

# **Introduction to Stoicism for Modern Day Life**

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# 1 Introduction

Stoicism is an ancient school of philosophy from Greek founded by Zeno of Citium in Athen. Notable figures include Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. The Stoic believe that the universe is structured in a rational way, so everything that happens has its cause or reason. We humans are rational creatures capable of understanding it. And by recognizing the rational nature of the universe we are able to accept what happens and act accordingly. By doing so one is said to be living in a state conformable to nature, which leads to eudaemonia and inner peace. Eudaemonia is a Greek term that can be roughly translated as happiness or flourishing, it refers to a state of living well and realizing one's potential.

This essay discusses the way of living that the Stoic believes to be most conformable to nature – pursuing virtues with good reasoning, no matter what the universe throws at us. The ideas are presented in a way that emphasizes aspects of Stoicism most practical to modern daily life.

Chapter 2 - 4 is a logical deduction on, given consensus on certain assumptions, why should we place the pursuit of virtues as the highest goal in our life. Chapter 5 listed out what Stoicism considered as the four cardinal virtues. Chapter 6 provided some practical tricks that may assist one in the pursuit of virtues. Chapter 7 discusses the relationship of Stoicism between some other major philosophical schools such as Epicureanism and Existentialism.

## 2 Situations are Good or Bad only due to Judgement

Situations are good or bad only due to our judgements. Consider all the situations we encounter in our daily life, are there some that guarantee happiness while others lead to certain misery? Definitely not. If wealth naturally leads to happiness than we would expect people in the richer regions to be always happier than people in poorer regions, yet this obviously is not the case. As it turns out, our judgement on a situation is the source of our emotions towards a situation. To many people, this process of judgement often happens unconsciously, giving raise to the illusion that the situation itself gives rise to the emotional response.

To understand how this is true, let us have a look at the process of how humans make judgement towards a situation.

The first step is to determine to what extent a situation affects us and in turn affects how strong of an emotional reaction we get from it. Some psychologists call it the primary appraisal. If a stranger passes in front of you on the street, you will probably not feel anything at all. This is because you judged it to not affect you. If you miss a bus while going for a vacation, you may feel some disappointment but not to the point of being devastated. Since you perceive the negative impact of waiting for a few more minutes as limited. If you win a lottery ticket, you may get very excited. For you believe it can hugely improve your life and have a great positive impact.

At this point error of judgement can already occur. Losing a hundred dollars to a thief? Given you are not on the edge of bankruptcy, this would probably have minimal to no impact on your life. Yet some people may feel great anger, to the point where the emotional suffering vastly outweighs the actual financial losses. Would one feel the same emotion if it happened to someone else? If not, one is vastly overestimating to what extent the event affects him or her. By making the correct judgment one would not feel much anger at all.

After determining the extent of impact of a situation. People usually judge it by two aspects. Namely its accountability and one's ability to cope with the situation. These are sometimes called secondary appraisals and are also done somewhat unconsciously by most. By summarizing the above items together with some other cultural or social factors we come to a judgement on a situation. Whether it is good, bad, or sometimes a mix.

Accountability is about who is responsible for the situation. If we judge a good situation with others being responsible. We feel emotions such as gratitude or appreciation. If we judge ourselves to be responsible, we feel honor or pride. If we judge a bad situation with other being responsible, we feel anger or resentment. If we judge ourselves to be responsible, we feel regret.

Accountability is another place where errors in judgment commonly occur according to the Stoic. Back to the losing a hundred dollars to a thief example, if one is feeling angry it is likely because one is believing that the thief is the one accountable for the loss. While this is an intuitive thought, the Stoic argues that if one has the exact life experience as the thief, one would most likely have done the same thing. So, are you going to blame all the things in the thief's life that have led to such action? The better way would be to accept that such things can happen, and it is part of the natural order of the universe. By doing so you will retain your inner peace no matter what happens. I should emphasize that this does not mean we should not take measures to prevent this from happening again, but the decision to take preventive actions should not be driven by emotions.

