Teach Yourself®

STOICISM AND THE ART OF HAPPINESS

Practical wisdom for everyday life

DONALD ROBERTSON

Copyrighted material

Contents

Note on terminology and citations

Preface: modern Stoicism

What's this book all about?

Why focus on Stoic Ethics and psychotherapy?

A taste of the Stoic paradoxes

Stoicism today in the modern world

1 The way of the Stoic: 'Living in agreement with Nature'

Introduction: What is Stoicism?

The goal of life: 'living in agreement with Nature'

The twofold goal of life

The three theoretical topics of Stoicism

The three lived disciplines

2 Stoic Ethics: The nature of the good

What's important about Stoic Ethics?

The nature of the good

The virtues and vices

Stoic indifference to 'indifferent' things

Preferred indifferents and primary value

3 The promise of philosophy ('therapy of the passions')

What is the ancient 'promise of philosophy'?

The Stoic concept of Happiness (Eudaimonia)

The Stoic theory of the 'passions'

Automatic emotional reactions

What about the 'good' or 'healthy' passions?

4 The discipline of desire (Stoic acceptance)

What is the discipline of desire?

Contemplating the 'here and now'

Loving your fate and joyful acceptance

Copyrighted material

5 Love, friendship, and the ideal Sage
Stoicism and the philosophy of love
Stoic philanthropy and 'affinity' for others
How does a Stoic love?
Why is the Sage important to Stoicism?
How to contemplate the Sage
The seeds of wisdom in everyone

6 The discipline of action (Stoic philanthropy)
What is the 'discipline of action'?
Undertaking action with a 'reserve clause'
The Stoic archer
Undertaking action 'for the common welfare' of mankind

7 Premeditation of adversity
Why is anticipating future 'misfortunes' important?
How do Stoics premeditate adversity?
Habituation and imaginal exposure
Decatastrophizing imagery
Modelling and rehearsing coping skills
Eliminating surprise
Reversing 'hedonic adaptation'?

8 The discipline of judgement (Stoic mindfulness)
What is the 'discipline of judgement'?
Stoic psychology and theory of knowledge
'Objective representation' and 'physical definition'
Cognitive distancing in Stoicism

9 Self-awareness and the 'Stoic Fork'
How is self-awareness developed in Stoicism?
The 'Stoic Fork' or 'sovereign' precept
Postponement: not getting 'carried-away'
Why meditate morning and night?

10 The view from above and Stoic cosmology

Copyrighted material

Why is contemplating Nature important?
The Pythagorean 'festival'
The 'view from above' and 'cosmic consciousness'
The contemplation of impermanence and 'eternal recurrence'
11 The Stoic contemplation of death
Why is contemplating your death important?
Death is no evil
Death is ordained by Nature
Further Reading
References

Copyrighted material

Note on terminology and citations

I've chosen to retain conventional translations of certain key terms employed in ancient Stoic literature, while sometimes offering alternative translations. My aim has been to make this book more contemporary in feel and accessible to a modern reader, without compromising too much on meaning. *Eudaimonia*, I've translated using the conventional 'Happiness', although this is problematic and I've chosen to address that in the book; it's also therefore capitalized to highlight the special sense of the word.

Referencing, Translations and Further Reading

This book follows the standard *Teach Yourself* series format. I've deliberately omitted many citations because the series is geared towards general readability and practical application. In many cases, I've quoted or paraphrased ancient sources without including the specific reference.

Throughout this book I've quoted many different ancient sources, most of which are available in different English translations. For the sake of consistency, I've typically retranslated passages from the original Greek myself, often drawing on several existing translations in doing so. The main English translations I've quoted from, or consulted, are listed below:

- Seneca, *Dialogues and Essays* (trans. John Davie, 2007).
- Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Includes selections from *On Anger, On Clemency/Mercy, the Consolations to Marcia and Helvia*, and *On Earthquakes*, etc.]
- Seneca, *Selected Letters* (trans. Elaine Fantham, 2010). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cicero, *On the Good Life* (trans. Michael Grant, 2005). Middlesex: Penguin.
- Cicero, *On Moral Ends* (trans. Raphael Woolf, 2001). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Copyrighted material

- Musonius Rufus, *Lectures and Sayings* (trans. Cynthia King, 2010). Lulu.
- Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations* (trans. C.R. Haines, 1989). The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Epictetus, *The Discourses & Handbook* (trans. W.A. Oldfather, 1925). The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lucan, *The Civil War* (trans. Susan H. Braund, 1992). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Diogenes the Cynic, *Sayings and Anecdotes* (trans. Robin Hard, 2012). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cicero, *On Moral Ends (De Finibus)* (trans. Raphael Woolf, 2001). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cicero, *On the Good Life* (trans. Michael Grant, 1971). Middlesex: Penguin. [Includes *Tusculan Disputations, On Duties*, Laelius: *On Friendship*, and *The Dream of Scipio*, etc.]
- Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (trans. R.D. Hicks, 1925). The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

The two main translations of early Greek Stoic fragments are:

- The Hellenistic Philosophers (Vol 1): Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary. (1987). (A.A. Long & D.N. Seldey, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- *The Stoics Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia*. (2008). (B. Inwood, & L. P. Gerson, Trans.) Cambridge: Hackett.

Translations of Cynic fragments, Hermetic, and Pythagorean texts, as well as the writings of Plato, can be found in:

- Diogenes the Cynic, *Sayings and Anecdotes*. (2012). (Robin Hard, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- *The Way of Hermes: New Translations of The Corpus Hermeticum* and *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*. (1999). (C. Salaman, D. van Oyen, W.D.

Copyrighted material

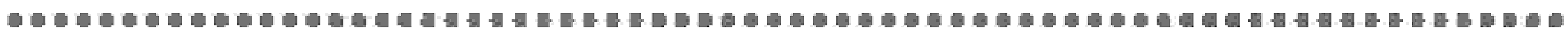
Wharton, J.P. Mah, Trans.). London: Duckworth.

- *The Pythagorean Sourcebook*. (1988). (K.S. Guthrie, Trans.). MI: Phanes.
- *Plato: Complete Works*. (1997). (J. M. Cooper, ed.). Cambridge: Hackett. [Contains all the works attributed to Plato, translated by a number of different academics.]

You'll find information on suggested further reading for each chapter at the end of this book, along with a more-detailed bibliography section. Where I've referred the reader to one of the ancient sources, I'd recommend consulting the published translations above. In general, the *Loeb Classical Library* series contains reliable English translations of Stoic texts from Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca, although a number of other versions of the most-popular works are now available.

Note on gender

The ancient sources are all written by men. They tend to refer to Stoics in general in the masculine. I've retained this use of gender in relation to the Sage for the sake of consistency with the source texts but I've deliberately tried to vary the gender assumed when speaking about modern (aspiring) Stoics, for the sake of balance often referring to hypothetical students of Stoicism as 'she'. Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, began his training in philosophy by studying for many years with the famous Cynic philosopher Crates of Thebes whose wife Hipparchia of Maroneia was one of the most notable *female* philosophers of antiquity. Zeno and his followers apparently considered men and women to be equals and Stoic schools were known for accepting female students, at a time when this was unusual. We have two surviving lectures from the great Roman Stoic Musonius Rufus, in which he argues that girls have a right to benefit from the same philosophical training as boys because they are capable of possessing the same fundamental virtues of character. They are called: 'That Women Too Should Study Philosophy' and 'Should Daughters Receive the Same Education as Sons?'



The Teach Yourself Breakthrough series has a number of features to help you get the most out of reading this book. *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* includes the

Copyrighted material

following boxed features:

'Key idea' boxes that distil the most important ideas and thoughts

'Remember this' boxes to help you take away what really matters

'Try it now' boxes to provide you with useful exercises and techniques

'Focus points' at the end of each chapter to help you hone in on the core message of each chapter.

At the end of the book you will also find a list of resources providing further information and help.

Copyrighted material

Preface: Modern Stoicism

> O ye who've learnt the doctrines of the Stoa
> And have committed to your books divine
> The best of human learning, teaching men
> That the mind's virtue is the only good!
> She only it is who keeps the lives of men
> And cities safer than high gates and walls.
> But those who place their happiness in pleasure
> Are led by the least worthy of the Muses.
> (Athenaeus the Epigrammatist, quoted in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*)

> Well – I'm not the final word on this, Mr. Croker, but what [the ancient Stoic teacher Epictetus is] saying, it seems to me, he's saying that the only real possession you'll ever have is your character and your 'scheme of life,' he calls it. Zeus has given every person a spark from his own divinity, and no one can take that away from you, not even Zeus, and from that spark comes your character. Everything else is temporary and worthless in the long run, your body included. You know what he calls your possessions? 'Trifles.' You know what he calls the human body? 'A vessel of clay containing a quart of blood.' If you understand that, you won't moan and groan, you won't complain, you won't blame other people for your troubles, and you won't go around flattering people. I think that's what he's saying, Mr. Croker. (Wolfe, *A Man in Full*)

What's this book all about?

This book is about Stoicism, a philosophical school founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium around 301 BC, which endured as an active philosophical movement for almost 500 years, and has experienced a resurgence in popularity over the past few decades. However, it's also a 'how to' guide that will hopefully show you ways in which Stoicism might provide, or at least contribute towards, a 'philosophy of life' for the modern world – an art of living with Happiness that aspires to be both *rational* and *healthy*. (This book is unlike others on the subject because it follows the *Teach Yourself* series format, which breaks the content

Copyrighted material

down into manageable chunks designed to help learners and repeats key information so it's easier to remember.)

If you ask most modern philosophers ‘What’s the meaning of life?’ they’ll probably just shrug and say that’s an unanswerable question. However, the major schools of ancient philosophy each proposed competing answers to that question. In a nutshell, the Stoics said that the goal (*telos*, ‘end’ or ‘purpose’) of life is to live consistently in harmony and agreement with the Nature of the universe, and to excel with regard to our own essential nature as rational and social beings. This is also described as ‘living according to virtue’ or *aretê*, although as you’ll see it’s best to think of that word as meaning *excellence* in a broader sense than the word ‘virtue’ normally implies – something I’ll explain later. It's synonymous with living *wisely*.

The word ‘stoic’ (small ‘s’) is still used today to mean being calm or self-controlled in the face of difficulties. Curiously, the adjective ‘philosophical’ is used to mean more or less the same thing, e.g., ‘He developed a serious illness but remained *philosophical* about events.’ The *Oxford English Dictionary* includes the following, virtually identical, definitions:

> **philosophical**. *adj*. Calm in adversity.
>
> **stoical**. *adj*. Having or showing great self-control in adversity.

Isn’t that striking? It’s as though, when it comes to actually *living* philosophically, rather than just talking about philosophy, these two words have come to be almost synonymous. You could say that Stoicism is the quintessential (Western) 'philosophy as a way of life'.

However, to the majority of non-philosophers, the word ‘stoical’ also means being ‘unemotional’, or ‘having a stiff upper-lip’ in the crude sense of *repressing* one’s feelings. That’s definitely *not* what it originally meant, though. In other words, it’s not what ‘Stoicism’ (with a capital ‘S’) means. A lot of confusion therefore tends to arise when people mix up lower-case *stoicism*, the personality trait, with upper-case *Stoicism*, the school of Greek philosophy.

