

THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

A quarterly eJournal published by the
Marcus Aurelius School
of the College of Stoic Philosophers

APR/MAY/JUN 2019: Issue # 30

Founding Editor: Erik Wiegardt

“Coming to Reason”

This quarter, we have essays written by two students of the College of Stoic Philosophers. Although they have ended up on the same path of virtue, aretē, their lives began in profoundly different ways. It is only in the intensity of their efforts to follow reason that their stories can be viewed as similar or the same.

The first essay was written by Scott Stoddard, a Marcus Aurelius School student as partial fulfillment of the requirements of his third term. It begins in the midst of a crisis of faith that took him away from “The Order,” an extreme form of Mormonism, into a new world and life he had never known. The actual essay is 18 pages in length, and after the two pages presented here there is a hyperlink for you to click on that will take you to the complete essay located in the Scholarch's Permanent Collection.

The second is the “Know Thyself” essay written by David Lundmark, a College of Stoic Philosophers applicant, as part of his acceptance into the School of Essential Studies. This student was born into the heart of Upper-Middle America with intellectual opportunities and influences early in life that the first essay writer would have never experienced or imagined. His essay in its entirety is included here.

Erik Wiegardt, Founding editor

<<<>>>

Polygamy, Faith, and Reason

by Scott Stoddard

I wanted desperately to believe in the Order. Every dream I'd ever had, every plan, every thought, had been about the Kingdom of God, and where I fit in it. I grew up very much into the whole thing. At the time I felt that if the Order was not true, I had nothing to live for, and wanted to die. At the same time I could no longer believe. I would sit and think about what I should do. I wanted to know absolutely for certain the truth about the Order. I used to think that I should just fast until I either starved to death, or until God showed me the truth. This was kind of a fantasy thing because I knew I wasn't actually going to starve myself completely to death when it came down to it.

In June of 1980, I spent a sleepless night trying to decide what to do next. I decided that I would go up in the mountains and fast and pray for one week. I'd experienced intense indoctrination which I knew would cause guilt if I left the Order while I still held doubts about its truth. I decided that if God was going to show me, one week of fasting, prayer and study should be enough, and if not, he really couldn't expect me to put up with the injustice any longer. He would know what I was expecting, and if he still wanted me in his kingdom, he'd know what I needed in order to stay. If I would have known it to be right, I could have put up with nearly anything. At daylight I headed into the mountains.

The day was June 12, 1980. I had recently turned twenty-four years old. The entry in my journal from that day reads in part:

The main reason I am up here is because my testimony of the Order is gone, and I don't even know if I believe in God...

Anyway either God exists or he doesn't and either the Order is right or it's not. I hope to find out.

...I hope one week of my life is not too much for the [coal] mine to spare me.

...The thing most people don't understand is that man needs something to believe in and most people just take what's there handy. I know how it is because I need to believe in the Order desperately and yet my mind won't really let me.

I spent a week up in the mountains with no food. I went several days without water. I went to a place we called "Up on top." It was sort of a high plateau with lots of roads going to the heads of many canyons.

I had the back seat of my Blazer unbolted so it could be pulled out. At night I'd build a fire and sit on this bench seat and stare into the flames, or up at the stars, thinking. I remember one night in particular was very clear, and up at the high altitude, with no light pollution, and clear sky, the milky way was just a brilliant blaze of light across the sky; so many stars that they couldn't even be individually distinguished. I thought about how what I could see was just a fraction of the stars in just one galaxy, and that there were more galaxies in the Universe than stars in the milky way. It made me feel infinitesimal; A speck on a speck on a speck.

I threw another log on the fire. This one had a spider living on it, and suddenly the spider had a existential crises of its own; running around, looking for a way out. I wondered if, in the grand scheme of things, this spider's plight had any more or less meaning than my own; Just another random, meaningless event, in the vastness of the Universe.

Maybe this scary sense of meaninglessness is exactly why people create these belief systems. Belief systems in which they are chosen, special, protected, and cared for by an omnipotent being. At the same time I was aware of how amazing it was that I had consciousness and could perceive the Universe in at least part of it's immensity, and scariness. These and many other thoughts of like sort swirled in my head; day after day; night after night.

I slept in the Blazer. With the rear seat out there was room to stretch out in a sleeping bag. I remember one night I was really hungry and found an old Reese's Peanut Butter Cup candy bar wrapper in the Blazer. There was a tiny bit of chocolate and peanut butter residue on the wrapper. Of

course I wanted to lick this off, but that would have been a violation of my fast, so I just smelled it. It smelled wonderful.

