

STOICISM AND MARCUS AURELIUS' MEDITATIONS

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

"Take away thy opinion, and then there is taken away the complaint, "I have been harmed." Take away the complaint, "I have been harmed," and the harm is taken away." (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations)

Stoicism is a branch of Hellenistic ("Greek-influenced") philosophy that was especially popular from around 300 BCE to 300 CE, when it was largely supplanted by the rise of Christianity. Stoic writings and ideas, however, have remained a well-spring of inspiration for many later writers, artists, religious thinkers, and philosophers. In this class, we'll be taking a look at Stoic "ethics" as they are presented in one of the most famous and well-known expositions of Stoicism: Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*.

The Basics: Logic, Physics, and Ethics. The Stoics philosophy was built on the foundation provided by Plato and Aristotle. They saw philosophy (by which they mean something like "the study of reality") as being broken into three different areas: logic, physics, and ethics.

- Stoic **logic** held that humans reasoned by means of **propositions** (roughly, "sentences") that could be either true or false. Moreover, the world *itself* had a propositional structure, such that there was some state of the world that either corresponded to the proposition (and made it "true") or did not (and made the proposition "false"). So, for example, the proposition "Marcus Aurelius was a Roman Emperor" is true, while the proposition "Marcus Aurelius was a famous novelist" is false. This view of logic and truth would prove to be highly influential, and would eventually (thousands of years later) help set the stage for modern computers.
- Stoic **physics** (and **theology**) saw the universe as something like a giant living being, with all things being interconnected. The Stoic "God" was something like the soul or mind of this giant being, which helped set the direction for all the parts. The universe was constantly in a state of change, but this change was ultimately **rational** and goal-directed. This helped lead to the Stoic idea that "everything that happens is for the best" (how could it not be, if God caused it?). Many Stoics also subscribed to the doctrine of **eternal recurrence**, where time moves in a circle (so, you will be born, live your life, and die an infinite number of times).
- We'll have much more to say about Stoic **ethics** in the next section. However, the main idea of Stoicism is that the only truly *good* things in life are those that are entirely under your control, and we should train ourselves to care only about such things. In particular, since things like wealth, health, or status are NOT under our control, we need to let go of our attachment to such things. Instead, we should aim to lead our lives according to "reason," and allow our happiness to be determined by how well we do this. Basically: So long as we choose wisely and treat others well, we should not let ourselves be upset if "things don't go our way."

THE MEDITATIONS AND THE STOIC WAY OF LIFE

Marcus Aurelius (121 to 180, "MA" from here on out) was a Roman Emperor, military leader, and philosopher. His book the *Meditations* (most likely written for his own use, and never intended to be published) has remained one of the well-known expositions of Stoicism. In comparison to the highly structured, argumentative works of philosophers such as Plato or Aristotle, the *Meditations* reads more like a personal journal, with collections of aphorisms. Here, we'll be taking a look at some of the main ideas and arguments, based on some of the more famous passages in the *Meditations*.

THEME 1: WE ARE A PART OF NATURE, AND SO SHOULD ACT NATURALLY

"That which rules within, when it is according to nature, is so affected with respect to the events which happen, that it always easily adapts itself to that which is and is presented to it. For it requires no definite material, but it moves towards its purpose, under certain conditions however; and it makes a material for itself out of that which opposes it, as fire lays hold of what falls into it, by which a small light would have been extinguished: but when the fire is strong, it soon appropriates to itself the matter which is heaped on it, and consumes it, and rises higher by means of this very material."

Let no act be done without a purpose, nor otherwise than according to the perfect principles of art." (Ch. 4).

