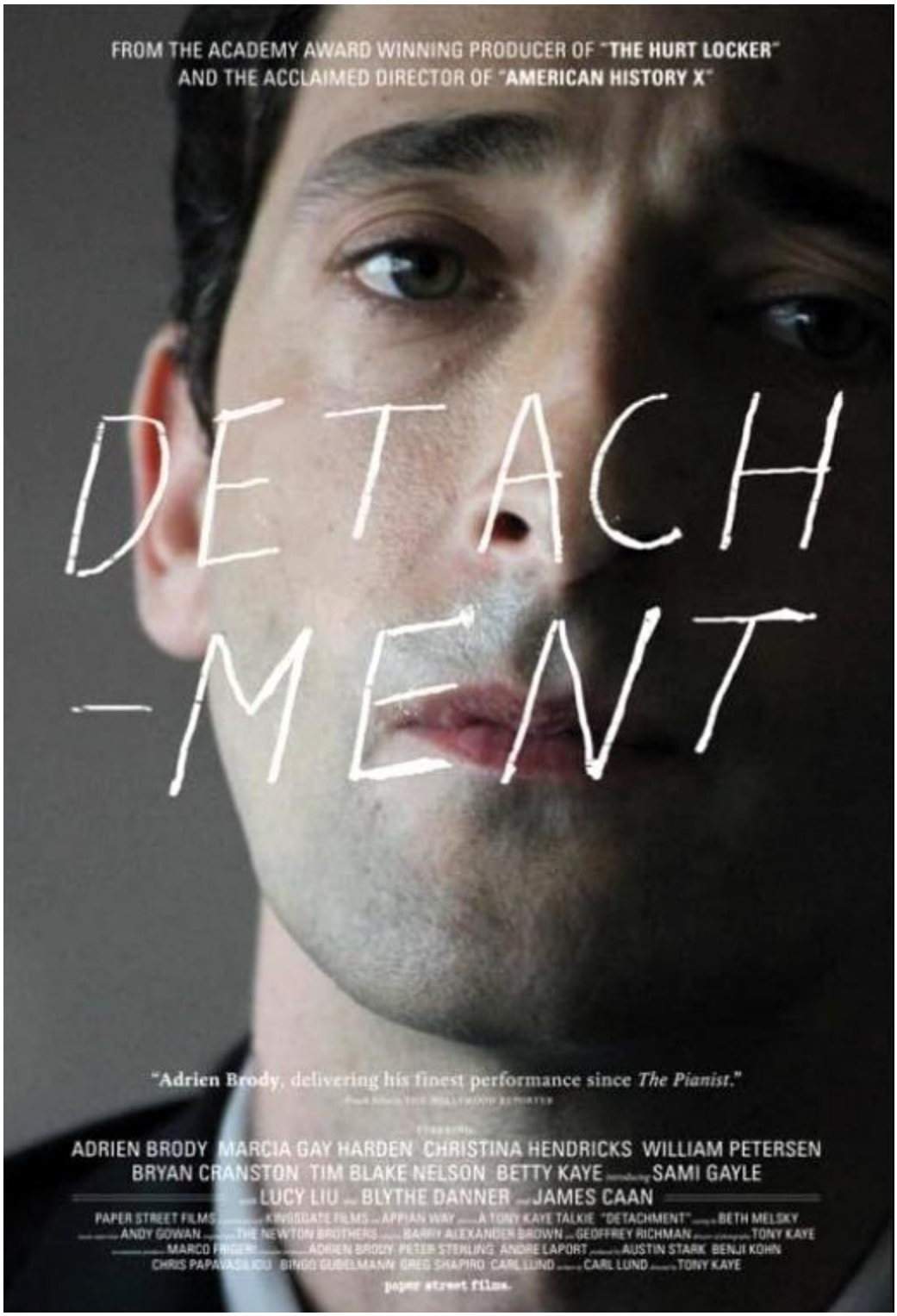
THE ONLY ANTIDOTE TO EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS IS ALSO A DECISIVE STEP TOWARD A FLOURISHING LIFE

(Possible feedback: What is this guy talking about? Philosophy in the middle of summer?! 😉)



The film “Detachment,” directed by Tony Kaye, is a raw and realistic social drama from 2011 that explores people’s emotional alienation and the collapse of the education system. In Greece, it was released under the title “Life Lessons,” a rather unfortunate title, as it seems to intensify whatever didacticism the film may contain.



The film’s protagonist, Henry Barthes (played by Adrien Brody), is a wandering substitute teacher. He avoids lasting bonds with people in order to protect himself from emotional trauma dating back to his childhood (detachment as a defense mechanism). His relationship with Erika, an underage sex worker (played by Sami Gayle), forms the emotional core of the film. Both are psychologically wounded. Erika desperately seeks love and acceptance, while Henry, carrying the trauma of his mother’s suicide and the shadow of abuse by his grandfather, struggles not to become emotionally attached to anyone.



Let us watch some characteristic scenes from the film featuring these two characters.