During the day I drove around exploring. I had a hang glider at the time, and I'd taken it with me, but I didn't use it, partly because I didn't find a good place, and partly because after a few days, I was too weak from lack of food. I drove to the head of Trail canyon one day. Trail canyon is where the people from Co-op mine lived. I looked down and could see all the houses. They looked like little ant houses. I was thinking about how all those people were talking about me, wondering where I was. I wondered what is was going to be like going back.

For the first three days I went without water. On the fourth day I got rather ill, and started dry heaving. Almost nothing came up except a tiny bit of really vile nastiness. I'd located a spring which had a cattle watering trough. I went there, rinsed out my mouth, drank some water, washed up a little, after that I drank water.

There was one night in particular that I couldn't sleep, got really depressed, and nearly gave up and went home. I thought that if I did, however, I'd never know if I would have gotten an answer.

I spent a lot of time reading, writing, praying, and thinking. Nobody knew where I was. There were no miracles. It was probably the longest week of my life. After I came back down I never again seriously considered that the Order might be right

[Scott's essay continues in the Scholarch's Permanent Collection of the College of Stoic Philosophers library. [Click Here](#) to read the full essay]

ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ

School of Essential Studies

Autobiographical Essay

by David Lundmark

I was born on March 4, 1985, in Phoenix, Arizona. My father was, and is, an attorney, and my mother left work after I was born to devote herself full time to caring for me and, later, my sister. My schooling and upbringing were ordinary. I learned to read early, got in lots of trouble as a student in grade school, enrolled in advanced classes, and generally got good grades.

Religion played a powerful role in my childhood and youth. My family attended a conservative "nondenominational Bible church" that had a terrific youth program, in which I participated eagerly until I was in my late teens. I was fortunate in the leadership of this church. The senior pastor had his [Doctor of Divinity degree] from Cambridge and was bookish, intellectual, and charismatic. He, as well as the youth pastor, always encouraged us to ask questions of our faith, even and especially very difficult ones. After all, if what we believed was true, there would be an answer to even the most difficult questions. Truth should fear nothing.

That questioning nature took deep root in me, and as a child and teenager I devoured literature with abandon. Well, that may be an overstatement: in addition to the Bible, I read works on

Christian apologetics and, especially, lots and lots of science fiction, which taught me wonder. One of the most influential books I read as a teenager was Ursula K. le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. About a physicist on an anarchist world, it set me to thinking about politics, society, and economics in a way I never considered before. I started delving into literature on anarchism (the classical, communist kind) and was soon convinced that anarchism was in full accord with Christian ethics, as I understood them: the principles of caring for the poor, of resisting injustice, of not dominating others resonated powerfully with me.

This interest in anarchism was bound to raise eyebrows among my peers at church, as I was not then very shy about expressing what I thought. This led to a conversation, which, although simple, stands with me to this day as an example of intellectual friendship and charity. While on retreat with my youth group, my senior pastor approached me in a private moment to ask me, in short, what was going on with all the anarchism stuff. I explained as best I could what I thought about it and how it fit with the Christian faith, invoking Tolstoy and whatever other examples came to mind. He listened patiently, asking a few questions. At the end, he smiled and thanked me for explaining it to him, and then suggested that I do some reading on Calvinism and its relationship with capitalism. There was no condemnation, only listening and nudging in the direction he thought I should pursue. (To my discredit, I never followed his suggestions: I was too sure I already had the truth.)

Calvinism. That word ultimately spelled the doom of my youthful Christian faith. Somehow, my youth group had become infected with a long-running debate between Calvinist double-predestination and an Arminianism which allowed free will. This seemed to be a question of no small importance to me, as the Calvinist position struck me as cruel and monstrous. What kind of God would create a man with the sole purpose of damning him? Surely that had to be false, and Arminianism correct. But I knew that, just because one alternative was more attractive, it was not thereby true. So, I agonized for months over this question, studying the Bible, talking with pastors, reading other books. Even when I tried to put the question aside, it kept coming back: predestination or free will? Cruelty or kindness?

The more I read, the more I became convinced that the Calvinists had the better of the argument. Finally, during one conversation with friends from church, the topic came up, and I made my decision: "Predestination is a doctrine of hate. It is also the biblically justified doctrine. I will choose love." My apostasy sounded grand in my head, although I'm not sure anyone else around me even noticed.

