



THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

STOIC ETHICS AND POLITICAL CITIZENSHIP



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Stoicism is often thought of as an individualistic philosophy and, while that is true to an extent, for a Stoic the only good is virtue which is found within their own choices and not in anything external. However, that does not imply that a Stoic should remain unconcerned with their broader communities and politics. Stoic ethics, in various points, shows the importance of our social relationships and good reasoning to live mutually beneficial lives. There are also many examples from ancient Rome of Stoics engaging politically. In *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius thanks his brother for teaching him about several of them who stood up against tyrannical moves from those in power (2011, p. 47). Marcus also credits his brother with teaching him what a Stoic might consider to be a fair and just government “to conceive the idea of a balanced constitution, and of government founded on equity and freedom of speech, and of a monarchy which values above all things the freedom of the subject” (2011, p. 47). These words contain many ideas that are progressive by ancient standards. They come from the Stoics’ cosmopolitan nature, their concept of virtue being the only good, and our nature as humans and universal nature as a whole.

Stoics are cosmopolitan world citizens, an idea stemming from Stoic physics and theology based on the idea being that everything is interconnected and interdependent via reason. Human reason is a fragment of universal reason from God which is immanent and pervades the entire universe. Being cosmopolitan is a recognition that we are related to our fellow human beings across the world both ethically and socially (Long, 2007). We, as humans, have a faculty of reason and we share that with all other humans. This universal reason is essentially the reason everything is the way that it is, or the laws of nature. The goal for a Stoic is the development of their own reason and bringing that into agreement with universal reason. That is what is meant by the Stoic phrase of ‘living in agreement with Nature’. Essentially, a Stoic will seek to adapt to the way things are by bringing oneself into agreement with the whole of the universe for the benefit of the whole. As Marcus mentions in *Meditations* 6.54: “*What brings no benefit to the hive brings none to the bee.*” A point also echoed by Epictetus in *Discourses* 2.10:

“Consider, through the possession of reason, what you are distinguished from. You are distinguished from wild beasts; you are distinguished from sheep. What is more, you are a citizen of the world and a part of it and moreover no subordinate part but one of the leading parts. Insofar as you are capable of

understanding the divine governing order of the world and of reflecting about all that follows from it.” (2014, p.90).

News from the College

Did you know? Since its founding in 2008 through late 2022, the College has enrolled nearly 600 students. Of these, 263 successfully completed their program (Prep, SES or MAP). The College’s graduates reside in 37 countries around the globe. Marcus Aurelius Program courses can now be started on the first of any month; contact us if you wish to renew your studies.

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The New Stoa board met on November 19. We thank the departing board members, Mark Karet, Adam Valenstein and Kevin Patrick for their service. New board members elected are Kathryn Bucher, George Nagel and Kai Whiting. Mitch Leventhal was elected to serve a full term as President, with George as Vice President and Kathryn as Secretary. Welcome to our new board and officers.

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For a Stoic, virtue is the only good, vice the only bad and everything else is indifferent. There are also further categorizations of indifferents into preferred indifferents, dispreferred indifferents, and neutral indifferents. The category of indifferent includes many things that people generally assume to be good such as health, wealth, reputation, and other people. That may seem like a contradiction to say a Stoic should be concerned for their community, which is made up of many other people who are all indifferents.

But it isn't a contradiction when the concept of indifferents in Stoicism is properly understood.

It is important to keep in mind what virtue and good mean for a Stoic as it is good for me and good for my soul or character. For a Stoic, virtue comes from cultivating a good character or soul through making appropriate choices. Both good and bad come from ourselves and from our choice. It is how we respond to the situations that happen that determine whether they are good or bad (Schofield, 2003). These are what Epictetus referred to as things that are 'up to us' which are our opinions, desires and actions. It is everything outside that, everything 'not up to us', which is indifferent. If I have appropriate opinions, desires and actions, I will be living well and making progress towards virtue and everyone else's opinions, desires and actions will have no effect on my own soul or my ability to live well. They are indifferent in that regard. As Marcus Aurelius asserts in Meditations:

"To my own free will, the free will of my neighbour is as much a matter of indifference as his breath and his flesh. For even though we exist primarily for the sake of one another, it is still the case that the ruling centre of each individual has its own independent authority. Otherwise, the evil of my neighbour would become an evil for myself too, but that was contrary to God's wish, so that my ill fortune should not come to depend on anyone other than myself." (2011, p. 141).

