

Seeing the mind-body connection

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“In Stoicism body, mind and spirit are not distinct but are all made of one and the same matter.”



Writing and publishing pieces always entails a turnaround time, so by the time you read this both Tokyo 2020 and Euro 2020 are almost ancient history. I'm not an avid fan of watching sport, but in the summer my interest always resurfaces a bit. Particularly when Euro and Olympic Games come within a couple of weeks. And every year I see more and more connections between sport and Stoicism.

Competitive sports and the dichotomy of control

First of all, any competitive sport is a great manifestation of the Dichotomy of Control. It's really the plainest example of all. Picture this. There is a tennis match in progress (it can be any sport, of course, yet William Irvine used tennis as an example in his book and I simply bow to the tradition). The purpose of playing a match of tennis is to try to win it – without it the game itself wouldn't make sense. What then should a player focus on if she wants to maximize her chances for winning it?

Should you focus on winning?

A straightforward answer is that she should focus on... winning the match. But does it really hold? Let's imagine that she's down on points, it's not her lucky day, and the

opponent has the upper hand. In this case focusing on winning the match may actually discourage her. She will feel that the victory is sliding away, hence frustration and quite possibly even poorer performance. That's a clearly downward spiral.

Enter Stoicism: she should focus not on the final result (which is still not set and ultimately outside of her control) but on trying to play the best tennis she can in this very moment. It may seem a tautology on paper (playing good tennis equals good tennis) but in life it's not. If what she strives to achieve is playing the best she can in this very second, then the ultimate result of the match doesn't concern her. And she gets on the upward spiral. Not being concerned with the result only boosts her performance so the chances for actually winning the game are only increased. Tell all the truth but tell it slant, wrote Emily Dickinson. Here, in a similar vein, you get the best result when you don't shoot for it directly.

Healthy mind in a healthy body

Needless to say, simply analyzing this or watching sport on the internet doesn't make you a Stoic. The best way to go is to practice sport yourself. Keeping a specific regimen, exercising regularly, overcoming weakness –

here Stoicism and sport go hand in hand and reinforce each other. An additional golden point is that all of this works perfectly no matter how skilled you are. From the Stoic point of view, it doesn't matter if you run 10k in 30 or 70 minutes. The benefits of practicing sport – benefits for your body, mind and spirit – will be just the same.

Mens sana in corpore sano – healthy mind (and spirit!) comes in a healthy body. This phrase seems particularly suited for Stoicism given the fact that in Stoicism body, mind, and spirit are not distinct but are all made of one and the same matter.



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