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Contents

Philosophers of the Hellenistic period see philosophy as having the practical purpose of guiding people towards leading better lives. The aim was to secure for oneself *eudaimonia*, and the different schools and philosophers of the period offered differing solutions as to how the *eudaimôn* life was to be won.

The meaning of *eudaimonia* is not that well conveyed by the English term 'happiness', which is commonly the term used in contemporary translations. In fact, as Keith Seddon succinctly puts it:

> *Eudaimonia* means 'supremely blessed', and conveys the notion of someone who is flourishing fully, someone who is happy not just in the sense that they are having a good time, or enjoying some temporary

pleasure, but whose happiness is of a special kind: it is stable and enduring, it is a persistence of flourishing that pervades their whole life. Zeno defines it as a 'good flow of life' (*euroia biou*).[1]

It is readily evident that, alas, few people are content with their lives, certainly not in any sustained or permanent fashion. In the language of the ancient philosophers, we can make the bold (but nevertheless honest) claim that if anyone ever does enjoy *endaimonia*, that will be the rarest of phemonena.

In the course of daily life, we are beset by frustrations and setbacks of every conceivable type. Our cherished enterprises are hindered and thwarted, we have to deal with hostile and offensive people, and we have to cope with the difficulties and anxieties occasioned by the setbacks and illnesses visited upon our friends and relations. Sometimes, we are ill ourselves, and even those who have the good fortune to enjoy sound health have to face the fact of their own mortality. In the midst of all this, only the rare few are blessed with lasting and rewarding relationships, and even these

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[1] Keith Seddon, *Epictetus' Handbook and the Tablet of Cebes* (London: Routledge, 2005), 33.

> relationships, along with everything that constitutes human life, are wholly transient.[2]

There is a good reason for this state of affairs. According to Epictetus, this situation results from mistaken beliefs about what is truly good. We have invested our hope in the wrong things, or at least invested it in the wrong way.

We can remedy this by understanding that our capacity to flourish and be happy is entirely dependent upon how we dispose ourselves to ourselves, to others, and to events generally. Therefore, our capacity to be *eudaimôn* is entirely up to us.

Keith Seddon continues:

> The central claim of Stoic ethics is that only the virtues and virtuous activities are good, and that the only evil is vice and actions motivated by vice. When someone pursues pleasure or wealth, say, believing these things to be good, the Stoics hold that this person has made a mistake with respect to the nature of the thing pursued and the nature of their own being, for the Stoics deny that advantages such as pleasure and health (wealth and status, and so forth) are *good*, because they do not benefit those who possess them

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[2] Seddon, *Epictetus' Handbook*, 9.

in all circumstances. Virtue, on the other hand, conceived as the capacity to use such advantages wisely, being the only candidate for that which is always beneficial, is held to be the only good thing. Thus the Stoics identify the *eudaimôn* ('happy') life as one that is motivated by virtue.[3]

If, as explained above, the goal of philosophy is to guide people towards leading better lives, there should be a link between philosophy and virtue.

Indeed, Stoic definitions of philosophy may appear dissimilar at first view, but they are in reality very close to each other. According to Seneca,[4] 'some said that it consisted in exercising oneself to virtue (*studium virtutis*), others that it was to exercise oneself to correct our mind (*studium corrigendae mentis*) and consequently, some inferred that it was the search for correct reasoning (*adpetitio rectae rationis*).'

In concrete terms, philosophy consists in exercising virtue. Virtue, which constitutes the excellence or nobility (*aretê*) of a human life, is also the *psyche's health*. Zeno chose to say that virtue consists in 'living in accordance' (*to homologoumenôs*

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[3] Seddon, *Epictetus' Handbook*, 10.
[4] *Moral Epistle* 89.

zên) where the Greek can be understood as both the accordance of each of us with the *logos* and the accordance of reason with itself, that is free of passions.

Virtue is also generally considered as being a science (*epistêmê*), which means full comprehension of a certain number of notions, which forms a coherent and true system. What ancient Stoics tried to explain by using the term *full comprehension* was that a virtue should not be grasped only through mere intellectual investigation but also through *incorporation of the experience*.