Unfortunately for me, the choice of love over hate (at least as I understood it at age 16 or 17) created rather more problems. After all, I still believed that the Bible was the Word of God and was, therefore, infallibly true. I just wanted no part of it. Thus, I lived in a strange kind of limbo, where I lived in opposition to what I believed to be true, because what I believed to be true I found abhorrent.

Sometimes I wonder if my departure from my youthful Christianity owed less to these grand intellectual and theological controversies and more to my cultivation of an immoral lifestyle. After all, in high school I started experimenting with drugs and alcohol, and I entered a disastrous sexual relationship with a girl. Could those moral choices have occasioned my departure from the faith? I am strongly inclined to say no. I was perfectly willing to accept that something could be true, no matter how much I didn't want it to be. I was interested in truth for its own sake, and not for the sake of justifying the life I wanted to lead.

That said, it is hard to maintain a contradiction for long, and with time, my "believing unbelief" transformed into a general agnostic theism. I could not imagine that there was no God: the philosophical proofs were just too good! But it came to seem less important that God be identified with the God of the Bible, with whom I had grown up.

My political engagement continued unabated during this period, and I suppose I found in anarchism a surrogate religious faith. With the decline of my native faith, however, the replacement grew increasingly bitter. I came to reject my initial Tolstoyan pacifism and adopted a generalized advocacy of insurrectionary violence along with a skepticism toward most forms of “activism,” which struck me as privileged, narcissistic, and ineffectual.

After high school, I attended Pomona College in Claremont, California. College saw some radical shifts in my life, both intellectually and morally. Morally, I became a wreck: my vices increased in number and frequency, I became increasingly unsociable, and I felt like I lost much of what had made me a happy, outgoing person in my younger years. Intellectually, however, college was a game-changer. I became an avowed atheist almost out the gate: a friend loaned me a book by Richard Dawkins, and I was swept away by his withering rebukes of “bronze-age gods.” Empirical science had done away with the need for God, I believed, and, besides, all those arguments I thought proved the existence of God turned out not to hold much water, anyway.

On entering college, I intended to study history, which had been my favorite subject in high school. This, happily, was not to be. My second semester at school, I enrolled in an extremely lousy history class and in an extremely interesting course in Ancient Philosophy. I was immediately hooked. There was something compelling about the ethical writings of Plato and, especially, Aristotle: a recipe for ethics and goodness that rested on reason and not on religious faith. More than this: it was not simply a recipe for good behavior, but rather for *eudaimonia*, for a flourishing human life. I devoted the rest of my college career to studying philosophy, with a focus on ancient Greek philosophy and Aristotle's ethics in particular. Virtue ethics seemed more fully human to me than its deontological or consequentialist competitors. I was convinced that Aristotle had captured a truth that was necessary to my happiness.

One great consequence of studying philosophy was that I was almost completely depoliticized. I retreated into a realm of abstract arguments and did not make much time for my anarchist convictions. By the time I graduated, after various experiences, none important here, I had renounced my surrogate religion, too. My time was better spent translating Greek and Latin literature and pondering the nuances of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Of course, my own shabby personal moral life meant that I did not reap many fruits from my philosophical studies. I struggled powerfully with the existential angst of youth, and I was haunted by the absence of the God who had once been the source of all meaning in my life. I am unsure if I really wanted God to exist—it probably depended on the day. But I was convinced he could not. As the years went by, especially after I graduated and lost the structure of student life (to fast forward briefly), I especially mourned the lack of a center in my life, the lack of a motive to overcome my moral torpor and become a functional, virtuous adult. I thought that if I had a God, I could do anything. After all, if an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being exists, why *wouldn't* you do anything you could for Him? I never read anything by Sartre, but I stumbled upon a quote from him that succinctly summarized my own view at the time: “God doesn't exist. The bastard.”

My reflexive and arrogant atheism suffered some knocks, however. The most significant was from a professor in a course on Jewish Mysticism, which friends had encouraged me to take. After reading the material for the first week, I became frustrated with the repeated references to God. I was convinced that “God” was an absurdity, a contradiction in terms, something that could not only not exist but could not even be coherently thought. So, I approached my professor after class and told her I was having trouble making sense of all the God talk. The word “God,” I explained, seemed to be merely a placeholder word because the writer didn't know what he was talking about. The professor looked at me with much greater patience than I deserved. “Yes,” she explained, “‘God’ is a placeholder.

Your job as a reader is to figure out what the writer is pointing toward by using that word.” No surprise, but 19-year-old me had never thought of that before, and I took the matter under advisement.

