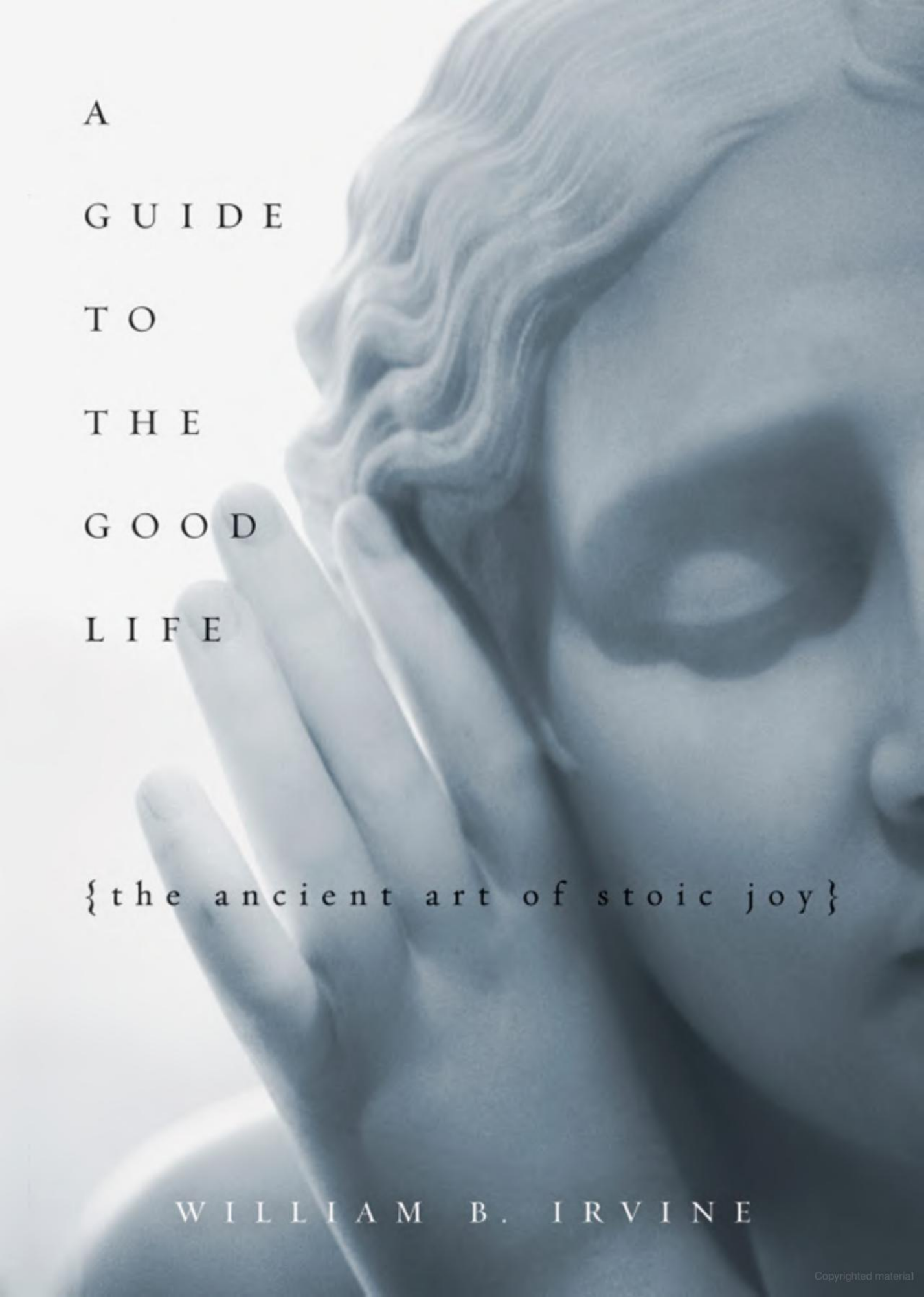

A GUIDE TO THE GOOD LIFE

{the ancient art of stoic joy}

WILLIAM B. IRVINE

A Guide to the Good Life

The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy

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A Guide to the Good Life

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Introduction
A Plan for Living

WHAT DO YOU WANT out of life? You might answer this question by saying that you want a caring spouse, a good job, and a nice house, but these are really just some of the things you want *in* life. In asking what you want *out of* life, I am asking the question in its broadest sense. I am asking not for the goals you form as you go about your daily activities but for your grand goal in living. In other words, of the things in life you might pursue, which is the thing you believe to be most valuable?

Many people will have trouble naming this goal. They know what they want minute by minute or even decade by decade during their life, but they have never paused to consider their grand goal in living. It is perhaps understandable that they haven't. Our culture doesn't encourage people to think about such things; indeed, it provides them with an endless stream of distractions so they won't ever have to. But a grand goal in living is the first component of a philosophy of life. This means that if you lack a grand goal in living, you lack a coherent philosophy of life.

Why is it important to have such a philosophy? Because without one, there is a danger that you will mislive—that

despite all your activity, despite all the pleasant diversions you might have enjoyed while alive, you will end up living a bad life. There is, in other words, a danger that when you are on your deathbed, you will look back and realize that you wasted your one chance at living. Instead of spending your life pursuing something genuinely valuable, you squandered it because you allowed yourself to be distracted by the various baubles life has to offer.

