

Stoicism: An Ancient Philosophy for the 21st Century

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Introduction

- ▶ I think I'm becoming a Stoic!
- ▶ Stoicism and Humanism
- ▶ Stoicism won't necessarily appeal to everyone

Benefits of Stoicism

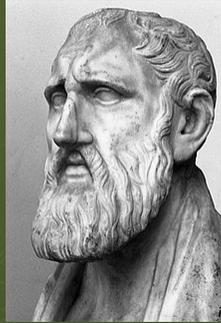
- ▶ How to ...
 - Have deep satisfaction with life and inner tranquility
 - Take charge of your own life
 - Be the best person you can be
 - Remain rational and realistic
 - Be free from anger, envy, bitterness
 - Make good decisions, know what is most important
 - Stop caring about what others think about you
 - Have serenity even in adversity, loss, illness, death
 - Deal with difficult, obnoxious people
 - Overcome anxiety, worry, depression, and guilt
 - Stop avoiding things that normally trouble you
 - Have confidence to handle whatever life throws at you

Common Stereotype of Stoicism



- ▶ Stoics value *positive* emotions
 - Joy, love, gratitude, awe, humour and laughter
- ▶ Understand and manage *negative* emotions
 - Depression, guilt, anxiety, fear, anger
- ▶ Basis of modern evidence-based therapies (CBT)
- ▶ Emphasizes rationality and reality-based view of the world – avoiding superstition, delusional thinking

Origins of Stoicism

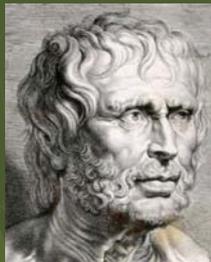


Zeno of
Citium
(334-262 BC)



A Stoa
(Porch,
Colonnade)

Surviving Writings (From first 2 centuries AD)



Seneca
(0-65 AD)

*Letters,
Essays*



Epictetus
(55-135 AD)

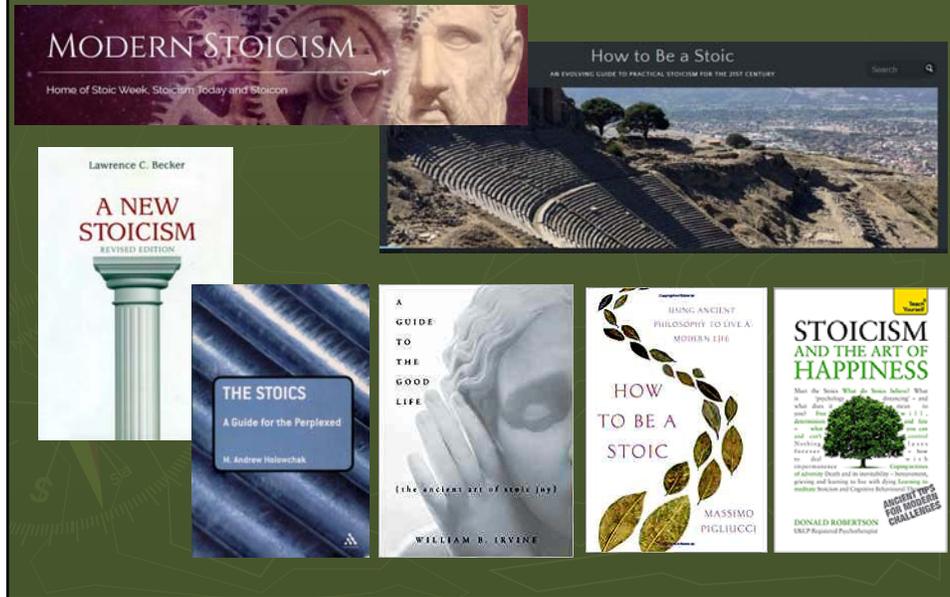
*Discourses,
The Handbook*



Marcus
Aurelius
(121-180 AD)

Meditations

Modern Rediscovery of Stoicism



Happiness (*eudaimonia*)

- ▶ The goal of Stoicism: Happiness (*eudaimonia*)
- ▶ Not just a superficial, temporary cheerful mood
- ▶ Deep, enduring sense of fulfillment, flourishing
- ▶ Satisfaction with a life well lived
- ▶ Doesn't depend on external circumstances
- ▶ *Ataraxia* = tranquility, equanimity, serenity

Virtue

- ▶ Necessary and sufficient for true happiness, tranquility
- ▶ *aretê* = "excellence of character"
- ▶ Trying to be the best person you can be
- ▶ Happiness and tranquility are natural consequences of being a good, decent person

Four Cardinal Virtues

1. **Wisdom** - knowing what to do in any given situation
2. **Justice** - benevolence, fairness, compassion, social justice, concern for others; treating others with dignity and fairness
3. **Courage** – moral courage to do the right thing, even when it goes against popular opinion
4. **Self-Control** – restraint, moderation, avoiding excesses, addictions – brings personal freedom

What do most people think they need in order to be happy?



