



**THE STOIC  
PHILOSOPHER**

## ***In the Nick of Time***

**Liam Stephens**

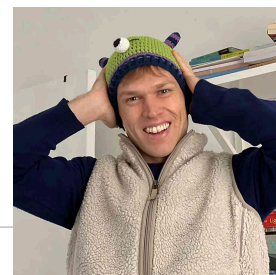
*"...that everything has always been the same, and keeps recurring..."*

*"Nature's job: to shift things elsewhere, to transform them, to pick them up and move them here and there. Constant alteration..."*

- Marcus Aurelius (2003, pp. 21, 102)

Encapsulated in these quotes above, we see two themes running through *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, which are also repeated in other Stoic sources: constancy and change. A glance might assume they are in contradiction with each other, but further probing shows us that this is not the case. The universe follows orderly rules. There are not only physical and mathematical constants, laws of gravity, thermodynamics, and the like, but we repeat our stories on a human level. Empires rise and fall. Greed and heroism can appear in every time period. But if we are to make an accurate account of our shared reality then we also find that nature loves change. Stars and planets evolve, as well as organisms. Human beings grow and decay, as do animals and plants. In the short time that we have here, and the limited wisdom we can muster, how do we adapt ourselves to both?

There is a notion of "timeliness" that can help us understand this question. The right time, or good timing, is built into Stoicism in a way that is easy to take for granted as a modern practitioner. It was expounded clearly and briefly in a few sources, but otherwise, not repeated often, because it was taken as an assumption. Yes, fate, or nature, places us in circumstances that are not of our choosing, which can follow consistent patterns, but often vary. Then it is given to us to respond with skill and grace when the time arises. The Stoics tried their best to follow this to the letter, but they would not have been alone in this view. They had support from myriad voices, including Homer and the Bible. In the following paper, I will help clarify some of these views on the "right time".



### **Orderliness and Timeliness**

Central to the doctrines of the Stoics is the sage. The perfect person who embodies goodness, virtue, in its truest sense. But who is this perfect person? I have never met one myself, but A. A. Long says that the philosophers of the ancient Mediterranean had a few tests. The first was that they should perform "appropriate action" in body and mind, not only doing the right thing, but knowing it deeply and clearly. They should show "steadiness and orderliness", performing reliably in the face of change. But, also adapting

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to circumstances, being timely, called opportune in Latin (1986, pp. 205-206).

Here is the same contradiction mentioned above. On a normal day, we would expect the Stoic sage to follow a routine, reliably doing good in their community. But a Stoic sage is also able to break with social taboos when circumstance requires it. Suicide is the most common example of this pattern. We expect people to reliably tend to their health and well-being, but there are numerous examples of Stoic practitioners committing suicide in the name of a cause, or responding to injustice. The Stoics even made exceptions for cannibalism, incest, and non-burial of the dead if the time was right (Inwood & Gerson, 2008, p.175).

One example given by Cicero is that of the Saguntines, Roman citizens, living in the Iberian Peninsula. While facing a siege against the Carthaginian army, they committed the act of patricide. They had a hard choice to make. They knew that as the enemy approached, many of their family members would be taken as prisoners and sold into slavery. These people had lived as free citizens their whole life. Under any other circumstances they would have shown unshakable loyalty to their families, but they believed the most rational action was to take the lives of their parents as an act of mercy, and to preserve their dignity (Tsekourakis, 1974, p.56). When we think in terms of timeliness, the Sanguntines had a window of opportunity to act rightly. Too soon, and they would be criminals, too late and they would be in bondage.

If we agree with this view, what are we assuming? Firstly, that time is not separate from its contents. Yes, it may be useful to abstract time as a stand alone, measurable thing, for the sake of scientific measurement, but this does not match experience. We always observe time as a change in something we observable (people aging, movies starting and ending, plants growing, etc.). The Stoics were obsessed with continuity. Everything is connected through an interdependent web of cause and effect (Frede, 2003, p.185). To them there would be no reason to treat time separately, as it seemingly links into all the other processes that are also part of nature.