As we’ll see, Stoicism, like most ancient Western philosophies, assumed that the goal of life was Happiness (*eudaimonia*). The Stoics believed this coincides both with rational self-love and an attitude of friendship and affection towards

Copyrighted material

others, sometimes described as Stoic 'philanthropy', or love of mankind. For instance, the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius, writing in his journal, repeatedly advises himself to 'love humanity from the bottom of your heart' while rejoicing in doing good to others for its own sake and treating virtue as its own reward (*Meditations*, 7.13).

We might say that a central paradox of Stoicism is therefore its assumption that, far from being heartless, the ideal wise man, called the 'Sage' (*sophos*), will both love others and yet be undisturbed by the inevitable losses and misfortunes that life inflicts on him. He has natural emotions and desires but is not overwhelmed by them, and remains guided by reason.

In fact, Stoicism provides a rich armamentarium of strategies and techniques for developing psychological resilience, by changing our feelings *rationally* and *naturally* rather than simply trying to block them by force. In a sense, ancient Stoicism was the granddaddy of all 'self-help'. Its doctrines and practices have inspired many modern approaches to both personal development and psychological therapy. Moreover, it's generally accepted that the modern psychotherapy that most resembles ancient Stoic 'remedies' for emotional problems is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and its precursor Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). Indeed, the founder of REBT, Albert Ellis, and the founder of cognitive therapy, Aaron T. Beck, both cite Stoicism as the main philosophical inspiration for their respective approaches. In the first major textbook on cognitive therapy, for instance, Beck and his colleagues wrote: 'The philosophical origins of cognitive therapy can be traced back to the Stoic philosophers' (Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979, p. 8).

Although CBT is mainly *remedial* in nature, dealing with clinical anxiety and depression, it has also been adapted for use as a *preventative* approach, for generic psychological 'resilience-building'. Ancient Stoic 'therapy' was likewise more of a general resilience-building approach, although it also set out to remedy extreme distress where necessary. CBT happens to have the strongest scientific support of any modern form of psychological therapy. So we're looking at an ancient philosophical system, employed for emotional resilience-building, which has inspired a hugely successful modern therapy with a scientifically proven track record.

Stoicism is currently experiencing a major resurgence in popularity. However,

Copyrighted material

Some people question how we can study it today when the original tradition basically died off in late antiquity, along with other 'pagan' philosophical schools, following the rise of Christianity. The Stoic school was an influential philosophical movement, which endured for many centuries in both Greece and Rome, but it gradually came to an end as a living philosophy. Indeed, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who died in 180 AD is the last major Stoic figure we know much about today. You may have seen the Hollywood film *Gladiator* in which Marcus is portrayed by the actor Richard Harris. There's not much reference to Stoicism in that film, incidentally, although Russell Crowe's character says near the end:

> I knew a man once who said, 'Death smiles at us all. All a man can do is smile back.'

That's not a real quotation from Marcus Aurelius but it's obviously inspired by passages from his personal journal, the *Meditations*, probably the best-known surviving Stoic text today. Many modern readers base their understanding of Stoicism solely on this short book. Despite its popularity, though, the *Meditations* was a private journal of Marcus' Stoic practice and never intended as a comprehensive introduction to Stoicism. So we're going to be going a bit deeper into the subject by looking at a wider range of ancient sources.

In fact, Zeno's original Stoic school was based on the study of detailed arguments contained in its many founding texts. The early Stoics alone reputedly wrote over a thousand 'books' (although, some of these were probably more like long essays). The original Stoic school disappeared along with the centres of other major philosophical schools at some point following the sack of Athens by the Roman dictator Sulla in 86 BC. Nevertheless, Stoicism continued to flourish for several centuries, during the Roman Imperial period, albeit in a more dispersed and fragmentary form.

By the time of Marcus Aurelius, Stoics presumably had access to a much more limited handful of Stoic texts, many early Greek writings having already been lost over the intervening centuries. Marcus appears to have drawn mainly on the Stoic teachings of Epictetus as recorded in his *Discourses*, about half of which still survive today. By contrast, he does not make any reference to Seneca, the Stoic author from whom we have the largest volume of surviving writings. Marcus' seemingly impoverished access to the original teachings of Stoicism might be

Copyrighted material

compared to that of a modern student of the subject, although he did also benefit from personal acquaintance with several Stoic tutors and lecturers.

We have to reconstruct a picture of Stoicism from the fragments that remain, over 2,300 years after the school originated. However, we benefit from five or six volumes of detailed modern commentary and analysis (Long, 2002; Hadot, 1998), and we have numerous examples of practical guidance from people applying Stoicism to modern life (Evans, 2012; Irvine, 2009). In some ways we're therefore no worse off than students of Stoicism in late antiquity and may even have advantages that they lacked, including access to texts they had perhaps not read.

Some ancient Stoics were prolific writers and lecturers, who dedicated their lives to educating others. Indeed, early Stoics reputedly taught that all wise men have a natural love of writing the sort of books that can help other people. So perhaps modern students of Stoicism, although far removed from the lofty ideal of the Sage, can nevertheless be expected to enjoy writing self-help books or blogs with the purpose of aiding others and exchanging ideas about the modern relevance of Stoicism. Nobody should dare *claim* to be wise, although everyone should dare to *try* to be so.

The role of a modern author on Stoicism might perhaps be best described as resembling that assumed by Seneca. He says to his aspiring Stoic friends that he is like an invalid in one bed discussing how his therapy is going with the man in the bed beside him. As we'll see, the Stoics had no gurus because they denied anyone was perfectly wise. Perhaps even Zeno, the founder of the philosophy, adopted Seneca's attitude, treating his students as peers. The Stoics were greatly inspired by the original philosophy of Socrates and they treat him as the closest thing they possess to an ideal role model. Socrates, of course, made a point of stressing that he was merely a *lover* of wisdom (philosopher) and not someone claiming to be truly wise himself.

Less than one per cent of the original Stoic literature has survived but, if that were compiled into one publication, it would probably be about seven or eight volumes in length – so not an insignificant amount of material. Unfortunately, we often need the help of modern academic commentators to help us reconstruct the meaning of these early Greek fragments. However, they provide an important resource that can help us understand the underlying philosophical

Copyrighted material

system taken for granted by more widely-read Stoic authors such as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius.

Yet we should be especially cautious that Stoicism does not turn into a deadened and *bookish* subject. One solution to this problem is provided by the first chapter of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, where he shows how an aspiring Stoic may contemplate the virtues of his friends, family, colleagues, and perhaps even some of his enemies, to find traces of inspiration.

Throughout this book, I'll refer to many specific examples of people, both ancient and modern, whose lives have been changed by Stoicism. My own interest in this area began when I was about 17 years old and a college lecturer suggested I should study philosophy. I began reading the classics, mainly Plato, and went on to do my degree in philosophy at Aberdeen University. I was also a member of the student Buddhist society and regularly practised meditation. I went on various Buddhist retreats because I wanted to find a lifestyle and daily practice that somehow complemented my study of philosophy.

After graduation, I trained in and started to practise counselling and psychotherapy because I felt this gave me a practical vocation that complemented my interest in philosophy. However, I always yearned to bring these three things – therapy, philosophy and meditation – more closely into harmony, and it was only some years later that my eyes were opened to the rich tradition of spiritual exercises in ancient philosophical literature by the writings of the eminent French scholar, Pierre Hadot, such as his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995).

Hadot's marvellous books ignited my interest in Stoicism and inspired me to begin publishing short articles on the subject. This led to a longer article on Stoicism for one of the main counselling and psychotherapy journals (2005), and eventually a book on Stoicism and modern psychotherapy called *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy* (2010). I've been trying to assimilate Stoicism, in terms of specific practical strategies as well as the overall way I live my life, for nearly twenty years now. I've also had plenty of experience discussing aspects of Stoicism with anxious or depressed clients, in relation to my work as a CBT practitioner. (My previous book in the *Teach Yourself* series, *Build your Resilience* (2012), draws on Stoic philosophy in relation to modern mindfulness and acceptance-based CBT

Copyrighted material

and psychological resilience-building.)

I'm interested in Stoicism, therefore, because I agree with what I consider to be its core doctrines, and because I believe its psychological exercises are of practical value in modern living. However, I also find much of the surviving Stoic literature to be both beautiful and profound. Part of its enduring appeal is undoubtedly the literary merit of writings such as the letters and essays of Seneca, and the aphorisms of Marcus Aurelius.

Why focus on Stoic Ethics and psychotherapy?

This book won't give equal weight to all aspects of ancient Stoicism. As we'll see, the Stoics divided their philosophical curriculum into three topics, called 'Ethics', 'Physics' and 'Logic'. (These words aren't very good translations but they're the ones commonly used.) We're mainly going to focus on Stoic Ethics. There are several reasons for doing this:

- We know far more about Stoic Ethics than about their Physics or Logic, because the extant writings, particularly those of the 'big three' Roman Stoics – Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius – are mainly concerned with this topic, which may have been the central focus of late Roman Stoicism in general.
- There tends to be most interest in Stoic Ethics among modern readers because of its obvious relationship with contemporary self-help and psychological therapies, such as CBT, whereas the remnants of their (theologically-grounded) Physics may be perceived as less relevant today, and ancient Logic can be less accessible to the average reader.
- Some important, albeit unorthodox, Stoics focused *solely* on Ethics. For example, we're told one of Zeno's followers, Aristo of Chios, 'discarded altogether the topic of physics, and of logic, saying that the one was above us, and that the other had nothing to do with us, and that the only branch of philosophy with which we had any real concern was ethics' (*Lives*, 7.160).
- The Stoics generally held their forerunners the Cynics in particularly high esteem and some saw their austere and challenging lifestyle as a 'short-cut to

Copyrighted material

virtue', even though they deliberately eschewed technical philosophical debates about Logic or Physics; this admiration for the Cynic way of life is particularly apparent in the *Discourses* of Epictetus, the only surviving book-length text from an actual Stoic teacher.

- If technical knowledge of Stoic Physics and Logic were absolutely essential to the goal of life, then ancient Stoics would presumably not have revered historical and mythological figures such as Hercules, Socrates and Diogenes the Cynic as exemplary role models. In other words, the individuals ancient Stoics typically sought to emulate, in their daily lives, were not primarily logicians or natural philosophers, but men of exemplary ethical virtue and *practical* wisdom.
- From the outset, all Stoics appear to have agreed that Ethics was ultimately the most important aspect of their philosophy, e.g., Chrysippus, the influential third leader of the school, allegedly said that the only reason for studying Physics was for the sake of Ethics.

Cicero, one of the most important ancient commentators on Stoicism, described the question of what is the supreme 'good' in life, the central topic of Stoic Ethics, as the foundation of their whole philosophy. He says the 'most important' Stoic doctrine was that 'the only good is virtue' and calls it 'the veritable head of the Stoic household' (*De Finibus*, 4.14; 4.44). Indeed, Epictetus repeatedly warned his students that excessive concern with other, more academic, aspects of philosophy risks becoming a diversion from the central task of living virtuously.

However, as we shall see there is overlap between Stoic Logic, Ethics and Physics and so our discussion will bring in some elements of the other topics where it seems necessary or helpful to do so. In particular, we'll be looking at the lived practice of Stoicism in terms of three practical 'disciplines', which scholars have correlated with the three topics of the theoretical curriculum: Judgement, Action, and Desire.

