

# THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

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## Death by Gangrene

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### Part One: Theory

In keeping with our tradition, this essay examines Stoic concepts of death, suicide, and what lies beyond the grave in both theory and practice. To philosophers the subject of death is profoundly important and can often appear to be the only thing that really matters. It's as true today as it ever was.

“Man laughs and plays and gallops and dances without thinking at all of death. Nonetheless, when it comes to them by surprise, or to their wives, children, or friends, what torment and outcries, what madness and despair! Have you ever seen anyone so changed, confused, and subdued? Therefore, man must prepare in advance for it...Let us disarm death of all novelty and strangeness. Let us converse and be familiar with him, and have nothing so frequent in our thoughts.”

Montaigne, Book 1, Chapter 19: **“That To Study Philosophy Is To Learn To Die”**

I emphasized the title of Montaigne's essay in bold type to draw attention to it. “That to study philosophy is to learn to die,” is a line borrowed from Cicero's *Tusculun Disputations*. Cicero likely got the idea from Socrates who made a similar comment in his discussion with Simmias and Cebes in *Phaedo*: “Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death. If this is true, and they have actually been looking forward to death all their lives, it would of course be absurd to be troubled when the thing comes for which they have so long been preparing and looking forward.”

Do Stoic philosophers also emphasize this study of death? In the final passage of Book III, chapter 26, of the *Discourses*, Epictetus says, “Why, do you not know, then, that the origin of all human evils, and of baseness and cowardice, is not death, but rather the fear of death? Fortify yourself, therefore, against this. Hither let all your discourses, readings, exercises, tend. And then you will know that only in this way are men made free.” Let all your discourses, readings, exercises, tend? Well, getting away from the rather formal language of the translator, I think we can readily see that this is the same or similar to what Montaigne, Cicero, and Socrates also said.

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Unlike most religious philosophies, Stoics have no *fixed* orthodoxy and make no promises about what lies beyond the grave. Here is a brief review of what we know about the various possibilities:

**On what lies beyond the grave:** “And the soul is a nature capable of perception. And they [the Stoics] regard it as the breath of life, congenital with us; from which they infer first that it is a body and secondly that it survives death. Yet it is perishable, though the soul of the universe, of which the individual souls of animals are parts, is indestructible....Cleanthes indeed holds that all souls continue to exist until the general conflagration [*ekpyrosis*]; but Chrysippus says that only the souls of the wise men do (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II, book VII, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard, pp. 156-7).”

**On daemons and heroes:** “Also they hold that there are daemons who are in sympathy with mankind and watch over human affairs. They believe too in heroes, that is, the souls of the righteous that have survived their bodies (ibid., p. 151).”

**On suicide:** “They [the Stoics] tell us that the wise man will for reasonable cause make his own exit from life, on his country's behalf or for the sake of his friends, or if he suffers intolerable pain, mutilation, or incurable disease (ibid., p. 130).”

**On the soul:** “...the soul is conceived by Zeno as a warm breath or sentient exhalation....It permeates the whole body and death is its separation therefrom. However, the soul is not eternal, though it does endure for a time after its departure from the body (Josiah B. Gould, *The Philosophy of Chrysippus*, SUNY, 1970, p. 33).”

**On the corporeal soul:** “Like Cleanthes, Chrysippus, too, held that the soul is a body, and his argument, somewhat similar to those of his teacher, is derived from the phenomenon of death and a consideration of the relation between the incorporeal and the corporeal. Death, he maintains, comes about when soul and body separate. But nothing incorporeal can be separated from something corporeal, because it never could have been attached to it. Therefore, the soul is a body (ibid., p. 129).”

**Marcus Aurelius:** As Pierre Hadot points out, the *Meditations* are dominated by Marcus Aurelius's obsession with death. They are also a preparation for death as a liberation and great equalizer for all, from the highest to the lowest members of society (*The Inner Citadel*, trans. Michael Chase, Harvard, 2001, p. 275). “To see things of the present moment is to see all that is now, all that has been since time began, and all that shall be unto the world's end; for all things are of one kind and one form (*Meditations*, book 6, 37).”