Suppose you can identify your grand goal in living. Suppose, too, that you can explain why this goal is worth attaining. Even then, there is a danger that you will mislive. In particular, if you lack an effective strategy for attaining your goal, it is unlikely that you will attain it. Thus, the second component of a philosophy of life is a strategy for attaining your grand goal in living. This strategy will specify what you must do, as you go about your daily activities, to maximize your chances of gaining the thing in life that you take to be ultimately valuable.

If we want to take steps to avoid wasting our wealth, we can easily find experts to help us. Looking in the phone book, we will find any number of certified financial planners. These individuals can help us clarify our financial goals: How much, for example, should we be saving for retirement? And having clarified these goals, they can advise us on how to achieve them.

Suppose, however, that we want to take steps to avoid wasting not our wealth but our life. We might seek an expert to guide us: a philosopher of life. This individual would help us think about our goals in living and about which of these goals are in fact worth pursuing. She would remind us that

because goals can come into conflict, we need to decide which of our goals should take precedence when conflicts arise. She will therefore help us sort through our goals and place them into a hierarchy. The goal at the pinnacle of this hierarchy will be what I have called our grand goal in living: It is the goal that we should be unwilling to sacrifice to attain other goals. And after helping us select this goal, a philosopher of life will help us devise a strategy for attaining it.

The obvious place to look for a philosopher of life is in the philosophy department of the local university. Visiting the faculty offices there, we will find philosophers specializing in metaphysics, logic, politics, science, religion, and ethics. We might also find philosophers specializing in the philosophy of sport, the philosophy of feminism, and even the philosophy of philosophy. But unless we are at an unusual university, we will find no philosophers of life in the sense I have in mind.

It hasn't always been this way. Many ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, for example, not only thought philosophies of life were worth contemplating but thought the raison d'être of philosophy was to develop them. These philosophers typically had an interest in other areas of philosophy as well—in logic, for example—but only because they thought pursuing that interest would help them develop a philosophy of life.

Furthermore, these ancient philosophers did not keep their discoveries to themselves or share them only with their fellow philosophers. Rather, they formed schools and welcomed as their pupils anyone wishing to acquire a philosophy of life. Different schools offered different advice on what people must do in order to have a good life. Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates,

founded the Cynic school of philosophy, which advocated an ascetic lifestyle. Aristippus, another pupil of Socrates, founded the Cyrenaic school, which advocated a hedonistic lifestyle. In between these extremes, we find, among many other schools, the Epicurean school, the Skeptic school, and, of most interest to us here, the Stoic school, founded by Zeno of Citium.

The philosophers associated with these schools were unapologetic about their interest in philosophies of life. According to Epicurus, for example, "Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind."[1] And according to the Stoic philosopher Seneca, about whom I will have much to say in this book, "He who studies with a philosopher should take away with him some one good thing every day: he should daily return home a sounder man, or on the way to become sounder."[2]

This book is written for those seeking a philosophy of life. In the pages that follow, I focus my attention on a philosophy that I have found useful and that I suspect many readers will also find useful. It is the philosophy of the ancient Stoics. The Stoic philosophy of life may be old, but it merits the attention of any modern individual who wishes to have a life that is both meaningful and fulfilling—who wishes, that is, to have a good life.

In other words, this book offers advice on how people should live. More precisely, I will act as a conduit for the advice offered by Stoic philosophers two thousand years ago. This

is something my fellow philosophers are generally loath to do, but then again, their interest in philosophy is primarily "academic"; their research, that is to say, is primarily theoretical or historical. My interest in Stoicism, by way of contrast, is resolutely practical: My goal is to put this philosophy to work in my life and to encourage others to put it to work in theirs. The ancient Stoics, I think, would have encouraged both sorts of endeavor, but they also would have insisted that the primary reason to study Stoicism is so we can put it into practice.

Another thing to realize is that although Stoicism is a philosophy, it has a significant psychological component. The Stoics realized that a life plagued with negative emotions—including anger, anxiety, fear, grief, and envy—will not be a good life. They therefore became acute observers of the workings of the human mind and as a result became some of the most insightful psychologists of the ancient world. They went on to develop techniques for preventing the onset of negative emotions and for extinguishing them when attempts at prevention failed. Even those readers who are leery of philosophical speculation should take an interest in these techniques. Who among us, after all, would not like to reduce the number of negative emotions experienced in daily living?

Although I have been studying philosophy for all my adult life, I was, until recently, woefully ignorant of Stoicism. My teachers in college and graduate school never asked me to read the Stoics, and although I am an avid reader, I saw no need to read them on my own. More generally, I saw no need to ponder a philosophy of life. I instead felt comfortable with

what is, for almost everyone, the default philosophy of life: to spend one's days seeking an interesting mix of affluence, social status, and pleasure. My philosophy of life, in other words, was what might charitably be called an enlightened form of hedonism.

In my fifth decade of life, though, events conspired to introduce me to Stoicism. The first of these was the 1998 publication by the author Tom Wolfe of *A Man in Full*. In this novel, one character accidentally discovers the Stoic philosopher Epictetus and then starts spouting his philosophy. I found this to be simultaneously intriguing and puzzling.

Two years later I started doing research for a book about desire. As part of this research, I examined the advice that has been given over the millennia on mastering desire. I started out by seeing what religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, Sufism, and Buddhism (and in particular, Zen Buddhism), had to say about desire. I went on to examine the advice on mastering desire offered by philosophers but found that only a relative handful of them had offered such advice. Prominent among those who had were the Hellenistic philosophers: the Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics.