Some people feel that modern Stoicism isn't faithful enough to the ancient tradition but hopefully these remarks help to justify the differences. On the other hand, others can feel that *too much* emphasis is placed on what the ancient Stoics said. However, Stoicism (with a capital 'S') is, by definition, an *ancient* philosophy. Even those who adapt it for modern living, generally consider

Copyrighted material

themselves to be united by an interest in the original Greek and Roman teachings, from which they seek inspiration. These texts are still immensely valuable and highly-regarded. In many cases, they're remarkably beautiful. In fact, Seneca (a Stoic) and Cicero (not a Stoic but an important source nevertheless) are renowned as two of the very finest writers of antiquity.

I've therefore quoted the ancient Stoics frequently; partly to provide evidence where some interpretation may be in question, but also because they're frankly much better writers than I could ever hope to be and deserve to be more widely read. Indeed, these are some of the greatest philosophical minds and most accomplished writers of all time. However, even the ancient Stoics were conscious that a balance needs to be struck between too much and not enough reliance on the original texts of their sect. Over three centuries after the Stoic school was founded, Seneca wrote:

> So am I not following our predecessors? Yes I am, but I allow myself to discover some new thing and to change or abandon others: I am not a slave to them but I agree with them. (*Letters*, 80)

To paraphrase a famous Latin saying: 'Zeno is our friend but truth is an even greater friend.' We now have access to enormous volumes of psychological research, which tell us many things about human nature that the Stoics could not have known so easily. In particular, a large body of research on CBT exists that tells us a great deal about healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to emotional distress. As we shall see, this was a major concern for the Stoics and they were traditionally perceived as the philosophical school with the most explicit 'therapeutic' focus. Readers today are naturally interested in what the Stoics said about therapy, and how it compares to modern research on the subject.

Stoicism was often employed therapeutically, as a remedy for overwhelming distress, as in the many examples of ancient 'consolation' letters, written to help others cope emotionally with traumatic bereavements and other misfortunes in life. Sometimes people mistakenly assume that Stoicism is being turned into a psychotherapy by modern commentators. In fact, it was the ancient Stoics themselves who introduced the medical model of philosophy and described the practices they developed as a moral and psychological 'therapy' (*therapeia*).

Copyrighted material

However, as noted above, prevention is better than cure, and the main focus of Stoic psychological exercises would be better described as resembling what we now call 'emotional-resilience building'. Hence, Musonius Rufus, one of the pre-eminent Stoic teachers of the Roman Imperial period, reputedly said that 'in order to protect ourselves we must live like doctors and be continually treating ourselves with reason.' He advised his students, the most famous of whom was Epictetus, that we should not use philosophy like the prescription of a drug for remedial purposes, to be discontinued whenever we're feeling better. Rather, we must allow philosophy to remain with us, continually guarding our judgements throughout life, forming part of our daily regimen, like eating a nutritious diet or taking physical exercise.

This notion of practical philosophy as a foundation for building general emotional resilience seems to appeal to many modern readers and its part of the reason people are drawn to the subject. Just like in ancient times, those who are unsatisfied with life, and in need of emotional healing, are often drawn to Stoicism, searching both for peace of mind and a sense of purpose. As we'll see, the Stoic 'therapy of the passions' aimed at nothing less than the transformation of our character. Stoic ethics and therapy go hand in hand, lie at the centre of the subject, and are the aspects people tend to find most relevant and intriguing today.

However, there are also aspects of Stoicism which people find extremely challenging. Some will be put off by their fundamentally *uncompromising* stance on ethics. Others will find it refreshing and intriguing, perhaps even quite radical and exciting. The Stoics were undoubtedly regarded as a philosophical force to be reckoned with in the ancient world. Even those who disagreed with them were impressed by the scope and consistency of their philosophical vision but they were also criticized for being obscure at times. Cicero wrestled with Stoicism and complained:

> In both its foundations and in the edifice itself Stoicism is a system constructed with great care; incorrectly perhaps, though I do not yet dare pronounce on that point, but certainly elaborately. It is no easy task to come to grips with it. (*De Finibus*, 4.1)

This book focuses on providing a practical introduction to Stoicism and so it doesn't explore the criticisms of their philosophy in much detail. However,

Copyrighted material

Cicero's *De Finibus* provides a classic account of relatively even-handed arguments for and against Stoicism. Plutarch's essay on 'Stoic Contradictions' likewise provides another classical source of criticism. A modern appraisal of Stoicism that tries to provide a detailed technical defence of its doctrines in relation to ethical philosophy can be found in Becker's *A New Stoicism* (1998).

Nevertheless, although a detailed critique of Stoic philosophy is beyond the scope of this book, it's not the intention to portray Stoicism as somehow above philosophical or scientific criticism. Stoicism is a philosophy *not* a religion. So readers should take it upon themselves to think through these ideas carefully and question them deeply. Of course, you need to learn what the Stoics actually believed first, before you can do that. So let's plunge right in...

A taste of the Stoic paradoxes

Although Stoicism was a *philosophical* system that prized rational understanding, the original philosophical arguments of Zeno were notoriously terse and remained unconvincing to his philosophical critics. Zeno proclaimed many famous 'paradoxes', which literally meant ideas that go against what the majority believe, flying in the face of popular opinion. They portrayed a radical but impressively coherent world view that attracted many people who wanted to see if it could be defended more rigorously.

The third head of the Stoic School, Chrysippus, one of the very greatest intellectuals of the ancient world, attempted to do this, writing hundreds of volumes of detailed philosophical arguments in defence of Stoic doctrine, particularly engaging with the criticisms made by ancient Skeptics who represented a rival school, the Academy of Plato. He basically transformed Stoicism from the small movement founded by Zeno into one of the philosophical heavyweights of the ancient world.

> For if Chrysippus had not lived and taught,
>
> The Stoic school would surely have been naught. (*Lives*, 7.183)

We're told he was known for making the striking remark to his teacher Cleanthes that he only wanted to be instructed in the core doctrines (*dogmata*) of Stoicism and that he could discover better arguments for and against them himself. Many modern readers will likewise first be attracted to the attention-

Copyrighted material

grabbing ideas of the Stoics, which promise to turn our prevailing philosophy of life on its head, and then seek to weigh them up rationally in their own terms. Some Stoics even referred to this upheaval in our world-view and system of values, turning away from the conventional view of the majority, as a philosophical 'conversion' (*epistrophê*), literally a 'turning around' or 'U-turn' in life. In this regard, the Stoics were influenced by the Cynics, who we're told would walk against the flow of the crowds leaving a theatre, or walk about backwards in public. This illustrated their desire, paradoxically, to swim against the current in life and go in the opposite direction from the majority of people.

The Stoics recognized that they were saying things many people would struggle to accept at first, although they also believed that their philosophy was ultimately based on common sense assumptions, accessible to everyone on reflection. For example, Cicero defends six notoriously cryptic 'Stoic Paradoxes' in his short book of that title:

1. Virtue, or moral excellence, is the only good (conventional 'goods' such as health, wealth and reputation fundamentally count as *nothing* with regard to living a good life).
2. Virtue is completely sufficient for Happiness and fulfilment, a man who is virtuous lacks no requirement of the good life.
3. All forms of virtue are equal as are all forms of vice (in terms of the benefit or harm they do to the individual himself).
4. Everyone who lacks perfect wisdom is insane (which basically means everyone alive; we're all essentially mad).
5. Only the wise man is really free and everyone else is enslaved (even when the wise man is imprisoned by a tyrant, or sentenced to death like Socrates, he is still freer than everyone else, including his oppressors).
6. Only the wise man is truly rich (even if, like Diogenes the Cynic, he owns nothing that he can't carry in his knapsack).

These puzzles require some explaining, as we'll see. Musonius Rufus apparently used to say that students were expected to be left in stunned silence following his lectures rather than applauding him. They felt that they'd heard something radical and powerful but they were often unsure what to make of it all at first. I'd say that this is true for modern readers as well. If we don't feel at least

Copyrighted material

slightly unsettled by what the Stoics are saying then we're probably missing something important about their philosophy.

Yet despite the paradoxes, Stoicism was in many respects the most down-to-earth of the Athenian philosophical schools, being grounded in our experience of daily life. We're told Cleanthes, the second head of the Stoa, used to remark: 'Possibly the philosophers say what is contrary to opinion [or 'paradoxical'], but assuredly not what is contrary to reason' (Epictetus, *Discourses*, 4.1).

Case study: The University of Exeter's research project on modern Stoicism

Stoicism was the original philosophical inspiration for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Both approaches interpret emotions as being due mainly to our beliefs and patterns of thinking ('cognitions'). They also share the assumption that by altering relevant beliefs we can overcome emotional distress. An impressive body of scientific evidence from clinical trials and other types of research has provided support for the efficacy of CBT, particularly as a treatment for anxiety and depressive disorders.

This might be seen as lending *indirect* support to 'Stoic therapy'. However, until recently, there's been no attempt to provide *direct* evidence of Stoicism's psychological benefits.

In November 2012, however, Patrick Ussher, a doctoral student researching Stoicism at the University of Exeter (Ussher, 2012), organized an informal pilot study called 'Stoic Week', under the supervision of Christopher Gill, a professor of Ancient Thought who has written and contributed to academic research on Stoicism (Gill, 2006; 2010; 2011).

A multi-disciplinary team of philosophers, classicists, psychologists and psychotherapists were involved in the project (myself included). A handbook explaining basic Stoic concepts and practices was made available online for participants to use in their daily lives over a one-week period as an initial feasibility test. (I wrote some sections of the handbook and the book you're reading was partly inspired by this and several of our findings.) It generated a lot of interest and was covered in several articles in *The Independent* and *Guardian* newspapers.

Stoic Week has been running each year since. In 2018, 7,000 people participated in the project online, and data were collected from them. The philosopher and psychotherapist Tim LeBon, author of *Wise Therapy* (LeBon, 2001) published several statistical reports that are also available from the website.

So what are the findings? It must be stressed that these are still just initial pilot studies and more formal research is required. However, the data each year have consistently shown a

Copyrighted material

roughly 10 per cent increase across three different self-report measures of psychological wellbeing, after as little as one week of following the project's Stoic handbook. Of course, that's a very brief period of practice from which to expect much measurable change. There was also a decrease of about 10 per cent in measures of negative emotions, although positive emotions increased by only around 5 per cent. Participants were able to choose from a range of Stoic strategies and have reported the three most useful to be the following:

- Stoic mindfulness (*prosochê*)
- The retrospective evening meditation
- The view from above

We'll therefore be exploring these three classic Stoic strategies in more detail, in later chapters. The main finding of our research, though, was that it appeared feasible to construct a regime of Stoic exercises simple enough for people to learn in a few days and apply to modern living. Participants enjoyed following the exercises, perceived them as helpful, and were keen to do more. These initial studies weren't carefully-controlled scientific experiments so we have to be cautious about the findings but the data are suggestive that even practising Stoic exercises for a week may have a positive psychological effect that can be measured using scientifically-validated scales. You can find more information at: http://modernstoicism.com

Stoicism today in the modern world

What about Stoicism today? Well, there is a growing community of people studying it around the world, connected via the Internet. If you just type 'Stoicism' into Google, it probably won't take you long to find practising Stoics because there are many who participate in online forums, etc. We recently estimated that roughly 100,000 people are members of the various communities for Stoicism online.

