

DYING (EVERY DAY) WITH DIGNITY: LESSONS FROM STOICISM

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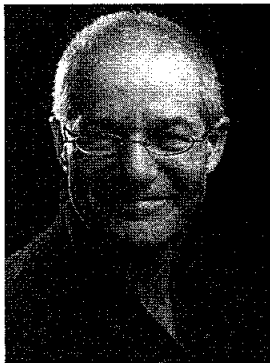


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ABSTRACT: *Stoicism is an ancient Greco-Roman practical philosophy focused on the ethics of everyday living. It is a eudaemonistic (i.e., emphasizing one's flourishing) approach to life, as well as a type of virtue ethics (i.e., concerned with the practice of virtues as central to one's existence). This paper summarizes the basic tenets of Stoicism and discusses how it tackles the issues of death and suicide. It presents a number of exercises that modern Stoics practice in order to prepare for death (one's own, or those of relatives and friends). It argues that modern Stoicism is a viable personal philosophy.*

KEY WORDS: DEATH AND DYING, ETHICS, STOICISM



In the Louvre Museum of Paris, visitors can see Luca Giordano's 1684 painting entitled *The Death of Seneca*. Even though it presents the ancient Stoic philosopher with physical features he likely did not have (only relatively recently have scholars debunked the myth that Seneca had a gaunt appearance: Prinz 1973), it is nonetheless a poignant reminder of not only the influence of Stoicism as an ancient philosophy, but also of the general idea of dying with dignity.

Stoicism offers an important perspective on humane dying in contemporary societies. Its point of view warrants exploration. It does so not because many will ever experience the wrath of a cruel emperor such as Nero (the trigger for Seneca's suicide (Romm 2014)), but because recent attempts at reviving and re-evaluating Stoicism (e.g., Becker 1997; Irvine 2008; Brouwer 2014) may have something important to contribute to modern society's concept of death and dying.

I will proceed by briefly introducing readers to the basic precepts of Stoicism,

in order to frame the discussion appropriately. I will then introduce a series of Stoic ideas and how they may help us think in novel ways about the issue of death. I will end by discussing a number of Stoic exercises (or “spiritual practices”) that aim at traducing the theoretical part of the paper into a pragmatic one: philosophy, for the Stoics and the ancient Greco-Romans in general, is something to be employed in everyday life, not just an academic exercise. As Seneca famously put it¹:

We do not suddenly fall on death, but advance towards it by slight degrees; we die every day. For every day a little of our life is taken from us; even when we are growing our life is on the wane. ... It is not the last drop that empties the water-clock, but all that which previously has flowed out.

Which means we need to prepare for it every day. That, according to Socrates (who was a major influence on the Stoics), is the very point of philosophy.²

Stoicism 101

In its original conception (Inwood 2003), the Stoic system was meant to be eminently practical and focused on ethics. However, ancient Stoics also thought that a good understanding of ethics required the study of “physics” (in modern terms, a combination of natural science, metaphysics, and theology) and “logic” (a combination of modern logic, rhetoric, epistemology, and psychology). Like many modern commentaries, my discussion focuses on Stoic ethics (Sharpe 2014), because part of the ancient logic and physics have been superseded by intervening philosophy and science.³

It is important to remember that Stoic ethics is only one type of virtue ethics. The quintessential example of virtue ethics is the Aristotelian treatment of the subject in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle’s version has been revived and updated in modern philosophical discourse by a number of authors,

¹ *On Despising Death*, Letters XXIV:19-20.

² In *Phaedo*, 63e-65a, particularly: “Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death. If this is true, and they have actually been looking forward to death all their lives, it would of course be absurd to be troubled when the thing comes for which they have so long been preparing and looking forward.”

