

Stoic Reflections

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This document [1] is also available in epub and pdf format if you prefer.

XXII

If you have an earnest desire toward philosophy, prepare yourself from

the very first to have the multitude laugh and sneer, and say, "He is

returned to us a philosopher all at once"; and, "Whence this supercilious

look?" Now, for your part, do not have a supercilious look indeed, but

keep steadily to those things which appear best to you, as one appointed

by God to this particular station. For remember that, if you are persistent, those very persons who at first ridiculed will afterwards

admire you. But if you are conquered by them, you will incur a double

ridicule.

Epictetus, Enchiridion #22 [2]

This document will hopefully not make me appear to think I am an expert in philosophy or Stoicism.

I am neither.

What I've written here are my reflections, struggles, and ideas on Stoicism. My primary intention is to curate and organize my thoughts, and reference the works of wiser men than I. If you the reader happen to find this useful, then that is all the better.

My current daily meditations

1 - Premeditatio malorum

Negative Visualization.

III

With regard to whatever objects either delight the mind or contribute to

use or are tenderly beloved, remind yourself of what nature they are,

beginning with the merest trifles: if you have a favorite cup, that it is

but a cup of which you are fond of-for thus, if it is broken, you can

bear it; if you embrace your child or your wife, that you embrace a

mortal-and thus, if either of them dies, you can bear it.

[2]

I try to think about all of the worst case scenarios for anything that gives me anxiety. I tend to do this as I feel anxiety, but also ahead of time.

2 - Memento mori

"Let death [...] be daily before your eyes".

The full quote comes to us from Epictetus:

XXI

Let death and exile, and all other things which appear terrible,
be daily
before your eyes, but death chiefly; and you will never entertain
an
object thought, nor too eagerly covet anything.

[2]

I remind myself that I might die today, or tomorrow. That I have no idea how long I could live and that I should be grateful to have another day at my disposal.

16. But now, to close my letter, I have only to stamp the usual
↪ seal upon it, in
other words, to commit thereto some noble message to be delivered
↪ to you: "The
fool, with all his other faults, has this also, - he is always
↪ getting ready to
live." [3] Reflect, my esteemed Lucilius, what this saying means,
↪ and you will
see how revolting is the fickleness of men who lay down every day
↪ new
foundations of life, and begin to build up fresh hopes even at
↪ the brink of the
grave.

From the Gummere translation of Seneca's *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* [3], Book 2, Letter 13, Verse 16.

The original latin [4] for this appears to be:

Sed iam finem epistulae faciam, si illi signum suum in pressero, id est aliquam magnificam vocem perferendam ad te mandavero. 'Inter cetera mala hoc quoque habet stultitia: semper incipit vivere.' Considera quid vox ista significet, Lucili virorum optime, et intelleges quam foeda sit hominum levitas cotidie nova vitae fundamenta ponentium, novas spes etiam in exitu inchoantium.

3 - Step outside yourself

I try to view myself from a distance, or imagine that I am seeing myself as a stranger would.

XXVI

The will of nature may be learned from things upon which we are all agreed. As when our neighbor's boy has broken a cup, or the like, we are ready at once to say, "These are casualties that will happen"; be assured, then, that when your own cup is likewise broken, you ought to be affected just as when another's cup was broken. Now apply this to greater things. Is the child or wife of another dead? There is no one who would not say, "This is an accident of mortality." But if anyone's own child happens to die, it is immediately, "Alas! how wretched am I!" It should be always remembered how we are affected on hearing the same thing concerning others.

[2]

I literally try to imagine myself from outside of myself, and remind myself of my small significance in relation to vastness of the cosmos, and the short scale of time of any human life. This helps me to not take everyday things for granted.

The other technique, to try and see myself and my own

circumstances as a stranger would is probably closer to Epictetus' original advice from the Enchiridion.

In particular, when I catch myself bewailing something trivial, I like to myself hearing Epictetus jokingly chide me "AlAs! HoW WreTchED Am I!" at my imagined hardships.