One's ability to cope with the situation is the judgement commonly linked to fear or stress. If a car is rushing towards you from a far, you would not feel a strong fear. For you know you can deal with it by running to the side of the road. But if it is close, you may panic for there may not be enough time for you to evade it.

After a failed business venture that results in huge amount of debts, it is natural to feel a sense of hopelessness to the point where some may commit suicide because of it. While it is indeed an undesirable situation, most countries have bankruptcy laws that give the debtor a chance to restart their life under certain conditions. It is therefore the inaccurate judgment at one's ability to cope that leads to the degree of hopelessness that has taken people's lives.

The Stoic argues that we humans have the reasoning faculty that can make rational judgement on situations, hence our attitude and emotions towards situations. And the errors in our judgments are what give rise to negative emotions. A good judgment should embody the understanding of the natural order of reality, be it human nature, society, or law of physics. If information is lacking, it may be wise to remind ourselves not to form a baseless opinion or judgement. Instead of blaming others, we may want to try understanding what causes them to do what they do. By reminding ourselves judgment is what leads to our emotion, not the situation itself being good or bad, we will not be constantly hurry away by our emotions and retake control of our life.

### 3 What is in our Control and What is Not

The first step towards making rational judgement towards a situation is to understand the natural order of the universe. Set aside it being an abstract topic no one can fully grasp, the Stoic put emphasis on a simple concept called the dichotomy of control. The dichotomy of control simply states that something is in our control while others are not. The Stoic define control as having the final say over something. Following this definition, the number of items actually within our control is surprisingly limited.

Is your possession under your control? It may seem so but not quite. The bank where you put your money can suddenly go bankrupt someday, causing you to lose part or all your deposits. There is always a probability that a natural disaster will occur tomorrow destroying your house. While these examples may seem rare, it has happened to many people all around the world. You may have great influence over your possession, but never have true control over it. Otherwise, it would be impossible for you to lose it. The reality is fortune takes and gives at its will.

How about other people? This is an obvious no. Changing how others think is known to be a very difficult task. And no matter how hard you try, there will always be some people that do not like you. How about past events? Of course not, changing the past directly violates the law of physics. To summarize, anything external to our mind is not in our control. Even our own body may subject to health issues or injuries we cannot prevent.

So, what is within our control? The one thing that we can control as rational beings is our own mind and how we form opinions and make judgements. And by making judgements we can then affect our emotions and actions.

Procrastinating? This is probably because one has not truly held the belief that acting is more beneficial to oneself. Another extreme but apparent example of how our judgement determines our action is committing suicide. Killing oneself obviously violate the basic animal instinct to survive, yet one can do so if one has made the judgement that death is preferable to survival in the situation. As for emotion, the previous section has discussion on how our judgement affects our emotion, not the situation itself.

By understanding the dichotomy of control, we can focus on what we can control in any given situation. It is our opinion, hence action towards the situation instead of the outcome. Anxious before an interview? Do some the preparation and dress well, as for the result it is not in your control. There is no reason to feel anxious if you have already done the former which is all you can do. Feeling regret? By understanding that the past cannot be changed you will see that there is no reason to hold the present you accountable for what you cannot change. You better focus on taking action to prevent the same mistake.

In fact, many negative emotions arise from mistaking influence for control and holding yourself accountable for what you cannot control. Have you ever felt bad about not being able to fly around like a plane? Probably not, because you firmly believe that you have no control over such matter hence not taking yourself accountable. In reality, the outcome of events is no more within our control when compared to being able to fly.

## 4 Virtue and the Path to Inner Peace

Focusing on virtue and valuing virtuous actions is the path to happiness and inner peace of the mind. For it is the only thing that is in our power.