³ There nonetheless remains much of value in the idea that one’s ethics needs to be grounded in one’s best understanding of how both the world and human beings work, an idea that was a crucial foundation of Stoicism.

including Philippa Foot (1978; 2001) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1984). Broadly speaking, the major difference between the virtue ethical framework and more recent approaches, such as Kantian deontology (Alexander and Moore 2012) and consequentialism (Sinnott-Armstrong 2011) is that the latter take the fundamental question in moral philosophy to be “what is right (or wrong)?” In virtue ethics, the focal question is rather “what kind of life ought we to live?” This, it can be argued, makes virtue ethics inherently more practical and relevant to everyday concerns.

The ancient virtue ethical schools differed in how they defined the proper life to live. They strove to determine which paths would best lead to eudaimonia, a concept loosely translated as “happiness” or more properly as “flourishing.” The Stoics thought of virtue as fundamental, meaning that a eudaimonic existence is one in which the individual lives morally, practicing and exercising the four cardinal virtues of (practical) wisdom, courage, justice, and moderation (Schofield 2003). To exercise these virtues meant to “live according to nature,” i.e., to embrace one’s natural human state as a rational and social animal. In order to live harmoniously within society, the individual deploys reason. Reason leads to the understanding that a good life is possible through the exercise of the virtues. In addition to eudaimonia, another major goal of Stoic practice is apatheia. While obviously related to the English “apathy,” this actually refers to tranquility of mind, specifically the serenity that comes from knowing one is doing the right thing and has the right priorities in life.

Stoicism is very much practice-oriented. The Stoics taught three “disciplines” that together constitute the core of their ethical system: the Discipline of Desire (Stoic acceptance), the Discipline of Action (Stoic Philanthropy) and the Discipline of Assent (Stoic Mindfulness). The first discipline is exemplified in this quote by Epictetus: “Don’t hope that events will turn out the way you want, welcome events in whichever way they happen: this is the path to peace.”⁴ The discipline suggests that individuals should recognize their inability to control how the universe works, and that struggling against the uncontrollable is a major source of human unhappiness. Death, of course, is the main thing that is outside human control. It is a natural part of what it means to be alive, so that when it comes (for others as well as for ourselves), it is far better to go with the flow of things. This, notably, does not mean that one should not take care of one’s health or may otherwise live

⁴ *Enchiridion*, 8.

recklessly, as the Stoics considered the human instinct for self-preservation to be a natural law. But the “go-with-the-flow” logic does have obvious implications for end-of-life care and the difficult decisions made at that stage, whether for one’s own self or for loved ones. The Stoics, incidentally, derived the Discipline of Desire from their understanding of physics. Specifically, it came from the idea—shared by modern science—of universal causality, which theorizes that everything is connected within a universal web of cause and effect, including human agency itself. In Stoic philosophy, desire is controlled through the exercise of virtues, such as courage (to face whatever comes) and temperance or moderation (to desire things in proportion to one’s needs and means).

The second discipline, the Discipline of Action, refers to ethics in the social sense of the term and articulates the virtue of justice. It is an inherently socially-oriented discipline, as is clear from this quote from Marcus Aurelius: “Men exist for the sake of one another. Teach them then or bear with them.”⁵ The Stoics (and the Cynics, who heavily influenced them) were the first in the Western tradition to use the term “cosmopolitanism” and to develop the concept. The discipline registers humanity as one community, with members who are ethically obligated to help each another (or as Marcus says, at the very least tolerate one another). One of the Greek Stoics, Hierocles, proposed that we think of our concerns in terms of a series of concentric circles. The circles begin with natural regard for oneself and one’s family, and expand outwards toward fellow citizens, countrymen, and eventually mankind as a whole. The ancient Stoic taught that members of the community should “collapse” the external circles in order to extend the natural affection for themselves and their family to every other member of the human community. This is known as *oikeiōsis*, a technical Stoic term with no direct translation in English, though rooted in the word for household or family. It conveys that it is natural for humans to care about family, and rational to expand this affinity to humanity at large. The Discipline of Action treats humanity’s struggles as the basis of human ethical concern.

Finally, the Discipline of Assent conveys the importance of self-discipline. “What decides whether a sum of money is good? The money is not going to tell you; it must be the faculty that makes use of such impressions—reason,” says Epictetus.⁶ The idea is that individuals are constantly bombarded by their

⁵ *Meditations*, VIII.59.