Another quote that I particularly like is from the discourses of Epictetus:

'Am I then to have a maimed leg?'

Slave, do you mean to arraign the universe for one wretched leg?
Will you not

[5]

Though other translations [6] have it as:

"What, then, must my leg be lame?" And is it
for one paltry leg, wretch, that you accuse the
universe?

[7]

Original Greek source since I'm so obsessed with this quote:

‘σκέλος οὖν μοι γενέσθαι πεπηρωμένον.’ ἀνδράποδον,
εἴτα δι’ ἐν σκελύδριον τῷ κόσμῳ ἐγκαλεῖς;

Ancient Greek	English
μοι	my
σκέλος	leg
οὖν	then
γενέσθαι	become
πεπηρωμένον	lamed
ἀνδράποδον	lowlife / wretch / slave / one who acting slavishly
εἴτα δι’ ἐν	then for one
σκελύδριον	leg, diminutive form / paltry leg / poor leg
ἐγκαλεῖς	(do you) accuse / blame
τῷ κόσμῳ	the world / universe

[8]

Lessons

Speak through action

From the Enchiridion [2], #46:

XLVI

Never proclaim yourself a philosopher, nor make much talk among the ignorant about your principles, but show them by actions. Thus, at an entertainment, do not discourse how people ought to eat, but eat as you ought. For remember that thus Socrates also universally avoided all ostentation. And when persons came to him and desired to be introduced by him to philosophers, he took them and introduced them; so well did he bear being overlooked. So if ever there should be among the ignorant any discussion of principles, be for the most part silent. For there is great danger in hastily throwing out what is undigested. And if anyone tells

you that you know nothing, and you are not nettled at it, then
you may be
sure that you have really entered on your work. For sheep do not
hastily
throw up the grass to show the shepherds how much they have
eaten, but,
inwardly digesting their food, they produce it outwardly in wool
and
milk. Thus, therefore, do you not make an exhibition before the
ignorant
of your principles, but of the actions to which their digestion
gives
rise.

This also really reminds me of #22, which I quoted earlier at the very start of this. Another reason why I'm hesitant to write this at all - this lesson that it is better to show your intention through action.

Rather than vomit up the grass to show what good sheep they have been, or in my case, vomit up whatever philosophical teachings / lessons that are in fashion, it is better to actually try and **live** these actions to show their merit, and indeed speak nothing of them.

So, as much as I write here, I must always keep in mind that if I am not actually living these lessons, I am just like the sheep as I vomit up the lessons, rather than produce the "wool" of their teachings outwardly.

I think that this teaching also helps to be skeptical of others who preach, but do not even practice what they preach. It also adds helps to remain skeptical of anyone preaching anything in general - if they really wanted to convince the stoic, they should simply live as they would preach others to do so.

I think that Diogenes [9], an early Cynic that probably helped to influence Stoic philosophy even before it was yet to form, is an interesting example to analyze for

this.

He did appear to truly live the ascetic lifestyle that he professed to, but he also was very bold and eager to point the finger at others who he felt were less virtuous. There are even accounts of him bursting into houses uninvited to tell others how they were living wrong, slaves to their possessions, and other Cynic doctrine.

I don't want to be like Diogenes (though I do admire his persistence), so to the greatest extent that I can I will avoid having a "supercilious look", and keep to my own affairs, unless someone asks me about my Philosophical thinking and struggles.

Is it within my power?

Excerpt from the Enchiridion [2], #1:

I

There are things which are within our power, and there are things which

are beyond our power. Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in one word, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our

power are body, property, reputation, office, and, in one word, whatever

are not properly our own affairs.

This is probably the most famous, and "number one hit" of the Enchiridion. Many know it as the "Serenity prayer", and as I learned in [10] many other cultures have had similar sentiments expressed throughout history.