If we deeply long for something but such things do not come to us, or we hold great fear towards something that we inevitably encounter, what would happen? We feel pain, anxiety, sadness, and other negative emotions. And the more we value or averse something, the stronger emotional response we get when the situation happens. As we can see, most things are simply not within our control, including most of the items that we usually desire for. Health, wealth, or good relationships are considered valuable by many, yet these can be stripped away from us by fate at any time. So, the inner peace and happiness of our mind is often dependent on what destiny imposes on us.

Does this necessarily have to be the case? Not really. Because our judgement on a situation is what makes us perceive something as good or bad. If health is a must for happiness, how can there be people who remain cheerful even in terminal illness? If wealth is a must for happiness, how can we see poor wearing a smile on their face? If good relationships are a must for happiness, how can we see people remaining content in solitude?

By placing too much value on things we do not control makes our well-being vulnerable to what fate may impose on us. The good news is that the reasoning faculty of making value judgement is within our control. According to the Stoic, we should therefore value items that are within our control, namely our own actions and wish it to be virtuous. And to place virtuous actions at higher value over external circumstances. For external circumstances never guaranteed happiness nor being a necessity for it.

For all the situations that are beyond our control, the Stoic call them indifferences. Among the indifferences the desirable ones are called preferred indifferences, while the undesirable ones are called dispreferred indifference. Indifference in this sense does not mean complete removal of preference but acknowledging that it is not within our control, and we should not let our well-being depend on it. If knowing that we are acting virtuously and had already done our best in a situation, there is no reason to get emotionally attached to the outcome for we accept what is left is outside of our control and do not hold ourselves accountable. In the rest of the article, the term indifferences will keep appearing bearing this specific meaning, not in the literal sense of something one does not care about at all.

While virtues often bring preferable indifferences as side products, one must realize that this is not necessarily the case. It is important to see virtuous actions as its own reward. If you help somebody today, hold no expectation that they will help you back in future. For it is outside of your control, and your virtuous act of helping has its intrinsic value. The action itself is enough for you to be happy about it.

## 5 The Four Stoic Virtues

If one accepts that we should value our own virtuous actions over externals. The obvious question then becomes what counts as a virtuous action. In this regard, the Stoic identify four core attributes that virtuous actions should demonstrate. Namely Wisdom, Courage, Justice, and Temperance. The four virtues are all interconnected, and it is not possible to find an action that satisfies one but violates another.

### 5.1 Wisdom

Wisdom is about striving to possess an accurate understanding of reality and acts accordingly with good reasoning. It enables one to make the correct judgment on situations without being carried away by emotions, making a moral call and choosing the virtuous action in any given circumstances. An action that encompasses the other three virtues while bringing us closer to our preferred indifference. Because of this, wisdom is often seen as the foundation for all other virtues.

To the Stoic, the first step to wisdom is by recognizing the dichotomy of control. Too often we mistaken influence for control and are devastated when things do not go as intended. By recognizing that things can always happen in an undesirable way, we maintain a clear mind unaffected by emotion and make the best decision under the situation.

### 5.2 Justice

Justice is about doing the right thing for oneself and the community and taking care of others whenever possible. It involves recognizing the inherent worth of every individual, regardless of their status or background, and acting in a way that promotes the common good.

While giving a precise definition of what constitutes a just action can be difficult and is often a topic of debate. One central nature of Stoic justice is cosmopolitanism. That is justice applies to all fellow human beings and is not divided by nationality or groups.

### 5.3 Courage

Courage is the ability to uphold virtues even in spite of difficulties or risk of dispreferred indifference. These indifferences can include those we commonly fear like losing money, getting hurt, or even death. However, it does not necessarily have to be related to some dangerous situation. Small things like getting out of bed on time and working industriously despite hard labor are also an act of courage. Keep in mind that courage is interconnected with other virtues, taking foolish actions without considering the consequence is reckless but not courage.

## 5.4 Temperance

Temperance is about self-control and taking everything with moderation for nature has set a limit on many things. Because of this if any ideas or actions are taken to extremes their negative effect becomes apparent. That is why temperance is important. Choosing to fight armed bandits with bare hands instead of calling the police is not courage but recklessness. This principle can be applied to many other situations as well.