⁶ *Discourses*, I:1.5.

own impressions, or the instinctive reactions they form in response to external happenings. One may, for instance, react to a situation with fear or lust. The Stoics taught that these impressions need not be granted automatic assent and accepted at their face value. The virtuous person exercises a degree of detachment, adopting enough distance from the impression to rationally inquire whether fear or lust is warranted. Assent is bound with the virtue of practical wisdom, i.e., the ability to do the right thing in response to given circumstances. It is also conceptually linked with the study of logic (after all, *reason* dictates whether or not to give assent to a particular impression).

In summary, the three disciplines are meant to cover all areas of ethical living, applying the four virtues, and combining the three “*topoi*” (ethics, physics, and logic) into one coherent framework for how to live a eudaimonic life.

Death and suicide according to the Stoics

The Stoics were very concerned with death, although, given the general gist of their philosophy, perhaps “concerned” is not the best word. All of the major Stoic philosophers wrote about death and suicide and, in a number of documented cases, actually practiced what they preached.

From the general principles of Stoic philosophy, one can derive two generalizable attitudes about death: (i) Death itself is not to be feared, because it is a natural process, and because the individual is not “there” when it happens; and (ii) suicide is the always “open door” that helps making life meaningful and frees us from enslavement.

The first point was famously made by Epicurus, when he said that “Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not.”⁷ And here is Seneca:

Reflect that the dead suffer no evils, that all those stories which make us dread the nether world are mere fables, that he who dies need fear no darkness, no prison, no blazing streams of fire, no river of Lethe, no judgment seat before which he must appear, and that Death is such utter freedom that he need fear no more despots. All that is a phantasy of the poets, who have terrified us without a cause.... Death is neither a good nor a bad thing, for that alone which is something can be a good or a bad thing: but that which

⁷ *Letter to Menoecus*, <http://www.epicurus.net/en/menoecus.html>.

is nothing, and reduces all things to nothing, does not hand us over to either fortune, because good and bad require some material to work upon.⁸

Seneca's speech sounds extremely modern, containing language that a secular humanist (Grayling 2002; Kurtz 2006; Kitcher 2014) might comfortably use. He dismisses talk of the afterlife as the mere invention of poets (and, implicitly, of religious and political authorities), and recasts the Epicurean argument that death is not to be feared because where it is, we are not, and vice versa. The Stoics were thoroughgoing materialists,⁹ so of them something had to exist in order to be attributed a value of good or bad. Since death is by definition a state of non-existence, the problem simply does not arise. Modern philosophers might say that worrying about how one would experience death is a category mistake (Ryle 1949), given there will be nobody there to experience anything.

The Stoics also viewed death, in a sense, as a positive reality. Its inevitability was a reminder to focus on the *hic et nunc* (the here and now), to help them to be more mindful of how they were living and what they were doing. Marcus Aurelius, in his famous *Meditations* (written as a personal diary not meant for "publication"), reminds himself of this several times:

A limit of time is fixed for you, which if you do not use for clearing away the clouds from your mind, it will go and you will go, and it will never return. (II.4)

You will give yourself relief, if you do every act of your life as if it were the last. (II.5)

Do not act as if you were going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over you. While you live, while it is in your power, be good. (IV.17)

Michelle de Montaigne, a later author deeply influenced by Stoicism, explained¹⁰:

⁸ *Letter to Marcia*, XIX.

⁹ Even though the Stoics talked of a "soul" and of "God" the first one was considered a physical entity, while the second one was identified with the organizing principle of the universe.

¹⁰ "That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die," <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm#link2HCH0019>.

Life in itself is neither good nor evil; it is the scene of good or evil, as you make it... The utility of living consists not in the length of days, but in the use of time; a man may have lived long, and yet lived but a little. Make use of time while it is present with you. It depends upon your will, and not upon the number of days, to have a sufficient length of life.