In conducting my research on desire, I had an ulterior motive. I had long been intrigued by Zen Buddhism and imagined that on taking a closer look at it in connection with my research, I would become a full-fledged convert. But what I found, much to my surprise, was that Stoicism and Zen have certain things in common. They both, for example, stress the importance of contemplating the transitory nature of the world around us and the importance of mastering desire, to

the extent that it is possible to do so. They also advise us to pursue tranquility and give us advice on how to attain and maintain it. Furthermore, I came to realize that Stoicism was better suited to my analytical nature than Buddhism was. As a result, I found myself, much to my amazement, toying with the idea of becoming, instead of a practicing Zen Buddhist, a practicing Stoic.

Before I began my research on desire, Stoicism had been, for me, a nonstarter as a philosophy of life, but as I read the Stoics, I discovered that almost everything I thought I knew about them was wrong. To begin with, I knew that the dictionary defines a *stoic* as "one who is seemingly indifferent to or unaffected by joy, grief, pleasure, or pain."[3] I therefore expected that the uppercase-*S* Stoics would be lowercase-*s* stoical—that they would be emotionally repressed individuals. I discovered, though, that the goal of the Stoics was not to banish *emotion* from life but to banish *negative* emotions.

When I read the works of the Stoics, I encountered individuals who were cheerful and optimistic about life (even though they made it a point to spend time thinking about all the bad things that could happen to them) and who were fully capable of enjoying life's pleasures (while at the same time being careful not to be enslaved by those pleasures). I also encountered, much to my surprise, individuals who valued joy; indeed, according to Seneca, what Stoics seek to discover "is how the mind may always pursue a steady and favourable course, may be well-disposed towards itself, and may view its conditions with joy."[4] He also asserts that someone who practices Stoic principles "must, whether he wills or not, necessarily

be attended by constant cheerfulness and a joy that is deep and issues from deep within, since he finds delight in his own resources, and desires no joys greater than his inner joys."[5] Along similar lines, the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus tells us that if we live in accordance with Stoic principles, "a cheerful disposition and secure joy" will automatically follow.[6]

Rather than being passive individuals who were grimly resigned to being on the receiving end of the world's abuse and injustice, the Stoics were fully engaged in life and worked hard to make the world a better place. Consider, for example, Cato the Younger. (Although he did not contribute to the literature of Stoicism, Cato was a practicing Stoic; indeed, Seneca refers to him as the perfect Stoic.)[7] His Stoicism did not prevent Cato from fighting bravely to restore the Roman republic. Likewise, Seneca seems to have been remarkably energetic: Besides being a philosopher, he was a successful playwright, an advisor to an emperor, and the first-century equivalent of an investment banker. And Marcus Aurelius, besides being a philosopher, was a Roman emperor—indeed, arguably one of the greatest Roman emperors. As I read about the Stoics, I found myself filled with admiration for them. They were courageous, temperate, reasonable, and self-disciplined—traits I would like to possess. They also thought it important for us to fulfill our obligations and to help our fellow humans—values I happen to share.

In my research on desire, I discovered nearly unanimous agreement among thoughtful people that we are unlikely to have a good and meaningful life unless we can overcome our insatiability. There was also agreement that one wonderful

way to tame our tendency to always want more is to persuade ourselves to want the things we already have. This seemed to be an important insight, but it left open the question of how, exactly, we could accomplish this. The Stoics, I was delighted to discover, had an answer to this question. They developed a fairly simple technique that, if practiced, can make us glad, if only for a time, to be the person we are, living the life we happen to be living, almost regardless of what that life might be.

The more I studied the Stoics, the more I found myself drawn to their philosophy. But when I tried to share with others my newfound enthusiasm for Stoicism, I quickly discovered that I had not been alone in misconceiving the philosophy. Friends, relatives, and even my colleagues at the university seemed to think the Stoics were individuals whose goal was to suppress all emotion and who therefore led grim and passive lives. It dawned on me that the Stoics were the victims of a bum rap, one that I myself had only recently helped promote.

This realization alone might have been sufficient to motivate me to write a book about the Stoics—a book that would set the record straight—but as it happens, I came to have a second motivation even stronger than this. After learning about Stoicism, I started, in a low-key, experimental fashion, giving it a try as my philosophy of life. The experiment has thus far been sufficiently successful that I feel compelled to report my findings to the world at large, in the belief that others might benefit from studying the Stoics and adopting their philosophy of life.

Readers will naturally be curious about what is involved in the practice of Stoicism. In ancient Greece and Rome, a

would-be Stoic could have learned how to practice Stoicism by attending a Stoic school, but this is no longer possible. A modern would-be Stoic might, as an alternative, consult the works of the ancient Stoics, but what she will discover on attempting to do so is that many of these works—in particular, those of the Greek Stoics—have been lost. Furthermore, if she reads the works that have survived, she will discover that although they discuss Stoicism at length, they don't offer a lesson plan, as it were, for novice Stoics. The challenge I faced in writing this book was to construct such a plan from clues scattered throughout Stoic writings.

Although the remainder of this book provides detailed guidelines for would-be Stoics, let me describe here, in a preliminary fashion, some of the things we will want to do if we adopt Stoicism as our philosophy of life.