1. Rescuing Erika from the margins — Rescuing Erika from prostitution.mp4

2. Like a proper father — Like a proper father.mp4

3. Care and complex emotions — Care and complex emotions.mp4

4. The painful sacrifice — The painful sacrifice.mp4

5. Optimism for the future — Optimism for the future.mp4

When Henry finds Erika on the street—a homeless, abused, and vulnerable teenage prostitute—he sees in her the profound pain he himself tries to conceal. He decides to take her home, feed her, and care for her, offering her refuge from the abuse she experiences on the streets. Their mutual need for “connection” leads them to live together and create a “clean” space within a corrupt surrounding world, a place where they can both let down their defenses. Although Erika is a prostitute, their relationship remains strictly platonic and protective, with a substitution of “father–daughter” roles: it is a deep, paternal relationship marked by emotional complexity. When she tries to approach him physically (a consequence of her trauma: offering what she knows how to offer—sex—in this case to receive love rather than money to survive), he gently moves her away. Henry assumes the role of the loving father Erika never had. He cooks for her, buys her clean clothes, and offers her safety. By caring for Erika, Henry unconsciously

tries to atone by healing his own childhood wounds (his mother's suicide and the abuse by his grandfather) and overcoming his inability to save his now helpless, very elderly grandfather. At some point, Henry realizes that Erika has become too attached to him. Although Erika has developed strong feelings and sees him as family, Henry considers maintaining his usual "safe distance." He also knows, however, that he cannot become Erika's permanent guardian because of his troubled past and his longstanding emotional detachment from people. For her own good, Henry eventually calls social services. Their parting is the first time Henry breaks through the wall of his "apathy," emotional distance, and neutrality, and cries bitterly—showing that he genuinely cares for Erika and that calling social services, although logically necessary, was not an act of the disconnection and detachment that had characterized him until then. At the end, Henry visits Erika at the institution, where she appears healthy, clean, and smiling. Their relationship remains unresolved. Henry had to place Erika in a care facility to protect her, but the ending leaves open the possibility that he will continue visiting her and eventually try to save her permanently by becoming her guardian.



Henry and Erika's relationship illustrates the film's central message: human connection and empathy, even when they cause pain, are the only antidote to existential loneliness.

In my view, Henry's rescue of Erika exemplifies a virtuous act—one that leads a person toward eudaimonia, that is, deep peace of soul. Some people adopt a religion, uncritically or consciously, to navigate life. Others, consciously or

unconsciously, create their own philosophy of life without examining it particularly closely, and proceed accordingly. Still others devote time to examining and revising their lives in order to live better. In any case, flourishing in life is related to cultivating our character so as to balance and connect care for ourselves with care for other people, not only those close to us. Henry avoided emotional attachment by keeping himself at a "safe distance." Yet his offering to Erika, and the beautiful relationship he formed with her in order to help her, allowed beauty to return to his own soul as well. The "I" acquired meaning through giving to the "you." Of course, we must care for ourselves: by looking after our health, achieving financial security, setting boundaries with others, and resisting manipulative and abusive behavior, we secure our survival. But survival is not the ultimate purpose of life; it is a fundamental prerequisite, a "preferred indifferent," as we shall discuss below, on the path toward a flourishing life. What we offer others is ultimately what gives meaning to our own lives as well. According to the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, a fundamental aspect of human nature is that we are social—not merely because we enjoy company, but in the deeper sense that we could not actually exist without one another's help. Consequently, when we act for the good of society, we may also, perhaps indirectly, benefit ourselves.



Taking Henry's virtuous act as our starting point, we will explore the practical cultivation of virtue from a philosophical perspective.

There are three kinds of virtue: one derives from our natural gifts; the second is acquired through habit, especially early in life; and the third can be attained intellectually and therefore potentially taught, perhaps by aligning ourselves with

carefully chosen role models whose moral strength clearly has nothing to do with accumulating likes or followers on today's social (or anti-social) media...

The practical cultivation of virtue lies at the heart of practical philosophy. It is not merely a theoretical concept, but a way of life aimed at achieving eudaimonia—that is, deep inner tranquility—through daily action, self-control, and conscious choice.

Socrates held that virtue is knowledge. When a person truly knows what is good, they cannot help but do good. Philosophy thus becomes the daily "care of the soul."

According to Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics, moral virtue is not innate; it is acquired through habit (ethos) and systematic practice. It is based on the concept of the mean, the continual search for the "golden mean" between excess and deficiency.



The Stoic philosophers advocated a developmental model of morality, believing that we are naturally equipped to care not only for ourselves but also for those who care for us and for other people with whom we regularly interact early in life. Once

we reach the age of rational thought, around seven or eight, we can further develop our virtuous character in two ways: through habit and, later in life, through philosophical and critical reflection—at least for those inclined to it.