According to Stoicism, each of us is our own therapist. For the ancients the term *therapeutès* had two meanings. It can be translated as either 'to serve, to take care, to worship' or 'to cure'. Indeed, Marcus Aurelius[5] says that a man should not fail 'to hold fast to the guardian spirit within him and serve it single-mindedly' (*pros nomô tô endon eauton daimoni einai kai touton gnêsiôs therapeuein*). So ancient Stoics also practised medicine (*iatrikê*) but their profession was superior to the one usually practised in cities, which only cures bodies, for they also aimed at curing the psyche when the latter was prey to harsh illnesses called passions.

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[5] *Meditations* 2.13.

All of this is very interesting, but it does not explain how we should proceed to be virtuous, to develop a healthy mind and behaviour.

Every Hellenistic school of philosophy, including the Stoics, had their own spiritual exercises (*askêsis*, *meletê*), that is, personal and voluntary practices designed to bring about an inner transformation.

Despite the fact that many texts refer to these exercises, no systematic treatise exhaustively codifies a theory of *askêsis* and practice, for this teaching was probably transmitted orally. However, Pierre Hadot maintains that some treatises on such exercises existed which are now lost.[6]

We know little about ancient Stoic practices: In fact, only a helpful little treatise written by Musonius Rufus[7] has survived in which he distinguishes two main categories of exercise.

First, exercises peculiar to the soul. This first category is itself divided into two subsections:

(1) Those exercises consisting in always keeping in mind (or meditating upon) the school's fundamental teachings which aim at developing a different outlook upon things. Here, the ancient Stoics re-

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[6] Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 135.

[7] In A-J Festugière, *Deux prédicateurs de l'Antiquité : Télès et Musonius* (Paris: Vrin, 1978), 69–71.

quired their students to learn by rote a summary of their doctrines in the form of short sentences logically and harmoniously linked together. Among the other schools of philosophy, Stoics were famed for their rigor in this.

(2) Those exercises consisting in examining the purity of intention. What I call the '*aproptôsia*' exercises are a good example of this (see page 37, below).

Secondly, exercises peculiar to both the soul and the body. The goal of this second category of exercise is to get used to cold, heat, hunger, frugal food, an uncomfortable bed, and so forth. In doing so, the student's body becomes insensitive to pain, and consequently the soul itself is fortified and becomes courageous, disciplined and ready for action.

Hadot stresses the idea that these thoughts from Musonius are precious because they show that the notion of philosophical exercises has its roots in the ideal of athleticism and in the habitual practice of physical training typical of the gymnasia:

> Just as the athlete gave new strength and form to his body by means of repeated bodily exercises, so the philosopher developed his strength of soul by means of philosophical exercises, and transforms himself. ...

> Exercises of body and soul thus combined to shape the true person: free, strong, and independent.[8]

This essay will focus on the first category of exercise, that is, those peculiar to the soul.

However, I do not underestimate the value of the second category of exercise, for it is obviously difficult to resist different kinds of desires if, for instance, one never leaves the security of a cosy house or has always been accustomed to expensive food, or the luxury of beautiful and warm clothes. Stoic tradition has always strongly promoted living simply (with respect to food, shelter, clothes, and so forth) in order that we should remain free from accumulation of power, knowledge and possessions that may entice us away from Nature.

There may be real value in practising such exercises today. I would nevertheless urge modern Stoics to seek advice from their physician before undertaking exercises along these lines, because there are potential dangers in engaging in demanding training to which one is not accustomed.

However, I think that a good beginning would be to regularly practise some form of physical exercise, along with a healthy diet. I personally chose to

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[8] Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* 189.

practise the Original Pilates Method, for it is both a meditation and a way of strengthening the body.

Whatever may be your choice, you should never forget that being a *therapeutês* implies that you have to *take care of yourself* and not to harm your body through unwise training that would bring you nothing.

This essay will, first, describe the different ways of meditation within the Stoic tradition. Secondly, it will develop Pierre Hadot's theory that Stoic exercises are in fact the constant application of Logic, Physics and Ethics, before finally trying an attempt to reconstruct a form of Stoic meditation.

I The different ways of meditating

Pierre Hadot[9] has made an approximate reconstruction of the way Stoic philosophers used to meditate. Such a reconstruction is difficult, although not impossible, because of the lack of sources. Nevertheless, he has been able to distinguish, as far as Stoics are concerned, the writing meditation (*hypomnêmata*) from the self-attention or mindfulness exercise (*prosochê*).

A The memorisation exercise (*mnêmê*)

Stoics have always drawn to their students' attention the necessity to keep 'right at hand' (*procheiron*) their fundamental teachings.