We will reconsider our goals in living. In particular, we will take to heart the Stoic claim that many of the things we desire—most notably, fame and fortune—are not worth pursuing. We will instead turn our attention to the pursuit of tranquility and what the Stoics called *virtue*. We will discover that Stoic virtue has very little in common with what people today mean by the word. We will also discover that the tranquility the Stoics sought is not the kind of tranquility that might be brought on by the ingestion of a tranquilizer; it is not, in other words, a zombie-like state. It is instead a state marked by the absence of negative emotions such as anger, grief, anxiety, and fear, and the presence of positive emotions—in particular, joy.

We will study the various psychological techniques developed by the Stoics for attaining and maintaining tranquility,

and we will employ these techniques in daily living. We will, for example, take care to distinguish between things we can control and things we can't, so that we will no longer worry about the things we can't control and will instead focus our attention on the things we can control. We will also recognize how easy it is for other people to disturb our tranquility, and we will therefore practice Stoic strategies to prevent them from upsetting us.

Finally, we will become a more thoughtful observer of our own life. We will watch ourselves as we go about our daily business and will later reflect on what we saw, trying to identify the sources of distress in our life and thinking about how to avoid that distress.

Practicing Stoicism will obviously take effort, but this is true of all genuine philosophies of life. Indeed, even "enlightened hedonism" takes effort. The enlightened hedonist's grand goal in living is to maximize the pleasure he experiences in the course of a lifetime. To practice this philosophy of life, he will spend time discovering, exploring, and ranking sources of pleasure and investigating any untoward side effects they might have. The enlightened hedonist will then devise strategies for maximizing the amount of pleasure he experiences. (Unenlightened hedonism, in which a person thoughtlessly seeks short-term gratification, is not, I think, a coherent philosophy of life.)

The effort required to practice Stoicism will probably be greater than that required to practice enlightened hedonism but less than that required to practice, say, Zen Buddhism.

A Zen Buddhist will have to meditate, a practice that is both time-consuming and (in some of its forms) physically and mentally challenging. The practice of Stoicism, in contrast, doesn't require us to set aside blocks of time in which to "do Stoicism." It does require us periodically to reflect on our life, but these periods of reflection can generally be squeezed into odd moments of the day, such as when we are stuck in traffic or—this was Seneca's recommendation—when we are lying in bed waiting for sleep to come.

When assessing the "costs" associated with practicing Stoicism or any other philosophy of life, readers should realize that there are costs associated with *not* having a philosophy of life. I have already mentioned one such cost: the danger that you will spend your days pursuing valueless things and will therefore waste your life.

Some readers might, at this point, wonder whether the practice of Stoicism is compatible with their religious beliefs. In the case of most religions, I think it is. Christians in particular will find that Stoic doctrines resonate with their religious views. They will, for example, share the Stoics' desire to attain tranquility, although Christians might call it *peace*. They will appreciate Marcus Aurelius's injunction to "love mankind."[8] And when they encounter Epictetus's observation that some things are up to us and some things are not, and that if we have any sense at all, we will focus our energies on the things that are up to us, Christians will be reminded of the "Serenity Prayer," often attributed to the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

Having said this, I should add that it is also possible for someone simultaneously to be an agnostic and a practicing Stoic.

THE REMAINDER OF this book is divided into four parts. In part 1, I describe the birth of philosophy. Although modern philosophers tend to spend their days debating esoteric topics, the primary goal of most ancient philosophers was to help ordinary people live better lives. Stoicism, as we shall see, was one of the most popular and successful of the ancient schools of philosophy.

In parts 2 and 3, I explain what we must do in order to practice Stoicism. I start by describing the psychological techniques the Stoics developed to attain and subsequently maintain tranquility. I then describe Stoic advice on how best to deal with the stresses of everyday life: How, for example, should we respond when someone insults us? Although much has changed in the past two millennia, human psychology has changed little. This is why those of us living in the twenty-first century can benefit from the advice that philosophers such as Seneca offered to first-century Romans.

Finally, in part 4 of this book, I defend Stoicism against various criticisms, and I reevaluate Stoic psychology in light of modern scientific findings. I end the book by relating the insights I have gained in my own practice of Stoicism.

My fellow academics might have an interest in this book; they might, for example, be curious about my interpretation of various Stoic utterances. The audience I am most interested in reaching, though, is ordinary individuals who worry that they might be misliving. This includes those who have come to the realization that they lack a coherent philosophy of life and as a result are floundering in their daily activities: what they work to accomplish one day only undoes what they accomplished

the day before. It also includes those who have a philosophy of life but worry that it is somehow defective.

I wrote this book with the following question in mind: If the ancient Stoics had taken it upon themselves to write a guidebook for twenty-first-century individuals—a book that would tell us how to have a good life—what might that book have looked like? The pages that follow are my answer to this question.

PART ONE

The Rise of Stoicism

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ONE

Philosophy Takes an Interest in Life

THERE HAVE PROBABLY always been philosophers, in some sense of the word. They were those individuals who not only asked questions—such as Where did the world come from? Where did people come from? and Why are there rainbows?—but more important, went on to ask follow-up questions. When told, for example, that the world was created by the gods, these proto-philosophers would have realized that this answer didn't get to the bottom of things. They would have gone on to ask why the gods made the world, how they made it, and—most vexatiously to those trying to answer their questions—who made the gods.

