected in the impressions an agent assents to when she becomes angry. In line with the early Stoics, Seneca thinks that we generate emotions by *assent* to *impressions*. Each such impression has a linguistic counterpart, so that we can speak in a shorthand way of the impression “I have been wronged,” meaning the impression to which the *lekton* “I have been wronged” corresponds. At the beginning of Book 2 Seneca gives a list of what is involved in anger, which he says is *compositum* and *plura continens*: we realize something, experience indignation, condemn, and seek retribution (2.1.5). There are two steps prior to the judgment that we have been unjustly harmed: we realize what has happened and we feel the impact of indignation. This first stage of anger is described, only a few lines later, as an involuntary movement (2.4.1), a preparation for emotion. It has often been remarked that Seneca seems to share Posidonius’ interest in the *propathēia*, states of being moved which are in themselves not yet *pathē*, given that the agent has not yet assented to anything. After this preliminary movement, according to 2.1.5, there is *one* judgment—to condemn the other’s deed—and this is followed by action, the quest for revenge. According to this outline, it seems that a single judgment—that one has been wronged—gives rise to anger. This way of reading Seneca is confirmed when we look at the way in which he puts the key question of the early chapters in Book 2: “Anger is

<sup>20</sup> I am following the reconstruction and translation of the text by Cooper and Procopé 1995, 20 n. 8.

undoubtedly set in motion by an impression *received of a wrong*. But does it follow immediately on the impression itself and break out without any involvement of the mind? Or is some assent by the mind required for it to be set in motion?" (2.1.3; emphasis added).<sup>21</sup> Seneca's answer to this question is an emphatic "yes"—there is an involvement of the mind. The mere impression of a perceived injustice does not set anger into motion; only assent to this impression does.

The impression which we assent to in anger is, it seems, an impression received of a wrong. Of course, a lot of earlier assents will figure in the background—e.g., only an agent who judges certain forms of politeness to be important will feel slighted when she is not greeted by her colleague. The immediate assent to "he is offending me" is based on the earlier assent to something like "when people don't greet me, they express disrespect." And given that we are talking about anger in the sense that seems to have been prevalent in ancient discussions, the agent who is prone to anger has probably also assented at some point to an impression like "when someone is offending me, he needs to be paid back," as well as something like "revenge is good." But the anger arises out of the immediate judgment that one has been wronged.

On the basis of Seneca's account, I can further explain both what I called the "anomalies of anger," as described in questions (ii) and (iii) above, as well as the general question about emotion and action outlined in question (iv).

(ii) According to Stoic theory, emotions are beliefs, and these beliefs are generated through judgments about what is good and bad. The agent who suffers from *pathê* assents to impressions which present things as good and bad, even though they in fact are (according to the Stoics) indifferent. Insofar as the theory of the good and the indifferent is central to the Stoic theory of the emotions, it seems plausible that the Stoics would single out these judgments as what sets off emotion: for example, according to Chrysippus, pain is a belief that something bad is present (Andronicus, *On Passions* 1 = *SVF* 3.391, part = LS 65B). Even though, like in anger, several other assents may figure in the background, we can see why Chrysippus would focus on this belief: without the deficient judgment on what is bad and what is indifferent

<sup>21</sup> Cooper and Procopé's translation (1995). I have used this translation and edition throughout my work on Seneca's *De ira*. However, for many of the following passages, I provide my own translation, which slightly modifies, and sometimes importantly departs from, Cooper and Procopé's translation.

there would be no pain.<sup>22</sup> However, it seems that anger is, compared to other desires, an anomalous case: while other desires can be described with respect to beliefs about the presumed goods that the agent wants, anger seems, according to Seneca, to be generated by assent to “I have been unjustly offended,” not to “revenge is a good.”

