**Roman Stoicism**

Introduction

Stoicism was a style of philosophy that flourished for over 500 years. As a result of this longevity, it underwent a number of changes during this time but retained a fairly consistent core set of beliefs and attitudes.

Stoicism can be divided into three main eras. Early Stoa (starting around the beginning of the 3rd century BCE), Middle Stoa (starting in the middle of the 2nd century BCE) and Late Stoa (starting around the year 0). Each of these eras differed primarily in the particular aspect of their philosophy that the leading exponents chose to emphasise.

Early Stoa, pioneered by Zeno of Citium, concerned itself with three broad fields; logic, physics/cosmology, and ethics. This period was particularly concerned with establishing a rigorous system of logic and postulating grand cosmological theories. An important element in this, something which reflected the influence of Heraclitus, was the belief that the active portion of the universe was a fiery ether which would periodically consume the other elements in a great conflagration.

Panaetius of Rhodes made Middle Stoa more practical in focus, rejecting some of the grander cosmological ideas that had occupied his predecessors. Posidonius followed Panaetius and was a noted astronomer and scientist; a true polymath who contributed much to the knowledge of the times with an influence second only to Aristotle’s in many areas.

Late Stoa was centred around Stoicism’s most famous philosophers; Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. All three of these philosophers were Roman and were almost exclusively focused on ethics. It is important to note that in ancient Greece, ethics meant something a little different from what we think of these days. Ethics was essentially concerned with how to live the ‘good life’ rather than trying to establish a set of prescriptive norms or considering whether certain acts are ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. They were seeking guidelines that would allow one to attain *eudaimonia* (‘happiness’ or ‘flourishing’) and were interested primarily in achieving serenity or tranquillity.

This essay will be restricted in scope to the three Roman Stoics of the Late Stoa period. In what follows I won’t be arguing *for* any particular thesis, I will simply be attempting to summarise and clarify the Stoic philosophy of the time.

The essay will be divided into three sections.

In the first section I will outline (very) brief introductions to the three philosophers themselves, addressing their personal histories, rather than their philosophical standpoints.

The second will discuss what I believe to be the key concepts that make up the three Romans’ thoughts. As such, this section will be subdivided by topic. Each topic will be discussed without prejudice at first, that is, I will attempt to relay, without bias, each philosopher’s thoughts according to their original writings, but will conclude with a short statement discussing my personal opinion on the subject.

The third section is an extension of the second but rather than being structured by topic will proceed by philosopher. Under each philosopher, I will address some final topics that they tended to give focus to which the other philosophers may not have spoken so much about. These issues, more or less signify how each philosopher’s take on Stoicism differed in emphasis.

The fourth and final section will be more prescriptive and will contain practical advice given by the philosophers, which I believe to have value, even (and sometimes *especially*) in our modern age.

The Philosophers

*Seneca* (c. 4BCE – 65CE)

Seneca was born in Spain but raised and educated in Rome. He achieved success as a lawyer and amassed a large fortune early in his career. Despite principally being a philosopher, who earned for himself a reputation as a skilled orator and writer, he also enjoyed a colourful political career featuring exile under Claudius and tutelage to and service under Nero. The vagaries of political life eventually caught up to him and he was ordered by Nero to take his own life in 65CE. True to his philosophical teachings, it is recorded that Seneca accepted his fate with Stoic equanimity and calmly severed the arteries of his arms on the appointed day.

Some have criticised Seneca for possessing such wealth while at the same time espousing the irrelevance of external goods (including money). There are two responses one might make to this. First, Seneca himself says that there is nothing wrong with externals themselves; they only become a problem when you make your happiness conditional on them. Second, even if this is true (i.e. Seneca failed to live by his own principles), it in no way negates those principles and, as a philosopher, that is first and foremost what we are interested in here.

The material on Seneca’s philosophy in this essay is based entirely on five of his essays and a number of letters written by him. The essays are entitled *On Providence*, *On the Shortness of Life*, *On Tranquillity of the Mind*, *Consolation to Helvia*, and *On Clemency*.

*Epictetus* (c. 55 – 135CE)

We know little about the life of Epictetus but it seems that as a boy he somehow came to Rome as the slave of a wealthy freedman, Epaphroditus. While still a slave he studied philosophy under Musonius Rufus. At some time in his life he was manumitted, and after Emperor Domitian banished all philosophers from Rome around the year 89, he went to Nicopolis where he opened his own school.