Brendan's Notes: This passage (which starts chapter 4) is pretty opaque on first reading. However, there's a lot in here in terms of Stoic themes and ideas:

1. The goal of human life is to follow "nature" and "what's natural." MA and other Stoics have a few reasons for thinking this. First, since the world/universe/God (these are all the same thing) are as good as they can possibly be, the "bad" things that happen to us can't actually be that bad. Second (and more convincingly), MA will argue that even if this *isn't* true, we should live as if it is. After all, we humans can't *defeat* nature (e.g., we're all going to get sick and die! Eventually, everyone will forget that we've ever lived!).
2. Living in accordance with nature means somehow bending/adapting your response to fit the circumstance. MA's metaphor: when life gives us things that *seem* be difficulties, these are like the "wood" that we can "burn" through if we only respond correctly. Again, this reinforces the idea that we should aim to see the universe as essentially "good," and to reframe any difficulties we encounter as opportunities for self-growth instead. For Stoics, it is *entirely within our own control* to lead a good life—we simply need to do "what's natural."

3. Finally, our lives should always be **purpose-driven**, in the sense that we should always be seeking to advance “nature’s” goals for us as humans. As humans, it’s simply a fact that certain things are *good* for us (exercise, eating healthy, reading good books, talking with friends, etc.). Every activity we do should take account of this. We shouldn’t spend our time doing purposeless/wasteful things.
4. Stoics in general place a big emphasis on the idea that we are **parts of a bigger whole**, and this “parthood” relation determines how we should live our lives. We are part of the universe (and hence, part of God), we are part of society, etc.

THEME 2: LIVE BY REASON, NOT BY THE OPINIONS OF OTHERS

“Love the art, poor as it may be, which thou hast learned, and be content with it; and pass through the rest of life like one who has entrusted to the gods with his whole soul all that he has, making thyself neither the tyrant nor the slave of any man.”

Brendan’s Notes: MA (and other Stoics) have a somewhat nuanced view of society, and of our relationship to other humans:

1. They believe that humans are, by our very nature, social beings. In particular, what separates us from the other animals is our ability to **reason** with one another using language and argument. For Stoics, part of “living naturally” means “living according to reason.” This means, for example, that we should change our opinions about things if other people give us rational reasons to do so! However, we should NOT change our opinions for bad reasons (such as wanting to impress someone, or fit in with others).
2. Another part of “being social” means accepting one’s limitations when it comes to one’s place in society, and not getting hung up on fame or power. We have the talents we have, and we should do our best to cultivate them, both for our own good, and the good of those around us. But we should NOT aim at being successful, powerful, well-liked, or even “being remembered after I die.” If these things happen, that’s fine, but we shouldn’t strive after them. After all, one’s social standing is, to a large extent, outside of one’s control, since it depends on things like our “natural talents” (we’d say *genetics*) and our upbringing. What we need to focus on is treating each other well, and fulfilling our own role as best we can.
3. Stoicism’s emphasis on the importance of “reason” is shared with the other popular philosophies of the time period, such as **Epicureanism** and **Skepticism**. For all these philosophies, the basic claim is that human happiness (and a successful human life more generally) can be *guaranteed*, if only we live rationally. They are all strongly influenced by Plato and Aristotle, but the claim that there is some sort of “formula” for leading a good human life goes beyond what Plato and Aristotle would have claimed (and, indeed, one common criticism of Stoicism is that this claim is simply unrealistic—sometimes our lives go badly, no matter how rationally we behave!). This basic outlook eventually places Stoicism in conflict with the Christianity that will eventually take its place, which has a much greater emphasis on “faith.”

THEME 3: LEARNING TO LIVE WITH CHANGE AND DEATH

“Everything is only for a day, both that which remembers and that which is remembered.”

Observe constantly that all things take place by change, and accustom thyself to consider that the nature of the Universe loves nothing so much as to change the things which are and to make new things like them. For everything that exists is in a manner the seed of that which will be. But thou art thinking only of seeds which are cast into the earth or into a womb: but this is a very vulgar notion.

Thou wilt soon die, and thou art not yet simple, not free from perturbations, nor without suspicion of being hurt by external things, nor kindly disposed towards all; nor dost thou yet place wisdom only in acting justly.”