The goal is to get accustomed to the rules of life (*kanôn*) by applying them to everyday circumstances, in a very similar way to that in which one

[9] Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est ce que la philosophie antique?* (folio essais, Gallimard, 1995). This book has been translated into English under the title *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

assimilates a rule of grammar by applying it to particular cases.

However, the issue here is not to acquire a theoretical knowledge. As John Sellars eloquently puts it:

> To become a student of philosophy in antiquity did not mean merely to learn a series of complex arguments or engage in intellectual debate. Rather, it involved engaging in a process of transforming one's character (*êthos*) and soul (*psuchê*), a transformation that would itself transform one's way of life (*bios*).[10]

The aim, then, is to formulate to oneself a rule of life in the most dynamic and concrete way, to put 'before ones eyes' the circumstances one is experiencing in the light of this rule.

Students of Stoicism were provided with such 'right at hand' maxims, very much like formulas or persuasive argumentations (*epilogismoi*), such as the *tetrapharmakos*, or fourfold remedy (adopted by Epicurus and his followers):

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[10] John Sellars, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2nd edition, 2009), 23.

(1) *Gods are not to be feared;* (2) *death is not to be dreaded;* (3) *what is good is easy to acquire;* (4) *what is bad is easy to bear.*[11]

Arrian's *Handbook* of Epictetus, or *Encheiridion*, is another good example of a set of easy-to-learn short formulas, but many other persuasive arguments may be rediscovered through a careful reading of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (*ta eis heauton*) such as this one:

> The soul of man does violence to itself above all when it becomes, so far as it can, an abscess and a sort of morbid outgrowth on the universe. For to set your mind against anything that comes to pass is to set yourself apart from nature, which embraces as part of itself the nature of all individual things.
>
> Again, it does violence to itself
>
> (1) when it turns away from any other person, or
>
> (2) moves against him with the intention of causing him harm, as it is the case with those who lose their temper; and
>
> (3) thirdly, when it is overcome by pleasure or pain; and

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[11] Philodemus in Herculaneum Papyrus 1005, col 5, 9–14.

(4) fourthly, when it dissimulates, and says or does something under false pretences; and

(5) fifthly, when failing to direct any act or impulse of its own towards a definite mark, it embarks on anything whatever in an aimless and ill-considered manner, although even the least of its actions should be performed in reference to an end; and the end for rational creatures is this, to conform to the reason and law of the most venerable of cities and constitutions.[12]

This exercise of memorising short maxims requires constant input: that is, it requires the understanding of the theoretical basis which justifies any specific rule of life. It is therefore very important not to discard the intellectual study of Stoic theory through the reading of philosophical texts, whether these are books written by contemporary scholars, or texts written by ancient or modern Stoics themselves. The ancients had also developed a classification of exercises corresponding to the study of philosophical discourses (*logos*): reading, audition (*akroasis*), research (*zêtêsis*), deep examination (*skepsis*).

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[12] *Meditations* 2 16 (trans. Hard, typographically modified).

I shall detail below two examples of how maxims or short formulas may be used: the writing meditation and the self-examination.

1 The Writing Meditation (or *hypomnêmata*)

Pierre Hadot[13] has shown that the writing meditation was a spiritual exercise in itself, especially for the Stoics of the imperial era.

As I explained above, ancient Stoics advised their students, day and night, to recall to mind their doctrines with the help of summaries composed as memorable maxims. Students were probably asked to write their own journal, using the given summaries as models and starting points.

Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* should be understood in this way. In his work, the Emperor formulates for himself the dogmas of Stoicism. However, it is not enough merely to re-read his words. On the contrary, the important thing is to continuously reformulate the doctrines and the sentences which invite action of a particular character. What is really

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[13] Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1987).

important is the art of writing, understood in this context as the art of speaking to oneself.

The writing meditation is not a summary like a mathematical formula that one should re-read and apply mechanically whenever one so pleases. Its aim is not to solve abstract and theoretical questions, but to put oneself in such a situation that one feels obliged to live as a Stoic. This is why Marcus Aurelius so many times appears to repeat the same thing in various ways in his *Meditations*, as you have probably noticed.

This form of exercise is typically Stoic, and its use extended through the centuries. In his Exercises (or *Askêmata*), Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, a modern Stoic living into the eighteenth century, still respects this tradition.