We have no direct writings from Epictetus himself but one of his students, Flavius Arrian, authored a compilation called *Discourses* which is divided into four books and purports to contain the philosophy of Epictetus. We have no way of knowing whether the *Discourses* are directly transcribed lectures given by Epictetus or simply Arrian’s best attempt at a faithful reproduction of his master’s thoughts. Despite this, whoever wrote them and whatever they were based on, the thoughts contained within them stand and warrant our investigation.

I have also included one final work called the *Encheiridion* (or Handbook), also penned by Arrian, which seems to be something of a shorter summary of the material contained in the (much) longer *Discourses*.

*Marcus Aurelius* (121 – 180CE)

Marcus Aurelius was the last in a line of Emperors known colloquially as the ‘five good emperors’ beginning with Nerva in 96CE and ending with the death of Marcus in 180CE. Marcus was adopted by the Emperor Antoninus Pius in 138CE and became emperor in 161CE. By all accounts he was a fair, respected, and genuinely noble man earning a number of titles and honours during his reign.

He had an abiding interest in philosophy, which he had abandoned rhetoric to study, and although not a philosopher by occupation, was very much a Stoic. His philosophy also shows more than a hint of an existential leaning.

Marcus spent much of his time on campaigns and the sole work we have from him, *Meditations*, was written, at least in part, in the field. It is a unique piece of work in that it is a very personal journal containing Marcus’ private thoughts and philosophical reflections. It seems unlikely that it was ever intended for publication but fortunately, it found its way into a publisher’s hands somewhere along the way.

The Roman Stoic Philosophy

Platonic Dualism

All of the philosophers very clearly accepted Plato’s distinction between the body and soul/mind. What’s more, they all downgraded the physical as something inferior to the mind, largely because we share our physical bodies with animals.

Marcus divides the human into three parts; body, soul (or breath), and mind[[1]](#endnote-1). To the body belong sense impressions; to the soul, impulses; and to the mind, judgements[[2]](#endnote-2). Receiving sense impressions is something we share with cattle, responding to impulse is shared with wild beasts, but forming judgements using reason is unique to humans. It would seem to follow from this that the mind is the most important part and Marcus confirms this when he says that the first two parts are ours only in so far as we have to care for them while our minds are the only things that are truly and fully ours[[3]](#endnote-3). For Marcus, our body is nothing more than an instrument to be used as the mind sees fit, comparing it to a “pen without the writer”[[4]](#endnote-4).

In addition, Marcus speaks quite disparagingly of the body, telling us to disdain the flesh[[5]](#endnote-5) and “never give any equal thought to the vessel”[[6]](#endnote-6) which merely surrounds the mind. In fact, the way Marcus phrases it at one point gives the impression that there is some kind of contest between the body and the mind which the latter can lose. “…the fourth case for self-reproach is that in which the more divine part of you loses the contest and bows to the lower, mortal part, the body and its gross pleasures.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Seneca has the same things to say about the body, calling it “trivial”[[8]](#endnote-8) and complaining that the “body is a weight upon the soul and its punishment”[[9]](#endnote-9). He, like Marcus, believes that we shouldn’t wait until we die for our soul to soar free and unhindered by the body urging us to “dissociate yourself from your body and contemplate loftier and sublimer things.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Epictetus holds a similar opinion although may be a little less emphatic than Marcus or Seneca. He says that we are distinguished from “wild beasts” by our rationality and that when we act for the sake of our belly or our sex organs, having lost our reason, we are reduced to the level of sheep.[[11]](#endnote-11)

*My Two Cents*

This disparaging attitude toward the body and all bodily interests had a long history in Greek thought before Stoicism. It was, of course, also adopted by early Christianity and thereafter evolved into a specific neurosis about sex.

For my part, I can’t see the value in treating the body as inferior in any way to the mind. The main reason why these thinkers degrade the physical so is their belief in dualism which posits that an eternal, non-physical soul inhabits a physical vessel. Since I completely reject this notion, I find myself thinking of the human as nothing more than the physical. Sure, some of the things we are capable of are non-physical (our thoughts or feelings, for instance) but it seems pretty clear that these capabilities are fairly well-grounded in our brains, very much a physical organ (if you don’t believe this, might I quickly detach your brain from your body to test the theory?). Since, we are nothing more than physical beings then I find it hard to treat our natural physical desires as somehow inferior to our mental activity.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that we should give in to every physical desire we have all the time, but it does mean that there is nothing ‘second rate’ about them. They make up an integral part of the human animal and to deny them or relegate them to something less meaningful than our mental endeavours is to lose sight of what it means to be human.