(iii) According to early Stoic theory, actions are caused by impulses, and an impulse (*hormê*) is generated through assent to impressions of a specific kind, which we may call hormetic. Even though the impulse causes the bodily movement of action, it is not yet itself the action or bodily movement; it is defined as a movement of thought towards something in the sphere of action (Stob. 2.86.17–87.6 = *SVF* 3.169, part = LS 53Q). Sources on how exactly the Stoics think of hormetic impressions are scarce. Stobaeus reports that according to the Stoics all impulses are acts of assent, “[b]ut acts of assent and impulses actually differ in their objects: propositions (*axiômasi*) are the objects of acts of assent, but impulses are directed toward predicates (*katêgorêmata*), which are contained in a sense in the propositions” (Stob. 2.88.2–6 = *SVF* 3.171 = LS 33I). Insofar as an impulse is an act of assent, it relates to an impression, and respectively to the *axiôma* which corresponds to this impression. But strictly speaking, the agent generates an impulse by assenting to an impression. The linguistic counterpart of this impression names—through a predicate—a specific course of action. Assent to the impression causes the motion towards this course of action. While assent refers to the impression, impulse relates to the predicate which is part of the *axiôma*, and names an action (Stob. 2.97.15–98.6 = *SVF* 3.91 = LS 33J). Thus each impulse is generated by assent to an impression *which describes an action as to be done*.<sup>23</sup> Seneca clearly agrees with this analysis. In *Ep.* 133.18 he explains the nature of assent in a practical

<sup>22</sup> One of the striking aspects of the Stoic theory is that there is nothing like rational pain. The Stoics propose that the sage will have “good feelings” (*eupatheia*). Joy is the “opposite” of pleasure, watchfulness the “opposite” of fear, and wishing the “opposite” of desire (Diog. Laert. 7.116 = *SVF* 3.431 = LS 65F). The idea that these good feelings are *opposites* of the emotions highlights that they are not milder versions—since they are rational, they are the opposite of the emotions. It is not obvious why there is no such good or rational counterpart for pain (why, for example, the sage would not have any “good” or “rational feeling” when he considers the viciousness of all those around him who are not wise). On the question whether the good feelings relate to what the sage judges to be good and bad, or to what she judges to be indifferent, cf. Vogt 2004a, 76–79.

<sup>23</sup> It is a difficult question how exactly the *lekton* which is assented to needs to be construed. Cf. Inwood 1985, 45ff., esp. 55–56 and 60–66.

context: the action of walking is set off through “saying to oneself” and approving of one’s opinion that one should walk.

The Stoics define emotions as impulses (Stob. 2.88.8). Thus, whatever applies to impulses generally, should apply to the kind of impulse which the emotions are. However, if we follow Seneca’s outline, it seems that the angry acts of retaliation are set off by assent to the impression that one has been unjustly wronged, not by assent to an impression which presents a specific kind of action. Following the account of impulse, we would expect that, in anger, we assent to an hormetic impression, i.e., an impression which describes an action as to be done. But through assent to “I have been unjustly wronged” we do not seem to assent to performing *any* kind of action.

The fragments on the physiological definitions of the emotions give some indication of how the early Stoics thought that emotions propel us into action: desire is said to be an irrational “stretching,” or pursuit of an expected good, and fear an irrational “shrinking,” or avoidance of an expected danger. It seems that the emotion impels us toward a certain *direction* in action: pursuit or avoidance. This motion into one or the other direction seems to be envisaged as a physical extension towards an object, or a physical shrinking back from it. The corresponding physiological definitions of pleasure and pain say that in pleasure people think it right to be “swollen,” and in pain they think it right to be “contracted” (Andronicus, *On Passions* 1 = *SVF* 3.391, part = LS 65B). Thus it seems that in pleasure and pain, we don’t have something like a “direction” into which we are being propelled, so that the emotion would be tied up with some kind of action that fits this direction. Rather, in for example annoyance an agent who thinks it right to be contracted may retreat into grim silence, or in pleasure the agent who thinks it right to be elated may laugh. Retreating into grim silence or laughing seem more like expressions of emotion than actions. However, leaving aside this problem we may say that the fact that assent to an impression sets off a physiological motion explains to some extent how it sets off action (without the agent assenting to, e.g., “it is fitting for me to laugh”).