However and whenever it may have started, philosophical thinking took a giant leap forward in the sixth century BC. We find Pythagoras (570–500 BC) philosophizing in Italy; Thales (636–546 BC), Anaximander (641–547 BC), and Heracleitus (535–475 BC) in Greece; Confucius (551–479 BC) in China; and Buddha (563–483 BC) in India. It isn't clear whether these individuals discovered philosophy independently of one another; nor is it clear which direction philosophical influence flowed, if it indeed flowed.

The Greek biographer Diogenes Laertius, from the vantage point of the third century AD, offered an eminently readable (but not entirely reliable) history of early philosophy. According to Diogenes, early Western philosophy had two separate branches.[1] One branch—he calls it the Italian branch—began with Pythagoras. If we follow through the various successors of Pythagoras, we ultimately come to Epicurus, whose own school of philosophy was a major rival to the Stoic school. The other branch—Diogenes calls it the Ionian branch—started with Anaximander, who (intellectually, pedagogically) begat Anaximenes, who begat Anaxagoras, who begat Archelaus, who, finally, begat Socrates (469–399 BC).

Socrates lived a remarkable life. He also died a remarkable death: He had been tried for corrupting the youth of Athens and other alleged misdeeds, found guilty by his fellow citizens, and sentenced to die by drinking poison hemlock. He could have avoided this punishment by throwing himself on the mercy of the court or by running away after the sentence had been handed down. His philosophical principles, though, would not let him do these things. After his death, Socrates' many followers not only continued to do philosophy but attracted followers of their own. Plato, the best-known of his students, founded the school of philosophy known as the Academy, Aristippus founded the Cyrenaic school, Euclides founded the Megarian school, Phaedo founded the Elian school, and Antisthenes founded the Cynic school. What had been a trickle of philosophical activity before Socrates became, after his death, a veritable torrent.

Why did this explosion of interest in philosophy take place? In part because Socrates changed the focus of philosophical inquiry. Before Socrates, philosophers were primarily interested in explaining the world around them and the phenomena of that world—in doing what we would now call science. Although Socrates studied science as a young man, he abandoned it to focus his attention on the human condition. As the Roman orator, politician, and philosopher Cicero put it, Socrates was "the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her also into their homes and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil."[2] The classicist Francis MacDonald Cornford describes Socrates' philosophical significance in similar terms: "Pre-Socratic philosophy begins . . . with the discovery of Nature; Socratic philosophy begins with the discovery of man's soul."[3]

Why does Socrates remain an impressive figure twenty-four centuries after his death? It isn't because of his philosophical discoveries; his philosophical conclusions, after all, were basically negative: He showed us what we don't know. Rather, it was the extent to which he allowed his way of life to be affected by his philosophical speculations. Indeed, according to the philosopher Luis E. Navia, "in [Socrates], perhaps more than in any other major philosopher, we come upon the example of a man who was able to integrate in his life theoretical and speculative concerns into the context of his daily activities." Navia describes him as "a veritable paradigm of philosophical activity both in thought and in deed."[4]

Presumably, some of those drawn to Socrates were impressed primarily by his theorizing, while others were most impressed by his lifestyle. Plato belonged to the former group; in his Academy, Plato was more interested in exploring philosophical theory than in dispensing lifestyle advice. Antisthenes, in contrast, was most impressed with Socrates' lifestyle; the Cynic school he founded eschewed philosophical theorizing and focused instead on advising people about what they must do to have a good life.

It is as if Socrates, on his death, had fissioned into Plato and Antisthenes, with Plato inheriting Socrates' interest in theory and Antisthenes inheriting his concern with living a good life. It would have been wonderful if these two sides of philosophy had flourished in subsequent millennia, inasmuch as people benefit from both philosophical theorizing and the application of philosophy to their own life. Unfortunately, although the theoretical side of philosophy has flourished, the practical side has withered away.

Under a despotic government such as that of ancient Persia, the ability to write, read, and do arithmetic was important for government officials, but the ability to persuade others wasn't. Officials needed only give orders, which those under their power would unhesitatingly obey. In Greece and Rome, however, the rise of democracy meant that those who were able to persuade others were most likely to have successful careers in politics or law. It was in part for this reason that affluent Greek and Roman parents, after a child's secondary education was completed, sought teachers who could develop their child's persuasive ability.

These parents might have sought the services of a sophist, whose goal was to teach pupils to win arguments. To achieve this goal, sophists taught various techniques of persuasion, including both appeals to reason and appeals to emotion. In particular, they taught students that it was possible to argue for or against any proposition whatsoever. Along with developing pupils' argumentative skills, sophists developed their speaking skills, so they could effectively communicate the arguments they devised.

Alternatively, parents might have sought the services of a philosopher. Like sophists, philosophers taught persuasive techniques, but unlike sophists, they eschewed appeals to emotion. Also unlike sophists, philosophers thought that besides teaching their pupils how to persuade, they should teach them how to live well. Consequently, according to the historian H. I. Marrou, in their teaching they emphasized "the moral aspect of education, the development of the personality and the inner life."[5] In the course of doing this, many philosophers provided their pupils with a philosophy of life: They taught them what things in life were worth pursuing and how best to pursue them.