Aristotelian ‘Purpose from Function’

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle sought an ultimate function for man. Since reason is the thing that sets us apart from the animals, man’s highest good and ultimate function must involve not just reason, but reasoning at the highest level. This, Aristotle calls ‘virtue’, from which he goes on to build a theory of ethics based on the doctrine of the mean and practical wisdom, and which concludes with the revelation that contemplation of God is the highest good for man.

Although they take it in a slightly different direction – or perhaps it is better to just say they emphasise slightly different things in their final analysis – the Roman Stoic philosophers all accept Aristotle’s starting point in this quest, namely that the purpose of human beings can be uncovered by coming to know their function.

Epictetus argues that each thing is “beautiful” (and here, he is obviously not referring to physical attractiveness, but rather a sense of ‘completeness’ or ‘the fulfilment of it’s potential’, or I suppose to go all behavioural psychology, ‘self-actualised’) when it has “achieved supreme excellence in terms of its own nature”[[12]](#endnote-12).

He goes on to discuss this in more detail as regards horses. If a horse were to proudly state that its sire was swifter than another horse’s or it had more barley, then this horse has failed to understand what it is that makes a horse beautiful. As Epictetus asks and answers for us, “What makes a horse beautiful? The presence of a horse’s excellence.”[[13]](#endnote-13) And this, Epictetus tells us, is the ability to run fast. It is the nature of horses to be swift. Aristotle would say that being swift is their function. It is this nature or function that provides us with the yardstick by which we can assess whether a thing is successful or not, or as Epictetus would say, is beautiful or not.

Epictetus then goes on to ask whether there is something in man that is like running in the case of a horse, i.e. something whereby we can recognise the better and the worse. He insists there is such a thing and identifies it by asking us who it is we praise, when we “praise people dispassionately; is it the just, or the unjust? – They just; - is it the temperate, or the dissolute? – The temperate; - and is it the self-controlled, or the uncontrolled? – The self-controlled.”[[14]](#endnote-14) So, it is human nature (that which makes a human ‘beautiful’) to be just, temperate, and self-controlled. He also identifies a number of other attributes in the *Discourses* such as reverence, faith, etc. which make up human nature and can therefore be used as yardsticks to measure ‘goodness’.

All this of course means that “since each [thing] has a different nature, each one of them… is beautiful in a different fashion… what makes a dog beautiful, makes a horse ugly”[[15]](#endnote-15). In recognition of this then, Epictetus identifies two standards, one general and one individual. The former means that human beings must act as humans (just, temperate, etc.) as opposed to sheep (without any purpose) or wild beasts (destructively). The latter individual standard applies to each man’s occupation, so a carpenter must act as a carpenter, for example, to fulfil his excellence[[16]](#endnote-16).

In a memorable line worthy of rounding off, Epictetus tells us, “If you tell me, “I can deliver a mighty kick,” I shall say to you in my turn, “You are proud over what is the act of an ass.””[[17]](#endnote-17)

There is little point in paraphrasing Seneca on this point when he says in a passage that could have come straight from Aristotle, “Everything is valued by its particular good… In every case the function for which a thing is created and by which it is rated ought to be the best. What is best in man? Reason, which puts him ahead of the animals and next to the gods. Perfect reason is, then, his peculiar good.”[[18]](#endnote-18) He goes on in this same letter to affirm that when a human’s reason is “right and perfected his measure of happiness is full.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

Seneca seems to be a little terser than Epictetus regarding this, restricting the function of man (and therefore the way he is to be rated) to reason, specifically perfected reason. However, I think it is fair to say that Seneca envisions all of the same attributes that Epictetus does, just all encapsulated under the umbrella of right reason. I would imagine that for Seneca, when a person’s reason is perfect, all the other traits that make up virtue would automatically follow.

Marcus is the most reserved amongst the three philosophers on this topic. He assures us that “everything has come into being for a purpose”[[20]](#endnote-20) and “an instrument, a tool, a utensil – all these are fine if they perform the function for which they were made.”[[21]](#endnote-21) He has therefore tied purpose to function but as to exactly what that function (and therefore our purpose) is, he has little to say.

He does assert that our purpose cannot be just pleasure. Rather, he insists that this purpose must lie in action. Unfortunately, this still doesn’t get us much closer to anything useful. The only thing he has to say to clarify things links our function to reason (much the same as Seneca) and holds that “…the end for rational creatures is to follow the reason and the rule of that venerable archetype of a governing state – the Universe.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

*My Two Cents*

The whole notion that purpose can and should be derived from function doesn’t appeal to many of us these days. After all, who hasn’t disproven this thesis by standing on a chair to reach something high (or fight off a tiger)? A chair’s function is to support our bums when we want to sit but that doesn’t preclude us from using it in some other way to achieve a different end.