Jules Evans also published a book recently called *Philosophy for Life*, which gives many concrete examples of people who apply ancient philosophy to modern living, particularly Stoicism and related Socratic schools of thought (Evans, 2012). Stoicism has been especially popular with the modern military. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Jarrett, a former Green Beret, has taught a psychological resilience programme to thousands of personnel in the US army, drawing on Stoic philosophy and elements of CBT. Data gathered from questionnaires completed by 900 participants in his Stoic 'Warrior Resilience Training' programme was suggestive of positive results. For example, the statistics showed his participants felt the training would indeed assist them in

Copyrighted material

becoming more resilient during deployment and on returning home (Jarrett, 2008). A recent book called *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind* by Prof. Nancy Sherman, former Distinguished Chair in Ethics at the US Naval Academy, has also explored the affinity between Stoic philosophy and contemporary military values (Sherman, 2005).

Many people, on the other hand, will have learned of Stoicism from Tom Wolfe's acclaimed novel, *A Man in Full* (1998). Two of the central characters become 'converts' to Stoicism at pivotal points, and their use of Stoicism becomes central to the climax of the story. The second half of the book contains many references, therefore, to the sayings of Epictetus. One of the characters, Conrad, comes across the writings of the Stoics by accident while imprisoned. When asked if he considers himself a Stoic:

> 'I'm just reading about it', said Conrad, 'but I wish that there was someone around today, somebody you could go to, the way students went to Epictetus. Today people think of Stoics – like, you know, like they're people who grit their teeth and tolerate pain and suffering. But that's not it at all. What they are is, they're serene and confident in the face of anything you can throw at them. If you say to a Stoic, 'Look, you do what I tell you or I'll kill you', he'll look you in the eye and say, 'You do what you have to do, and I'll do what I have to do – and, by the way, when did I ever tell you I was immortal?' (Wolfe, 1998, p. 665)

A good guide to applying Stoicism in the modern world is Keith Seddon's *Stoic Serenity*, which is based on his home-study course in the Stoic art of living (Seddon, 2006). His plain-English explanation of Stoicism is as follows: 'A Stoic can be regarded, perhaps, as someone who continually reminds themselves that their plight is not as bad as it may appear, and that our capacities, to deal with both the petty frustrations of daily life and significant turns of bad fortune, are superior (with philosophy's aid) to how we usually imagine them' (Seddon, 2006, p. 78).

The bestselling popular introduction to Stoicism is probably William Irvine's *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (Irvine, 2009). Nevertheless, Irvine acknowledged that there are a number of key respects in which his account departs from Stoicism as traditionally understood. He claims, for instance, that the focus of his book is on attaining 'tranquillity' rather than 'virtue' (Irvine,

Copyrighted material

2009, p. 42).

> The resulting version of Stoicism, although derived from the ancient Stoics, is therefore unlike the Stoicism advocated by any particular Stoic. It is also likely that the version of Stoicism I have developed is in various respects unlike the Stoicism one would have been taught to practise in an ancient Stoic school. (Irvine, 2009, p. 244)

To this, more orthodox Stoics might object that 'tranquillity' (*ataraxia*) is traditionally seen as a positive side-effect of virtue rather than the goal of life itself. To put it crudely, if tranquillity is really your supreme goal in life then you can just take *tranquilizers*. The Stoics argued that the chief good in life must be something that is *both* good itself and 'instrumentally' good, meaning that it brings about good consequences. Tranquillity is typically agreed to be a good thing but it doesn't lead anywhere, it doesn't reliably maintain itself or generate other good consequences – it can be misused or abused. A psychopath might experience tranquillity while chopping-up his victims' bodies! However, the pursuit of wisdom and virtue as the chief goal in life leads to something that both maintains itself and brings about other beneficial things, *including* tranquillity. As therapists like to put it, there's a real difference between merely *feeling* better and actually *getting* better.

In this book, therefore, we'll be looking at a modern approach to Stoicism that is more closely based upon the characteristic views of the ancient Stoics. We'll be placing Stoicism within its historical context, and examining the philosophical foundations of the school, particularly the core ethical doctrines, widely regarded in antiquity as the essence of Stoicism. In other words, by drawing extensively on the historical tradition, we'll attempt to answer the question: What *makes* someone a Stoic?

- **The Stoic Hymn to Zeus**

> Lead me, O Zeus, and thou O Destiny,
> The way that I am bid by you to go:
> To follow I am ready. If I will not,
> Making myself wretched, I still must follow.
> The willing are led by fate, the reluctant dragged.
> (Fragment of a Hymn to Zeus, Cleanthes, the second head of the Stoa)

Copyrighted material

1
The way of the Stoic: 'Living in agreement with Nature'

In this chapter you will learn:

- ***Who the Stoics were and the essence of their philosophy: that the goal is 'living in agreement with Nature'***
- ***About the overall structure of Stoicism and the three theoretical 'topics' of the philosophical curriculum: 'Physics', 'Ethics' and 'Logic'***
- ***How these inform three dimensions of Stoic practice: The Disciplines of 'Desire', 'Action' and 'Judgement'***
- ***How to contemplate the nature of the 'good' and how to appraise your sphere of control in life***

Copyrighted material

The duration of a man's life is merely a small point in time; the substance of it ever flowing away, the sense obscure; and the whole composition of the body tending to decay. His soul is a restless vortex, good fortune is uncertain and fame is unreliable; in a word, as a rushing stream so are all things belonging to the body; as a dream, or as vapour, are all those that belong to the soul. Life is warfare and a sojourn in a foreign land. Reputation after life is nothing more than oblivion.

What is it then that will guide man? One thing alone: philosophy, the love of wisdom. And philosophy consists in this: for a man to preserve that inner genius or divine spark which is within him from violence and injuries, and above all from harmful pains or pleasures; never to do anything either without purpose, or falsely, or hypocritically, regardless of the actions or inaction of others; to contentedly embrace all things that happen to him, as coming from the same source from whom he himself also came, and above all things, with humility and calm cheerfulness, to anticipate death, as being nothing else but the dissolution of those elements, of which every living being is composed.

And if the elements themselves suffer nothing by this their perpetual conversion of one into another, that dissolution, and alteration, which is so common to them all, why should it be feared by any man? Is this not according to nature? But nothing that is according to nature can be evil. (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2.15)

Self-assessment: Stoic attitudes and core principles

Before reading this chapter, rate how strongly you agree with the following statements, using the five-point (1–5) scale below, and then re-rate your attitudes once you've read and digested the contents.

1. Strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neither agree nor disagree, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly agree

1 'The goal of life is to 'live in agreement with Nature' by willingly accepting things outside of our control.'

2 'We should also live in harmony with our own human nature by trying to cultivate reason and progress towards perfect wisdom and virtue.'

Copyrighted material

3 'We should live in harmony with the rest of mankind by seeing ourselves as all fundamentally akin to each other insofar as we possess reason.'

Introduction: What is Stoicism?

What is Stoicism? To recap: it's an important school of ancient philosophy founded in Athens around 301 BC by a Phoenician merchant called Zeno who hailed from the city of Citium in Cyprus. However, as we'll see, Stoicism was also regarded as one of several competing schools inspired by the life and thought of Socrates, the pre-eminent Athenian philosopher, who had been executed a century earlier.

It was originally called 'Zenonism' but that name was dropped. Presumably that was because the Stoics didn't consider their founders to be perfectly wise, and they didn't want their philosophy to become a personality cult. Instead, it came to be known as 'Stoicism' because Zeno and his followers met in the *Stoa Poikilê*, or 'Painted Porch', a famous colonnade decorated with a mixture of mythic and historical battle scenes, situated on the north side of the *agora*, the ancient Athenian marketplace. Sometimes Stoicism, or the Stoic school, is therefore just called 'The Stoa' or even the philosophy of 'The Porch'.

Like their hero Socrates, but unlike the other formal schools of Athenian philosophy, the Stoics met out in the public marketplace, on this porch, where anyone could listen to them debate. Here Zeno vigorously paced up and down as he lectured, which we're told kept the porch clear of people slouching. The expression 'Stoic philosophy' has therefore been taken to suggest something like a 'philosophy of the street', a philosophy for ordinary people, not locked-up in the proverbial 'ivory towers' of academia. Indeed, until recently, the Stoics were rather neglected on most university degree courses.

> Before the twentieth century, those who were exposed to philosophy would likely have read the Stoics. In the twentieth century, though, philosophers not only lost interest in Stoicism but lost interest, more generally, in philosophies of life. It was possible, as my own experience demonstrates, to spend a decade taking philosophy classes without having read the Stoics and without having spent time considering philosophies of life, much less adopting one. (Irvine, 2009, p. 222)

Copyrighted material

Nevertheless, Stoicism has grown in popularity since the 1970s, partly because of the success of CBT.

In the ancient world, as we've seen, Stoicism was, from the outset and for nearly five subsequent centuries, one of the most influential and highly-regarded schools of philosophy. We're told the Athenians greatly admired Zeno, granting him the keys to their city and building a bronze statue of him, in stark contrast to the fate that befell his predecessor, Socrates. They also reputedly voted in favour of an official decree honouring his exemplary 'virtue and self-discipline', with a golden crown and a tomb, built at public expense. This public declaration praised his many years devoted to philosophy in Athens, and described him as a good man in every respect, 'exhorting to virtue and self-discipline those of the youth who come to him to be taught, directing them to what is best, affording to all in his own conduct a pattern for imitation in perfect consistency with his teaching' (*Lives*, 7.10).

The example set by Zeno's conduct was important to the Stoics because they considered emulation of the wise and good to be the best way to learn philosophy. He initially followed the simple and austere way of life adopted by the Cynic philosophers, which exerted an important influence over Stoicism. As a result, his reputation for self-mastery (*enkrateia*) apparently became quite proverbial; people were sometimes praised for having the self-discipline of a Zeno. Cynics were known for enduring physical hardship, and Zeno himself was certainly described as a philosopher toughened by the elements. For instance an unnamed ancient poet wrote of him:

> The cold of winter and the ceaseless rain
> Come powerless against him: weak the dart
> Of the fierce summer sun or racking pain
> To bend that iron frame. He stands apart
> Unspoiled by public feast and jollity:
> Patient, unwearied night and day doth he
> Cling to his studies of philosophy. (*Lives*, 7.27)

Where Zeno departed from his initial allegiance to Cynicism, however, was in his greater emphasis on the need to supplement their tough philosophical lifestyle, their 'Ethics', with the study of 'Physics' and 'Logic'. As we'll see, the Cynics also viewed all external things as ultimately 'indifferent', whereas the Stoics adopted

Copyrighted material

a more subtle position, allowing themselves to value certain conventional things, while retaining a sense of detachment from them. Nevertheless, the Stoics were particularly concerned with applying philosophy to everyday challenges and especially with the classic Socratic question: How does someone live a good life? They saw themselves as veritable warriors of the mind and would perhaps condemn modern academic philosophy as mere 'sophistry' rather than a true art of living.

Key idea: Philosophy as a way of life

It may come as a surprise to realize that ancient philosophy was a fairly practical business. It often emphasized training in psychological exercises or the adoption of a demanding lifestyle, a precursor in some ways of Christian monastic practices. Some philosophers, most notably the Cynics, even turned their nose up at theoretical debate or abstract speculation as a diversion from the true business of cultivating practical wisdom and self-mastery.

The Cynics ridiculed Plato and his followers for their 'Academic' style of philosophy. They believed voluntary poverty and endurance of hardship were better philosophical teachers than books and lectures. Zeno was initially a Cynic, although he studied Logic and Physics as well. So in this regard Stoicism can be seen as somewhere between the Academics and Cynics. Theoretical studies, such as Physics and Logic, have some value but only insofar as they actually contribute to the goal of *living wisely*.