Some of the parents who wanted a philosophical education for their child hired a philosopher to act as live-in tutor; Aristotle, for example, was hired by King Philip of Macedon to tutor Alexander, who subsequently became "the Great." Parents who could not afford a private tutor would have sent their sons—but probably not their daughters—to a school of philosophy. After the death of Socrates, these schools became a prominent feature of Athenian culture, and when, in the second

century BC, Rome came under the spell of Athenian culture, schools of philosophy started appearing in Rome as well.

THERE ARE NO LONGER schools of philosophy, and this is a shame. It is true that philosophy is still done within schools—more precisely, within the philosophy departments of universities—but the cultural role played by philosophy departments is quite unlike the role played by the ancient philosophical schools. For one thing, those who sign up for the philosophy classes offered by universities are rarely motivated to do so by a desire to acquire a philosophy of life; instead, they take classes because their advisor tells them that if they don't, they can't graduate. And if they do seek a philosophy of life, they would, in most universities, have a hard time finding a class that would offer them one.

But even though schools of philosophy are a thing of the past, people are in as much need of a philosophy of life as they ever were. The question is, Where can they go to obtain one? If they go to the philosophy department of the local university, they will, as I have explained, probably be disappointed. What if they instead turn to their local church? Their pastor might tell them what they must do to be a *good person*, that is, what they must do to be morally upstanding. They might be instructed, for example, not to steal or tell lies or (in some religions) have an abortion. Their pastor will also probably explain what they must do to have a *good afterlife*: They should come to services regularly and pray and (in some religions) tithe. But their pastor will probably have relatively little to say on what they must do to have a *good life*. Indeed, most religions, after

telling adherents what they must do to be morally upstanding and get into heaven, leave it to them to determine what things in life are and aren't worth pursuing. These religions see nothing wrong with an adherent working hard so he can afford a huge mansion and an expensive sports car, as long as he doesn't break any laws doing so; nor do they see anything wrong with the adherent forsaking the mansion for a hut and forsaking the car for a bicycle.

And if religions do offer adherents advice on what things in life are and aren't worth pursuing, they tend to offer the advice in such a low-key manner that adherents might regard it as a suggestion rather than a directive about how to live and might therefore ignore the advice. This, one imagines, is why the adherents of the various religions, despite the differences in their religious beliefs, end up with the same impromptu philosophy of life, namely, a form of enlightened hedonism. Thus, although Lutherans, Baptists, Jews, Mormons, and Catholics hold different religious views, they are remarkably alike when encountered outside of church or synagogue. They hold similar jobs and have similar career ambitions. They live in similar homes, furnished in a similar manner. And they lust to the same degree for whatever consumer products are currently in vogue.

It is clearly possible for a religion to require its adherents to adopt a particular philosophy of life. Consider, by way of illustration, the Hutterite religion, which teaches its adherents that one of the most valuable things in life is a sense of community. Hutterites are therefore forbidden to own private property, the rationale being that such ownership would give rise to feelings

of envy, which in turn would disrupt the sense of community the Hutterites value. (We can, of course, question whether this is a sound philosophy of life.)

Most religions, however, don't require their adherents to adopt a particular philosophy of life. As long as adherents don't harm others and don't do things to anger God, they are free to live their life as they will. Indeed, if the Hutterite religion seems both extreme and exotic to most people, it is because they can't imagine belonging to a religion that tells them how to live their life.

What this means is that it is entirely possible these days for someone to have been raised in a religion and to have taken philosophy courses in college but still to be lacking a philosophy of life. (Indeed, this is the situation in which most of my students find themselves.) What, then, should those seeking a philosophy of life do? Perhaps their best option is to create for themselves a virtual school of philosophy by reading the works of the philosophers who ran the ancient schools. This, at any rate, is what, in the following pages, I will be encouraging readers to do.

In ancient Greece, when schools of philosophy were still prominent features of the cultural landscape, there were any number of schools to which parents could send their children. Suppose we could travel back in time to 300 BC and take a thinking person's walking tour of Athens. We could begin our tour in the Agora, where Socrates a century earlier had philosophized with the citizens of Athens. On the northern side of the Agora we would see the Stoa Poikile, or Painted Porch, and holding forth there might be Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy. This "porch" was actually a colonnade decorated with murals.

As we walked through Athens, we might come across the Cynic philosopher Crates, whose school of philosophy Zeno had once attended. Although the first Cynics met near the gymnasium of Cynosarges—hence their name—they could be found anywhere in Athens, attempting to draw (or drag, if need be) ordinary people into philosophical discussions. Furthermore, whereas parents might have willingly sent their children to study with Zeno, it is unlikely that they encouraged them to become Cynics, inasmuch as Cynic doctrines, if successfully internalized, would guarantee their child a life of ignominious poverty.

Heading northwest and leaving the city by Dipylon Gate, we would come to the Garden of the Epicureans, presided over by Epicurus himself. Whereas the Painted Porch was in an urban setting, with Stoic lectures periodically interrupted, one imagines, by noise from the street or the comments of passers-by, Epicurus's Garden had a distinctly rural feel. The Garden was in fact a working garden in which the Epicureans grew their own vegetables.

Continuing toward the northwest, about a mile from the Agora, we would come to the Academy, the school of philosophy founded by Plato in 387 BC, a bit more than a decade after the death of Socrates. Like Epicurus's Garden, the Academy would have been a striking place in which to philosophize. It was a parklike retreat, furnished with walks and fountains. On the Academy grounds were buildings, paid for by Plato and his friends. Holding forth there in 300 BC might have been Polemo, who had inherited the position of master of the school. (The Stoic philosopher Zeno, as we shall see, attended Polemo's school for a time.)