Secondly, there is an assumption about the “appropriate” time to do things, like a sword fitting its scabbard. Believing in providence makes this view very tenable. We can imagine an intelligent agent directing circumstances to match our needs and abilities at the right moment, like a chef cooking a meal to fit our dietary needs, or a teacher tailoring a lesson to our understanding. However, even without this belief, we could imagine natural circumstances where it is most appropriate for us to step out of comfortable habits and act. If someone has a heart attack on a plane, and there is only one doctor there, it is appropriate and necessary for them to help in that moment.

Of course, both of these assumptions fit into an understanding of time that is qualitative, instead of quantitative, and challenges some of the beliefs taught by our culture in the Twenty-First Century. So, let’s delve further into how ancient peoples thought about time.

## **Kairos and Chronos**

Of all our cultural traits, time perception may be the hardest to change (Livermore, 2013, 1:30). Our schools train us from a young age to be mindful of the time. We are rarely far from a clock. Many of us are used to bells going off to mark the start and finish of each period. This was left over from Nineteenth Century Prussian reforms in education, which mimicked bells used on factory floors to



keep the time (Gatto, 2009, p.130). But why should we measure time in minutes and seconds? Why not instead focus on the quality of the task to be completed?

Philosopher, Lewis Mumford, suggested that the clock is the quintessential invention of the Industrial revolution, calling it, "... a piece of power machinery whose "product" is seconds and minutes..." (2010, p.23) This way of thinking, in discreet, measurable, passing time, had a Greek name, *chronos*. People of the ancient Mediterranean were aware of it, but it was not the only way they thought of time, especially since clocks did not become ubiquitous in urban centers, in Europe, until the Thirteenth Century (Mumford, 2010, p.22). Instead, many ancient peoples would have spoken of time as *kairos*, or time as organic moments. This was time as a quality, and not just a quantity (Hadot, 1995, p.221).

One writer stressed this when he said, "For the Homeric Greeks time was not homogeneous; it had quality... There are all the changes from dawn to the end of night, all the changes of the year from the beginning of spring on through summer, autumn, and winter. For the Romans time was weather, weather time, *tempus*, *tempestas*..." (Onians, 1951, p.411) This is important to understand. *Kairos* (Greek) or *tempus/ tempestas* (Latin) can mean time or weather, as this was how they related to time (Onians, 1951, p.411). While we might understand that *kairos* and *chronos* time demand different processes mentally, they literally conflicted physically. If ancient people kept time with a sundial the clouds could hide the hour. The winter could freeze a water clock (Mumford, 2010, p.23). They had to think in terms of the time to grow the crops, or when to go to battle. When we think of the famous line from Ecclesiastes, "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.", the Greek translates to *kairos*, not *chronos* (Ecclesiastes, 2024, 3:1).

Two analogies were popular for the workings of *kairos*, that of a bow and arrow, and that of the weaver's loom. Ancient Greek playwright, Euripides, spoke of, "aiming the bow beyond the *kairos*.", *kairos* here, not just speaking of timing, but a specific mark to aim for (Onians, 1951, p.343). Homer and other Greek writers often spoke of the *kairos* as a point on the human body where it was most easy to drive a weapon in with force, which explains the root of the English, "temple", derived from Latin (Onians, 1951, p.344). Many of us know the story of how Odysseus had to face a trial to regain his family and home back, by shooting a bow through a series of twelve axeheads (Onians, 1951, p.345). Just like the temple, these were small holes that he had to hit at just the right angle and timing or he would fail his trial. It is important to understand that this is why the English, pore (hole) and opportunity are closely related (Onians, 1951, p.345). The *kairos* was literally an opening, a fleeting moment in time for us to act, a chance to hit our mark, or miss it after it was too late. We still think this way when we use the expression, "in the nick (hole) of time." (Onians, 1951, p.347)

Once we understand how these terms for, holes, opportunities, and time were closely related, it helps us grasp Cicero's metaphor of the archer in a new light. As he says, "...actually striking [the target]... is as it were to be selected and not to be chosen." (Inwood & Gerson, 2008, p.153) We try to hit targets, but it is not up to us whether they land. *Kairos* time is a window where action becomes possible, and the use of our talents increases the chances of hitting our target, but if we are too early or too late, the opportunity will be lost. It is the time when the crossing of fate and choices become the most appropriate.