When it comes to organic things (the creation and ostensible function of which are much less straightforward than chairs), the problems of deriving purpose from function is only compounded. Horses can run fast, and that is indeed how we make the best use of them (their ‘function’, for us at least) but does that mean that should become their purpose for being? Moreover, why should their function/purpose be tied to humanity’s principle use of them?

Of course, when it comes to reasoning human beings, we really have a problem. Seneca and Marcus tie our function with our ability to reason, primarily because this is what makes us unique among all of the other organic beings we know of but must this dictate how we are to live? Imagine someone who complained every time you used a chair for something other than sitting on. This would be like complaining every time someone used their reason for something other than achieving virtue; say making money, or writing a book.

Epictetus circumvents this objection a little by appealing to an individual and a general standard. As regards the individual standard our money-maker can use his reason to his heart’s content to make as much money as he wants but when it comes to the general standard, he should still fall in line by upholding certain virtues.

Epictetus also ties our ‘beautifulness’ to virtue by asking what we praise in others. We praise those who are just, temperate, and so on, but does this necessarily mean that these are then our nature? We might find these traits likeable and praiseworthy in others but what does this really say other than we recognise that such traits enable us to live together harmoniously?

Ultimately, there are two big problems I have with this notion. The first is that without the Stoic belief in some kind of divine, ordering, *logos* to the cosmos (or a similar belief, such as in the Christian God), I find it hard to believe that there *is* any grand purpose (or function) for humans, or animals… or *anything*. A purpose (or a function), by definition implies a designer, and while this is fine for manmade things (like chairs) which are deliberately designed to perform a specific function in order to fulfil a certain purpose, it just isn’t obvious, or even plausible in my opinion, that organic things are designed in this way (and the whole of evolutionary biology supports me in this).

To get to function or purpose in any natural entity, the Stoics really need to show, in opposition to Jean-Paul Sartre, that essence precedes existence. And for this to be true, there really needs to be something over and above humans with some teleology in mind. Unfortunately, it just doesn’t seem like there is.

As we have seen, this idea starts with the Stoics attempting to show that there is some *natural* function of human beings. If they can get this, the hope is then that we can be induced to believe that our purpose should be the excellent performance of that function. The second problem is that even if they do show that there is a natural function for humans, there is absolutely no reason why we should then be bound to this as a benchmark. If I never once use a chair to sit on, but successfully use it to stave off a tiger a hundred times, has it failed? Perhaps it has, as a chair, but it is a resounding success as a tiger defence. Is one necessarily better than the other?

The crucial philosophical point behind my idea is that an *is doesn’t necessarily imply an ought*. It doesn’t follow that just because a thing *is* a certain way, it *should be* that (or this) way. We need additional premises before we can make the leap from an *is* to an *ought*. The Stoics think they have supplied this with their *logos* or *divine reason* but since I reject that, I also reject the conclusion that follows from its inclusion.

Socratic Influence

Socrates had a tremendous influence on all philosophy that came after him and philosophers would not just be quoting his ideas for centuries after his death but he would be upheld as a paradigm of virtue and admired as the quintessential philosopher. Among some of these ideas are two in particular that the Roman Stoic philosophers took to heart. These are:

* No one errs intentionally or assents to a falsehood willingly
* If someone acts wrongly, they only hurt themselves

Epictetus is quite clear where he stands on these ‘Socratic’ ideas and mentions them a few times but Marcus continually comes back to them in his *Meditations* marking them as a central notion for the Emperor.

Epictetus says, “What, then, is the cause of my going astray? Ignorance.”[[23]](#endnote-23) He also asserts that “he who is in error does not wish to err, but to be right”[[24]](#endnote-24). He claims that this is so because it is the nature of the intellect “to agree to what is true, to be dissatisfied with what is false, and to withhold judgement regarding what is uncertain.”[[25]](#endnote-25)

He then offers a proof that this is true by asking if is interlocutor can make himself believe that it is night now. Clearly, this is impossible. He also considers a possible objection; what about the person who knows that what they are about to do is wrong but can’t stop themselves; their “passion overmastereth sober thought.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Even in that case, Epictetus argues, the person regards the gratification of their passion as more profitable than the alternative.