Indeed, ancient philosophers, especially Cynics, were recognizable by their attire and behaviour. Cynics begged for food or lived on cheap and simple meals of lupin seeds or lentil soup, and drank only water. They dressed only in a cheap cloak, made of coarse undyed wool, which they doubled over for warmth in winter, carried everything they owned in a small knapsack, bore an ashwood staff, and bedded down on simple straw mats, often sleeping rough in public buildings. Some of Zeno's followers considered the Cynic lifestyle a "shortcut to virtue", although the later Stoics were typically less austere. Musonius tells his students that as long as they have the inner virtues of a philosopher: 'You won't need to don an old cloak, go around without a shirt, have long hair, or behave eccentrically', like Cynics (*Lectures*, 16). Elsewhere, however, he advises students to go shirtless and barefoot, which suggests the Stoics saw these Cynic trappings as *optional* to the philosophical way of life.

Copyrighted material

From the other schools of philosophy, the Stoics drew a broad armamentarium of psychological exercises, including contemplative meditation techniques, which have been explored in detail in several books by the modern scholar Pierre Hadot, such as his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Hadot, 1995). We'll be particularly focusing on this *practical* dimension of Stoicism, as an 'art of living', which traditionally held out the promise of attaining *eudaimonia*, supreme Happiness and fulfilment.

Try it now: In at the deep end...

Let's start right now by contemplating the nature of the good. Ponder the following interrelated questions until your head begins to ache:

1. What does it mean, fundamentally, for something to be 'good', as far as humans are concerned?
2. What qualities make a human being a good *person*? (Compare: 'What qualities make a horse a good horse?')
3. What qualities make someone's life a good *life*?
4. Can being a good person *contribute* to having a good life? (The Stoics and most other Graeco-Roman philosophers agreed that it did.)
5. Does being a good person *suffice* for having a good life, even in the face of external 'misfortunes', such as persecution by others? (Was the life of Socrates worse because he was poor and persecuted; would it have been a better life if he'd had good fortune in external matters, if he'd lived an easier and more comfortable life?)

We might call this last point the 'Stoic hard-line'. They were distinguished from other schools of philosophy by their insistence that being a good person, having virtue and honour, is the *only* true good.

In any case, these are some of the fundamental questions of Stoic Ethics. Indeed, they're some of the cardinal questions of ancient philosophy in general. So don't worry if you don't have a definitive answer yet! People have been arguing over them for nearly 2,500 years. Some people would say that the main thing is to wrestle with the questions, at least, even if the answers sometimes elude us. The Stoics did believe we could arrive at a kind of philosophical certainty in these matters, though not without hard study and training.

Copyrighted material

Case study: The self-mastery of Socrates

We're used to thinking of Socrates as a wise philosopher, but did you realize he was also a decorated military hero and held up as an exemplary model of courage and self-discipline in the ancient world? Zeno was apparently converted to philosophy by reading the famous Athenian general Xenophon's account of his friend Socrates. According to Xenophon, Socrates was 'the most self-controlled of men' in respect of his physical desires as well as his tolerance of hardship, including extreme heat and cold, having trained himself to have modest needs and to be content with the most basic material possessions. Despite being a pretty tough character himself, Xenophon was impressed by Socrates' strength of character and self-mastery, which closely-resemble the virtues and practices that subsequently became the focus of both Cynicism and Stoicism.

We're told Socrates rigorously trained both his mind and body through his philosophical lifestyle. He argued, paradoxically, that 'it is self-discipline, above all things, that causes pleasure.' By exercising restraint, we learn to only eat when genuinely hungry, drink when thirsty, and so on. Appetite and thirst are the natural 'sauce' of life and the secret to making even coarse bread and plain water seem delicious. Self-control is healthier and actually leads to more enjoyment than self-indulgence, particularly with regard to the most common sources of pleasure in daily life. By contrast, Socrates said that anything that impels us to eat when *not* hungry or drink when *not* thirsty 'ruined stomachs and heads and characters'. Hopefully, this seems more like common sense than self-mortification, although it flies in the face of modern attitudes towards food and drink – we're constantly bombarded with advertising for more convenient and enticing, but often unhealthy, things to consume.

Socrates also taught that we should keep the body fit through appropriate physical exercise. Our body is employed in all activity, he said, even thinking as everyone knows people can't think straight during certain illnesses. He danced alone at daybreak as a form of exercise, because it involved the whole body rather than just some parts – a habit that seemed quite eccentric to his friends. Overall, though, we're told Socrates believed that everyone should care for their health, by learning everything they can about it from experts but also by studying their own constitution, every day, and observing what food, drink or exercise actually do them good. Because everyone is different, he thought that ideally we should become our own physicians, learning from experience what's healthy in our own case. Xenophon likewise believed that just as people who fail to exercise their bodies become physically weak, people who do not train their characters, through self-discipline, become morally weak. The Stoics agreed, and we'll find them placing great emphasis on moral and psychological training in philosophy.

Copyrighted material

The goal of life: ‘living in agreement with Nature’

So what did the Stoics actually believe? Well, that’s what this whole book is about. The ultimate goal of life was agreed by most schools of ancient philosophy to be Happiness or *eudaimonia*. We’ll explore the Stoic concept of Happiness in more detail in the following chapters. However, Zeno originally wrote:

‘Happiness is a smoothly flowing life’ (*euroia biou*), where the mind adapts to any circumstances befalling us. So how then did the Stoics believe we might *achieve* this smooth-flowing and Happy attitude toward life?

Zeno tried to express his philosophy in notoriously laconic statements and brief syllogistic arguments, which had to be elaborated by his followers. The *best-known* definition of the Stoic goal of life, which is attributed either to Zeno or to Chrysippus, was simply ‘living in agreement with Nature’, and several variations of this can be found in the Stoic literature. ‘Our motto, as everyone knows,’ wrote Seneca, ‘is to live in conformity with Nature’ (*Letters*, 5). Indeed, Zeno reputedly wrote a book entitled ‘On the life according to Nature’. So this became the central tenet of Stoicism, sometimes abbreviated to ‘Follow nature’. However, four centuries on from Zeno, we find the famous Stoic teacher Epictetus telling his students that although the chief Stoic doctrines were originally summed up in brief maxims, when we try to clarify their meaning it inevitably raises questions, such as ‘What is nature in the individual and nature in the universe?’, and so the explanation becomes more lengthy.

What, therefore, does it mean to ‘live in agreement with Nature’? Throughout this book we’ll be unravelling that cryptic slogan. However, to begin with, it’s worth explaining that the Stoics *also* reputedly said that the goal of life was ‘living in accord with virtue’, or human excellence. In other words, they believed that we’re all born with the responsibility of excelling by bringing our own nature to perfection. This means completing the job left unfinished by Nature herself by voluntarily making the best use of our highest faculty: *reason*. Crucially, for the Stoics, adult humans are essentially reasoning creatures and therefore ‘to the rational creature the same act is at once according to Nature and according to reason’ (*Meditations*, 7.11). So following Nature doesn’t mean acting like a ‘dumb animal’ but rather fulfilling our natural potential as *human*

Copyrighted material

animals. Indeed, Chrysippus reputedly said:

> So, where shall I start from? And what am I to take as the principle of appropriate action and the raw material for virtue if I give up nature and what is according to nature? (Quoted in Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions*, 1069e)

The Stoics therefore emphasized the need to contemplate what a perfect human being would be like, someone whose life is both honourable and benefits themselves and others. They envisaged this as someone who has attained complete practical wisdom and 'virtue'. By 'virtue' they actually meant 'excelling' or flourishing in terms of our rational human nature, rather than what we might think of as 'virtuous' behaviour today. As we'll see, the Stoics argued that human nature is essentially rational and social, and so wisdom and justice are the very pinnacles of human achievement.

The goal of every human life is for us to voluntarily make progress in that direction. So Stoicism is a philosophy that focuses on teaching us how to excel, how to become better human beings, and how to live a good life. It can therefore also seem a little bit like a religion, albeit based primarily on rationality rather than faith or tradition. People have sometimes compared it to Buddhism for that reason. Providing a Western equivalent, in some respects, for the kind of philosophical 'way of life' that's found in many Eastern religions, is part of Stoicism's appeal for many people today.

It follows from the premise that our essential nature is rational that the greatest virtue is wisdom and the greatest vice folly or ignorance. Humans have the gift of conscious knowledge, we're invited by Nature to be spectators and interpreters of the universe, and the Stoics believed our fundamental task in life must be to do that well, by excelling in terms of knowledge and understanding about the most important things in life. This can be summed up as attaining wisdom in the art of living, or 'prudence' for want of a better word. Indeed, the word 'philosophy' literally means 'love of wisdom' in Greek.

The goal of life is therefore the goal of philosophy: to love and attain wisdom, particularly with regard to the way we actually live our lives, so we could call it *moral* or *practical* wisdom. In fact, practical wisdom, knowledge concerning what is good and bad, was thought by the Stoics to be the basis of all other forms of

Copyrighted material

human excellence, which were typically subsumed under the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, courage and moderation. As we'll see, they believed the virtues are both practical skills and forms of knowledge, involving a firm grasp of what's good and bad in different situations. Indeed, for the Stoics the other virtues basically consist in practical wisdom applied to different aspects of life, such as our actions, feelings and desires.

Epictetus' school made the central theme of its whole philosophy the doctrine that we must distinguish very carefully between what is 'up to us', or within our power, and what is not. This is because the chief good in life is squarely located within the sphere of our control, in our own actions and judgements, and everything else is classed as fundamentally 'indifferent' with regard to living a good life.

The philosophical conclusion that the chief good, the most important thing in life, must necessarily be 'up to us' and under our direct control is at once the toughest and most appealing aspect of Stoicism. It makes us completely and utterly responsible for the single most important thing in life, depriving us of any excuses for not flourishing and attaining the best possible life, because this is always within our grasp. Recalling this fundamental *dichotomy* between what is 'up to us' and what is not has therefore been described as the Stoics' 'sovereign' practice. We'll be coming back to it repeatedly in the following chapters!

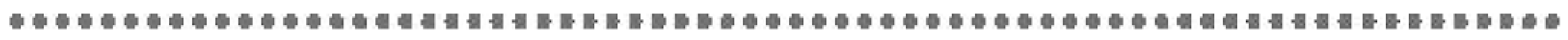
Key Idea: 'Living in agreement with Nature'

Stoicism defines the chief goal of life as 'living in agreement with Nature' or following Nature. The word for goal, *telos*, is sometimes translated as 'end' or 'purpose', and arguably comes close to what we call 'the meaning of life'. This didn't involve moving to the countryside or hugging trees, though! Following Chrysippus, the Stoic way of life was interpreted as being in harmony with nature at two levels. On the one hand, Stoics try to live according to their own *human* nature, as inherently rational and social creatures, by excelling in terms of wisdom, justice, and the virtues of self-mastery. The Stoics assumed that Nature is goal-directed and that our ability to reason suggests the possibility of its own completion or perfection, i.e., of attaining wisdom.

On the other hand, following Nature also means accepting our place as part of a whole, the nature of the *universe*, and welcoming our fate, insofar as it is beyond our control to change it. However, these two tasks are complementary because we require virtue to be able to rise

Copyrighted material

above adversity and welcome whatever life sends us. The ‘promise’ of Stoic philosophy is that by living in agreement with nature, or living virtuously and accepting our fate, we shall attain *eudaimonia*, complete personal fulfilment, wellbeing, and Happiness. We’ll return to what this meant in more detail later.