My penchant for “dangerous” reading continued while I was in college. This time, it took the form of reading articles of a conservative Catholic periodical. My readings in Aristotle had, it seems by necessity, led me to an interest in Catholicism. The Catholic Church, as far as I could tell, was the only body that really took a practical (as opposed to merely theoretical) interest in virtue ethics today. As I understood things, the Church had adopted Aristotle via Aquinas and was happily encouraging its members to cultivate the moral and intellectual virtues. This was intriguing, even though I was sure the Church was wrong about God, and about most of its countercultural moral stances, such as on sexual issues.

Nevertheless, I was drawn to the beauty of the Catholic Church. Not only the beauty of her art and architecture and liturgy, although that was there, but especially the beauty of her intellectual heritage. I could not help admitting that a great number of men who were far wiser than I had believed that God existed—I felt a little presumptuous—parochial, even—imagining that I had some kind of wisdom that these earlier sages had lacked. Nevertheless, I could not bring myself to believe. God simply could not exist, no matter how much I might want him to. I visited the resident priest on campus several times, and he graciously met with a bedraggled, scrawny student reeking of cigarettes and worse. But I could not commit. The Church might be Beautiful, and she might even be Good, but I could not except that she was True.

To cut to the chase, I did ultimately become a Catholic several years after my graduation in 2007. I had moved back in with my parents in Phoenix, was working at Starbucks, and was spending most of my free time drinking beer and hanging out with friends. It was a great way to use a \$160,000 degree.

One Sunday morning, I found myself with a powerful desire to go to Mass. I had just come out of some rough personal situations, and I was feeling lost. So, I went and had an emotionally overwhelming experience. That day, or shortly thereafter, I knew I either had to pursue my interest in Catholicism seriously or abandon it permanently. I had flirted long enough: it was time to ask the girl out or leave her alone altogether. So, still not believing in God, I enrolled in a class for potential converts.

The precise progression of my conversion is not the easiest for me to describe. I will accordingly condense it into three stages: first, *credo quia absurdum* (G.K. Chesterton helped); second, realizing the first was insufficient, *ad quem ibimus?*; third, and finally, *credo ut intellegam*. Please pardon the opacity of this description. To some extent, all three of these stages remain present with me to this day. Ultimately, converting was less a matter of assenting to true propositions than it was a matter of falling in love.

As expected, the Church provided a crash course on practical ethics. But, to my surprise, it was not nearly as easy as I thought it would be. I had no “road to Damascus” moment, and I was not instantly transformed into a virtuous soul. The sacraments were not magic, and I had lots of work to do.

The path of virtue, which I came to see also as the path of holiness, was long, slow, and difficult. I had lots of baggage and bad habits from my past, which I was not able to simply slough off all at once. It is discouraging to bring the same sins to confession week after week, month after month, year after year. And let me tell you: Catholic guilt is a real thing. When I find that I have slipped into a state of mortal sin, it is often enough to send me spiraling into despair and wallowing in my vices for days or even months before resolving to do penance and make amends. But, overall, I am

trying to cultivate virtue, which is more than I could say about myself earlier.

In addition to the above, my “external” life started moving again. After laboring as a barista for two and a half years, I realized I was never going to apply to graduate school. So, I took the LSAT and prepared to apply to law school, which was easier because it didn’t require a writing sample. Just after I sat for the exam, however, I was offered a teaching position at a classical liberal-arts charter school. That sounded much better than law school, and I accepted. For the next four years, I taught Latin and Medieval History, primarily to junior high students. I loved being back in an academic environment. The school actively discouraged any references to pop culture both inside and outside the classroom, and I had many searching conversations with faculty and students alike about philosophy, art, history, and religion. I was happy, and I thought I would make teaching my career.

But I did not reckon with the next big change in my life: marriage. I met my wife at church, and after a two-year courtship, we were married. In true Catholic fashion, our first child was born nine months after our wedding. My wife is not like me. In fact, it would be hard to find someone whose upbringing was less like mine. She is the oldest of 11 children, was raised Catholic, and was homeschooled through high school. She never attended college. She is, however, full of practical skills, disciplined, devoted to family, and has a no-nonsense approach to getting things done. Her work ethic and personal morality puts mine to shame.

My marriage therefore has been a great spur to try to tame my vices. For one thing, my wife does not let me get away with much self-deceptive nonsense. Furthermore, the responsibilities of family life have made me more conscientious of my duties. I now have three children, with a fourth almost here. When I see them, I am overwhelmed with love and a deep sense of how unfit I am to raise children. My family thus provides external sources of motivation for right action that are difficult to ignore.

