

# The Failing Stoic on Beauty

## Meditation #1

My wife recently informed me she rates my physical attractiveness as average.

Not one to mince words, that one. Actually, "inform" is misleading. It was a slow afternoon and against better judgement I just had to start a conversation when there was nothing to say. I should have known better from lessons learned the hard way that silence is sometimes preferable. Like e.g. when you are travelling with someone you hardly know, have little in common with and the conversation just does not sustain itself.

Be that as it may, I had asked how attractive she thinks I am and then was miffed and a bitch about the honest answer for a few days. I would have happily settled for a charming half-truth like "I think you look pretty good." Or a cop out like "For me you are the most beautiful." But there I found myself, put in my place: AVERAGE.

Not being an ancient Greek or Roman Stoic sage, but someone living in the internet fueled collective narcissism that has been the 21st century so far, I had to process this. In the end I decided to take it as a compliment: I must have a darn great personality, if a perfect 10 inside and out like my wife decides to waste her life on a meh looking dude like me (BTW, Honey, thanks for editing the first draft before I mail it to Klemens.) Or, if we put it in Stoic: I identified outward appearance as a "preferred indifferent" and prioritized a core value (family) over it. For once in my struggle to be a better Stoic, and hence a better man, I made progress. Yay!

This little victory is not so clear cut as it sounds however, because our term "indifferent" is harder than the Greek and Roman concept of "indifference". Our Stoic heroes were different from the competition, namely the Cynic school of philosophy. The latter regarded everything but virtue as completely irrelevant, unnecessary and even harmful to the pursuit of a virtuous, and hence good, life. The most famous Cynic today is a certain guy named Diogenes, I am a sure you heard of. Yes, the one who allegedly made a discarded barrel his home and was, like all Cynics, essentially a philosophizing homeless person who loved bothering people in the street and invading their homes to discuss philosophy. With an emphasis on how wrong the involuntary listeners' philosophy of life was. I seriously doubt these guys were popular and did not get punched in the face a lot.

For a Stoic "indifferent" is far less exclusionary and rather means "nice to have". Which probably does not lend itself to be a good philosophic term. The Stoics even invited their followers to enjoy such "indifferents" and thereby occupied the, in my opinion perfect, middle ground between the radically ascetic Cynics and the as radically hedonistic Cyrenaic school. Such arriving at a synthesis between two already established philosophies had as much to do with hard won insight as with marketing. Competition for paying disciples between various philosophical schools in Athens was stiff and as far as we know led to attempts of physically pulling the competition's clients over into one's own gaggle. I like to suppose it also came to fisticuffs between opposing philosophers and would give a kidney to witness such a fight between august sages.

It was probably less intense for the Stoics, because, arrogant bunch as we usually are, we let people have things like good food, physical height (apparently a big issue in ancient Greece), health, success in sports and beauty. And are therefore better liked and less often assaulted than Cynics. You knew there would be a BUT: only as long as the pursuit of these nice things does not compromise our morality, especially the core Stoic virtues (like wisdom, temperance, justice and courage — these differ a bit over time and from one philosopher to the next. Stoicism is not nearly as rigid, hewn in

stone, as ideologies and most organized religion are). "Preferred indifferents" should also not get in the way of their doing good to our fellow man.

Let us e.g. consider a slightly obese person who takes up exercising to lose a few pounds. Neither a Stoic nor any other sane person except maybe a Cynic would argue that this is a bad thing. However, motivated by initial success, this person now segues over into intense, time consuming athleticism. Not an unlikely proposition since [extreme exercising nowadays is the new midlife crisis](#). Take my word for it, been there, done that, got burned. This former chubby might even start to compete in ultra endurance events like marathons or triathlons. And begin to neglect spouse, parents and children, thereby not living up to a core Stoic virtue. This is where Stoics draw the line. Enjoy the good things in life. But do not become their slave or let them take over your life to the detriment of what is really important in a good life.

One would think it is as simple with aesthetics, but it is not. "Beauty" for Greek and Roman Stoics was a much broader concept than for us. In the age of Instagram we almost exclusively think of aesthetic, physical beauty. Inner beauty is something we attribute to the aesthetically undateable when we want to be nice about that. Real "beauty" for ancient Stoics was the sum of a well-rounded and proportioned body in accordance with nature and an equally as well rounded soul that lives in accordance with Stoic virtues. It is unlikely that the Stoics would have much admiration for modern supermodels who are usually extreme outliers in physical appearance and behavior. Or bodybuilders for that matter.