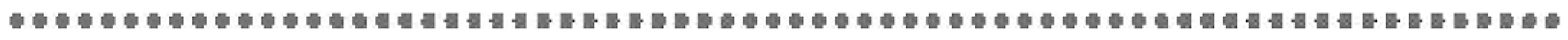


Try it now: Eat like a Stoic

Here’s a novel idea...try eating a more healthy diet for the next week. There is an important ‘Stoic’ twist, though. When you’re trying to stick to your plan, rather than motivating yourself by thinking about some desired outcome, such as losing weight or improving your health, etc., focus instead on the *inherent* value of developing self-discipline. Losing weight or improving your health isn’t guaranteed with any diet; it’s not directly under your control, but partly in the hands of fate. It’s also something that’s off in the future, a ‘hope’, a consequence of your actions rather than something happening ‘here and now’. By contrast, prudent self-discipline is good and praiseworthy in itself, whatever the long-term result.

You don’t need to imitate an ancient Stoic or Cynic diet, just challenge yourself to eat more healthily for a week or so, using your own common sense to guide you. For the record, though, the Stoics followed the advice of Socrates that we should ‘eat to live rather than live to eat’. In his lecture on food, Musonius Rufus argued that mastering one’s appetite is the very foundation of training in self-control. He says Stoics should drink only water and avoid gourmet meals, preferring vegetarian food that’s nourishing but cheap, convenient to obtain, and easy to prepare. For example, milk, cheese, honey and certain fruits and vegetables, etc. He says Stoics should eat slowly and with mindfulness, exercising moderation and self-control. For some modern readers just having still water for a week, instead of other drinks, might be a good initial challenge. Some people also might practise intermittent fasting.

Remember, the goal is to improve your self-discipline and related ‘virtues’ or character strengths, rather than to lose weight or gain physical health. If you’re exercising self-discipline, though, it makes sense to do it in a healthy manner. Stoics refer to physical health and fitness as something ‘preferred’ but ultimately irrelevant, or ‘indifferent’, in relation to the goal of life. Cultivating a healthy *character*, is infinitely more important to them than cultivating a healthy *body*. Nevertheless, we develop self-discipline precisely by trying to do healthy and appropriate things in the world, whether or not they turn out as we’d have preferred.



Copyrighted material

Remember this: Does human nature have a goal?

Some modern readers may struggle to accept the Stoic assumption that mankind has a natural goal. However, what sense does it make to complain of being injured unless we assume that there's some more-desirable state to be in? As Seneca puts it, 'What is in keeping with nature is blessed, in life, and it is apparent to our senses what is in keeping with nature, as it is whether something is damaged or not' (*Letters*, 124). However, when speaking of being 'harmed' the majority of us assume the goal that is jeopardized to be pleasure, self-preservation, or other external goods. For Stoics, these are 'indifferent', and true 'harm' only relates to our ruling faculty, our mind, which can be injured by descending into vice and nothing else. Try asking yourself: What does it really mean to be harmed?

The twofold goal of life

Stoic wisdom consists primarily in knowing good from bad, and that means knowing what is under our control and what is not. The inscription 'Know Thyself' from the Delphic Oracle of Apollo, which inspired Socrates, was therefore interpreted by the Stoics as an injunction to continuously monitor and examine their own souls. We truly 'know ourselves' when we separate what is *uniquely* human from what is external to us or shared with other animals. Self-knowledge means distinguishing what is under our control from what is not. To contemplate and understand our own existence is an ongoing effort, according to the Stoics, requiring a form of 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness is a concept often associated with Buddhist meditation, but which has clear precedents in ancient Graeco-Roman philosophy. As well as being a philosophical contemplation concerning the very nature of human existence itself, mindfulness of this distinction between what is up to us and what is not is one of the main remedies for emotional suffering. It is neatly expressed in the 'Serenity Prayer', a well-known early 20th-century formula, used by Alcoholics Anonymous and many modern therapists (Pietsch, 1990):

> God, give me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, The Courage to change the things I can, And the Wisdom to know the difference.

This is often interpreted simply to mean that we should distinguish between

Copyrighted material

some situations or aspects of the external world that we can change, and others that we cannot. For the Stoics, however, wisdom consists in realizing that the *only* thing we completely control, by definition, are our own volitions, or our *voluntary* judgements and actions.

Chrysippus was apparently the first Stoic to explicitly say that the goal of life should be understood as a *twofold* task: 'taken as living in accordance both with one's own nature and with the Nature of the whole' (*Lives*, 7.88). This subdivision can be seen to run throughout most of the surviving Stoic literature, right down to the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (6.58; 12.11):

1. **One's internal nature**: Nobody can prevent you from living according to your own internal nature, as a rational being, i.e., wisely and virtuously.
2. **Nature of the world**: Nothing can befall you externally that is contrary to the universal laws of Nature, which the wise man accepts piously as determined by fate or, in theological language, as the will of Zeus.

In the late Roman Stoicism of Epictetus, this appears to turn into the fundamental distinction mentioned earlier, between what is 'up to us', or under our control, and what is not. However, the Stoics also seem at times to turn this into a threefold division, by further distinguishing between the laws of Nature and the actions of other human beings, among external events. So we can think of 'living in agreement with Nature' as living harmoniously across *three* important dimensions of life:

1. **Self**: Harmony with our own essential nature, with ourselves as rational beings, which requires perfecting reason and virtue and fulfilling our nature.
2. **World**: Harmony with Nature as a whole, which means accepting our fate, insofar as it's beyond our control, as if we'd willed it to happen, rather than complaining and struggling futilely against events.
3. **Mankind**: Social harmony or 'concord' with other people, viewing all rational beings as our kin, and extending our natural affection for others into a heartfelt 'philanthropic' attitude towards the rest of mankind.

It's tempting to see this as connected somehow with the other threefold divisions found in Stoicism, to which we now turn, e.g., linking harmony with our inner self, with the world, and with the rest of mankind to Stoic Logic,

Copyrighted material

Physics and Ethics respectively.

Key idea: Stoicism as a perennial philosophy

The French scholar Pierre Hadot concluded from his detailed scholarly analysis of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius that Stoicism gave clear expression to a 'universal' and 'perennial' philosophical attitude, which crops up in different guises throughout history and around the world (Hadot, 1998, pp. 311–312). Like many other people, he notes similarities between Stoicism and some Oriental philosophies. On this view, the Stoic tradition founded by Zeno and continuing right through to Marcus Aurelius, constitutes just one of a handful of archetypal philosophical attitudes that we find in human history. Hadot sums up four key attitudes at the heart of this generic Stoic-like 'perennial philosophy', which he calls 'eternal Stoicism':

1. The spiritual awareness that humans are not fragmentary, isolated beings but are essentially parts of a bigger whole, both of the totality of all mankind and the totality of the cosmos itself.
2. The basic feeling of serenity, freedom, and invulnerability that comes from accepting that there is no evil but moral evil, and that the only thing that matters in life is moral integrity or what the Stoics call 'honour' and 'virtue'.
3. Belief in the absolute value of the human person, which Hadot illustrates with Seneca's saying 'man is a sacred thing for man' – a sense of kinship with all mankind which makes the wellbeing of humanity the chief preferred outcome of all moral action.
4. The psychological and philosophical exercise of 'concentration on the present instant', which involves living as if we were seeing the world for the first and last time, while being aware that, for the wise man, each instant intimately connects us to the totality of space and time.

Most people are drawn to Stoic philosophy without having had a chance to wrestle with the complexities of the vast philosophical system and literature associated with it. Rather, they find something in a few fragmentary Stoic quotations that resonates with them because they sense it expresses a more basic underlying set of philosophical attitudes, one of several *perennial* human philosophies.

The three theoretical topics of Stoicism

As mentioned earlier, the whole of Stoic philosophy was divided into three 'topics' (*topoi*), referred to as 'Physics', 'Ethics' and 'Logic'. This division was reputedly introduced by Zeno himself in a book called *Exposition of Doctrine*. As is

Copyrighted material

often the case, it's worth knowing the traditional translations, because you'll come across these in books on Stoicism. However, it needs to be said that they're slightly misleading terms.

1. **Physics** (*phusikê*) is sometimes called 'natural philosophy', but is mainly concerned with what we would call metaphysics and theology as well as ancient natural science; the Stoics were pantheists and determinists, for whom 'Nature' as a whole, 'Fate' and 'Zeus', or 'God', were synonymous. This aspect of Stoicism was influenced by Heraclitus, and perhaps other pre-Socratic philosophers of Nature in what's known as the 'Ionian' tradition.

2. **Ethics** (*êthikê*) is the study of the nature of the good, virtue and the goal of life (and to some extent politics) but also encompasses the study of emotional disturbance (irrational 'passions') and the improvement of human character (*êthos*) in a way that resembles modern self-help and psychological therapy. This part of Stoic philosophy is probably most influenced by the ethical views of Socrates and the Cynics.

3. **Logic** (*logikê*) is the study of definitions and rules, dialectic (philosophical debate) and formal syllogistic logic, an area where the Stoics, particularly Chrysippus excelled; it also encompassed Stoic rhetoric, which encouraged the use of concise and objective language; and in some respects it encompasses aspects of what we would now call psychology or theory of knowledge ('epistemology'). Stoic Logic was probably influenced by Zeno's time spent studying with two ancient Socratic schools known as the Megarians and Dialecticians, about which we know little today.

According to an early Stoic metaphor, philosophy is like an orchard or garden. Logic is the orchard wall, that protects everything growing within and makes it secure; Physics corresponds to the fertile soil and trees themselves, the natural source of the fruits that eventually grow and ripen in the orchard, which correspond to Ethics, and probably symbolize human virtue. However, these three topics were somewhat intertwined. Different Stoics disagreed about the correct order for them to be taught in and probably also differed about their relative importance. As we noted earlier, the late Roman Stoics, about whom we know the most, seem to be particularly concerned with Ethics.

Copyrighted material

Remember this: Stoicism versus eclecticism

Many modern students of Stoicism are probably attracted to some aspects of it more than others and they may even neglect doctrines that Zeno and his followers would have considered essential. However, many ancient philosophers, both Stoics and non-Stoics, were also quite eclectic in their approach so this is nothing new. Cicero was just one such example of an ancient philosopher who took Stoicism very seriously but didn't agree with all aspects of it, preferring to align himself with the Platonic Academy instead.

In the same way, today's readers will probably be divided into two groups: people who believe in the central ethical principles of Stoicism and are much more committed to it as a whole, and people who more closely resemble Platonists, Aristotelians or even Epicureans, and simply want to assimilate a few selected aspects of Stoic theory and practice. However, there are bound to be elements of Stoicism, particularly parts of Stoic Physics and theology (such as worshipping Zeus!) that might seem quite odd within the context of modern society, and which few people would accept today.

Try it now: Exercise like a Stoic

One of the famous slogans of Epictetus was 'endure and renounce'. You've seen how renouncing unhealthy, or unnecessary, food and drink can be used as a way to practise developing the virtue of self-discipline, or 'moderation' in our diet. Endurance is linked to the virtue of 'courage' and can be developed to some extent simply by learning to tolerate ordinary discomfort or fatigue, of the kind experienced during physical exercise. Musonius says that as we have minds *and* bodies, we should exercise both, although always paying most attention to our mind. 'We will train both mind and body when we accustom ourselves to cold, heat, thirst, hunger, scarcity of food, hardness of bed, abstaining from pleasures, and enduring pains' (*Lectures*, 9).