Preferred and Dispreferred "Indifferents"

- ▶ Don't be fooled! Money, status, good health, etc. are irrelevant to true happiness – "Indifferents"
- ▶ However, it is still preferable to have money, status, health, vs. poverty, lack of status, illness
- ▶ Preferred vs. dispreferred indifferents
- ▶ It's okay to seek a good education, good job, good income, "fame and fortune", etc.
- ▶ But need to always remind yourself that these are not really important for true happiness, tranquility
- ▶ Don't become too attached – you could lose them, but that wouldn't affect your inner happiness

The Dichotomy of Control

- ▶ Some things are up to us, some things are not
- ▶ Things that are up to us (in our control):
 - Our opinions, judgments (attitudes)
 - Our desires, aversions (values, goals)
 - Our motivations, intentions, will (actions)
- ▶ Things that are not up to us:
 - Our body (genes, health, physical appearance)
 - Our property, wealth, possessions
 - Our reputation, status – what others think of us
 - Everything that is not in our voluntary control (e.g., what other people do!)

Epictetus:

“If you confuse these things, and try to control what is not up to you, you will be frustrated, depressed, anxious, and angry.

But if you concern yourself only with the things that are up to you, and don't concern yourself with things not in your control, no one will ever be able to coerce you or hold you back, no one will disturb you, you'll do nothing against your will, you'll have no enemy, and no one will ever harm you, because no harm can affect you.”

- ▶ Most things we try to do in life are partly in our control, partly not
- ▶ We only have control over our own efforts to achieve something, not the final outcome
- ▶ Internalize your goals – accept outcome with equanimity
- ▶ Analogy of shooting an arrow
- ▶ NB: Not an attitude of resignation or fatalism:
Active engagement in life, but realistic about what we can and can't control



The Serenity Prayer

Grant 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.

~ Reinhold Niebuhr

Unhealthy Emotions (Passions)

- ▶ Emotions are determined by the way we think
- ▶ **Epictetus:** "It isn't *things* (or events) themselves that disturb people, but the *judgments* they form about those things."
- ▶ Unhealthy negative emotions are caused by failing to distinguish between what we can and can't control
 - E.g., anxiety, worry, depression, anger, rage

- ▶ Negative emotions can arise spontaneously
 - Anger, fear, grief, jealousy
 - Propatheia (proto-emotions)
- ▶ When negative emotions arise, stop and think about why you're feeling this way
 - What are the automatic thoughts underlying it?
- ▶ Does it involve something in your power or not in your power?
 - If not in your power, no need to concern yourself
- ▶ Over time, you can learn to calm yourself, avoid becoming overwhelmed by negative emotions
- ▶ Takes practice

Stoic Practical Exercises

- ▶ Simple exercises to practice regularly
 - Reinforce Stoic mindset, prepare for challenges
- ▶ Negative visualization (Premeditatio Malorum)
 - Contemplate losing the things you have
 - Not morbid; worrying, anxious
 - Not “positive thinking” – unrealistic optimism
 - Realistic – facing realities of life with courage
- ▶ The View from Above
- ▶ Morning and Evening Exercises

Summary

- ▶ Stoicism: how to have inner happiness & tranquility
- ▶ Happiness results from being a good person
- ▶ Know how to avoid things that erode happiness
- ▶ Enjoy your possessions, reputation, & health, but don't get too attached – not the basis of happiness
- ▶ Use reason to overcome negative emotions
- ▶ Distinguish between what you can & can't control
 - To avoid anxiety, depression, anger, envy, etc.
- ▶ Practice negative visualization and other practical exercises to reinforce a Stoic mindset
- ▶ Requires dedicated self-awareness, self-observation

Conclusion



Very little is needed to make a happy life; it is all within yourself, in your way of thinking.

~ Marcus Aurelius