If we never err intentionally, it logically follows that if someone is shown their error they will necessarily amend their actions. Epictetus affirms, “show them [thieves and robbers] their error and you will see how quickly they will desist from their mistakes.”[[27]](#endnote-27)

Marcus agrees, maintaining “…that they go wrong through ignorance, not intent…”[[28]](#endnote-28). He then goes on to consider exactly where their ignorance lies and concludes that, “All this [unpleasant traits; ungrateful, aggressive, treacherous, etc.] has afflicted them through their ignorance of true good and evil.”[[29]](#endnote-29)

Marcus follows Epictetus, holding that, “…no soul likes to be robbed of truth…”[[30]](#endnote-30) and later ties his concept of good and evil in with the “proper treatment of each individual as his worth deserves”[[31]](#endnote-31) meaning, essentially, that no one wants to harm other people or treat them poorly. They only do so because they don’t know what good and evil are, a situation Marcus goes so far as to call a “disability”.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Marcus, always concerned with conducting himself appropriately with others, draws another conclusion that is as impressive as it is difficult to live by; “Do not blame men either: all their wrongs are unwilled. No one, then, should be blamed.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

The second Socratic point, Epictetus encapsulates neatly when he says, “no one is evil without loss and damage”[[34]](#endnote-34) and again, “is it possible for one man to make the mistake and yet another suffer the harm? – No.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

Now, at first glance this might seem contradictory to what we normally think of when we imagine someone doing wrong to another. So, we call the person who is maltreated the ‘victim’, which literally means ‘the person harmed’, and the person who does the maltreating the ‘perpetrator’, which doesn’t carry any connotations of suffering harm. Epictetus is suggesting that we rethink this understanding, imputing the harm suffered to the perpetrator while leaving the ‘victim’ free from harm.

To understand why, we must ask what exactly Epictetus means by ‘harm’. He suggests that we would consider ourselves damaged if we were to lose our skill in the use of language or music. He then asks would we not be equally damaged if we were to lose our self-respect, dignity, or gentleness? According to Epictetus, someone who lusts “unnaturally” loses their manhood and someone who commits adultery “loses the man of self-respect that was, the man of self-control, the gentleman…”[[36]](#endnote-36).

Now we see that Epictetus’ opinion on this is closely tied to two other central Stoic themes, namely, the importance of virtue and the idea that no one can negatively affect our virtue.[[37]](#footnote-1) The primary thing that Epictetus values is virtue (self-respect, dignity, etc.) and if we act in such a way as to cause harm to another (evilly), then we only bring damage upon our own character. We may satisfy some desire or gain some other thing, but Epictetus asks us to consider the other side of the transaction, i.e. what we lose along the way. The ‘victim’s’ virtue remains completely unaffected by the perpetrator’s actions and may even be enhanced if she reacts nobly. Epictetus believes that even if a person is flogged, imprisoned, or beheaded, as long as “he bears it all in a noble spirit… [he] comes off with increased profit and advantage, while the other man is the one who suffers harm, the man who is subjected to the most pitiful and disgraceful experience, who becomes a wolf, or a snake, or a wasp, instead of a human being?”[[38]](#endnote-37)

I would be remiss if I didn’t also relay a sound piece of advice Epictetus offers regarding how to react (or rather how not to) when one is harmed.[[39]](#footnote-2) “Since so-and-so has injured himself by doing me some wrong, shall I not injure myself by doing him some wrong?”[[40]](#endnote-38)

Marcus also devotes a considerable amount of ink asserting the same thing. He explicitly states that, “Individual wickedness does no harm to the recipient: it is only harmful to the perpetrator…”[[41]](#endnote-39) and, like Epictetus, confirms that “the wrongdoer wrongs himself, by making himself morally bad.”[[42]](#endnote-40) Marcus sees our character as our most important possession and thinks that the tainting of this quality (which is very much the ‘real’ us) as the only thing that can ‘harm’ us.

And, as Epictetus does, Marcus concludes that since harming another only harms the self, we cannot be harmed by anyone else; “…the man has not harmed you – he has not made your directing mind worse than it was before”[[43]](#endnote-41) and again, “…I cannot be harmed by any of them, as none will infect me with their wrong.”[[44]](#endnote-42)

*My Two Cents*

First of all, it is true, I think, that *almost* everything we do, we do believing we are doing the right thing. No one who typically harms another person does so holding the opinion that they are doing the wrong thing. How can we know this? Because everybody *always* justifies their actions. “I hit him because he walks around thinking he’s the mack. He was asking for it.” “Those fat cats all basically steal from the little guy anyway – I’m just taking some of it back.” Everyone, even bad guys, have reasons to justify their actions.[[45]](#footnote-3) If we were really doing something we thought was wrong, we wouldn’t feel the need to provide an explanation.