Again, this sense of urgency of what we are doing at any particular moment, precisely because death could be around the corner, squares quite well with modern secular humanism. Both schools of thought emphasize that this is the only life and it ought not to be squandered, nor should the individual hope for some sort of redressing of wrongs in an afterlife that does not exist.

The second important Stoic idea about death concerns suicide. Epictetus refers to it as “the open door,” meaning the ever-present possibility that, should the situation require it, one may decide to leave on his or her own terms. As Epictetus puts it¹¹:

Pain too is just a scary mask: look under it and you will see. The body sometimes suffers, but relief is never far behind. And if that isn't good enough for you, the door stands open; otherwise put up with it. The door needs to stay open whatever the circumstances, with the result that our problems disappear.

Epictetus' message is common Stoic advice: life is full of unpleasant circumstances, which the Stoic needs to deal with by practicing the virtues of courage, justice, moderation, and wisdom. But a potential source of alleviation, which makes the whole experience bearable, is the knowledge that individuals are free to determine at any point that the game is not worth it, at which time they can walk through the open door available to us because of the possibility of suicide.

This, of course, is not at all counsel to take death and suicide in a facile way. Epictetus provides insight here, too, with his dry, characteristic sense of humor: “I must die. If soon, then I die; whereas if a little later, I will take lunch now, since the hour for lunch has come, and afterwards I will die at the appointed time.”¹² The Stoics valued life as a “preferred indifferent” (more

¹¹ *Discourses*, II.1.19.

¹² *Discourses*, I.1.

on this below). Their Discipline of Action required them to be intimately involved in society, making things better for humanity at large. The Stoics we know through Greek and Roman history were very much bent on making a difference: they were teachers (Zeno, the founder of Stoicism; Musonius Rufus, Epictetus' teacher; and Epictetus himself), politicians who influenced the course of history (Cato the Younger and Seneca), as well as generals and emperors (Marcus Aurelius).

That said, we have a number of examples of Stoic figures who did, in fact, commit suicide. They walked through the open door because they determined that either their utility on earth was at its end, or that their departure would help others (often their own families and friends). Socrates (not a Stoic, but arguably a major influence) committed suicide rather than take an easy way out of the sentence imposed by the Athenian state in order to, in modern terms, defend the principle of free speech¹³. Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, “endured many hardships by reason of old age”—and took his own life in his seventies¹⁴. The aforementioned Cato the Younger tore out his own guts when his friends tried to stitch his wounds after he had attempted suicide with a dagger, refusing to live under the rule of the tyrant Julius Caesar (Goodman 2012). Porcia Catonis, Cato's daughter and wife of Marcus Junius Brutus (a conspirator against Caesar) killed herself by (possible) self-inflicted carbon monoxide poisoning produced by coal, also for the purpose of political resistance.

The above examples highlight three themes within the Stoic approach to suicide. Good reasons to walk through the open door include: (i) relief of unbearable and pointless suffering for oneself (Zeno); (ii) benefit to one's friends and family (Seneca); or (iii) benefit to society (Cato, Porcia). All three find obvious equivalents in a modern context. The right to die movement in Western countries is precisely about (i) above (Rachels 1986). Clearly, even the very early Stoics, such as the School's founder, Zeno of Citium, saw that extreme suffering, especially at a stage in one's life when one is incapacitated from doing anything fulfilling for oneself or society, is sufficient cause to end one's own life. In some respects it is puzzling that such an ancient principle is not widely accepted in the contemporary world, likely

¹³ As recounted in Plato's *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. In the second dialogue Socrates defends the integrity of his teachings from his accusers, while in the third one he explains why he will not flee Athens, even though he has the opportunity to do so.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *Lives*, 7.1.

the result at the least in the West of the Christian concept of the “sacredness” of life.

The second scenario would presumably not occur in the way in which Seneca was affected, i.e., because of a tyrant threatening to confiscate one’s family holdings. But we can envision situations in which it is rational for, say, a terminal patient to want to end his pointless suffering, in part to spare expenses and suffering to his family. Naturally, this brings up the delicate issue of legal and medical safeguards for assisted suicide, so that people do not feel pressured by family to make an otherwise personal decision. From a Stoic and virtue ethical perspective, the wise, courageous, and just person would know, through conference with their own values, if and when to make such a decision regardless of familial pressures.