You don't need to strip naked and hug ice-cold statues in winter to develop endurance, like the Cynics reputedly did. Running, vigorous walking, or yoga stretches are simple forms of exercise, which can challenge us to push our tolerance of physical effort.

As we've seen, Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, was renowned for his physical endurance. Rather than sitting down idly to lecture, as he talked he would pace vigorously up and down the porch where his school gathered. Cleanthes, the second head of the Stoa, was originally a boxer; Chrysippus, the third head, was a long-distance runner. The founders of the Stoa, in

Copyrighted material

other words, were quite keen on physical exercise. However, as with their views on diet, there's a subtle 'Stoic' twist. Whereas people today often abstain from certain foods because they want to lose weight, or take exercise to improve their health or physical appearance, the Stoics would see these outcomes as 'preferred' but ultimately 'indifferent' things. Their real reason for renouncing certain foods or enduring tough physical exercise would be to strengthen the virtues of 'self-discipline' and 'courage', or endurance, as an end in itself.

The three lived disciplines

Epictetus, the most influential Stoic teacher of the Roman Imperial period, also described a threefold distinction between practical areas of Stoic training, which Marcus Aurelius quotes and applies systematically in his *Meditations*. Pierre Hadot has argued, based on a careful scholarly analysis of the texts, that he meant these to be understood as aspects of the three Stoic theoretical topics described above, insofar as they are applied to the art of living (Hadot, 1998, pp. 73–100). These practical disciplines came to describe three ways in which the Stoic aims to live a coherent and unified life, in harmony with himself, mankind, and the whole of Nature.

1. **The Discipline of Desire** (*orexis*) **and Aversion** (*ekklisis*), i.e., of the 'passions', requires us to have desire for and attain the good, to have aversion towards and avoid the bad, and to view other things with indifference. The good is defined solely in terms of what is under one's control, one's volitions or actions, making wisdom and virtue the only true good. Hadot argued that this was the applied form of Stoic Physics, living in harmony with the Nature of the universe and what is determined by fate. This may be particularly linked with the virtues of *courage* and *self-discipline*, which relate primarily to self-control regarding irrational or unhealthy desire (craving) and aversion (fear), and to the alleviation of emotional suffering through the Stoic therapy of the passions. Epictetus' famous slogan "endure and renounce" appears to be especially related to this discipline.

2. **The Discipline of Action** (*hormê*) requires us to act in accord with our duties or 'appropriate actions' (*kathêkonta*), to do the right thing in terms of our relationships, in the service of mankind, with the addition of the Stoic 'reserve clause', a caveat such as 'fate permitting'. Hadot concludes that this is the applied form of Stoic Ethics, and it relates to living philanthropically and in harmony with the community of mankind. It appears most linked to the

Copyrighted material

virtue of *justice*, which includes fairness and benevolence to others.

3 **The Discipline of Assent** (*sunkatathesis*) requires us to spot and evaluate our initial impressions, separating our judgements of 'good' and 'bad', and only giving assent to objective representations of reality. Hadot concludes that this is the applied form of Stoic Logic and entails living in accord with our own rational nature. It may be linked to the Stoic virtue of *wisdom*, which is the perfection of reasoning, and this discipline is important because it helps protect the other two.

Put crudely, we might say these deal with our 'feelings', 'actions' and 'thoughts' – the three main areas of our conscious experience that we can learn to achieve some voluntarily control over. Epictetus says that of these three, the first, the Discipline of Desire, is the one students should most urgently address because irrational, excessive or unhealthy 'passions' are simply incompatible with the good life and can prevent us genuinely benefiting from the study of Ethics or Logic.

We might also describe the first stage of Stoic training, therefore, as the discipline of fear and desire, through practice in self-mastery. As it happens, this is how we're told Zeno began his own philosophical career, becoming a follower of Crates, who taught him to endure hardship and renounce desire for conventional goods, by adopting the Cynic way of life. It was only later that he began to study Physics and Logic in depth by attending other schools of Athenian philosophy.

Key idea: The three Stoic disciplines of Epictetus

As far as we know, Epictetus was the first Stoic to distinguish between the three disciplines of 'desire and aversion', 'action', and 'assent.' Marcus Aurelius and presumably other followers of Epictetus' school adopted the same tripartite distinction. After a detailed textual and philosophical analysis, the French scholar Pierre Hadot (1998) concluded that these were groups of practical exercises meant to correspond with the Stoic theoretical topics of Physics, Ethics and Logic, respectively.

Other scholars, such as A.A. Long, a leading expert on Epictetus, broadly agree with this interpretation (Long, 2002, p. 117). Hadot also tentatively suggested that they may correspond with the cardinal virtues and with 'living in agreement with Nature' at three

Copyrighted material

different levels. The three 'topics' of Stoicism, and particularly these three disciplines, provide the structure around which the rest of this book is based. Although focusing more on Stoic Ethics than their Physics and Logic, we will draw on some elements of those theoretical topics in discussing the corresponding disciplines and psychological exercises found in Stoic literature.

Remember this: Stoicism was not 'unemotional'

It's a common misconception that Stoics were into repressing emotions. That's arguably just due to problems of translation and interpretation. The 'passions' they talk about overcoming were specifically defined as irrational, excessive and unnatural (or unhealthy) forms of fear and desire, and the consequent feelings of pain (meaning emotional suffering) and pleasure (in the superficial 'hedonistic' sense). Marcus Aurelius' remark about being 'free from passions and yet full of love', or 'natural affection', sums up the Stoic ideal nicely (*Meditations*, 1.9). The early Stoics made it clear that their goal was not to be cold-hearted like a stone or statue and their ideal community was founded on mutual love and friendship. 'Love' and 'natural affection', as we'll see, were very highly valued by the Stoics, as were a variety of rational, moderate, 'healthy passions' (*eupatheiai*), comprised mainly of rational joy, feelings of discretion, and well-wishing or affection towards others. The Stoics used reason and psychological exercises to overcome unhealthy desires and emotions, making way for healthy ones instead.

Focus Points

The main points to remember from this chapter are:

- ✻ Stoicism has a long history, over 500 years, but its central doctrine remained constant, 'living in agreement with Nature'.
- ✻ Living in agreement with Nature means acting with virtue, insofar as that's under your control, while accepting external events, outside of your control, and viewing them as part of the whole.
- ✻ Stoic teaching was divided into three theoretical topics that correspond with three practical disciplines, which we shall be exploring throughout the rest of this book.

Copyrighted material

> The principal task in life is this: distinguish matters and weigh them one against another, and say to yourself, 'Externals are not under my control; volition is under my control. Where am I to look for the good and the evil? Within me, in that which is my own.' But in that which is another's never employ the words 'good' or 'evil', or 'help' or 'harm', or anything of the sort. (Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.5)

> For I go around doing nothing but persuading young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: 'Wealth does not bring about virtue, but virtue makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively.' (Socrates in Plato's *Apology*, 30a-b)

Self-assessment: Stoic attitudes towards Ethics

Before reading this chapter, rate how strongly you agree with the following statements, using the five-point (1–5) scale below, and then re-rate your attitudes once you've read and digested the contents.

1. Strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neither agree nor disagree, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly agree

1 'Practical wisdom consists in knowing what it means for something to be good, bad or 'indifferent' when it comes to attaining Happiness and fulfilment.'

2 'Whatever is external to my will is 'indifferent' with regard to my ultimate Happiness.'

3 'Although they're ultimately unimportant, it's nevertheless natural and rational to 'prefer' some external things over others'.

What's important about Stoic Ethics?

What is the ultimate source of human Happiness and fulfilment? What do Stoics mean when they say that someone is a good or bad person? What do they mean by saying that external and bodily 'goods' are merely *indifferent* to them? How do they reconcile the need to live in the world, handling property and interacting with other people, with their stringent view that virtue is the only true good? These are the sort of questions addressed in this chapter on ancient Stoic Ethics, which will pave the way for further discussion of Epictetus' three *practical*

Copyrighted material

disciplines.

So what did the Stoics actually mean by 'Ethics'? We'll need to examine the significance of some Greek words to answer that question. First of all, the word 'ethics' (*êthikê*) carried very different connotations for ancient philosophers. It alludes to the development of one's character (*êthos*) and therefore overlaps with modern approaches to self-improvement and psychological therapy. The Stoics saw their Ethics as comparable to athletic or military training and also as resembling a branch of medicine, one treating the mind rather than the body, which they actually called a psychological 'therapy' (*therapeia*).

In this chapter, we'll focus on the question Epictetus told his students they should ask themselves first: 'Where is the nature of good and evil to be found?' (*Discourses*, 2.2). Indeed, when ancient authors compared Stoicism to other philosophical schools they typically focused on their uniquely uncompromising Ethical doctrines, rather than their Physics or Logic.

Cicero calls this the 'core' doctrine of Stoic philosophy: *virtue is the only true good*. The fundamental goal of mankind was therefore defined by the Stoics as 'living in accord with virtue', synonymous with living according to Nature, or living wisely, as a 'philosopher' or *lover of wisdom*.

The Stoics believed that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for living a good life and attaining *eudaimonia*, regardless of external misfortune or physical hardship. As Cicero wrote:

> The belief of the Stoics on this subject is simple. The supreme good, according to them, is to live according to nature, and in harmony with nature. That, they declare is the wise man's duty; and it is also something that lies within his own capacity to achieve. From this follows the deduction that the man who has the supreme good within his power also possesses the power to live Happily. Consequently, the wise man's life is Happy. (*Tusculan Disputations*, 5.28)

We might express the Stoic view by saying that being a good *person* is all it takes to have a good *life*, and therefore to be Happy and fulfilled, whatever our external fortune. The life of an enlightened Sage *lacks* nothing of intrinsic importance, even if he is deprived of health, wealth and reputation. The supposedly opulent and hedonistic life of the Great King of Persia is no better,

Copyrighted material

and in fact is much worse, according to the Stoics, than the life of poverty chosen by their hero Diogenes the Cynic, who slept rough and owned nothing but a cheap cloak and what little food he could fit in his knapsack. Moreover, Diogenes' life would not ultimately have been made any 'better' if fortune had granted him greater wealth and status. Scholars have therefore said that 'the bastion of Stoic ethics is the thesis that virtue and vice respectively are the sole constituents of happiness and unhappiness' (Long & Sedley, 1987, p. 357).

However, these radical opinions are worthless unless they transform our lives. Epictetus, in his typically blunt style, warns his students not to be satisfied with learning about the nature of the good as a set of abstract ideas but that we must vigorously apply them to specific situations and train ourselves systematically in doing so, because we have all had years of practice thinking and doing the opposite. We have to digest these ideas and allow them to permeate our lives, which the Stoics compare to sheep eating grass and using the nutrients to grow wool. Otherwise we're not true philosophers: we're just commentators on other people's opinions. Any idiot can give a discourse like this, Epictetus says, in the process giving us a convenient summary of Stoic Ethics:

> Of things that are, some are good, and some are bad, and some are indifferent: the good then are virtues, and the things which participate in virtues; and evil things the opposite; and the indifferent things are wealth, health, reputation. (*Discourses*, 2.9)

However, he adds, suppose that in the middle of this lecture on the good, right now, there's a sudden and frightening loud noise or some of the audience begin to laugh and ridicule us. We get upset because our philosophy comes from our lips only, and not from the very core of our being. For that reason, the Stoics stress the need for daily training in philosophy as a way of life, using exercises of the kind described throughout this book.