Pierre Hadot said, “When we view things from the perspective of death, it is impossible to let a single one of life's instants pass by lightly....The thought of death confers seriousness, infinite value, and splendor to every present instant of life (*The Inner Citadel*, p. 135).”

Diogenes Laertius said the early Stoics believed there is life after death, but they disagreed about who got it and how long it continued. The individual soul was thought to be perishable, but not so the soul of the universe, or God. Here's what we can summarize about the beliefs of Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus according to DL:

**Zeno:** “the soul is not eternal, though it does endure for a time after its departure from the body.”

**Cleanthes:** “holds that all souls continue to exist until the general conflagration [*ekpyrosis*]”

**Chrysippus:** “says that only the souls of the wise men do.”

**Seneca**, in Letter XCI, 21, said: “And yet one thing you do know and that is this, to how many people [death] is a blessing, how many people it frees from torture, want, maladies, suffering, weariness. And no one has power over us when death is within our own power.”

**Epictetus** doesn't refer to death as a blessing, but as a curse upon us when we fear it. “...the origin of all human evils, and of baseness and cowardice, is not death, but rather the fear of death? Fortify yourself, therefore, against this. Hither let all your discourses, readings, exercises, tend.”

**Marcus Aurelius**, the emperor is willing to face the three possible futures of the soul: “Happy the soul which, at whatever moment the call comes for release from the body, is equally ready to face extinction, dispersion, or survival. Such preparedness, however, must be the outcome of its own decision; a decision not prompted by mere rebelliousness, as with the Christians, but formed with deliberation and gravity and, if it is to be convincing to others, with an absence of all heroics (*Meditations*, book 11, 3).” Whether we face *extinction*, *dispersion*, or *survival* is the Stoic philosopher's study, and remaining strong and serene in the face of any eventuality is our practice.

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Stoics don't agree with Socrates' condemnation of suicide (he said we were given life by Nature and did not have the right to take it away). We would likely agree with the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, who questioned what kind of god would give one of its creations the ability to commit suicide, the only creature capable of rationally committing such an act, then punish it if it did? This is not the Stoic god.

Cato the Younger committed suicide because he so disliked Julius Caesar that he was unwilling to live defeated in the same world as this man he so hated. Really? That's reason enough for a Stoic to commit suicide? Hmm. (As to Cato's reason for suicide, I'm reminded of one poll in the last US election that claimed 13% of those polled said they would rather the planet was destroyed by an asteroid than have either Clinton or Trump as President.) Seneca committed suicide when given the choice between death by his own hand or by one of Nero's guards. Epictetus said the door is always open.

We don't have an orthodoxy on death, and as Marcus said, if the continuation of human existence is to the advantage to the Whole, then it will be done. That seems reasonable on the face of it, but does it really give one a lot of confidence in the continuation of life beyond the grave? This requires considerable faith in the providence of Nature to believe that the divine finds our souls, or at least some of our souls, so impressive as to wish to continue their existence. Could happen, but I'm reminded of Professor Keith Campbell, my old mentor's advice on death: “Find reconciliation to a finite life.”

Christians say fear is the beginning of wisdom. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Psalms 111:10).” Augustine wrote of this fear when he points out that it is the fear of God that motivates us to know what he wills, and thus avoid the horrors of everlasting hell fire. But, Stoics have traditionally held the position of eliminating fear from our lives. Those who are wise are without fear. Unlike the Christians, we don't fear our god as if it's some frightful tyrant that looks to punish us when we have failed to live up to its standards. Unfortunately, that actually makes Stoicism a rather difficult religion to sell. If you don't make people afraid of their god and of certain punishment when they disobey it, then why should they obey?

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## Part Two: Practice

My mother, a Christian, died of gangrene last week. She was 95 years old. She died on Thanksgiving Day. The circulation in her lower right leg was so bad that she got gangrene, beginning in her right toe. It started as a dark spot and gradually spread over most of her foot until it became black, rotting flesh that stank. Mother had a choice between amputating that leg above the knee, which would have probably killed her on the operating table because of her frail condition; or, she could go back home and do nothing. If she survived the surgery, she would have become a helpless invalid. She chose to go home and do nothing, death by gangrene.