The third scenario, suicide for societal benefit, is perhaps the most problematic from a modern perspective, as it may bring to mind the specter of suicide terrorism. There are two responses which undermine this worry: historically, nations have recognized, allowed, and even glorified ultimate sacrifices by individuals on behalf of society, most prominently in cases of soldiers sent to war, but also under a wide range of civilian circumstances. Second, from the Stoic viewpoint, the person deciding to end his or her life for a cause has done so within the ethical bounds of Stoic morality, meaning that it was done for a just cause. This justification may end up including some acts labeled by governing authorities as terrorism, while at the same time excluding others that authorities would consider military heroism. This is, I hope it will be clear, not a counsel for moral relativism, but a cautionary statement about too casually labeling certain acts of suicide “terrorism” or “heroism” without relevant analysis of the political, cultural, and ethical frameworks.

The idea of “Preferred Indifferents”

Contrary to some common misconceptions about Stoicism,¹⁵ the followers of Zeno did not adopt a practice of emotional distance from life, nor did such practice lead to a casual relationship with death. To appreciate this we need to briefly discuss the above mentioned concept of “preferred” (and “dispreferred”) so-called “indifferents” in Stoicism.

¹⁵ See <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2014/11/25/common-pitfalls-for-inexpert-stoics-by-riemke-wiersma/>.

According to Sharpe (2014), a major difference between Aristotelian and Stoic virtue ethics is that for Aristotle virtue is necessary but not sufficient for eudaimonia. Aristotle agreed with the Stoics that one cannot flourish in the virtue ethical sense of the word without conducting oneself morally. However, he added that a number of other things must be in place as well: (i) a reasonably supportive familiar and societal environment, (ii) good education, (iii) good health, and even (iv) good looks. The Cynics, followers of Antisthenes, maintained instead that not only is virtue necessary, it is entirely sufficient for a eudaimonic life. Moreover, they believed that Aristotle's other "externals," or requirements for flourishing, should be avoided because they distract from becoming virtuous. Hence, many famous Cynic figures carried on an ascetic life, like Diogenes of Sinop who allegedly lived in a tub in the streets of Athens.

The Stoics were influenced both by the Socratic tradition (Antisthenes was a student of Socrates) and by the Cynics (Zeno initially studied under the Cynic teacher Crates of Thebes), but sought a middle ground between the Peripatetics (followers of Aristotle) and the Cynics. They agreed with the Cynics, and in contrast to Aristotle, that in order to live a meaningful and moral life, the practice of the virtues was of singular importance. But the Stoics also maintained that externals could be divided into preferred (*proēgmena*) and dispreferred (*apoproēgmena*) indifferents. The term "indifferent" (*adiaphora*) has a technical meaning; it does not suggest apathy, but rather that the subject at hand does not pertain to virtue. This allowed the Stoics to maintain their focus on morality and the virtues, while at the same time recovering the commonsensical idea that some things are preferred (health, wealth, education), while others are avoided (sickness, poverty, ignorance).

This may sound like a clever loophole, but the principle has profound implications. First, it means that external goods such as health, wealth, and education are not guarantors of morality, nor are their opposites any indication of a lack of morality. This is a lesson many forget when they encounter someone who is sick or poor and are immediately tempted to blame the individual's choices (whether ethical or not) for their unfortunate situation. As Epictetus nicely put it: "The following are non sequiturs: 'I am richer, therefore superior to you'; or 'I am a better speaker, therefore a better person,

than you.”¹⁶ Here is Marcus on the same theme: “Death and life, honor and dishonor, pain and pleasure—all these things equally happen to good men and bad, being things which make us neither better nor worse. Therefore they are neither good nor evil.”¹⁷