As stated here, I think that this is a very helpful framework. Like others though, I think that the idea could use a bit of an update. I don't believe that it's a perfectly clean dichotomy - I think that the "Trichotomy Of Choice"

[11] that William Irvine discusses gets it right. There is an important third distinction: things which we have some, but not complete, control over.

A cannot influence if I get a promotion, that **is** truly outside of my control. That doesn't mean that I should not work hard, that I should not do everything within my power to **deserve** a promotion. Thus, I should set my goal on doing the best work I can, and enjoying it. This is just an example of course, but I think is good advice in general. By setting the goal to something that is actually within my power - doing my best work, I cannot be disappointed if something that is external to my power - getting a promotion, doesn't manifest.

I feel the same is true of romantic relationships. When I have most been rejected in the past, it was because I had set as a goal to win someone over. I was so concentrated on trying to be the best person that I thought they wanted me to be, I didn't actually concentrate on being the best **me** that I could be. Once I did that, rejection was less painful and I was more willing to take another swing at things. I couldn't affect if I was rejected or not, I could only do my best, try to roll with the punches, and be better for next time.

The quote in its entirety:

I

There are things which are within our power, and there are things which

are beyond our power. Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in one word, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our

power are body, property, reputation, office, and, in one word, whatever

are not properly our own affairs.

Now the things within our power are by nature free, unrestricted,

unhindered; but those beyond our power are weak, dependent,
restricted,

alien. Remember, then, that if you attribute freedom to things by
nature

dependent and take what belongs to others for your own, you will
be

hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will find
fault

both with gods and men. But if you take for your own only that
which is

your own and view what belongs to others just as it really is,
then no

one will ever compel you, no one will restrict you; you will find
fault

with no one, you will accuse no one, you will do nothing against
your

will; no one will hurt you, you will not have an enemy, nor will
you

suffer any harm.

Aiming, therefore, at such great things, remember that you must
not allow

yourself any inclination, however slight, toward the attainment
of the

others; but that you must entirely quit some of them, and for the
present

postpone the rest. But if you would have these, and possess power
and

wealth likewise, you may miss the latter in seeking the former;
and you

will certainly fail of that by which alone happiness and freedom
are
procured.

Seek at once, therefore, to be able to say to every displeasing
semblance,

"You are but a semblance and by no means the real thing." And
then

examine it by those rules which you have; and first and chiefly
by this:

whether it concerns the things which are within our own power or
those

which are not; and if it concerns anything beyond our power, be
prepared

to say that it is nothing to you.

Modern Sources

These are much easier to digest, as the authors are very smart and have done a lot of work to simplify and adequately contextualize the spirit of the original documents.

I went with these summaries first, and then to the original sources as I found that having a few seasoned guides to help me along made a big difference.

How to be a Stoic

This book [10] by Philosophy Professor Massimo Pigliucci [12] was one of the most influential in my own journey towards Stoicism.

The book focuses mostly on Epictetus, and a modern interpretation of stoicism.

In particular, the idea that it's actually quite alright to disagree with the few examples of Stoics we have in history, and proved a more modern interpretation of this philosophy, or rather, a practical use of this ancient wisdom in modern times.

This book ends recommending the reader next progress to the Enchiridion, and I highly recommend doing so. It is easy to find [2], and the translations are easily interpreted and almost pithy. You can easily read it in its entirety in an hour, and you'll recognize **a lot** of what Massimo is framing for you is directly from the source material.

I definitely recommend this above all else as a first read on Stoicism.

A Guide to the Good Life

[13]

[11]

Original Sources

While there are a number of great books that provide modern interpretations of ancient Stoic philosophy, I felt the need to read these original sources myself to better understand the nature of Stoicism.

Epictetus

Epictetus simply means “Gained” or “Acquired”, as Epictetus was a (freed) slave. He may have had a name, but if he did it was lost to history.

We don’t have any of his actual writings either, but we do have the writing of one of his students, Arrian of Nicomedia, who is generally considered a pretty reputable source, and who tried to preserve the fidelity of the original teachings of Epictetus.

