



Stoic Philosophy 101

The Pursuit of Virtue

Wisdom * Courage * Temperance * Justice

This document was created by members of The Stoic Fellowship in response to requests for a brief outline of the basics. It is not meant to be authoritative but aims to be an aid in providing some context to the readings and a potential starting point for further explorations of the philosophy.

The Founding Principle

We are endowed by Nature with the ability to reason and we seek to employ reason to understand the world, to meet the challenges we face, and to make our lives better.

Generations of Stoic philosophers have discovered, developed, refined, and expanded this concept into a formal school of thought. This heritage is our guide and not dogma. All points are open to debate and, in fact, that is the best way to learn, understand, and appreciate the concepts which many have used on their path towards happier and psychologically healthier lives.

What's it Good For?

Through theory and practice the Stoic philosophy offers:

1. A way to think about how to live and whether what you want will actually help or hinder your happiness.
2. A way to understand what goals to set in order to help you live your best life.

As the Stoic Seneca said:

“If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable.”

If you don't know where you'd like to head in life, then how will you know if you're making progress toward it or not?



The Goal of Philosophy

Stoicism is a philosophy of life that comes from ancient Greece and its goal is spiritual well-being – i.e., to allay the sufferings of humanity and become the best human being you can be.

There were several different philosophies in ancient Greece, but they had one common goal called *eudaimonia*. This literally means “having a good spirit”, also translated as ‘well-being’ or “thriving”. Some philosophers thought that *eudaimonia* consisted in bodily pleasure, others that it was the avoidance of pain, or in not clinging to beliefs. Aristotle’s school thought virtue and luck were needed to flourish. The Stoics, though, settled on virtue alone as being both necessary and sufficient for *eudaimonia*.

The Stoic Path to Peace and Happiness: Excellence

The Stoics noticed that we can’t control everything that happens to us. After all, you can’t always avoid pain, get pleasure, or be lucky. Also, unlike the Skeptics, the Stoics thought that we could actually know things. This ruled out Skepticism for the Stoics. So what’s left? The Stoic answer is: virtue. The Greek word for virtue is *arete*, which means “excellence”.

They answered this way for two reasons. The first is that virtue is a prerequisite to use the luck you get in life. If you’re wealthy, you could use it to help others and yourself... but only if you’re wise. But you could also use it to harm others or yourself if you’re not. The same thing goes for being healthy, and other things people tend to value that don’t relate to character. After all, would you rather have a healthy, wealthy Hitler or a sickly, poor Hitler? This shows that while things can be used for good or bad purposes, it is the wisdom and skill with which we use them that matters. Being an “excellent” person is always useful in every circumstance.

The second reason why the Stoics focused on virtue was because they believed it’s completely under our control. We can always change our conscious thoughts and habits in order to become a better person. Through repeated practice, we can become better and better people in any circumstance, whether or not luck is going our way.

So, because being virtuous is ultimately always useful and under our complete control, it is sufficient to do well in any circumstance. Whatever befalls us, doing the right thing always is its own reward.



The Stoic Curriculum of Excellence

The Three Stoic Studies

Stoics began by first learning theory, then moving on to practice. The theory consisted of learning:

- Logic - how to reason well
- Physics - how the world works
- Ethics - how to live well

They had a metaphor for how these worked together: logic is the fence of a garden, from which the crop of ethics sprouts from the soil of physics. Learning how to live (ethics) is what you ultimately harvest, but how to live well depends on how the world works (physics) and is protected by good reasoning (logic).

The Three Stoic Disciplines

Stoics train and practice in three areas related to the theoretical studies listed above.

- Discipline of Assent (logic) – developing the ability to think critically, objectively, and logically
- Discipline of Desire (physics) – training to accept the world as it is & focus on what's in one's control
- Discipline of Action (ethics) – practicing how to act well and justly

A Good Life

Through an understanding of theory and training in the exercises and practices of the Stoic Philosophy, many find a way of life that gives them inner strength, peace, and freedom, even in the face of adversity — in short, a path to a good and worthwhile life. According to the philosophy, this is something within everyone's reach and our heritage as rational beings.



“Therein is the secret of cheerfulness, of depending on no help from without and needing to crave from no man the boon of tranquility. We have to stand upright ourselves, not be set up.”

- Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 3.5

Stoicism Today

Several people are working to bring Stoic practice into the modern world and the philosophy is enjoying a modern Renaissance. Searching on social media sites or the internet in general will reveal several more sources which can help you learn how to apply Stoicism to your life. You can also keep coming to more meetups to learn more!

Major Stoics and Their Works

Very few documents that were written by Stoics survive today. Here is a list of some Stoics whose work survives to a decent extent:

- ***Letters of Seneca the Younger*** - A wealthy Roman Senator who wrote several essays and public letters about Stoicism which survive to this day
- ***Discourses of Epictetus*** - A former slave turned Stoic teacher, some of whose teachings were recorded by his student, Arrian
- ***Meditations by Marcus Aurelius*** - A well-respected Roman emperor whose main surviving Stoic work was a diary used as a Stoic exercise to remind himself of his Stoic principles

