Introduction to Stoicism

Excerpt from the Stoic Week Handbook 2020: Stoicism during a Pandemic: Care for Ourselves, Others, and Our World

What is Stoicism?

Stoicism is a school of ancient Greek philosophy in the Socratic tradition. It was founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium around 301 BC. The name comes from the painted porch (*stoa poikile*) where Zeno lectured his students. Stoicism later became very popular in ancient Rome, where it continued to flourish long after the disappearance of the original Greek school. Less than one percent of the Stoics' original writings now survive, however. The most important ancient sources that we have today are:

1. The many *Letters*, *Essays* and *Dialogues* of the Roman statesman Seneca, who was advisor to the emperor Nero.
2. The *Handbook* and four surviving books of Epictetus' *Discourses* compiled from his lectures by a student called Arrian. Epictetus, a Greek ex-slave, is the only Stoic *teacher* whose thoughts survive in book form.
3. *The Meditations*, a private Stoic notebook or diary of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, who was strongly influenced by Epictetus.

In the *Stoic Week Handbook* we include passages from all three thinkers, and sometimes also from other ancient authors who wrote about Stoic ethics. These texts are used for the morning and evening reflections. Several the passages are from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, which present Stoic ideas in an especially powerful and personal form. Some people think that Marcus wrote *The Meditations* as morning and evening reflections so they may be particularly helpful for encouraging your reflections.

Stoic Week gives *you* a chance to follow a similar routine to Marcus each day. You might like to write down your own morning and evening meditations and keep them in a notebook, or share them with other people through social networks. You can base your personal meditations on the topics suggested or use other Stoic ideas that you have learned about and find helpful.

You may find it helpful to read some of these Stoic writings during the week, or at least dip into them. For instance, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, Epictetus' *Handbook* and *Discourses*, and Seneca's *Letters* provide sources of helpful additional reading. All of these are available in up-to-date translations with introductions and notes, published by Oxford University Press, The World's Classics, or Penguin, for instance. We offer more suggestions for further reading at the end of the *Handbook*.

Introduction to Stoicism

Excerpt from the Stoic Week Handbook 2020: Stoicism during a Pandemic: Care for Ourselves, Others, and Our World

Central Stoic Ideas

What is Stoicism? How might it help us to live better, happier lives today? Some of you will be drawn to this experiment because you already know a little bit about Stoicism and want to put it into practice for yourselves. Others may know very little about Stoicism and are curious to learn more. The ancient Stoic philosophical system was well known for being vast and complex, addressing a wide range of topics under the headings of Ethics, Logic, and Physics. It will be impossible to introduce it all. However, here are several central ideas at the heart of Stoic ethics: happiness, virtue, ethical development, emotions, nature. These are also the main themes for reflection on different days of Stoic Week. Don't worry if some of these ideas seem a bit hard to grasp on first reading. They will become clearer as you go through each day of Stoic Week.

1. Happiness

We all want to live happily – but what *is* happiness? In modern terms, 'happiness' tends to mean being in a cheerful mood or having enjoyable experiences. People often think that being happy depends on factors largely outside our control, such as being healthy or well-off, or finding the right life partner or a stable family life. Ancient philosophers often thought of happiness as a matter of leading a certain kind of life, a life that we can determine for ourselves. In forming an idea of happiness, we are adopting a 'goal' (in Greek, *telos*) to provide shape for our lives. The Stoics offered an idea of happiness that gives a central role to our own agency, our ability to determine our own actions. They also insisted that we can all work towards achieving happiness whatever our situation in life. They maintained that adopting a correct view of happiness will affect our emotions and moods as well as our actions and relationships to others, and will do so in a very positive way.

What is happiness, then, according to Stoicism? The standard definition was 'the life according to nature' or 'the natural life'. 'Nature' in what sense, though? The Stoics seem to have in mind a combination of human nature and nature as a whole (the universe or cosmos). They defined human nature as rational and sociable. They saw animals in general as naturally sociable, and humans as sociable in a way that expresses rationality. They thought the universe or nature as a whole was characterised by two main sets of qualities. One is order, structure, and wholeness (overall, a kind of consistency). The other is providential care for all the forms of life

that make up the natural world, including human beings. The Stoics thought that human beings can express these same qualities, though in a human way.

… therefore, living in agreement with nature comes to be the goal, which is in accordance with the nature of oneself [human nature] and that of the whole […] the virtue of the happy person and his good flow of life [happiness] are just this: always doing everything on the basis of the harmony of each person's guardian spirit with the will of the administrator of the whole.