In daily life, the virtue of temperance is most often demonstrated as self-control. Physical pleasure has nothing wrong by itself but being indulged in them is a violation of temperance and wasting the precious time one has. Emotion is a natural part of being a human but getting too emotional to the point of losing our rational mind is certainly undesirable.

## 6 Practical Methods for Pursuing Virtue

Humans have many natural instincts. While we are given the gift of rational thinking, using this gift to pursue the virtues can sometimes go against our natural instinct. It takes training and practice for one to apply the Stoic way of thinking and act on it in daily life. This section aims to provide some practical methods that assist one to think a Stoic way, especially in difficult situations. Note that the methods mentioned below are tricks to help one get into a Stoic mindset, none of them are a virtue in and of itself.

### 6.1 Negative Visualization

Being optimistic is often overrated. The virtue of wisdom consists of seeing things as they are and minimizing subjective impressions. If you are unsure how things are going to turn out, do try to visualize the worst outcome within reasonable likelihood. By doing so it prepares you mentally for whatever may happen.

The outcome to most things is not in our control, yet humans are naturally concerned about the outcome of events. Negative visualization helps us manage our expectations and stop worrying about what could possibly happen. According to the Stoic, the outcome of events does not affect one's chance to act virtuously at the present moment and therefore are indifferences.

Optimism comes with an expectation that good things are going to happen. Being too optimistic makes us vulnerable to what fortune is going to impose on us. Some may feel like the world is a terrible place. More often than not, it is their judgment and more specifically, their over-expectation or sense of entitlement that leads to such feelings. Meeting deceitful people at the workplace? We all know that such people exist. To expect not encountering them in life is an irrational expectation.



Nonetheless, you should still try your best to obtain a preferable outcome if you consider doing so as virtuous. For the Stoic, the reason for taking actions is not merely for the outcome, but the actions themselves are virtuous and carry values. The very possibility of an undesirable outcome should not deter us from taking virtuous actions, not to mention a visualization of it.

By not having overly optimistic expectations, one can better focus on their own virtuous actions without imagining a reward as compensation. Which helps to maintain tranquility and inner peace in the face of adversity. This concept is often referred in Latin as “*Premeditatio Malorum*”, which literally translate to “*Premeditation of Evils*”.

## 6.2 Remembering Death

We all die at some point in our life. Some may feel like it is a distant event and hence no sense of urgency, only to realize later in their life that they have wasted too much time doing nothing.

Procrastination is a common experience to many. It is a typical example of lacking in the virtues of courage as procrastination often originates from the unconscious avoidance of something and the feeling that there is plenty of time left.

To gain courage and act, a simple way is to remind ourselves that death is inevitable. Not only of dying at an old age, but also to recognize that accidents can happen and take away lives. It may happen next year or tomorrow, seeing the sun rise the next morning is never a certainty. When one keeps this fact in mind, it is easier to attain the virtue of courage. To let go of trivial things and focus on whatever one wishes to accomplish, be it to care for a loved one, learn a new hobby, or start a new business.

Keeping in mind that time is limited helps us realize our potential and act virtuously without further delay. This concept is often referred in Latin as “*Memento Mori*” which literally translate to “*Remembering Death*”.

## 6.3 Focusing on the Present

The Stoic advocate for valuing virtuous action above all else, and the chance to be virtuous can only be found in the present moment and nowhere else. For the past cannot be changed and one does not live in the future that has yet to arrive.

The human mind naturally wanders into the past or future, while this is not a bad thing in itself, it can often be a distraction from acting virtuously. By worrying too much about the future or thinking too much about past events, it can arouse certain negative emotions such as anxiousness towards the future or regret about something that has happened in the past. In fact, people may suffer more in imagination than in reality, as stated by the famous Stoic philosopher Seneca. On the other hand, we obtain tranquility by recognizing the fact that the past and future are out of control and there is no point in worrying.