Brendan’s Notes:

1. In keeping with their metaphor of the universe as a living being (of which we are just one part), Stoics emphasize that change is inevitable, and natural. And since it is natural, change is good, no matter how it might seem to us from our limited perspective.
2. For individual humans, of course, change can be unpleasant. We will all inevitably grow old and die. Along the way, we must deal with pain, sickness, the loss of friends and family, etc. Change will continue after we die, as our children/students/etc. grow old and die, and we are eventually entirely forgotten. Rather than try to ignore these things (as humans often do), MA advises that we keep them continuously in mind, as it will help us focus on doing what *truly* matters in life, rather than wasting our time on goals (such as political power or wealth) which are fundamentally worthless.
3. Stoics often talk about choosing between “**indifferents**.” The basic idea is as follows: As humans, our “natural state” is to be healthy and alive, and to cultivate good relationships with other humans. With this in mind, we should do what we can to achieve this state: exercise, eat well, be kind to others, etc. However, we must not allow ourselves to become attached to whether our efforts actually *work*. For example, while we must *aim* at being healthy, we must be “indifferent” as to whether we actually end up being sick (as this isn’t in our control). A similar thing holds for death: we should generally avoid it! However, we also need to accept that their times when this isn’t possible (e.g., a soldier must sacrifice their life), and that death will eventually come to us all. The idea is that we should base our happiness on things we can control.

SOME OBJECTIONS TO STOICISM

Stoicism was, for a few hundred years, probably the dominant philosophy in the Roman Empire. However, from the very beginning, it faced a number of objections from rival schools of philosophy/religion. A few of the most notable include:

- **If everything is fated, what's the point in trying?** One common criticism of Stoicism targets the idea that everything is “fated.” Stoics like Marcus Aurelius tend to think that knowing about this will help us lead *better* lives—for example, by making us less afraid of death, and less prone to wanting things that we can't have. Critics argue that thinking this way might well make people give up instead. This is called the **Lazy Argument**. After all, if I'm “fated” to win (or lose) regardless of what I do, what's the point in *trying* to win? (The Stoic response: This is too narrow a conception of fate. You are ALSO fated to be the kind of person who tries, or doesn't. And we know from experience that people who try are more likely to win than those who don't).
 - The Stoic position on fate (and their critics arguments against it) are the basis of thousands of years of argument about **free will** and **moral responsibility**. Increasingly, the “stoic” position (that everything is *determined*) has become the dominant one among both scientists and philosophers. However, this means that the Lazy Argument is now our problem, as well.
- **Is Stoicism too difficult or “inhuman”?** A second criticism of Stoicism is that it is simply too difficult. In particular, Stoics often speak as if we are somehow supposed to convince ourselves to become “indifferent” to anything bad that might possibly happen to us, including things like the death of our children. One criticism is that this isn't simply the kind of thing that humans can or should be “indifferent” to: part of loving our children means that losing them would *hurt*. (The Stoic response: No one is saying you shouldn't feel sadness. The argument is simply that you can allow this sadness—or any emotion!—to overcome you, especially to the point where it causes you to stop caring about your *other* obligations to family, society, etc. The goal is to become the sort of person who can “carry on” even in the worst of circumstances.)
- **Does Stoicism lead us defend the “status quo” even when we shouldn't?** A final concern is that Stoicism's emphasis on accepting “what is natural” in the social/family/natural world can lead people to “give in” to unjust social norms when they ought to fight to change these norms. So, for example, while many historical Stoics recognized that woman were capable of reason/virtue/etc., they generally thought that the way women should “use” this was to do whatever their societies currently required of them. Another example: both Seneca (a Stoic who served the horrible emperor Nero) and Marcus Aurelius (who appointed his blatantly unfit son as heir to the Roman Empire, with predictably bad consequences) might have been better served if they had defied the status quo. (A Stoic response: It's true that Stoics have made mistakes, especially when it comes to failing to challenge bad things about their society! But that's true of every philosophy/religion. The only solution to this is for people to become *better* Stoics).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are two or three ideas from Stoicism that you could apply in your own life? Explain in a little detail.
2. What are the similarities/difference between Stoicism and “religious” views of life (such as those provided by Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.)?
3. Stoics claim that our happiness is ultimately under our own control. Why do they think this? Do you agree? Why or why not?