But anger still presents a special case. The link between assent and motion is decidedly easier to understand with respect to other desires. If one assents to the impression that a hot bath would be a great good, one’s motion towards this perceived good seems—even though one has not assented to the hormetic impression which presents a hot bath as to be taken now—closely connected to the impression. But in anger the

relevant impression does not present us with the future good that we desire and towards which we, physiologically speaking, stretch out; it presents the offense, not the revenge.

The problem can be described further if we ask how the agent can storm off into a *specific* course of action. This difficulty—number (iv) from above—, however, is not specific to anger, but seems to pose itself with respect to all emotions. Suppose I assent to the impression that an approaching tiger will kill me—what generates the action of climbing onto a tree or running to the left or to the right? Similarly, if anger is generated through assent to the impression that I have been unjustly harmed, it is quite unclear how I can *either* bring charges against the offender *or* kick him without first assenting to an impression which names either the first or the second of these actions. If the agent does not assent to an hormetic impression, she does not assent to doing either A or B. The theory seems to say that when an emotion is generated we storm away into action on the basis of a judgment like that this approaching tiger will kill me, or that someone has unjustly offended me.

If the Stoic theory indeed says that in emotion we storm off into action without having assented to an hormetic impression, then the Stoic theory of the emotions seems to be discontinuous with a very basic tenet of the Stoic theory of action: that there is no action without assent to an impression which presents an action as to be done. Given how firmly this idea is rooted in Stoic ethics, we would rightly be reluctant to call it into question. It would seem decidedly more promising if we found a way of making sense of this discrepancy as a meaningful part of the standard Stoic theory.

I now want to turn back to Seneca's *De ira* and ask whether he either gives any explanation of these difficulties, or whether he amends them to some extent. We may hope to find some suggestion in Seneca that, while the agent primarily assents to "I have been unjustly harmed," she also assents in a secondary way to something like "this deed needs to be avenged." An impression like this would be hormetic, but in a deficient way: it would, in a way analogous to the physiological movement of stretching, indicate a direction; but it would not tell the agent exactly what to do. It would also seem to imply the kind of value-judgment which we would expect in a desire—that revenge is a good thing.

When Seneca sets out to describe the three *motus* of anger in 2.4.1, he writes that he is going to tell us how the emotions begin or grow or

get carried away. According to this passage, there is first the involuntary reaction to the perceived offense; Seneca calls this stage a preparation for emotion<sup>24</sup> and describes it as a “threat.” The second movement is “voluntary, but not insistent” (*cum uoluntate non contumaci*). The agent thinks something like “it is right for me to take revenge because I have been harmed” or “it is right for him to be punished because he has committed a crime”; the fact that she thinks in terms of what is right or appropriate (*oportet*) bears witness to the fact that her will is not “insistent.” The third movement is out of control and has defeated reason; the agent does not want to take revenge only if it is called for (*si oportet*), but wants revenge no matter what (2.4.1).

Movement 2, just as movement 1, envisages an agent who *is not angry*. The agent who is in the second state is in this state through her will, but her will is not an obstinate or insistent will. She actually *can* think about things, and she can, just like the agent in state 1, stop short of becoming angry. “Suppose that someone thinks himself harmed and wishes to exact retribution, that something dissuades him and he promptly calms down—this is not called ‘anger,’ since it is a motion of the mind obedient to reason” (2.3.4).