Secondly, the Stoic system dictates that things are not good or bad in themselves, because they acquire or lose value as a result of what is done with them. Epictetus asserts, “‘Being healthy is good, being sick is bad.’ No, my friend: enjoying health in the right way is good; making bad use of your health is bad.”¹⁸ Seneca is often the one to articulate ideas most clearly and entirely, as he does in the case of the “externals” in his epistle, “On the happy life”:

‘What then,’ comes the retort, ‘if good health, rest, and freedom from pain are not likely to hinder virtue, shall you not seek all of these?’ Of course I shall seek them, but not because they are goods—I shall seek them because they are according to nature and because they will be acquired through the exercise of good judgment on my part. What, then, will be good in them? This alone—that it is a good thing to choose them. For when I don suitable attire, or walk as I should, or dine as I ought to dine, it is not my dinner, or my walk, or my dress that are goods, but the deliberate choice which I show in regard to them, as I observe, in each thing I do, a mean that conforms with reason.¹⁹

So the radical notion that only virtue matters for the eudaimonic life, which the Stoics inherited from the Cynics, becomes more agreeable to common-sense because some externals are preferred or dispreferred. The notion is an integral part of a philosophical system according to which morality itself has nothing to do with the acquisition of goods. This aspect of the Stoic ethos is in agreement with progressive and humanistic critiques of contemporary culture of materialism and consumerism, although the Stoics articulated their critique from within the framework of a coherent ethical system, or philosophy of life, which at times seems missing or *ad hoc* in the humanistic approach.

¹⁶ *Enchiridion*, 44.

¹⁷ *Meditations*, II.11.

¹⁸ *Discourses* III.20.4.

¹⁹ *On the happy life*, XCII.11.

Facing Death: The Stoic Practice

Stoicism, like pretty much all philosophical approaches in the ancient Greco-Roman world, was meant to be practiced as a way of life; it was not just an exercise in theoretical judgment (as, unfortunately, much modern philosophy has become). Modern texts such as Irvine's (2008) include a number of "spiritual exercises" for people interested in practicing Stoicism, and there are outlets that provide guided meditations for the same purpose.²⁰

On the specific topic of death, there are five common exercises that may be useful for the modern reader in order to gain a Stoic perspective, even without a stronger commitment to Stoic philosophy more generally:

(i) Meditate on the deaths of powerful or famous people. This meditation helps one to gradually internalize that he or she is not exceptional within the lot of humanity. Marcus weighs in here: "Hippocrates, after curing many diseases, himself fell sick and died.... Alexander and Pompeius and Caesar, after so often completely destroying whole cities...at last departed from life. Heraclitus, after so many speculations on the conflagration of the universe, was filled with water and died smeared all over with cow dung."²¹

(ii) Read about the good deaths of worthy people. The Stoics were valued as what modern society calls "role models," though they picked theirs more carefully than we typically do in today's culture of celebrity worship. This is entirely consistent with the basic virtue ethical idea that practice is just as important as theory; one learns to be virtuous by attempting to be virtuous, and one learns what virtue is by watching virtuous people. Indeed, Marcus begins the *Meditations* with a list of people he has learned from, detailing what he has learned from them. It famously starts out: "From my grandfather Verus I learned good morals and the government of my temper."²²

(iii) Ponder the endings of entire civilizations. This is a broader version of the previous exercise, and can be thought of as a smaller version of the next.

²⁰ A collection of downloadable guided Stoic meditations can be found here: <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2013/11/24/audio-recordings-for-stoic-week-2014/>; see also my own suggestions here: <https://howtobeastoxic.wordpress.com/meditations/>

²¹ *Meditations* III.3.

²² *Meditations* I.1.