Chrysippus, quoted by Diogenes Laertius, 7.88

So, the happy life for Stoicism is a life that expresses human nature at its best and reflects, at a human level, the best qualities of nature as a whole. The happy life combines the proper use of rationality with sociability (wanting to benefit other people). It is a coherent life, marked by inner order, structure and wholeness or integrity, rather than being chaotic or unstable. It is also a life which combines caring for ourselves (wanting to express the best qualities of our nature) with caring for other people. This idea of happiness is closely linked with Stoic thinking about virtue and ethical development, and their views on those subjects help to spell out what is involved in Stoic happiness.

Compared with some modern ideas of happiness, the Stoic view stresses inner rather than outer features, qualities of understanding and character rather than success or good health or being rich. Although Stoic happiness is not defined in terms of feeling or mood, Stoics think that someone who is happy in the Stoic sense is also someone who experiences positive emotions such as joy and does so in a consistent way, which does not depend on external circumstances. Even if we do not entirely share the Stoic picture of human or universal nature, we may still find their idea of happiness a powerful and inspiring one and one that we want to explore further.

During a pandemic, when many avenues of happiness (as conventionally understood) are limited - foreign holidays, going out, even meeting friends - the Stoic view, stressing the importance of inner qualities, can be particularly helpful. The Stoic view of happiness reminds us, for example, that true happiness is not so much about having lots of positive experiences so much as how you conduct yourself. Happiness, so understand, is within our grasp even during a pandemic.

Introduction to Stoicism

Excerpt from the Stoic Week Handbook 2020: Stoicism during a Pandemic: Care for Ourselves, Others, and Our World

2. Virtue

Virtue is a consistent character, choice-worthy for its own sake and not from fear or hope or anything external. Happiness consists in virtue since virtue is a soul which has been fashioned to achieve consistency in the whole of life. (Diogenes Laertius, 7.89)

For the Stoics, the ideas of happiness and virtue are closely connected; indeed, happiness was sometimes defined as 'the life according to virtue', as well as 'the life according to nature'. The virtues, taken generally, are the qualities that enable us to lead a happy life, that is, a fully human and 'natural' life, in the Stoic sense.

The Stoics thought there were four core (or 'cardinal') virtues, with many subdivisions, which cover the four main areas of human experience and motivation. They defined them as forms of knowledge or expertise (skill in living a happy life). But they are not purely intellectual skills and cover qualities of character as well as understanding. The core virtues are:

- **Wisdom**, excellence in reasoning and judgement in theory and practice
- **Courage** (or resilience), ability to deal with dangers properly
- **Justice** (including kindness and generosity), excellence in our relationships with others
- **Moderation** or self-control, ability to deal properly with emotions and desires

The four virtues were seen as very closely linked. Sometimes, wisdom was regarded as the core virtue, and the other three virtues as aspects of wisdom, that is, as wisdom applied in the various sectors of human experience. The virtues were also seen as depending on each other, so you could not be brave or moderate, in a real sense, unless you were also wise (using good judgement) or just (treating people properly).

In modern thought, virtues are often described as 'moral' qualities and these are seen as qualities that benefit other people rather than ourselves (or that express altruism rather than egoism). In ancient ethics, including Stoicism, virtues are generally seen as qualities that benefit us ourselves as well as other people. In Stoicism, the virtues enable us to lead a happy life, that is, the best possible life for a human being (seen as part of nature as a whole). By exercising wisdom or good judgment in the four main areas of human experience, we express the distinctively human combination of rationality and sociability. In this way, we also take the best possible care of ourselves and of other people who form part of our lives, by

achieving the best possible qualities of human excellence and expressing this in the way we treat others, for instance, by acting justly, bravely and with self-control. We also give our lives an overall shape and coherence or wholeness, as the virtues are applied consistently in all aspects of our actions and experiences. Thus, we achieve happiness, but a form of happiness that benefits other people as much as us, and does so to the fullest possible extent.

The Stoics sometimes draw a sharp distinction between the virtues (genuinely good) and other things often *assumed* to be good by the majority of people, such as health, prosperity, reputation and the welfare of our families and friends. The second kind of things are described by Stoics as 'matters of indifference' or, more precisely, as indifferents that are 'preferred' or 'preferable', rather than the opposite. This distinction is a potentially confusing one, especially as the Stoics also recognise that the preferred indifferents such as health and the welfare of our families have a real, positive value and are things that human beings naturally want to have rather than not have. Why, then, are they described as 'indifferents'? They are indifferents because they do not make the difference between leading a happy life or not, whereas the virtues do make this difference. If you have and exercise the virtues, you will achieve happiness, as Stoics understand this (leading a life that is properly rational and sociable, for instance), and you will do so whether or not you also have health, prosperity and so on. But if you have the preferred indifferents but not the virtues, you will not lead a happy life (you will not care for yourself and others in a proper way or give your life coherence and unity). So the distinction reflects the central role given by the Stoics to virtue in producing happiness.