Epictetus was a student of Musonius Rufus [14], and so much of Epictetus’ Stoic Philosophy was likely influenced by and built upon these teachings.

The Enchiridion

The Enchiridion is Arrian’s compilation of Epictetus “best hits”, and a pretty concise distillation of a lot of the material that is covered in the rest of the discourses.

[2]

Discourses

There were supposedly 8 volumes of the discourses, but 4 have been lost to time. This is a real shame, but what remains is very insightful. Much of this is greater detail of lessons from the Enchiridion, and a more conversational approach to philosophical discussion and lessons.

[6] from [15]

[16]

Musonius Rufus

I haven't yet been able to find easy access to original writings of Musonius.

[14]

Seneca

Seneca has a series of letters that I've purchased the audiobook for, but have not yet listened to.

Marcus Aurelius

These [17] are the reflections that the Roman Emperor, considered by many historians to be "the last good Emperor" of Rome. He wrote these to himself, titled: "Ta eis heauton", literally meaning "things to one's self". It was discovered after his death, and published most commonly as just "Meditations".

I had originally tried to start directly with the Meditations [17] by Marcus Aurelius, but felt that even with my interest in Ancient Rome, I still had a hard time easily understanding it without more context. I found that Epictetus' Enchiridion was a much better starting point, as it was written to be an actual handbook, but I imagine that reading Marcus Aurelius will be quite insightful, as he is often held up as a, if not the, iconic Stoic.

I haven't actually gotten through this yet, but I've heard it referenced quite extensively in [11]. I believe that [18] is meant to be a modern distillation of this, but until I've read the original I can't meaningfully comment on to what fidelity it is presented with.

Why Stoicism

On reflection, some of the aspects of Stoicism where things I had come upon on my own. For instance, I already practiced reflection of the day's events, and negative visualization. Stoic teachings have helped me to provide more structure, intention, and reasoning to these existing habits, and allow me to exert more control over them, and not the opposite way around.

In other aspects, I found the advice to be things I intuitively agreed with, but had not yet come upon or internalized. These are where I must expend the most effort and intention, as I am more at odds with my nature here in some cases. For instance, I must daily remind myself to only dwell on those things which are within my control, and remind myself how best to assess this.

It could be that Stoicism is just a phase for me, a step towards something else - this has certainly been the pattern in my life. I am hopeful that I'll be able to stick with this, as it feels to just "fit" in certain ways that other ways of living that I've tried. Up until now, this has mostly been a combination of improvising and (sometimes-) enlightened hedonism.

My path to Stoicism

// FIXME probably cut this out to separate doc, it is self involved and // rambling, anyone interested can find it on their own.

This is my own story, as best as I can reason and as much as I'm willing to share. Perhaps you will have some parallels, perhaps you won't. Either way, I hope that sharing how I arrived on it may help you in some way. I have put this bit last, as I feel it is longer and more difficult - by its very nature - to not degrade to something utterly self-involved. Any readers who have yet to make it this far will be spared at least, and this gives me some measure of comfort.

Studying History

Gaius Marius was a character that struck me as inspiring and I leader that I wanted to emulate. When listening to Dan Carlin's Death Throws of the Republic, edition of his Hardcore History podcast, he spoke of him in a way that I found really held him up as an admirable leader.

What I respected about Gaius Marius was that he would get down on the level of his "Marius Mules" as they were nicknamed, as they would all march in full gear to train and harden themselves, but because he would do it also they were motivated to do so. He lead by example. He did not dine in a special fancy tent with the officers, but with the men of his army, eating what they ate.

I intuited that Gaius Marius had Stoic qualities, just by other examples of people that I had known to behave "Stoically". I don't know much about his own connection

to stoicism however, but he has inspired me all the same. Unfortunately I didn't actually have much material to draw on other than a few historical anecdotes about him. As I kept listening to the podcast, I kept an eye out for other leadership icons, and other lessons to be learned.

