The Pocket Stoic

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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637

Published 2020
Printed in the United States of America

29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-68296-9 (cloth)
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-68301-0 (e-book)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226683010.001.0001

First published by Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Random House UK, 2019.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sellars, John, 1971– author.
Title: The pocket stoic / John Sellars.
Description: Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019018460 | ISBN 9780226682969 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780226683010 (e-book)
Subjects: LCSH: Stoics. | Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, approximately 4 B.C.–65 A.D. | Epictetus. | Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome, 121–180. | Philosophy, Ancient.
Classification: LCC B528 .S2978 2019 | DDC 188 – dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019018460

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

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Prologue

WHAT IF SOMEONE told you that much of the suffering in your life was simply due to the way you think about things? I don't mean physical suffering like pain or hunger, but all the other things that can negatively colour one's life: anxiety, frustration, fear, disappointment, anger, general discontent. What if someone claimed that they could show you how to avoid all of this? And what if they said that these things were in fact the product of looking at the world in a mistaken way? What if it turned out that the ability

to avoid all of these things was completely within your control?

These are all claims that we find in the works of the three great Roman Stoics – Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius – who lived in the first and second centuries AD. Seneca is remembered for his role as tutor to the Emperor Nero, Epictetus was a slave who gained his freedom and went on to set up a philosophical school, while Marcus Aurelius was Emperor of Rome. Their lives could not have been more different, and yet they all embraced Stoicism as a guide to how to live well.

By the time our three Roman Stoics were writing, Stoicism was already hundreds of years old. It all began in Athens. The founder of the school was called Zeno, originally from Cyprus. He was the son of a merchant who, on one account, visited Athens shortly before 300 BC to conduct business for his father. While there, he came into contact with philosophers in the city, and soon began

studying with masters from a number of competing schools. Rather than committing himself to any one of these philosophies, he decided to become a teacher in his own right and started to lecture at the Painted Stoa – a covered colonnade – in the centre of Athens. He quickly gathered a number of followers, who soon came to be known as Stoics – the people who gathered at the Painted Stoa. The Stoic school developed under Zeno's successors Cleanthes and Chrysippus, both of whom came to Athens from Asia Minor. Subsequent Stoics came from ever further east, such as Diogenes of Babylon. None of the works of these early Stoics survived past the end of antiquity, never making the transition from ancient papyrus scrolls to medieval parchment manuscripts, and what we know of their thought is based on quotations and summaries by later authors.

For our three Roman Stoics, by contrast, we have substantial literary remains. In the case of Seneca, we have essays on a range

of philosophical topics, a set of letters to his friend Lucilius, and a number of tragedies. For Epictetus we have a series of discourses written by his pupil Arrian that purport to record lectures from his school, along with a short handbook that digests some key themes from those discourses. With Marcus Aurelius we have something quite different: private notebook jottings that record his attempts to grapple with some of the central ideas in Stoicism and to put them into practice in his own life.

The works of these three Roman Stoics have inspired readers ever since, speaking as they do to some of the day-to-day issues that face anyone trying to navigate their way through life. Their works, fundamentally, are about how to live – how to understand one's place in the world, how to cope when things don't go well, how to manage one's emotions, how to behave towards others, how to live a good life worthy of a rational human being. In the chapters that follow we'll explore

some of these themes further. We'll begin by considering what the Stoics thought their philosophy could offer, namely a therapy for the mind. We'll explore what we can and cannot control, and how the way we think about things can generate sometimes harmful emotions. We'll then think about our relationship with the outside world and our place within it. And we'll conclude by focusing on our relationships with other people, which contribute so much to both the joys and the stresses of daily life. As we shall see, the popular image of the isolated and unfeeling stoic hardly does justice to the rich vein of thought that we find in our three Roman Stoics. Their works have been perennial classics, and for good reason. Their popularity remains undiminished today, with new generations finding helpful lessons in the works of these Stoics.

TOWARDS THE END of the first century AD a former slave, originally from Asia Minor, whose real name we don't even know, set up a philosophy school in a new town on the western coast of Greece. He'd gone there not entirely through his own choice, having been banished from Rome – along with all the other philosophers – by the Emperor Domitian, who saw such intellectuals as a potential threat to his rule. The town was called Nicopolis, founded about a century earlier by Augustus, and the ex-slave was

known by the name of Epictetus, which in Greek simply means 'acquired'. During the years of its operation, Epictetus's school attracted many students and eminent visitors, not least the Emperor Hadrian, who was far more favourably disposed towards philosophers than some of his predecessors had been. Epictetus himself wrote nothing, but one of his pupils – a young man named Arrian who would go on to become an important historian in his own right – took notes of the conversations in the school and later worked them up into the *Discourses of Epictetus*. In the *Discourses*, Epictetus is quite clear about what his role is as a philosopher. The philosopher, he says, is a doctor, and the philosopher's school is a hospital – a hospital for souls.

When Epictetus defined philosophy in this way he was following a well-established Greek philosophical tradition that extended back at least to Socrates. In Plato's early dialogues, Socrates had argued that the task

of the philosopher is to take care of one's soul, just as a physician takes care of one's body. By 'soul' we ought not to assume anything immaterial, immortal or supernatural. Instead in this context we should understand it simply as mind, thoughts and beliefs. The task of the philosopher is to analyse and assess the things one thinks, examining their coherence and cogency. On this almost all philosophers, ancient or modern, would agree.

For Socrates, and later the Stoics, this concern with taking care of one's soul was all the more important because he and they held that the condition of our soul ultimately determines the quality of our lives. Socrates famously chastized his fellow Athenians for paying great attention to their bodies and their possessions but very little attention to their souls – to what they think or believe, to their values and characters. Yet Socrates insisted that the key to a good, happy life lies in attending to the latter, not the former.

In an important argument later taken up by the Stoics, Socrates sought to show that something like great wealth is, in a sense, worthless. To be more precise, he argued that material wealth is value-neutral, because it can be used for good or bad ends. The money in itself is neither good nor bad. Whether it is used for good or bad ends depends upon the character of the person who has it. A virtuous person can use money to do good things, while a not so virtuous individual might use it to generate great harm.

What does this tell us? It shows that the real value – the source of what is good or bad – resides in the *character* of the person who has the money, not in the money itself. It also tells us that paying excessive attention to our money and possessions while neglecting the state of our character is a grave mistake. It is the job of the philosopher to provoke us to see this, and then to support us as we try to cure our souls of whatever infirmities they may have.

One response to this line of thought would be to say that we should pay attention *only* to the state of our souls, and become indifferent to things like worldly success, money or reputation. Indeed, the Stoics called such things 'indifferents'. Only an excellent, virtuous character is genuinely good, they claimed, while only its opposite, a vicious character, is bad; everything else is a mere 'indifferent'. There were some philosophers who came after Socrates who thought just this. These were the Cynics, the most famous of whom was Diogenes of Sinope, who is said to have lived – for a while at least – in a barrel, like a stray dog. Diogenes pursued a virtuous, excellent character at the expense of everything else, advocating an austere, simple life in harmony with Nature. On seeing a child drinking water just using its hands, Diogenes is reported to have said, 'A child has beaten me in simplicity of living,' and then to have thrown away one of the few things he owned, his cup.