It is not just that people die; entire societies die as well. Athens fell. Rome fell, and so did every other civilization in human history (Diamond 2004). Reflecting in some detail on these events helps to put human (and a fortiori one's own) impermanence into perspective. Marcus again: "In like manner view also the other epochs of time and of whole nations, and see how many after great efforts soon fell and were resolved into the elements."²³

(iv) Meditate on cosmic conflagrations. One of the standard Stoic meditations is the so-called "view from above," in which the subject visualizes his or her place in an increasingly vast world and cosmos, again with the objective of helping to put things into perspective. A variant of this is to remind oneself that entire worlds, and even the universe itself, eventually come to an end. Stoic cosmology was close to the modern scientific understanding of the history of the universe: it had a beginning, and it will eventually end. The Stoics believed in a cyclic universe with a series of beginnings and endings, and though some modern cosmological models predict something similar, the essential agreement is that both individual (and personal) worlds and the cosmos will cease to exist. If that doesn't help someone to take the long view of human affairs, it is hard to imagine what would. Here is how Marcus put it: "All things are changing: and you yourself are in continuous mutation and in a manner in continuous destruction, and the whole universe, too."²⁴

(v) Reflect on individual mortality as a way to renew appreciation of life. We have already seen that Marcus often reminded himself of his own mortality, and we have encountered Epictetus' somewhat sardonic take on the subject as well. Irvine (2008) suggests that this sort of meditation, as well as the others mentioned above, may be used not just as a way to put life in a broader perspective and better understand one's place in the cosmos, but also as a psychological trick to appreciate what one has while possessing it. Although it is true that one's existence is but a blink in the eye of cosmic history, isn't it nonetheless amazing to take part in that cosmic unfolding, for however brief a moment?

Why Stoicism?

Stoicism offers a coherent and well thought out attitude toward death and

²³ *Meditations* IV.32.

²⁴ *Meditations* IX.19.

dying, including a perspective on the possibility of suicide. ~~But why Stoicism?~~ Why think that a philosophy that saw its heyday almost two thousand years ago may still speak to 21st century concerns? There are two answers to this question. The first is broader and is not limited to Stoicism in particular, but can be applied to any other practical philosophy that is sufficiently coherent. As Irvine (2008) insists, it is good to pick a (good) philosophy for life because it helps us to organize and make sense of what happens to us and how to respond to it. The idea is that we all have a life philosophy of sorts anyway, but often we either have not reflected on it, or we have simply automatically absorbed it as part, for instance, of a cultural religious tradition. Consciously reflecting on one's philosophy of life, be it secular humanism, Stoicism, Buddhism, or whatever, helps us being in control of our existence to the greatest extent possible. The examined life is (more) worth living....

The second answer more directly concerns Stoicism. It is one of a number of philosophies developed over time by different cultures, a set that includes other Greco-Roman approaches (especially Epicureanism, but also the Peripatetic version of virtue ethics, as well as more esoteric ones like Cynicism), Eastern approaches (again Buddhism, but also secular versions of Taoism or Confucianism), and of course modern approaches (chiefly secular humanism, but also Ethical Culture, or Unitarianism).²⁵ Stoicism may not be for everyone, but it does present a number of advantages, especially given its recent modern resurgence. Modern Stoicism offers new possibilities, such as the ability to get in touch with other practitioners virtually via social networks,²⁶ or in person via local "meetup" style groups.²⁷

To explore Stoicism as one's own life philosophy means becoming acquainted with it in its original form, one of the most influential philosophies of antiquity. However, this is a philosophy, not a religion, so one does not treat Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius or Seneca as if they had produced the equivalent of scriptures. What they wrote was brilliant and insightful, but it was also the product of human minds constrained by their own times and cultural prejudices. That is why it is important to also examine various modern authors who have engaged in updating Stoicism, including Becker (1997), Hadot (1998), Irvine (2008), Robertson (2013), and Brouwer (2014).

²⁵ There are also, naturally, bad choices. Under these fall any kind of fundamentalist religion, but also practices such as Scientology and Ayn Rand's objectivism.

²⁶ E.g., <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Stoicism/>

²⁷ As in <http://www.meetup.com/New-York-City-Stoics/>

They provide a wealth of thoughtful resources useful for anyone attracted to the basic aspects of Stoicism outlined above. As far as the topic of death is concerned, the Stoics have quite a bit to teach us about what they considered the supreme test of one's character: how we handle our own exit from the cosmic stage.



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