Following this account, we are able to describe Seneca’s answer to the first question I raised—(i) whether the Stoics capture the painful side of anger even though it is unqualifiedly classified as a desire. Only agents who storm off into action, and thus present us with cases of the *third motion*, are angry. As long as an agent has not arrived at such an uncontrolled action, there is no way of saying whether she really is angry, or whether she may still turn around and be able to give in to reason. Thus anger really *is* the storming off into revenge, and is therefore adequately defined as a desire for revenge. At the same time, the starting-point of anger is a judgment about being wronged, and by naming the indignation which hits us, Seneca arguably does not neglect the painful element of anger. Even though he does not use the term “pain” in his detailed analysis, it seems clear that the indignation is a negative type of experience. Thus Seneca remains true to the Stoic classification which steers clear of mentioning pain or pleasure in the definitions of desire and fear. Nevertheless, his elaboration of the first

<sup>24</sup> Throughout his analysis, Seneca goes back and forth between describing movement 1 as a preparation for emotion and as what the virtuous person will have *instead* of anger. On the *propathēia kai ou pathos*-idea in different authors compare Graver 1999, 308.

movement, where we experience indignation as a result of perceiving a wrong done to us, seems to acknowledge the negative experiences of anger.

If we infer from Seneca's analysis of anger how the Stoic classification of the emotions works *in general*, it would seem that the distinction between four kinds of emotion ultimately focuses on the thesis that emotions are excessive impulses (Stob. 2.88.8), and as impulses are directed at *action*. This would reaffirm the reasoning I have offered for the classification of annoyance, mental pain, and vexation not as milder forms of anger, but as emotions of a different *kind*: anger and annoyance are of a different kind because anger pushes us into action towards a perceived good, whereas annoyance pushes us into the kind of expressive action that accompanies contraction.

Seneca's account also helps to clarify the two questions relating to the "anomalies of anger." While Seneca does not explicitly state what the agent assents to in stage 3, we can infer this from the difference between 2 and 3. In stage 2, the agent thinks things like "it is *right* for me to take revenge because I have been offended." In stage 3 she does not think in terms of *what is right*: she will assent to something like "I have to take revenge because I have been offended." Thus, it may seem that this passage gives indirect evidence for the thesis that, *pace* Seneca, anger is not generated by assent to the simple impression "I have been unjustly harmed," but rather through assent to the more complex impression "I have to take revenge because I have been unjustly harmed." This reading understands movement 3 as an uncontrolled version of movement 2.<sup>25</sup>

Seneca seems to give the following picture: an agent who is unjustly offended suffers from the impact of this "attack," and thus experiences the involuntary first movement. This makes her think about what has just happened, and what kind of reaction is called for. While she thinks about this, the ideas of punishment and revenge figure in her thoughts. Seneca's outline is compatible with either of two readings: either an impression presenting revenge is somehow in the background of the decisive impression "I have been unjustly harmed," or "I have been unjustly harmed" is, when cited as the decisive impression, simply shorthand for a more complex impression which also presents revenge. In both cases, Seneca would seem to make an effort to explain how

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Inwood 1993, 180 on how stage 3 can be interpreted as an uncontrolled version of 2.

the agent, by assenting to the impression of a perceived wrong, relates to the future good which we would expect in a desire, and how she is propelled into action. Both “anomalies of anger” would be, to some extent, amended: (ii) the relevant impression(s) would present the future good at which a desire is directed (revenge), and (iii) they would indicate the direction into which assent propels the agent (revenge).

Two further passages add to this picture. In 2.1.4 Seneca gives the following outline of what is involved in anger: “To receive an impression of wrong done to one, to lust for retribution, and to connect the two, that the damage ought not to have been done and that punishment must be inflicted.”<sup>26</sup> Even though Seneca does not explicitly talk of two impressions and consequently two assents (or assent to a complex impression), it may seem that what is tied together are in some sense two judgments, one stating “I have been unjustly harmed,” the other “there must be retribution.” 2.3.4–5 further affirms this interpretation. In 2.3.4 Seneca states that it is impossible to act for the sake of retribution or punishment without the mind knowing of it. In 2.3.5 he writes: “So the first mental agitation induced by the impression of wrong done is no more anger than the impression itself. The impulse that follows, which not only registers but confirms the impression, is what counts as anger, the agitation of a mind proceeding to retribution on its own will and judgment” (*concitatio animi ad ultionem uoluntate et iudicio pergentis*). Here it seems that Seneca starts out with the assumption that we assent to an impression of wrong done when we generate anger. He goes on to say that the mind proceeds to retribution on its own will and judgment, *not* that the mind *judges* that it should seek retribution; however, he is suggesting that the agent’s quest for retribution is *voluntary*, and this would seem to imply that she has made a judgment about whether or not to seek retribution.