Getting started: write down your own *hypomnêmata*

- Please take a good translation of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and try to isolate the fundamental points hidden behind Marcus' literary style in the following chapters: 2.1, 2.6, 4.3, 4.26, 7.22, 8.21, 11.18, 12.7, 12.8 and 12.26

- Learn by rote these fundamental points in the form of laconic *aide mémoire*

- Take a sheet of paper, or a notebook, then write down these fundamental points at any convenient moment, embroidering them with your own style. You can choose either to reconstruct the whole argument, or focus on a specific point

2 Self-examination exercise

Self-examination is a key feature in the Stoic programme of self-development. Seneca writes:

> [One's mind] should be summoned each day to give account of itself. Sextius used to do this. At the day's end, when he had retired for the night, he would interrogate his mind: 'What ailment of yours have you cured today? What failing have you resisted? Where can you show improvement? … Could anything be finer than this habit of sifting through the whole day? Think of the sleep that follows the self-examination! How calm, deep, and unimpeded it must be, when the mind has been praised or admonished and—its

own sentinel and censor—has taken stock secretly of its own habits.[14]

Epictetus also refers to this exercise, quoting one of Pythagoras' golden verse in his *Discourse* 3.10.3:

Do not let sleep fall upon your soft eyes
Before you have gone over each act of your day
three times:
Where have I failed? What have I done? What duty
have I omitted?
Begin here, and continue the examination. After
this
Find fault with what was badly done, and rejoice in
what was good.[15]

This is a good exercise to do just before going to bed. Buddhists, who practise a similar exercise, tend to think that it contributes to sleeping well.

If you feel disappointed by your lack of progress dealing with other people, suffering a loss or facing setbacks and suchlike, try to think of what Seneca or

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[14] Seneca, *On Anger* 3.36 1–3, trans. John M. Cooper and J. F. Procopé, *Seneca: Moral and Political Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 110.

[15] trans. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004), 199–200.

Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius would have done, or what indeed they would have said to you.

As much as you must be honest with yourself about your faults, you must also not forget to acknowledge your achievements.

Deepening your understanding

- This practice of 'self-examination' goes with another one. Every morning, remind yourself of your determination to apply Stoic principles throughout the coming day. Rejoice in still being alive – you could, after all, have died during the night – and be happy to be granted a new day in which to become a better Stoic

B *Prosochê* or the art of attention

Prosochê is the exercise of self-attention or mindfulness. It is a form of mental development by which we progressively learn to be attentive to every single action, thought or sensation we may have or feel at the very time they appear.

Of course, developing this ability requires some

training using appropriate techniques. Indeed, whether you are walking, sitting down, standing up, crouching, sleeping, eating, drinking, and so on, you should be fully conscious of what you are doing. This means that you should live in your present action. This does not mean that you should forget about the past and the future. On the contrary, you have to think about other times, but in relation to the present, and your present action, and when it is necessary to do so.

This idea is well rendered by one of the Stoic conceptions of the present, in which the present is defined in relation to the person's consciousness which perceives it and the degree of attention applied to it. From this point of view, the present has a certain duration, a certain 'density' which may be more or less large (*kata platos*).

Prosoché does not mean that you should actually think: 'I am doing this' or 'I am doing that.' The danger in thinking 'I am doing this' arises when you become conscious of yourself and, consequently, you do not live in the action but in the idea of 'I am.'

The same attention should be applied to every feeling or sensation you may have. In fact you should be able to observe yourself as a scientist would.

It is strange to note that a person who gets angry

usually does not realise that she is angry. As soon as someone makes her realise her emotion, she becomes quieter and often somewhat uneasy. Attention to thoughts and sensations is, I think, the most difficult to practise.

The ancients generally defined the psyche in terms of activity, as 'that which moves itself'. Hence, the *hêgemonikon*—sometimes called *nous* or *daimon* by ancient Stoics, as Pierre Hadot demonstrated—gives rise to good or bad thoughts and emotions in response to various kinds of impressions. These may be qualified as 'movements of the soul'.

With reference to the uneducated person, the *hêgemonikon* can be qualified as being *aeikinetos kai polukinetos*, which means 'always and extremely agitated'. Thus, the uneducated person is not likely to control the multiple passions that may arise if she is not able to pacify her *psuchê*.

As Epictetus explained:

> The soul is like a vessel filled with water; and impressions are like a ray of light that falls upon the water. If the water is disturbed, the ray will seem to be disturbed likewise, though in reality it is not. Whenever, therefore, a man is seized with vertigo, it is not the arts and virtues that are confounded, but the spirit in