To say something is indifferent is to say that it does not make a difference in making correct choices, it does not mean that it has no value or that it should be treated with indifference.

Another key point in Stoic ethics is their doctrine of appropriation. Appropriation is a sense of what is a natural and appropriate action for a being and a sense for what is our own. This is based on the most basic instinct of all animals, that of self-preservation (Schofield, 2003). We, as all animals, are inclined to naturally pursue those things that are beneficial and avoid those things which cause harm. This is also where the idea of preferred, dispreferred, and neutral indifferents comes in. Preferred indifferents are naturally preferable according to this impulse; being healthy, eating, sleeping, surviving and other functions that are natural to us as biological organisms. Dispreferred indifferents are logically those things that are not naturally preferable such as sickness and death. And neutral indifferents are those things which are neither, such as the colour of my shoes or whether I have an odd or even number of hairs on my head. However, all these indifferents cannot be valued in relation to virtue, which is to have an excellent character. We choose indifferents based on their being preferable or not in relation to these natural instincts (Brennan, 2003) but also, and importantly, in relation to the whole, to universal reason. Epictetus makes this clear when quoting a passage of Chrysippus in Discourses 2.6

"So Chrysippus did well to say, 'As long as the consequences remain unclear to me, I always hold to what is best fitted to secure such things as are in accordance with nature; for God himself, in creating me, granted me the freedom to choose them. But if I in fact knew that illness had been decreed for me at this moment by destiny, I would welcome even that; for the foot, too, if it had understanding, would be eager to get spattered with mud.'" (2014, p. 81-82).

How we make these choices also develops as we grow, mature, and further develop our reason. We begin to understand cooperation as a benefit and begin to consider our family as our own. What is good for them is also good for us so, if we are using our reason, we will not cheat them out of something for our own selfish purposes. As our reason develops, we extend outwards this feeling of what is our own, ideally coming to see all of humanity and the entire cosmos as our own. The Stoics described the affinity we feel more readily for those close to us with an image of concentric circles. The first and innermost encircles ourself, next comes our family, then our friends, our community, our countrymen and finally all of humanity. The goal for a Stoic is to work to move those in outer circles closer into the inner circles (Long & Sedley, 1987, p. 349-353). This further speaks to the cosmopolitan nature of Stoicism and our shared bond with the rest of humanity and all life on earth, this would be seen as a 21st century adaption of Hierocles' model of concern (Whiting et al, 2018).

For a Stoic, it is this ability to reason that allows us to act appropriately, or virtuously, and with compassion towards others. Emotions for a Stoic are not motivators for proper conduct or political change as emotional empathy is not a helpful guide in doing what is right. Without getting into too many of the intricacies, Stoics are not against emotions altogether. Emotions are created from judgements of whether something is good or bad and rational or irrational. This excludes many of the more passionate emotions that people often credit for positive social change. For instance, righteous anger would be the result of irrationally judging something to be bad.

Psychology Professor Paul Bloom makes a claim very similar to that of the Stoics in his book *Against Empathy*. He posits that emotional empathy is not necessary for us to act in a kind and compassionate manner and that, in fact, many problems we face are due to too much empathy (Bloom, 2017). Against the common refrain

that what the world needs to solve the issues facing us is more empathy, Bloom states:

"I want to make a case for the value of conscious, deliberative reasoning in everyday life, arguing that we should strive to use our heads rather than our hearts. We do this a lot already, but we should work on doing more." (2017, p. 5).