This is not to say we should disregard the past or future at all. Part of the virtue of wisdom comes from experience learnt in the past and planning is vital to the accomplishment of complicated tasks. However more often than not, people get distracted into thinking the past or future when the task at hand is actually more important. Since the only chance to act virtuously is this very moment, reminding ourselves to focus on the present is a great way to help one stay virtuous.

## 7 Comparison to other School of Thought

### 7.1 Cynicism

Cynicism is another ancient Greek philosophy with deep connection to Stoicism, with Diogenes of Sinope being the most prominent figure. It asserts that to live a good life one only needs to fulfill the most basic biological need, anything more than that is artificial. As a result, Cynics are known for their defiant behavior and critique of societal norms where they consider unnatural and not beneficial to a good life.

Cynicism emphasizes that the only way that one can attain freedom of mind and a good life is to let go of all those additional things such as wealth or social status and lead a simple life. If one cringe onto those things, they become a handle on the person where fate or other people can manipulate one's will.

While the Stoic hold a similar view that we must not let external circumstances carry our mental state, they do not agree that wealth or social status are inherently bad. Instead, the Stoic called them a preferred indifference. Because wealth and social status can also help us magnify our virtues. The way to attain mental freedom of the mind is by focusing on virtuous thought and actions, not external circumstances be it preferable or not. This is the main difference in belief between Cynicism and Stoicism.

### 7.2 Epicureanism

Epicureanism is an ancient Greek philosophy founded by Epicurus. It claims that the pursuit of pleasure is the primary goal of life. However, it also mentions that we should focus on moderate and intellectual pleasures instead of bodily and excessive ones. By doing so one can reach a state of tranquility and freedom from fear and mental disturbances.

While there are some common ideas such as moderation, the key difference is clear. Stoicism says virtuous actions have intrinsic value regardless of the result. While Epicureanism place value in pleasures which depends on external circumstance hence an indifference according to Stoicism.

## 7.3 Existentialism

Existentialism is a popular contemporary philosophy that first appear in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It has this famous quote “existence precedes essence”. Which declares that there is no inherent meaning in life or universe, each individual has their own freedom to choose what they would like to value in this meaningless world.

The rejection of the existence of universal good or a rational universe where everything that happens has a reason is the main difference between Existentialism and Stoicism. While Stoicism leaves plenty of room for discussion on what counts as virtuous action in specific scenario, it did assert that the four cardinal virtues form the basis of all virtuous actions and are universally applicable. Existentialism rejects such ideas and believes that each individuals must forge their own path, for there are no universal or objective goods when facing the absurdity of the universe.

## 8 On Divinity

Stoicism asserts that the universe is governed by a divine and rational principle called “Logos”. Logos can be thought as a kind of pantheism where God and universe are one and the same. Stoicism does not claim the existence of a personal deity.

However, Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius did argue that whether the presence of fate or God that govern the world has no impact on the pursuit of virtue. Quoting translation from original text as follow:

“Either there is a fatal necessity and invincible order, or a kind Providence, or a confusion without a purpose and without a director. If then there is an invincible necessity, why do you resist? But if there is a Providence that allows itself to be propitiated, make yourself worthy of the help of the divinity. But if there is a confusion without a governor, be content that in such a tempest you have yourself a certain ruling intelligence.”

## 9 Conclusion

Striving for virtues is one of the core advocations of Stoicism. This text shows the logical reasoning behind this advocacy. The text also presents what the Stoic consider as virtues and how they related to each other, as well as some practical advice that can help one practice these virtues in daily life.

Do ware that there are many other teachings of Stoicism that are not discussed in detail here. Such as to live a life conformable to nature and the three Stoic discipline: discipline of desire, discipline of assent, and discipline of action. Those teachings are mutually compatible with the contents of this text and offer other perspectives on why and how to pursuit virtues.