Despite myself being far from free from habitually reducing beauty to outward appearance, it makes me sad that we as a society have regressed behind people who lived as far back as 300 BC. But, if we want to reap the benefits of practical philosophy, we also have to (in true Stoic fashion) accept things we cannot change. None of us will convince any number of Instagram users to share thoughts instead of carefully curated selfies. Hence we need to have a conversation about beauty as it is generally understood today and consider the topic from a Stoic perspective to better deal with it on our way to a good life.

Studies thrown around the internet under click bait headlines want to make us believe that the beautiful people have it all so easy. They get more pay, they rise faster in hierarchies and people are friendlier towards them. But is this really the case?

One thing I can tell you as an academically trained critic of science (I will be forever grateful to that philosophy professor) is that this is all so much junk that only makes us uglies and just bearables-to-look at feel bad. Nobody in the first place doubts that looking good is a preferable indifferent that has its advantages. But for the individual such a generality holds little promise.

Being beautiful according to the current societal norm is like an elite pedigree or rich parents. It can be a huge asset. Or it can be a millstone around your neck. I think especially if you are a great looking woman and look for someone who truly loves you for who you are, life can be as complicated as for a male millionaire who wants more out life than copulating with gold diggers by the pool: is he/she only with me for my looks/money and what happens if that is gone? The beautiful have it worse than the rich, because their looks will definitely be gone at some point. Before you roll your eyes, consider that a lot of these rich and/or beautiful people are profoundly unhappy. Hell, Brad Pitt has at several points in his life already let the tabloid reading public know he is not happy.

I think I only ever met two women who modelled. Both perfect beauties that teenage boys and later men were bending over backwards to please. Guys were queuing just to get rejected and gave them cars as presents. Bot married well and had respectable careers outside fashion. You would think they had it all and it came to them easy. And then the first shot herself and the second became disabled after jumping out of a window.

A friend recently told me something he had witnessed at a supermarket. An unusually attractive and very well dressed woman seemed to be aimlessly wandering around aisles. Men were gawking, women were punching their mates in the ribs without bothering to check if their eyes wandered because they simply had. Finally this woman got a single item that she quickly slipped into her bag and made for the check out. You know where this is going: my friend forgot all about it until he saw her ducking into a building entry on his way home. Perfect beauty was drinking vodka straight from the bottle at some strangers' door at 10 am in the morning.

I regret focusing on women with my examples, but we still live in a society where women are way more judged by their looks than men and hence make better case studies for what can go sideways.

Do not get me wrong, however, I freely admit I would still rather be hyper attractive than not, but it is as we have seen a double edged sword. Also because being on top of the aesthetic food chain not only does something to those who are, but also to the beholder. I considered this recently and I think overall their experience with me was better for less attractive former girlfriends and is for all people in general. Because I become anxious, distant and envious around winners of the aesthetic lottery. And I suppose it is like that for a lot of people. I am just nicer, more self-confident and overall better for people in my league. But the beautiful are not monads living in castles, they are people like you and me who want to, who need to, connect with others. Now consider how your life would be if from most people you only ever get unwarranted admiration and flattery. Or aloofness and envy.

So, next time you want to excuse getting fired with facial (in)justice, consider you being late all the time having more likely something to do with it. Let us in the middle or more to the bottom of the hit parade be content like true Stoics. And beauty being a preferred indifferent, let us also put a temperate amount of effort into improving our appearance which can never hurt. For most lacking in the looks department simple things like better grooming and losing a few pounds (or kilos in my case) by removing an unhealthy item like sodas from their diet go a long way. And might just be the step that gets us into good life territory. You might also kill two indifferents with one stone by improving your health as well.

Good luck my sister or brother in plainness. Stay strong and focus being beautiful in the Stoic sense. Maybe drop me a few a lines and tell me about your challenges and your victories.

This being the first of my meditations raises the question of how you will proceed from here on. I of course suggest, if you liked what you read, you stay with the series that I will continue to publish on amazon. I will explore more 21st century 1st world issues through Stoic glasses with an emphasis on that and only light amounts of philosophical theory. If you are a new to Stoicism and want to go deeper along with my meditations, I suggest you get a good comprehensive introduction into Stoicism like "[A Guide to the Good Life](#)" by William B. Irvine.

Please, also ignore my e-book on direct mail fundraising in German titled "Klasse statt Masse" and my introduction to this series "[Why I write philosophical e-booklets and what the reader can expect.](#)"

[edited by Klemens Dombrowski]