This is also why weaving was such a fitting analogy for the *kairos*, the best moment to act. The Greeks loved using weaving and thread as a metaphor for human fate (Onians, 1951, p.349). A loom, a weaving machine, provides a method for vertical and horizontal threads to mesh together, the warp and the woof. Using such a device requires a sense of rhythm, as each section of the cloth develops its color and pattern, the threads of the vertical warp open. A talented craftsman needs to find the right moment to send the shuttle through, or ruin their design. While this analogy is more elegant, and less violent, than that of a bow and arrow, the intention is the same. Fate provides the moment, the opportunity, but human talent and effort needs to seize on it to achieve its culmination.

## Counterpoints and Key Takeaways

It should be stressed that none of these views are Stoic *per se*. They reflect some known views from literate peoples of the Mediterranean, from a wide period of time. There could have been individuals who disagreed with these analogies, preferring others, but I do believe that these views are coherent with the Stoic one. Seneca's views on death drink from the well of *kairos* time, "So it is: we are not given a short life but we make it short, and we are not ill-supplied but wasteful of it... Life is long if you know how to use it." (Seneca, 2005, p.2) Counting every second is not important, but seizing the moment, and using the time we are given is important.

Are there any concerns that would make us discount this view? I can think of a few. Firstly, it could be used as a justification for moral relativism, or a kind of self-serving egotism. Someone could say, "Yes, I am a good person, but I had to murder my parents. It was all I could do in the moment." Maybe the Saguntines were more self-interested than we thought from the story. For now, I can only say that the ego will rally any argument to its benefit when it wants to. Motivated reasoning is endemic to all people, but that is not the intention of this view. Virtues such as justice and bravery can also be thought of as tools that can apply to malleable circumstances. While they do not change in their direction, they can often change in their outcome and certainly will change from circumstance.

Secondly, there might be some professional roles who favor *chronos* time over *kairos*. If an engineer wants to build faster rockets, well, that is purely about quantity not quality. They might have to refocus their attention onto minutes and seconds out of necessity. The Greeks used both terms for a reason, they each had their purposes and domains. There is nothing wrong with exploiting *chronos* to our benefit, but let's not forget that the same engineer eventually has to go home to friends and family. Or they may need to choose what they are doing with those rockets when circumstances change. We are still humans who have to make hard choices when the time comes.

Lastly, I will just mention that *kairos* time coheres nicely with the theory of virtue ethics. It concerns itself with cultivating and using our ethical talents at the right time. Because of this it has the same shortcomings of the virtue systems. While a Kantian might have a clear set of rules to follow and a utilitarian will choose what brings the most happiness, virtue ethics tries to promote ethics as a skill. It will not always be clear what the wisest or the bravest things will be, but we try to practice these and get better at this. In this matter I will not try to convince true believers of the other systems, but leave it as something to consider.

Is this view insightful? Logically consistent? I think so. But the biggest challenge is how to apply it. First, how to recognize a *kairos* moment, the *opportunitas temporum*? Then, how to bring it to its



fulfillment? Briefly, recognition will come from applying our wisdom and practicing vigilance (prosoche) everyday. We must gain as much experience as we can and cultivate our ability to recognize principles when they arise. We can use our talents for temperance (sophrosyne) for maintaining everyday habits, but then, to act on unique situations, we need our sense of bravery, to grab the moment when it comes. Most interesting, however, timeliness requires us to start practicing a light touch, to be able to switch gears when the time calls. Dwight Eisenhower once said, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." (Nixon, 2015, p.253) Let's stay our course, follow our best plans, but when reality decides to surprise us, be ready to switch on a dime.

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