There are two recent dialogues on the Stoic idea of 'indifferents' between Tim LeBon and Chris Gill on the 'Stoicism Today' blog that you might find helpful:

1. Stoic Values Clarification Part 1

2. Stoic Values Clarification Part 2

The virtues are extremely relevant in a pandemic. We need *courage* to carry on doing what is right, even if it is difficult (such as an employee complaining about a flaw in an organisation's safety). We need *self-control* so that we don't do certain things even though we want to (such as reading too much new or breaking the guidelines). We need *justice and kindness* to look after those who need it, such as the vulnerable in our

neighbourhood (and beyond). We need *wisdom* to understand the situation well, and to decide which of the virtues are relevant.

3. Ethical Development ('Appropriation')

From the beginning nature has assigned to every type of creature the tendency to preserve itself, its life and body, and to reject anything that seems likely to harm them […] Common to all animals is the instinct to unite for the purposes of procreation, and to care for those that are born… The great difference between humans and other animals is this […] Human beings have a share in reason.
(Cicero, *On Duties*, 1.11)

Stoics believed that all human beings have a natural, in-built, capacity to develop towards virtue and happiness. In this respect, they differed from some other ancient thinkers who believed that ethical development depended on having a special kind of inborn nature, and a special kind of upbringing and social context or education. For the Stoics, ethical development is a matter of fulfilling your own nature as a human being and an integral part of the natural universe; and everyone, even someone who seems to be evil or conflicted, has this ability at a deep level. They described this process as 'appropriation' (in Greek, *oikeiōsis*), which suggests making your human nature 'your own' or making other people who share your nature 'your own' (*oikeion*).

This process of development was sometimes subdivided by Stoic thinkers into two strands (though they are also seen as interlinked). These can be seen as *rational* and *sociable* strands, corresponding to the two main distinctive features of human nature. In the first strand, we express our rationality by learning how to select properly between 'indifferents' (things such as health and prosperity) and in this way learning how to select virtuously (wisely, bravely, justly, moderately). As we come to learn what the virtues involve, we also recognise that it is virtue, rather than other things, that enables us to lead a happy life, and we begin to form a proper understanding of what happiness is.

In the second strand, we develop the sociability that is also an integral part of human nature. The Stoics thought that all animals have a social instinct, expressed most obviously in the love of parents for their offspring. In human beings this social instinct can be developed in a rational way, and can lead us to care for (or to 'make our own') family members, friends, neighbours and fellow citizens. These different

kinds of relationships were sometimes described as 'circles' around ourselves. Also, the Stoics, exceptionally in the ancient world, maintained that all human beings, including foreigners, are our brothers or sisters or fellow citizens, in that we all share the same core human characteristics of rationality and sociability and are equally capable of virtue and happiness.

These two strands of development are interconnected. Learning how to select things virtuously depends partly on forming attitudes of care towards other people, in different forms of relationship. Caring for other people properly depends on treating them virtuously and also on recognising that happiness depends on virtue rather than indifferents. Although the Stoics thought this process was natural for us as human beings, they did not see it as easy or automatic. Indeed, for virtually all of us, it will be a life-long process and one that we do not complete in full. However, we can make progress in doing so, and in learning how to carry through these two strands and to relate them to each other. Aiming to make progress towards virtue and happiness can provide a coherent and powerful framework for our lives, even if we fall short of the perfection of the ideal wise person.

The pandemic may be an opportunity to rise to the occasion and make the ethical development advocated by the Stoics. When other options are limited, and the needs of others are particularly obvious, it could be the perfect time to find opportunity in crisis.

4. Emotions

Modern ideas of happiness often give a central place to emotions (feeling happy), and this topic also plays a part in Stoic thinking on happiness and ethical development. In the popular imagination the Stoic is someone who has no emotions (like a robot) or who represses her feelings in an unhealthy way.

The Stoics' real views on this are more credible and also more complex. Stoics think that a further strand in our ethical development is the emotional one. As we make progress towards virtue and happiness, our emotional life changes. We stop having ethically misguided and intense or conflicted emotions (sometimes called 'passions') and we move towards having 'good emotions'.

Introduction to Stoicism

Excerpt from the Stoic Week Handbook 2020: Stoicism during a Pandemic: Care for Ourselves, Others, and Our World

As Epictetus puts it: 'if virtue promises to enable us to achieve happiness, freedom from passion, and serenity, then progress towards virtue is surely also progress towards each of these states' (*Discourses*, 1.4.3).