Doubling back, going through the city again, and exiting the city gates into the eastern suburbs of Athens, we would have come to the Lyceum. In this wooded area, near a shrine to Apollo Lykeios, we could see the Peripatetics, disciples of Aristotle, walking and talking, and at the head of the group might be Theophrastus.

But this is only the beginning of the educational options open to ancient parents. Besides the schools mentioned in connection with our walking tour, there were the Cyrenaic, Skeptic, Megarian, and Elian schools mentioned earlier, to which we can add several other schools mentioned by Diogenes Laertius, including the Eretrian, Annicerean, and Theodorean schools, along with the schools run by the Eudaemonists, the Truth-lovers, the Refutationists, the Reasoners from Analogy, the Physicists, the Moralists, and the Dialecticians.[6]

As it so happens, young men (and, rarely, young women) weren't the only ones to attend schools of philosophy. Sometimes fathers studied alongside their sons. In other cases, adults attended a school's lectures by themselves. Some of these adults were simply interested in philosophy; perhaps they had attended a school as a youth and now sought "continuing education" in the philosophy of life taught by that school. Other adults, though never having belonged to a school, might have attended its lectures as guests. Their motives were probably very much like the motives modern individuals have in attending a public lecture: They sought to be enlightened and entertained.

Yet other adults had an ulterior motive for attending schools of philosophy: They wanted to start their own school

and listened to the lectures of heads of successful schools in order to borrow philosophical ideas they could use in their own teaching. Zeno of Citium was accused of doing just this: Polemo complained that Zeno's motive for attending lectures at the Academy was to steal his doctrines.[7]

THE RIVAL SCHOOLS OF PHILOSOPHY differed in the subjects they taught. The early Stoics, for example, were interested not only in a philosophy of life, but in physics and logic as well, for the simple reason that they thought these areas of study were inherently entwined. The Epicureans shared the Stoics' interest in physics (although they had different views about the physical world than the Stoics did) but did not likewise share their interest in logic. The Cyrenaics and Cynics were interested in neither physics nor logic; at their schools, all one was taught was a philosophy of life.

Those schools that offered students a philosophy of life differed in the philosophy they recommended. The Cyrenaics, for example, thought the grand goal in living was the experience of pleasure and therefore advocated taking advantage of every opportunity to experience it. The Cynics advocated an ascetic lifestyle: If you want a good life, they argued, you must learn to want next to nothing. The Stoics fell somewhere between the Cyrenaics and the Cynics: They thought people should enjoy the good things life has to offer, including friendship and wealth, but only if they did not cling to these good things. Indeed, they thought we should periodically interrupt our enjoyment of what life has to offer to spend time contemplating the loss of whatever it is we are enjoying.

Affiliating oneself with a school of philosophy was a serious business. According to the historian Simon Price, "Adherence to a philosophical sect was not simply a matter for the mind, or the result of mere intellectual fashion. Those who took their philosophy seriously attempted to live that philosophy from day to day."[8] And just as a modern individual's religion can become the key element of his personal identity—think of a born-again Christian—an ancient Greek's or Roman's philosophical association became an important part of who he was. According to the historian Paul Veyne, "To truly be a philosopher was to live out the sect's doctrine, conform one's conduct (and even one's attire) to it, and if need be, to die for it."[9]

Readers of this book should therefore keep in mind that although I am advocating Stoicism as a philosophy of life, it isn't the only option available to those seeking such a philosophy. Furthermore, although the Stoics thought they could prove that theirs was the correct philosophy of life, I don't (as we shall see in chapter 21) think such a proof is possible. Instead, I think that which philosophy of life a person should choose depends on her personality and circumstances.

But having made this admission, let me add that I think there are very many people whose personality and circumstances make them wonderful candidates for the practice of Stoicism. Furthermore, whatever philosophy of life a person ends up adopting, she will probably have a better life than if she tried to live—as many people do—without a coherent philosophy of life.

TWO

The First Stoics

Zeno (333–261 BC) was the first Stoic. (And by *Zeno*, I mean Zeno of Citium, not to be confused with Zeno of Elea, who is famous for a paradox involving Achilles and a tortoise, or with any of the seven other Zenos mentioned by Diogenes Laertius in his biographical sketches.) Zeno's father was a merchant of purple dye and used to come home from his travels with books for Zeno to read. Among them were philosophy books purchased in Athens. These books aroused Zeno's interest in both philosophy and Athens.

As the result of a shipwreck, Zeno found himself in Athens, and while there, he decided to take advantage of the philosophical resources the city had to offer. He went to a bookseller's shop and asked where men like Socrates could be found. Just then, Crates the Cynic was walking by. The bookseller pointed to him and said, "Follow yonder man." And so it was, we are told, that Zeno became Crates' pupil. Looking back on this time in his life, Zeno commented, "I made a prosperous voyage when I suffered shipwreck."[1]

The Cynics had little interest in philosophical theorizing. They instead advocated a rather extreme philosophical lifestyle.

They were ascetics. Socially speaking, they were the ancient equivalent of what we today call the homeless: They lived in the streets and slept on the ground. They owned only the clothing on their backs, typically one poor cloak, what the ancients refer to as "Cynic garb." Theirs was a day-to-day, hand-to-mouth existence.