I think Epictetus is right about what he calls the “nature of the intellect” although we would probably call it something like the tendency of the brain to avoid dissonance. Our brains don’t like dissonance and will conjure up any number of excuses to avoid it. If we truly believe something is wrong, we will either not do it or attempt to justify it when we do do it.

But, you might argue, simply justifying some act can’t magically make a wrong act right. That is true, but remember, we aren’t talking about the rightness or wrongness of an act here, we are only talking about whether a person acts *in accordance with their understanding of morality*. If they steal from someone rich and believe that that is acceptable, then they haven’t violated their morality. We might criticise their sense of morality, but this just means they have acted wrongly out of ignorance. They haven’t intentionally done something wrong; rather they have done something wrong thinking they were doing something right.[[46]](#footnote-4)

This covers even the person who, when asked why he hit someone, says, “I just punched his lights out for fun.” Clearly this person believes that that kind of behaviour, i.e. punching people for fun, is acceptable. We may think that he is mistaken about what good and evil are but according to morality, *as he understands it*, he hasn’t done anything wrong.

This, then, is my first point; no one who truly believes that something is wrong then goes out and does that something but… (and here is my second point) the first point applies only under normal circumstances.

When I say “normal circumstances” I am referring to situations where we are acting rationally and with complete mental clarity. Of course, the human being is a complex animal. As I’ve already hinted at, this discussion largely turns on humans being completely rational and this is a notion that I think is impossible to maintain. Because we aren’t just rational minds (although the Stoic philosophers certainly believed we are) our actions and decisions aren’t always predicated on reason. Rather than rationally weighing our options and acting accordingly, humans are (almost by definition) a roiling mass of emotions, memories, habits, inclinations, tendencies, likes, dislikes, with a subconscious we barely understand anything about thrown in for free, all heavily influenced by our past and current environments, who often just react to situations long before thought enters into it (if it *ever* does). Sometimes then, ‘in these abnormal circumstances’[[47]](#footnote-5), we do things we believe are wrong just because we don’t think or act rationally.

It is easy to think of such situations. Our emotions, in particular, are frequently accountable for making us do things against our ‘normal’ character. Anyone with a temper might do or say something they wouldn’t ‘normally’. Habits or patterns of behaviour are another source of our actions which bypass the usual thinking process.

So, regarding the first Socratic point; no one errs intentionally, I guess I partially agree with the Stoics. It is true that no one errs intentionally (i.e. no one wilfully does something against their beliefs about right and wrong) when they are thinking clearly (i.e. rationally or unemotionally) although it is important to note that this doesn’t preclude them being mistaken about what is right and wrong.

However, what the Stoics fail to consider[[48]](#footnote-6) is that we can still act in opposition to our moral impulse (that is, do something even though we believe it to be wrong) simply because we are human. Sometimes emotion gets the better of us or we react out of habit or instinct to a certain stimulus even though that act doesn’t reflect our thoughts about right and wrong.

Still on the first point (the second half now); no one willingly assents to a falsehood, I think the Stoics are right about this. We don’t, perhaps even *can’t*, willingly believe something that we think is false, to be true.

Try it. If you believe God is real, try to believe that he isn’t. You can’t. That’s just not the way we are wired. We can and do change our beliefs but *only* to match new facts or when our understanding of something changes. Beliefs don’t just change by force of will; they change in response to new information.

If we want to believe something strongly enough, we may convince ourselves a falsehood is true, but this only proves my point. The reason we need to go through the motions of *convincing* ourselves in the first place is because we can’t just happily accept something we truly think is false. No one in their right mind can say, “Even though I know that the earth is 4.5 billion years old, I believe it is only 6,000 years old.”

What about people who deceive themselves?[[49]](#footnote-7) Aren’t they believing something they know to be false? In a way, yes. But, I think more centrally, no. People are surprisingly capable of deceiving themselves – I think this happens a lot in religion. People look for evidence supporting their beliefs and ignore evidence that contradicts it. They also lower the bar to ridiculous levels for anything that comes along in favour of their belief.

But, I don’t think they do this with full conscious awareness. As I have already mentioned, humans are extremely complex primates. We cherish our beliefs more than anything else because they form the foundation we build our lives upon. We defend them to the point of insanity[[50]](#footnote-8) and this defence can sometimes take place at a level below conscious awareness. We see people acknowledge this after they have surrendered to the truth when they say things like, “I think I knew on some level that xx wasn’t true but…”

I think our brains *demand* consonance between our beliefs and external information. Of course, many things in this world aren’t black and white and so there is scope for a little interpretation here and a little self-deception there but we can’t knowingly (i.e. with full conscious awareness) believe something we know to be false.