Seneca presents us with an account of anger in which anger arises out of assent to a single impression—that one has been unjustly harmed. But he importantly complements this picture by suggesting that the agent who responds to an offense envisages revenge or punishment, or thinks about it. When she assents to the impression that she has been unjustly harmed, this seems to be closely tied to these

<sup>26</sup> Cooper and Procopé translate the latter part of this sentence differently: “to put together the two propositions that the damage ought not to have been done and that punishment ought to be inflicted” (*nam speciem capere acceptae iniuriae et ultionem eius concupiscere et utrumque coniungere, nec laedi se debuisse et uindicari debere*).



thoughts. Seneca seems to incorporate the thought about revenge into his account of the process that leads up to anger, while at the same time staying true to the Stoic definitions, according to which anger starts out from a perceived injustice.<sup>27</sup>

But we are still left with the fourth problem (iv): actions that result from excessive impulse, i.e., that go along with emotions, seem to differ from other actions insofar as we *do not* assent to impressions which name these actions and present them as to be done. If we extrapolate from Seneca's account of anger, it might seem that desire and fear are not just, physiologically speaking, "stretchings" and "shrinkings" towards and away from the objects that are judged to be good or bad. There may, additionally, also be thoughts which mirror this physiological movement, like "get it" or "avoid it." But the impressions we assent to do not name *specific courses of action*.

From the point of view of ethics, actions that accompany emotions differ in a very fundamental way from other actions: they are the kinds of actions that only the fool or inferior agent performs; none of the actions of a virtuous agent springs from an excessive impulse. Once we consider that the actions that arise from excessive impulses are actions of those who generally act badly, we can see how the fact that in these actions the agent has not even assented to an impression which presents the course of action fits into the ethical theory. To set off an action through assent to an impression which doesn't present us with what we are going to do, but simply propels us into some direction, is, on Stoic premises, clearly unwise. The wise man's lack of any precipitancy in assenting to impressions might partly be described by saying that he would never assent to an impression which will set off an impulse, while not presenting a specific course of action. Thus, (iv) turns out to be not a problem within the Stoic theory. Rather, it highlights a central tenet of the Stoics: that emotions are irrational, which would only make it plausible that they go along with actions which, too, are irrational.

In fear, we do not decide to either climb onto the tree or run to the left or to the right, and that is one way of explaining what is so bad about fear. If we are in fear of the tiger, there is no gap between this fear and an *erratic* attempt to escape. Flight will *not* be the result of assent to

<sup>27</sup> Further, as Frede 1986, 103–107 has pointed out with respect to early Stoic philosophy, not every feature of an impression will be captured in the *lekton* that corresponds to it. It is important to note that we assent to an impression, not to a *lekton* or proposition. See also Inwood 1993, 168.

an impression which presents a specific action as to be done; rather, we run or climb before we even consider the different options. Similarly, in anger, we shout or hit or call our lawyer not because we have assented to an impression like “I will call my lawyer.” One of the many bad things about anger is that we have already shouted or kicked or made the phone-call before we have given assent to any such impression.

If this interpretation is convincing, it contributes to our understanding of how not only the emotions themselves, but also the actions that go along with them are irrational. The actions accompanying an emotion are irrational because the agent has not assented to an impression which presents a *specific* course of action. Loosely speaking, the agent who assents to the impression which generates an emotion, and thus an excessive impulse, isn't aware of where exactly this assent will take her.