When someone told Epictetus—who, although himself a Stoic, was familiar with Cynicism—that he was contemplating joining the Cynic school, Epictetus explained what becoming a Cynic would entail: "You must utterly put away the will to get, and must will to avoid only what lies within the sphere of your will: you must harbour no anger, wrath, envy, pity: a fair maid, a fair name, favourites, or sweet cakes, must mean nothing to you." A Cynic, he explained, "must have the spirit of patience in such measure as to seem to the multitude as unfeeling as a stone. Reviling or blows or insults are nothing to him."[2] Few people, one imagines, had the courage and endurance to live the life of a Cynic.

The Cynics were renowned for their wit and wisdom. When, for example, someone asked what sort of woman a man should marry, Antisthenes replied that no matter what woman he chose for his wife, he would live to regret marrying: "If she's beautiful, you'll not have her to yourself; if she's ugly, you'll pay for it dearly." Concerning our dealings with other people, he commented that "it is better to fall in with crows than with flatterers; for in the one case you are devoured when dead, in the other case while alive." He also advised his listeners to "pay attention to your enemies, for they are the first to discover your mistakes." Despite, or perhaps because of, his sharp wit, Antisthenes was described as being "the most agreeable of men in conversation."[3]

Diogenes of Sinope (not to be confused with Diogenes Laertius, who wrote a biographical sketch of him and other philosophers) was a student of Antisthenes and went on to become the most famous Cynic. In defense of simple living, Diogenes observed that "the gods had given to men the means of living easily, but this had been put out of sight, because we require honeyed cakes, unguents and the like." Such is the madness of men, he said, that they choose to be miserable when they have it in their power to be content. The problem is that "bad men obey their lusts as servants obey their masters," and because they cannot control their desires, they can never find contentment.[4]

Men's values, Diogenes insisted, had been corrupted. He pointed out, by way of illustration, that a statue, the only function of which is to please the eye, might cost three thousand drachmas, while a quart of barley flour, which when consumed can keep us alive, can be bought for only two copper coins.[5] He believed hunger to be the best appetizer, and because he waited until he was hungry or thirsty before he ate or drank, "he used to partake of a barley cake with greater pleasure than others did of the costliest of foods, and enjoyed a drink from a stream of running water more than others did their Thasian wine."[6] When asked about his lack of an abode, Diogenes would reply that he had access to the greatest houses in every city—to their temples and gymnasia, that is. And when asked what he had learned from philosophy, Diogenes replied, "To be prepared for every fortune."[7] This reply, as we shall see, anticipates one important theme of Stoicism.

The Cynics plied their trade not in a suburban setting, as Epicurus and Plato did, but on the streets of Athens, as Socrates had done. And like Socrates, the Cynics sought to instruct not only those who offered themselves as pupils but anyone at all, including those who were reluctant to be taught. Indeed, the Cynic Crates—who, as we have seen, was the Stoic philosopher Zeno's first philosophical teacher—wasn't content simply with badgering the people he encountered on the street; he also entered people's homes uninvited to admonish those within. For this habit, he became known as "the Door Opener."[8]

After studying with Crates for a time, Zeno decided that he was more interested in theory than Crates was. He therefore came up with the idea of focusing not just on a philosophical lifestyle or a philosophical theory, but combining lifestyle with theory, the way Socrates had done.[9] The nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer summed up the relationship between Cynicism and Stoicism by observing that the Stoic philosophers proceeded from the Cynics "by changing the practical into the theoretical."[10]

Zeno therefore set out to learn philosophical theory. He went off to study with Stilpo, of the Megarian school. (Crates responded by physically trying to drag him away.) He also studied with Polemo at the Academy, and in around 300 BC, he started his own school of philosophy. In his teaching, he appears to have mixed the lifestyle advice of Crates with the theoretical philosophy of Polemo. (According to Polemo, Zeno did little more than give the doctrines of the Academy

"a Phoenician make-up.")[11] Into this mix he incorporated the Megarian school's interest in logic and paradoxes.

Zeno's school of philosophy enjoyed immediate success.[12] His followers were initially called Zenonians, but because he was in the habit of giving his lectures in the Stoa Poikile, they subsequently became known as the Stoics—as, by the way, had been the poets who had formerly been in the habit of hanging out there.[13]

One thing that made Stoicism attractive was its abandonment of Cynic asceticism: The Stoics favored a lifestyle that, although simple, allowed creature comforts. The Stoics defended this abandonment by arguing that if they avoided the "good things," as the Cynics did, they thereby demonstrated that the things in question really were good—were things that, if they did not hide them from themselves, they would crave. The Stoics enjoyed whatever "good things" happened to be available, but even as they did so, they prepared themselves to give up the things in question.

ZENO'S PHILOSOPHY had ethical, physical, and logical components. Those who studied Stoicism under him started with logic, moved on to physics, and ended with ethics.[14]

Although the Stoics were not the first to do logic—Aristotle, for example, had done it before them, as had the Megarians—Stoic logic showed an unprecedented degree of sophistication. The Stoics' interest in logic is a natural consequence of their belief that man's distinguishing feature is his rationality. Logic is, after all, the study of the proper use of reasoning. The Stoics became experts on argument forms, such as "If A, then B; but