Does this mean that I think showing someone the error of their ways will result in a change of behaviour? Sometimes. Their behaviour under “normal circumstances” can be changed but this may not amend their actions in those “abnormal circumstances” I discussed earlier.

On the other hand, if you can make someone see that a falsehood they believe is actually false, this will absolutely result in them assenting to the truth. Emotion and irrational influences tend not to change our beliefs like they do actions (we don’t believe the sun is the centre of the solar system when we are happy and the earth is when we’re stressed, whereas we might hit someone when stressed but never do so when relaxed) so incorrectly believed falsehoods are always *automatically* changed when someone *really* assents to the truth.

Now (when it comes to “normal circumstances” and believing a falsehood), this doesn’t mean that it is *easy* to show people doing wrong/believing a falsehood the error of their ways or even that they *can* be shown the error of their ways. They may be too stubborn or unwilling to accept the truth or have too much invested in some belief to consciously abandon it, but if they *truly* realise their error, they will stop doing what they are doing or believing what they believe.

Let’s turn now to the second Socratic point; doing harm to others only harms ourselves. I propose we investigate this by imagining an example. Imagine one person, A, insults another person, B, randomly, i.e. B hasn’t done anything wrong. Traditionally, B is the victim in this scenario. The Stoics, however insist that A is actually both the perpetrator and the victim. B, on the other hand, remains untouched.

First up, it is clear that B may be emotionally hurt by A’s insults and feel depressed or angry afterwards. I think however, the Stoics aren’t saying that B *will* not be affected, but that she *shouldn’t* be affected. She hasn’t done anything to be ashamed of. A, on the other hand, has acted in a manner unbecoming of a human being (as the Stoics define ‘human being’) and has therefore damaged her all-important virtue.

Now, I’m not sure that I see virtue the same way the Stoics do[[51]](#footnote-9) but I do intuitively think they are right about this; someone who harms someone else is in effect harming themselves. They are doing two things. First, they are showing their true nature, and it turns out not to be so nice; this damages them in the eyes of others. Second, they are reinforcing this habit of hurting others, which locks their character further into this negative pattern of acting.

Think about our earlier case. A insults B for no good reason. What do we know about B after this? Nothing. But what do we know about A. We know she is quick to anger, she doesn’t consider the effect her words might have on others, she has a caustic tongue, and so on. These aren’t traits we typically consider desirable.

I don’t think we need to have formulated a lofty morality based on virtue (as the Stoics do) to justify this position. All we need do is think about the kinds of people we ourselves like. Do we like people who enjoy causing harm to others? Are these the people who, when we think about, we think, “She’s a good person”? Are these the people we want to hang around with? Do these people make us feel better or worse?

I don’t want to try and derive a moral system just yet, that is, I don’t want to say ‘hurting others is wrong’ because there is more to it than that. At the moment I just want to point out that, in general, we intuitively neither like nor want to hang out with people who hurt others. This is enough, I think, to get us to the idea that people who hurt others also hurt themselves, i.e. they reveal themselves to be the kind of person most of us don’t like and reinforce patterns of behaviour that make them the kind of person most of us don’t like.

What this doesn’t get us to, is the idea that the people who hurt others *only* hurt themselves. For this, we need one more postulate; we can’t control other people’s actions or thoughts and we therefore shouldn’t let them concern us[[52]](#footnote-10). If we can accept this, we immediately see that whatever A says about B or does to her shouldn’t matter in the slightest. B is only concerned with acting well according to her morality[[53]](#footnote-11), not about other people’s harmful actions. If A rants and raves about B, this by itself hasn’t affected the way B acts according to her morality.[[54]](#footnote-12)

B preserves what we might call her integrity just by doing nothing because A’s actions only reflect on A, for better or for worse. We needn’t let other people’s actions upset our balance because in truth, the louder they talk about us, the more they are revealing about themselves.

What about the case of physical harm? Should we still be unconcerned? Well, we may be more motivated to avoid this but, while we may feel the pain, we shouldn’t feel upset (inside) over it because ultimately you can’t control what other people do. The only thing you can control is your reaction, so as long as you act in a way you believe to be moral, you have nothing to be upset over.

If you think about it, all too often we are upset, not so much by what people actually say or do to us but by how we imagine their words or actions reflect on us. “How dare he do that do me? Who does he think I am?” “She made me look like a fool!” “He beat me up – that makes me look weak.” The source of our discontent isn’t actually what the other person said or did; it is nothing more than wounded pride. If you let go of the need to defend yourself from an attack which, in actuality, only damages the attacker, then there is no inner turbulence.