Case study: Jules Evans and modern Stoicism

Jules is an author and researcher involved with the 'Stoic Week' project. In an article called 'How Ancient Philosophy Saved My Life', published on his blog and in *The Times* newspaper (8 May 2012), he describes the 'breakdown' that led him to seek help from Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Stoic philosophy. While studying literature at university,

Copyrighted material

Jules experienced worsening panic attacks, depression and anxiety. By attending a CBT-based self-help group, he was able to overcome his panic attacks and to better manage his emotional problems.

Inspired by his success, he travelled to New York, as a trainee journalist, to interview Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), the main precursor of modern CBT. Jules did the last ever interview with Ellis before he died. Ellis told him about how he'd been directly influenced by ancient Greek philosophy in his pioneering work as a psychotherapist in the 1950s. He'd been particularly taken by the famous quotation from Epictetus' *Handbook*: 'Men are disturbed not by events but by their opinions about them.' This became the central philosophical inspiration for REBT and most subsequent forms of CBT.

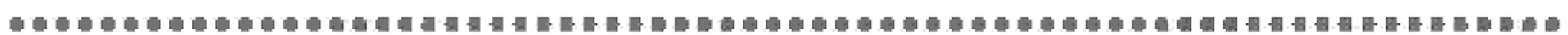
As Jules points out, almost all schools of ancient Graeco-Roman philosophy shared a 'cognitive' approach to the emotions. This interprets emotional distress as being largely due to our individual beliefs and patterns of thinking, which are changeable through philosophical reflection and diligent training in related psychological exercises. Ancient philosophy, in other words, was *inherently* a form of psychological therapy.

Jules concluded that his own emotional problems came, to some extent, from his personal values – putting too much emphasis on winning others' approval, etc. One of the lessons he took from ancient Socratic philosophy was that 'we can take back possession of ourselves, by choosing intrinsic values like wisdom rather than extrinsic ones like status or power.' For the Stoics, the *only* thing of any ultimate importance in life is virtue, particularly wisdom, and 'extrinsic' things are of absolutely secondary value, because they are inherently unimportant when it comes to attaining Happiness and freedom from emotional suffering.

As a blogger and in his book, *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations* (Evans, 2012), Jules has written extensively about the relevance of ancient philosophy for modern living, particularly as a means of improving emotional resilience and personal wellbeing. He sums up three of the lessons he derives from Stoicism and other branches of Hellenistic philosophy as follows:

1. Focus on what you can control, and accept what you can't.
2. Choose your role models wisely, a lesson he takes from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives.*
3. Keep track of your thoughts and behaviour by, for example, monitoring them in a personal therapy journal.

He writes: 'Socrates showed us that we all have the power to heal ourselves and change our characters, at any stage of our lives; we might not become perfect sages like him, but I believe we can all become a little wiser and happier.'



Copyrighted material

Key idea: ‘Practical wisdom’ and ‘virtue’

The Stoics believed that humans are inherently *rational* animals, perhaps uniquely so apart from the god Zeus. So they defined the intrinsic goal of human nature as the perfection of reason, referred to as ‘wisdom’ (*sophia*), or more specifically *phronêsis*, which means ‘prudence’, ‘moral wisdom’ or ‘practical wisdom’. The ideal human being, someone both perfectly good and rational, is called the ‘Sage’ or ‘wise man’ (*sophos*). Those who aspire to become Sages are therefore called ‘philosophers’, lovers of wisdom, as we've seen.

Practical wisdom is the essence of all virtue, according to the Stoics. This consists of knowledge, about the nature of the ‘good’, applied to different aspects of living – so all the virtues are essentially one. As we’ve noted, the Greek term *aretê* is notoriously tricky to translate. It’s usually rendered as ‘virtue’ but it really refers to excelling in terms of one’s natural function or essential character, in a manner that’s both healthy and praiseworthy. A strong and fast horse has *aretê*, for example, although we wouldn’t call it ‘virtuous’ in English.

Likewise, the Greek word *kakia*, translated as ‘vice’, means something more like the ‘badness’ or ‘wretchedness’ of a feeble and sickly horse. As humans are naturally rational and social creatures, our two most important virtues are *wisdom* and *justice*, the perfection of reason and of our relationship with others. The remaining cardinal virtues of ‘courage’ and ‘self-discipline’ are necessary to overcome the irrational fears and desires (‘passions’) that would otherwise interfere with living wisely.

Practical wisdom or virtue therefore consists largely in making accurate value judgements. Most importantly, this means judging virtue itself to be ‘good’, and bodily and external things to be ‘indifferent’. Later Stoics also defined prudence as ‘reasoning well in the selection and rejection of things in accordance with nature’. This probably alludes to selecting *between* ‘indifferent’ things on the basis of their natural value (*axia*), and knowing which ones to ‘prefer’ over others, a more ‘worldly’ aspect of wisdom.

By contrast, according to legend, Pyrrho of Elis, the founder of Greek Skepticism,

Copyrighted material

something more like 'excelling' in terms of one's natural function in life. Humans are inherently both rational and social beings, whose natural goal is therefore to perfect their capacity for wisdom and justice. For Stoics, this is the goal of life handed to us by Nature herself, and the commandment of Zeus, the father of mankind: to bring his unfinished work to perfection.

'Cato' therefore also describes the good for man as 'ripeness' or 'timeliness' (*eukairia*), a surprising but perhaps revealing Stoic technical term. Virtue, like ripeness, does not increase in value over time, because it is found in our nature having achieved its end, and reached perfection. 'That is why, for the Stoics, a happy life is no more desirable or worth seeking if long than if short' (*De Finibus*, 3.46). To have attained *eudaimonia* by excelling in accord with our essential nature, perfecting reason and achieving wisdom, is to flourish and ripen naturally like a fruit.

This is an important Stoic doctrine because it means that prolonging one's life will not necessarily add to virtue, and so death is indifferent with regard to the highest good. In response to those who argue that preserving one's life is good because it allows wisdom to be exercised for a longer period, Cato is portrayed as objecting quite bluntly but somewhat cryptically: 'This argument fails to grasp that while the value of good health is judged by its duration, the value of virtue is judged by its ripeness.' This is another Stoic bombshell; one we'll return to in the chapter on death.

The early Stoics refer to *many* additional qualities possessed by the nature of 'the good', which Diogenes Laertius and Stobaeus both summarized in fairly similar ways. For instance: 'All good things are beneficial and well-used and advantageous and profitable and virtuous and fitting and honourable; there is an affinity to them' (*Stobaeus*, 2.5d). The Stoics appear to have maintained that these characteristics of the good are preconceptions shared, on reflection, by all mankind, which Nature has created in us free from any contradiction.

> For which of us does not take it that a good thing is advantageous and worthy of being chosen, and something we should seek and pursue in every circumstance? Which of us does not take it that justice is something honourable and fitting? (*Discourses*, 1.22)

We likewise share the basic preconception of 'evil' that it is something 'harmful,

Copyrighted material

to be avoided, something to get rid of in every way' (*Discourses*, 4.1). Epictetus says that conflict arises between us, nevertheless when we try to apply abstract preconceptions to real situations, such as judging whether specific actions are good and just or whether they are not. However, perhaps the two most important qualities of the good are that it is inherently:

- **Beneficial** or helpful (*ôphelimos, from which the Shakespearean name 'Ophelia' derives*), rather than harmful or injurious, 'because [by itself] it is such as to benefit' us in terms of Happiness (*eudaimonia*), being *inherently* good and healthy as a state of mind in its own right – the 'good' is its own reward, the *only* truly beneficial thing for man and its absence, or its opposite, is the only true harm.
- **Honourable** and beautiful (*kalos*), because it is intrinsically praiseworthy, perfectly harmonious and consistent with itself, 'has all the features sought by Nature', and is sufficient in itself to perfect life and bring it to completion.

When the Stoics speak of virtue as 'honourable', they basically mean that it is admirable and deserves to be unconditionally praised in *other* people. Therefore wise men also pride *themselves* in possessing it. By saying that it's 'beneficial' they mean that, crucially, *virtue is its own reward*. It is itself the very perfection of human nature, and the greatest form of wellbeing we can aspire to, although it also tends to bring many other advantages in life, fate permitting.

Being 'honourable' and 'beneficial' are undoubtedly two of the most important characteristics of the good as defined by the Stoics. In this way, Stoic Ethics equates the 'moral' and 'therapeutic' value of practical wisdom and other virtues. What is 'morally good', or honourable, is identical with what is 'good for us' or healthy. In addition to these qualities above, Epictetus in particular, a former slave himself, refers to wisdom and virtue as 'freedom', in the sense of being a free man but also free from irrational fears and desires. So badness or vice is likewise described as being a 'slave', in the sense of being enslaved by our passions and by excessive attachment to external things.

Key idea: The Stoic definition of the chief good

Most schools of ancient philosophy agreed that the chief good in life is *eudaimonia*, which

Copyrighted material

I've translated 'Happiness' or 'fulfilment'. This meant living a supremely good life, lacking nothing, and being free from anything bad. However, they disagreed over the precise definition of *eudaimonia* and the best way to attain it. The Stoics were unique in arguing that being a good *person* is completely sufficient to live the good *life*, and attain *eudaimonia*.

Stoics believe that, on reflection, we all share the natural preconception that what is absolutely 'good' in human life must be both 'beneficial' for us or healthy and inherently 'honourable' or praiseworthy. Most ancient philosophers agreed that what is 'good' is beneficial. Yet the Stoics also defined the good as the honourable. Only the good and honourable person is truly beautiful because true beauty resides in our character.

In addition, the Stoics argue that we all naturally assume our supreme good in life is 'desirable', and are bound to seek it out when we truly grasp its nature. However, the majority of people mistakenly judge external things to be 'good' and therefore experience feelings of desire for things beyond their control, leading to frustration and suffering.

Practical wisdom or virtue, excelling in terms of human nature, is identified as the only truly unconditional 'good' and the key to *eudaimonia* by the Stoics because it meets these criteria of being *intrinsically* beneficial, honourable, beautiful, desirable, praiseworthy, etc. Virtue in this sense is understood to consist of practical skill and moral wisdom, a quality of our conscious mind (*hêgemonikon*), or more specifically of our voluntary thoughts and decisions (*prohairesis*).

Our external actions can also be called 'good' insofar as they embody virtue. Other people, although strictly-speaking only Zeus and the ideal Sage, are also called 'good' insofar as they possess virtue. Only our own virtue is good for us, and the virtues or vices of other people are technically 'indifferent' regarding our own good – their business not ours. However, the wellbeing and virtue of those we love is naturally to be valued. Indeed, the virtue of 'justice' consists in willing others to also flourish and attain good lives, with the caveat: 'fate permitting'. According to the Stoics, 'natural affection' towards others therefore forms an integral part of our own supreme Happiness and fulfilment in life, and our self-interest is synonymous with altruism or a *qualified* interest in the welfare of others, as we'll see.

Remember this: Syllogism showing the good is virtue

Cicero describes a common Stoic syllogism, or 'sorites' argument, derived from Zeno, which heaped one premise upon another to arrive at the conclusion that the good, for man, is essentially synonymous with virtue. It probably functioned as a brief *aide-mémoire*, a summary of more complex lines of philosophical reasoning, to be kept ready-to-hand for challenging situations:

Copyrighted material

Published in Great Britain in 2018 by John Murray Learning
An Hachette UK company

Copyright © Donald Robertson 2018

The right of Donald Robertson to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781473674790

John Murray Learning
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

Copyrighted material