Of course, my wife’s and my profoundly different backgrounds have proved a fertile source of strife, particularly when it comes to child-rearing decisions. It is too easy for my passions to overwhelm my reason. Often, I do violence to my own objectives by failing to act and speak with prudence.

When my wife was pregnant with our first child, I realized that I could not support a child on a teacher’s salary, and, just before my LSAT score expired, I applied to law school. Three years later, in 2017, I took a J.D. from the University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law. I am now a practicing attorney, an associate at a law firm specializing in product-liability defense. As an attorney, I am accountable for how I spend my time and use my mind in a way that I have never been before. I enjoy the intellectual rigor of legal analysis, although the subject matter is far more mundane—dare I say boring?—than philosophy or theology.

I suppose I should finally say something about Stoicism.

I mentioned my somewhat counter-productive experiences with relying on religious devotion to grow in virtue. One serious fall, and it can be hard for me to lift my eyes to the Cross or to ask, again, the mercy of God. Far easier just to keep sinning. While emotionally and spiritually estranged from the Church, I find it easier to look elsewhere for possible solutions to my maladies that didn’t require as much emotional investment. Buddhist meditation has had great appeal. Confucian ethics are profound and inspiring. I need something to help me grow in natural virtue, to preserve a certain equanimity, even in the face of mortal sin. (I hasten to add that I do not impugn the Church or the sacraments: I do not mean that I am above their help, but that perhaps, in a way, I am below it. Grace builds on nature, and my nature is poorly formed.)

This is where Stoicism comes in. One day, while I was feeling sorry for myself and frustrated with my inability to overcome my vices, I remembered the opening lines of the *Enchiridion*, which a

college friend had shared with me many years ago. “Some things are up to us, and some things are not up to us.” I was inspired—there is no other word—to look up the text of Epictetus’s work. Immediately, I found practical, sage advice that cut through all my misery and excuses. I spent my spare time over the next month transcribing the Greek text of the *Enchiridion* into my journal, translating as I went. Along with the practical wisdom I was acquiring, it was a pleasure to use Greek again, which I have had few opportunities to do since I left college.

I next discovered Chris Fisher’s *Stoicism on Fire* podcast. I binge listened to all the available episodes while I was reading the *Enchiridion*, and I started to apply the Stoic disciplines to my life. These were practical techniques I could apply that were devoid of the religious baggage that so often disturbed my emotions and my conscience. Did I commit some grievous fault? Perhaps—but, once committed, it is in the past and beyond my power to change. It does not affect my present ability to apply the dichotomy of control, or the disciplines of assent, desire, and action.

Over the next few months, I consistently applied the Stoic disciplines as I understood them, while maintaining a consistent regime of “mindfulness” meditation and physical exercise. I was amazed at the results. I was happier and more content than I had been in a long time, and I had gone for longer without falling into old vices than I could remember.

A beginner’s progress cannot continue unabated, and mine did not. Problems arose at home and at work that I was not prepared to deal with, and I slacked off on the above disciplines. My bad habits returned. But I knew that I had hit on something that could serve as a guide.

I learned about the College of Stoic Philosophers from Chris Fisher’s podcast. I am specifically interested in the College, and in particular the School of Essential Studies, because I want to learn about, and be accountable for practicing, the disciplines that can lead to growth in virtue. Practical ethics is the primary reason I am applying to this course.

In addition, I hope to find an academically rigorous environment, where I can learn in a structured fashion about Stoic physics and logic, which I find independently interesting. I don’t expect to adopt Stoic physical dogmas. I remain a committed Catholic, even if a bad one. I also remain an Aristotelian at heart. The Angelic Doctor and The Philosopher both rule out materialism. I have fewer initial objections to Stoic determinism. Maybe that makes me a heterodox Catholic, with a lingering Calvinist influence (my youthful objections to the supposed “cruelty” of Calvin’s system no longer seem so persuasive). I am essentially a compatibilist, and I cannot make much sense of free will without at least some kind of determinism.

I do not necessarily consider myself a Stoic, for I do not subscribe to all the dogmas of that august and ancient school, although I am happy to call myself a *prokopton*. I may never be as virtuous as Socrates, but that does not mean I should not strive to progress in virtue. I will never be as rich as Croesus or as strong as Milo, but I of course take care of my wealth and my body. And if I can care for these things, which God can take from me at any moment, how can I fail to care for that which He has left entirely in my own power: my will?

<<<>>>