I found other models throughout history, both through the podcast and the historical parables in many of Robert Greene's books. This included both those whom I did and explicitly did **not** want to emulate. I found this model of analyzing stories (which is the common narrative approach Robert Greene uses throughout a lot of his books) to work pretty well for me. Having a story to illustrate a lesson is a helpful mnemonic trick, and have noticed that a lot of authors use it in some way to get their point across.

With this collection of stories though, I had to interpret and decide when to apply them, while trying to keep their essence in mind. This is a lot to juggle, and makes for a pretty complex framework. It's not always clear when the lesson of a story applies well, or if I even interpreted the story properly.

What was lacking, I think, in this approach was structure. Narrative ideas are great for illustrating details, but I really wanted a framework, a core set of simple rules, to call back to. I feel these stories now help to weave together the details and provide color, where the framework of stoic philosophy serves as the structure that ties it together.

Rather than trying to keep in mind Robert Greene's laws on... whatever, I find Epictetus gives a much more concise and refactored rules of living, but the parables apply to these just as well with a little interpretation.

Burnout

I burned out

<http://lindsaybraman.com/burnout/>

Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck

The Laws of Human Nature

How to be a Stoic

One day I reflected that I didn't **really** know what

Other resources

- Farnam Street Media stoic reading list [19]

[1] D. Hamel, "Stoic Reflections." [Online]. Available: <http://blog.srvthe.net/stoic-reflections/>

[2] Epictetus, "The Enchiridion." [Online]. Available: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/45109>

[3] R. Gummere and Seneca, "AD LUCILIUM EPISTULAE MORALES." [Online]. Available: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral_letters_to_Lucilius

[4] Seneca, "AD LUCILIUM EPISTULAE MORALES." [Online]. Available: https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/Epistulae_morales_ad_Lucilium

[5] P. E. Matheson, "Wretched leg quote, Matheson." [Online]. Available: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/dep/dep013.htm>

[6] Epictetus, "The Discourses of Epictetus." [Online]. Available: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/epictetus-the-works-of-epictetus-consisting-of-his-discourses-in-four-books#toc>

[7] Epictetus, "Discourses one wretched leg quote." [Online]. Available: https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/epictetus-the-works-of-epictetus-consisting-of-his-discourses-in-four-books#Epictetus_0755_190

[8] J. Mark and Epictetus, "Epicteti Dissertationes ab Arriano digestae. Epictetus. Heinrich Schenkl." [Online]. Available: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0235%3Atext%3Ddisc%3Abook%3D1%3Achapter%3D12>

[9] J. Mark, "Diogenes of Sinope." [Online]. Available: https://www.ancient.eu/Diogenes_of_Sinope/

[10] M. Pigliucci, "How to be a Stoic - Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life." [Online]. Available: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/31423245-how-to-be-a-stoic>

[11] W. Irvine, "A Guide to the Good Life - The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy." [Online]. Available: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/5617966-a-guide-to-the-good-life>

[12] M. Pigliucci, "Massimo Pigliucci Stoicism Wordpress." [Online]. Available: <https://howtobeastoxic.wordpress.com/>

[13] W. Irvine, "William Irvine Literary Website." [Online]. Available: <https://www.williambirvine.com>

[14] W. O. Stephens, "Musonius Rufus (c. 30–62 CE)." [Online]. Available: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/musonius/>

[15] "Source for text of discourses of epictetus." [Online]. Available: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/dep/index.htm>

[16] P. E. Matheson, "Matheson Translation of Epictetus Discourses." [Online]. Available: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/dep/dep013.htm>

[17] M. Aurelius, "Meditations." [Online]. Available: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2680>

[18] R. Holiday, "The Obstacle Is The Way." [Online]. Available: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/314003/the-obstacle-is-the-way-by-ryan-holiday/9781591846352/excerpt>

[19] Farnam Street Media Inc, "The Best Stoic Reading List Aurelius, Seneca, Epictetus and More." [Online]. Available: <https://fs.blog/2014/04/the-stoic-reading-list/>