



THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

AGAINST THE EXERCISES



CONTRA EXERCITIA

BY DIRK MAHLING, FCSP

Editor's note: This essay was written by Dirk Mahling, president of the College of Stoic Philosophers, who passed away in early 2022. It was originally a post on the Traditional Stoicism and Living Stoicism Facebook Groups. It is being reprinted here with the permission of Dirk's family.

There has been a recent flurry of [Facebook] posts - even books - on so-called "Stoic exercises". There seems to be a huge demand for "doing Stoicism". With the growing appeal of Stoicism it seems that many newcomers ask themselves "What do I need to do to be Stoic". Or, since we live in a society of achievement and folks striving to be over-achievers, the question even turns to "How can I do exercises to become a better Stoic faster". In this spirit it is no surprise to find publications such as the Stoic Gym or Daily Stoic exercises or "15 CBT exercises for Stoics". (It is well worth remembering the distinction of "doing vs being", much in the spirit of Erich Fromm's "Being vs Having"). So can Stoicism be learned the same way we go to the gym? Do we just need a good regimen of sit-ups and push-ups for the mind? Or can we actually do physical exercises to influence the mind, following some kind of body/mind/spirit connection? Is Stoicism like juggling? Just keeps practicing and you will get better? Overcome the ignorant old self and emerge a victorious enlightened sage after diligently exercising?

NO. Stoicism is NOT like juggling. It is NOT a "techne stochastike", a technical art you learn by practice, such as juggling. Imagine talking to a [Christian] friend: Is your xtian faith merely a technique? Does going to church on Sundays

make you a [Christian]? All the focus on "cold showers" or "memento mori coins" or "daily journaling" or repeating the serenity prayer or reciting the much abused "dichotomy of control", all such exercises look more like folks spinning prayer wheels in some sort of superstitious ritual in order to be "stoic". None of this makes you "stoic", if you do not know what the essence of Stoicism is. At best, they are life hacks without foundation "revealed" by the gurus of Stoicism and Broicism, separated from true Stoic Logic and Phusis - void of value and the pneuma of benevolent providence.

As Musonius Rufus points out, you need to learn and understand before you can put anything into practice. Once you understand that it is foolish to touch a hot oven, there is no more need to practice "not touching a hot oven". You know it, you don't do it. Done.

Socrates, the father of all hellenistic philosophical schools, such as the Lyceum, the Academy, the Stoa, or the Garden, even holds that all you need is insight! Nothing more. Merely proper *epistêmê*. That may be a bit extreme, but clearly, you can't practice what you don't know.

Following the Middle Stoa's Posidonius and, by inference Aristotle, you need to develop your dianoetic virtues before you can habituate your ethical ones. You need to understand new concepts and make them your own. Some of them are exquisite, solitary "AHA!" moments that from then on change your life, your behavior. For the Stoics that would be the monumental insight to the workings of the cosmos, determinism plus free will, co-fated actions, compatibilism, and kind providence. It takes a long time to get

your mind around that. No practice helps. Once you grasp the idea of pneuma and fate, everything in Stoicism becomes a lot more cohesive and meaningful. The existential questions are answered. Existence has a firm foundation - a feat not bought with a memento mori coin.

Thus... study! Take a class! Read a book! Look for a teacher. Otherwise you follow the path of the hack musician or hack golfer, who never learned their art right and now can't shake the bad habits and throws their clubs down in dis-gust every time they miss a chord or a shot.

That leaves us with the ethical virtues. Clearly, once you have understood what you want to implement - and WHY - you need to put it into action. You need to turn your insights into habits; and old habits tend to persist. So clearly you benefit from a well designed "workout" schema to habituate your new found insights, such as "dikaiosyne" or "sophrosyne". But I doubt that cold showers will do that.

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