The passions are misguided because the passionate person supposes that happiness depends on acquiring or retaining 'preferred indifferents', such as wealth or fame (rather than on exercising the virtues). This mistake generates emotions such as anger, fear, or overwhelming lust; as well as being mistaken, these emotions are often marked by intensity of feeling, instability and inner conflict. Ethical development leads someone towards acting virtuously and recognising that happiness depends on virtue. It also leads towards expressing affection and care for the other people who share our lives, including children and other family members, fellow-citizens and strangers or foreigners. Someone who develops in this way experiences 'good emotions', rather than misguided ones, based on sound ethical judgements and marked by a calmer and more stable and consistent pattern of feeling.

The Stoics recognise three main good emotions (with many subdivisions), corresponding to three of the main passions; these good emotions are focused on developing the virtues, rather than on preferred indifferents, as the passions are:

1. **Wishing**, directed at gaining what is genuinely good (virtue), rather than intense desire or craving for (for instance) wealth
2. **Caution**, directed at avoiding what is bad (vice or defective character), rather than fear about losing wealth or another preferred indifferent
3. **Joy** or delight directed at what is good (virtue or happiness in oneself or someone else), rather than (misguided) pleasure in something trivial or malicious

The good emotions can be focused on other people's virtues and happiness as well as one's own. The Stoics recognized good (wise) forms of erotic love and of affection for children and other family members as well as the three main good emotions and their subdivisions.

So, for the Stoics, as well as other thinkers, happiness has an emotional dimension. But good emotions, like happiness generally, come as a result of developing the virtues and should not be taken as a separate objective or goal in their own right.

Introduction to Stoicism

Excerpt from the Stoic Week Handbook 2020: Stoicism during a Pandemic: Care for Ourselves, Others, and Our World

Central to Stoic therapy about the emotions is the idea that it is not events but the interpretation of events that causes us problems.

The Stoics believed that we can go wrong in our beliefs about the facts and especially in our value judgements.

By becoming more aware of our thoughts and beliefs, we can avoid the "bad passions."

For example, imagine that Frieda is very disappointed about missing her foreign holiday this year. Frieda might benefit from recalling that actually a foreign holiday is not that much better, if any, than a holiday in her own country - think of the cost savings, the inconvenience of air travel. More importantly, the Stoic would also remind her that having a foreign holiday is a "preferred indifferent" - maybe a nice thing to have, but not something that would make the difference between her being happy or not. What matters more is how she handles each situation she finds herself in. She might decide that what is important is that she is a good parent and enthusiastically plans the family staycation. Can you see how Frieda's "bad passion" of extreme disappointment could be replaced by the "good emotion" of joy at the fact that her attitude leads to the whole family being positive about the staycation?

5. Nature

As brought out already, 'nature' is a very important idea in Stoic ethics, with several key senses:

1. Human nature, regarded as distinctively rational and sociable
2. Universal or cosmic nature, marked by order, structure, wholeness and providential care for all parts of the universe, including human beings
3. Our own nature, which at its best (when it achieves virtue and happiness) shares in these qualities of human and universal nature
4. The community or brotherhood of human beings, which is the bond existing between all human beings as co-sharers in nature in these senses.

Modern people would find it difficult to accept the kind of picture of the physical world offered by Stoic physics, rather than by modern science. But we can still see

the role allocated to nature in Stoic ethics as a powerful and suggestive one today, for several reasons. For instance, the Stoic idea of nature helps to give substantial content to their thinking on virtue and happiness. The idea that virtue and happiness consist in a combination of rationality and sociability, and involve order, structure, and wholeness, as well as care for ourselves and others of our kind, is one that modern thinkers can find convincing and inspiring.

Thinking about ourselves as an integral part of universal or cosmic nature may have ethical significance in other ways too. It can help us to see our lifecycle from birth to death as an infinitesimal part of life in nature, and thus to accept inevitable events such as our own death and that of others in a more realistic and calmer way. Also, today – much more than in the time of the ancient Stoics – we need, as human beings, to take care of the natural environment and to try to repair the damage we have done to many aspects of the natural order. Thinking of ourselves as integral parts of universal nature can help us to develop a proper sense of responsibility in this respect.

"You should regard the realization and fulfilment of what seems good to nature as a whole in the same way as you view your own health, and so welcome everything that happens, even if it seems rather harsh, because it leads in that direction, towards the health of the universe." Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.8.9

The pandemic is a reminder to us about all the aspects of nature mentioned by the Stoics. It reminds us about how connected we all are and how we are vulnerable are to the total web of causation. Furthermore the pandemic provides a unique challenge and opportunity to be at our most rational and sociable as individuals, communities and nations.

Conclusion

If you are going to follow Stoic week, then you need to be open-minded at least towards these core Stoic ethical ideas. Our aim here is not to convince you of the truth of these claims but to invite you to consider them and reflect on them and see if they can help you to formulate and shape your own thoughts about how to give more shape and purpose to your life. If the ideas we are presenting seem completely absurd to you it may simply be that Stoicism is not for you. But you will only find this out by giving yourself time to think about these ideas for yourself.