Did mother choose suicide? Perhaps. Would a Stoic condemn this choice? No. If there's any doubt, reread the DL passage and Seneca's counsel above. At her advanced age, mother's body, her organs, and circulation were beginning to shut down. I spoke to her on the phone at least twice a week, and it was clear that she was not comfortable. She hardly ate anything and quickly lost about a third of her weight. She was in considerable pain despite the medication available. When I knew the end was near, I made the journey from my home to where she was dying, about a thousand miles, to be with her. I was in time. She slept most of the three days I was there, but she was conscious occasionally. Mother knew she was dying, and said so. We talked about it.

Mother believed that when she died, she would be dead and have no consciousness of any kind until the Second Coming of Christ. And with his coming, she believed the dead would arise, both the righteous and the wicked, and all would be judged. The righteous would go to heaven; the wicked would go to hell. She believed this with all her heart all her life. What was I to tell her? I told her that very soon she would take a nap, and when she awakened she would be ready to go to heaven. She also made me promise that I would be with her in heaven. Could I promise such a thing? I could, and I did.

How could I do such a thing? Stoics don't believe in heaven or hell. Did I actually lie to my mother? Can we Stoics ever justify lying, or even half-truths, when someone is suffering and dying and looking to us for comfort? This is very hard. No, we should not lie. But, we can believe with the Hindus that there is not one path to the divine but many. I *do* believe this. And, I believe we should show respect to all paths to God, including the one my mother was on. Mother was a Seventh-Day Adventist.

I was raised in that faith and know that her beliefs centered around living a virtuous, humanitarian life. She was a vegetarian and a pacifist. There's a great deal more about mother and her beliefs that I could include here, but there was only one thing that really mattered right then and there. She knew that her life was ending and death could arrive at any moment to place her in a state of nothingness until the day when Jesus would come. Would a Stoic deny her the right of this hope, this firm belief that some day she would rise up again and go to heaven? Would a Stoic try to convince one who is only occasionally conscious and in great pain that her beliefs are wrong, that Stoic beliefs are best and that there is no time like the present to become one of us? No.

Do we know with certainty what comes after death? No. Do we know with certainty that there is no Jesus and no Second Coming and no heaven for the righteous? No. It may be just a fanciful story to us, as so many religious beliefs are, but until we Stoics have irrefutable proof about these things, then what right have we to sow seeds of doubt at a time like this? Certainly, I prefer the Stoic version, and I'm always glad to share it, but is it the only theory and practice that uplifts humanity? No. Who are we to define or confine Nature's God exclusively to our version of the story?

There is another matter to consider: piety. Epictetus is one of our best sources for an understanding of a Stoic's duty to be pious. Does piety only apply to our particular version of the phenomenon of existence? No. Here is a quote from the *Enchiridion*, the final sentence of #31, where Epictetus said, "But it also becomes incumbent on everyone to offer libations and sacrifices and first-fruits, *according to the customs of his country*, purely, and not heedlessly nor negligently..." I emphasized with italics the phrase most relevant to this situation. In that foul room where my mother was actively dying, I was not just following the customs of her country, I was deeply immersed in the end of her world.

We are not lying if we are tolerant and accepting of other beliefs as being real in the moment we are comforting one who is on the threshold of death. It's not the details of our piety that matter most at such times; it is the essence. We would not say to a Christian, "I don't believe in Jesus." We would not say to a Muslim, "I don't believe in Mohammad." We would not say to a Hindu, "I don't believe in reincarnation." What kind of cold, pedantic person would say such a thing at a time like that? Are we going to argue with a dying person about this? Really? If the dying person says to us, "I see Jesus!" We say, "Glory hallelujah!" We say it, and we mean it. Joy is a Stoic emotion.



*In memory of Nellie Valentine Wiegardt Morgan  
May you rest in peace—wherever you are*

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