Furthermore, he also states that: *"Empathy is a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now. This makes us care more about them, but it leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blind as well to the suffering of those we do not or cannot empathize with." (2017, p. 9).*

Bloom also makes a distinction between emotional empathy which is feeling what another does, and cognitive empathy which is understanding another's situation. Cognitive empathy is not problematic in the way that emotional empathy is. If someone is angry, responding in kind is unlikely to help the situation. But understanding their anger and being able to examine what may be causing their anger from a more neutral perspective, would be very helpful. However, cognitive empathy is neutral as it doesn't, and cannot, guide moral action. If one is acting emotionally, in anger for instance, that will motivate action even if it is inappropriate action and immoral. Stoicism can provide the moral framework to ensure that cognitive empathy is guided towards good. This is for the purpose of virtue and benefit of the whole. In Handbook 16, Epictetus appears to be advocating for something along the lines of cognitive empathy while eschewing emotional empathy

"When you see someone weeping in sorrow because his child has gone away, or because he has lost his possessions, take care that you're not carried away by the impression that he is indeed in misfortune because of these external things, but be ready at once with this thought, 'It isn't what has happened that

so distresses this person for someone else could suffer the same without feeling that distress but rather the judgement that he has formed about it.' As far as words go, however, don't hesitate to sympathize with him, or even, if the occasion arises, to join in his lamentations; but take care that you don't also lament deep inside." (2014, p. 291).

Another Stoic approach to difficult situations would also involve taking a step back and viewing the situation from the cosmic perspective with the bigger picture in mind. This is via universal reason to help determine what is good for the whole and not just ourselves. Looking at things objectively helps eliminate emotional overreacting. In Handbook 26, Epictetus tells us that we are better at judging appropriate responses to situations when they happen to someone else and that we should strive to respond in kind when similar events happen to us. Looking at events objectively, to avoid emotional overreaction or investment, is an important part of Stoicism and is also an important part of moral political action guided towards common good.

John Ralston Saul, in his book *The Unconscious Civilization*, posits that legitimacy within society comes from 1 of 4 different things: gods, kings, groups, or individual citizenry acting as a whole (1995). According to Saul, neither gods, kings, or groups are compatible with democracy because they lack what he refers to as disinterest. Disinterest being action taken with a long-term view in service of the public good. Gods, kings, and groups all act in self-interest. He posits that a society that bases its legitimacy in the individual citizenry is quite different:

"The society in which legitimacy lies with the individual citizen is quite different. It can happily tolerate gods, kings and groups, providing they do not interfere with the public good — that is, providing that they are properly regulated by the standards of the public good. The citizen-

based society can do this because it is built upon the shared disinterest of the individuals." (1995, p. 34).

This individualism, which is not based on selfishness, greed or the benefit of oneself over others, fits perfectly well with Stoicism. Epictetus speaks of the citizen in much the same way:

"Now what is the calling of a citizen? Never to approach anything with a view to personal advantage, never to deliberate about anything as though detached from the whole, but to act as one's hand or foot would act if it had the power of reason and could understand the order of nature, and so would never exercise any desire or motive other than by reference to the whole." (2014, p. 90).

Our calling as a citizen requires action, which is our participation in not working towards our selfish interests but towards our common good through use of our shared reason. Our affinity to those close to us in our circles of concern also means that may be where we can make the most positive impact. We do not need to be the leader of our country to effect positive change, we can start with our family and community, volunteering or getting involved with our local school board, even helping our neighbour in a time of need. All of these things, if we are doing them guided by reason, can have a positive effect and bring benefit to the whole. Stoics do put the focus on their own choices and reason. They understand that it is individuals who make decisions and that means it is our responsibility to create a better society. I think there is the idea of a positive feedback loop, where individuals making better reasoned choices will create a better and healthier society which will in turn create better individuals. But the change always originates with the individual. Stoicism tells us that the individual should be geared towards the good of the whole, bringing themselves into agreement with universal reason and helping others to do the same.

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Ryan currently teaches carpentry in northern Alberta, Canada where he lives with his wife and three children. He discovered Stoicism after hearing about it on a podcast in 2018, and has been working on integrating it into his life since.



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