According to Stoicism, which we will focus on in this exercise, virtue is the only good and is identified with reason. Stoic philosophers such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius (see the blog post linked here) emphasized self-control, distinguishing between what is and is not within our control, and the daily practice of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. In modern times, Stoicism has experienced a major revival, as its tools and principles are widely applied in contemporary cognitive behavioral psychology and personal development to manage stress and increase resilience. Stoic philosophy is a practical guide to life focused on psychological resilience, self-mastery, and inner peace through daily action. In Stoic philosophy, virtue, as noted above, is not merely a theoretical concept but an art of living. It is a practice and lived experience requiring daily discipline, control of the passions (such as fear, sorrow, and desire), and a conscious choice to live according to nature and right reason. The purpose of human life is to use reason to create the best society humanly possible.

Stoic ethics is structured around four main pillars:

- **Wisdom: The ability to discern what is truly good, bad, or indifferent.**
- **Justice: Acting with honesty and respect, contributing to the well-being of society by working for the common good and improving the world to the extent that we can.**
- **Courage: The psychological and moral strength of character to face difficulties, fear, and pain without giving way.**
- **Temperance / Self-restraint: Self-mastery and control of our desires and passions by setting limits on them.**

Stoicism regards virtue as the highest good and the only path to eudaimonia. Thus, cultivating wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance is the sole necessary condition for flourishing. Practicing these four cardinal virtues in Stoic philosophy is a daily, practical endeavor. Each virtue is put into practice through specific actions and mental exercises that turn theory into a way of life oriented toward self-improvement:

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- Practicing wisdom: We focus on what is within our control and accept what lies beyond it (the dichotomy of control). Distinguishing what depends on us (our actions and thoughts) from what does not (other people's opinions and behavior, and external events), and focusing on the former, helps reduce anxiety. We relinquish control over situations beyond our influence and direct our energy toward what we can improve directly. We practice recognizing and setting aside our biases and impulsive judgments.
- Practicing justice: We put it into practice in everyday life through kindness, honesty, and fair treatment of others, regardless of their behavior.
- Practicing courage: Rather than avoiding challenges, we face them resolutely, developing moral resilience and remaining hopeful in the face of pain or uncertainty.
- Practicing temperance: This involves deliberate self-restraint, avoiding extremes, and refusing to be carried away by passing pleasures or excesses. When difficulties arise, we do not react impulsively. We assess the situation rationally before allowing it to disturb our peace of mind.



Human compassion and moral integrity are pillars of Stoic philosophy, leading directly to inner balance and tranquility. These are achieved through discernment and harmony. True eudaimonia is not identified with wealth or external circumstances, but is attained through virtue, right reason, and the conscious acceptance of what we cannot control. Recognizing the kinship shared by all human beings, helping others and giving are not merely social duties but sources of moral fulfillment. We focus on how we can contribute positively to our surroundings without expecting anything in return.

The Stoic version of concern for others is embedded in the Stoic concept of oikeiosis, or moral development through becoming familiar with or appropriating other people's concerns as if they were our own. Although we can never know exactly what it is like to be someone else, we can certainly reach a high enough level of understanding to foster empathy. This idea is also reflected in Hierocles' concentric circles of concern, which lie at the heart of cosmopolitanism: the idea that, by improving our character, we should extend the love we feel for our relatives to our friends, acquaintances, fellow citizens, and even humanity as a whole.

In Stoic philosophy, offering help to others is connected with a sense of duty and justice. To survive without becoming exhausted, however, we must set boundaries by distinguishing what we can control from what we cannot. We accept that other people's reactions are beyond our control and focus on our own intention to help.

The Stoic principles that allow us to balance giving with our own survival and well-being include:

- **Compassion without exhaustion: We care for and love our fellow human beings (Stoic sympathy), while protecting ourselves from identifying completely with their pain—a particularly important consideration in the medical profession. We are the "rock"; we do not become the victim.**
- **The dichotomy of control: We do not spend our energy on things beyond our direct influence. We judge situations rationally, not emotionally. We focus on doing what is right (virtue) and leave the outcome of our efforts to fate. We reconcile ourselves to life events we cannot change, treating them as opportunities to practice patience and endurance.**
- **Mindful detachment: Observing events without the emotional exaggerations triggered by first impressions allows reason to prevail.**
- **The circle of duty: Our contribution should serve the common good, but nature also requires us to care for ourselves. If we neglect our own needs, we will soon be unable to help others.**
- **The "premeditation of adversity": We take time to consider what might go wrong in daily life or in our relationships with those we help. This prevents us from being caught off guard or disappointed when difficulties arise.**
- **Mindful review of the day: We review our actions before going to sleep and ask ourselves three questions: "What did I do well? What did I do wrong? What can I improve?" We assess what went well in terms of virtue (wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance) and identify shortcomings so that we can improve in the future.**
- **Awareness of mortality: We remember that our time on Earth is limited, so that we focus on what truly matters.**

- **Voluntary discomfort: We deliberately expose ourselves to small hardships (e.g., cold showers, fasting, or sleeping simply) to strengthen psychological resilience and appreciate life's basic goods.**