The other common inner disharmony caused by being harmed is the desire for revenge. This manifests as anger and a feeling that one should ‘get even’. I think this response is also misguided. Seeking to harm someone who harms you does not ‘redress’ anything. We have already established that the person harming other people only damages themselves. So, if you set out to harm someone (even if you ‘didn’t start it’) you are, in effect, trying to hurt someone by hurting yourself. This is hardly a prescription for mental health.

Metaphysics

Although the three Roman philosophers don’t have much to say about metaphysics, it is clear that Marcus, mainly, subscribes to the typical Stoic beliefs in this area; Epictetus says very little regarding this subject and I don’t have much from Seneca either.

MARCUS holds to a metaphysics that is very reminiscent of Aristotle and has its origins in the Pre-Socratic philosophers, namely that everything is made of the four elements, air, fire, water, and earth. The first two elements have a natural tendency to rise while the last two naturally sink down[[55]](#endnote-43).

He also believed that the “recurrent cycles of the universe are the same, up and down, from eternity to eternity”[[56]](#endnote-44). It is probably not a big stretch to conclude that this is the fiery conflagration that so characterised Early Stoic thought and which was adopted from Heraclitus. A curious element in this notion is the inclusion of the word “same”, suggesting that he believed in an actual version of Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence, where every event plays out exactly the same way, again and again for eternity.

Marcus also believed that every individual thing is just a small part of a greater, single, substance. He refers to, “One common substance, even though it is broken up into innumerable forms of individual bodies. One animate soul, even though it is broken up into innumerable species with specific individualities.”[[57]](#endnote-45) This is also undoubtedly a throwback to Pre-Socratic thought which attempted to understand the relationship between the one and the many, often postulating that all things are composed of a single substance (water for Thales, air for Anaximines, etc.).

He also mentions that there is “One intelligent soul, even though it appears divided”[[58]](#endnote-46), which suggests that the world of individual being which surrounds us is an illusion covering the true core which is unity. This is, of course, the position that would form the basis of Schopenhauer’s philosophy some 1,800 years later.

One last point here is that Marcus believes in another notion, common since Pre-Socratic times; that of ‘like attracts like’. Although he doesn’t go into any details on this, he would have been referring to the four elements which constitute everything and saying that things composed of earth, for instance, have some kind of natural ‘gravitation-like’ affinity for other things composed of earth, or for the parts of something that is more ‘earthy’ than others.

The only thing relevant I gleaned from my SENECA readings was a single passage that explained why bad things cannot happen to a good man. It was because “opposites cannot combine”[[59]](#endnote-47). This is obviously the flip side of Marcus’ like attracts like.

*My Two Cents*

It would seem that there is little of value or relevance to the modern individual to take from these Stoic beliefs. They are only of interest as historical steps that led us to where we are today.

Morality/Virtue

Morality is the study of the principles of right conduct. A virtue is a character trait that embodies one of these moral principles. When we think of what a system of morality is based on, we tend to imagine a normative statement like “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”[[60]](#endnote-48) or to ‘act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.”[[61]](#endnote-49) The Roman Stoics however, had quite a different idea in mind. As I mentioned in the introduction the ancient Greek philosophers were particularly interested in how to live the ‘good life’[[62]](#footnote-13) and they saw achieving this as the purpose of cultivating virtue.

EPICTETUS wrote an awful lot about morality and virtue in the *Discourses*. I would almost go so far as to say the whole treatise is just a forum for him to express his ideas on this subject. For Epictetus, ‘good’ involves “a proper moral purpose and a proper use of external impressions.”[[63]](#endnote-50)

Let’s quickly break this down. Epictetus takes ‘moral purpose’ to be something like your guiding principles or your moral compass. It is the faculty “that opens and closes the eyes, and turns them away from the things from which it should turn them, but directs them toward other things… the faculty by virtue of which men are curious and inquisitive, or again, unmoved by what is said…”[[64]](#endnote-51) It directs our focus to important things and lets us ignore those things which aren’t important. ‘Proper’ means that this faculty is correctly aligned; i.e. it operates without error, recognising the value of virtuous traits, such as, honesty, integrity, kindness, etc.

The second part of this definition talks about the use of ‘external impressions’ which are simply data fed to our reasoning brains by our senses. This data is raw and needs to be interpreted, so the proper use of it involves discriminating between those external impressions which are of no significance and those that are. At various places Epictetus calls this the faculty of “judgement”.

Needless to say, the bad (or evil) is having an *im*proper moral purpose and failing to make correct use of external impressions.

Now, it is significant that Epictetus’ definitions of both good and bad are centred on how we use our moral purpose and external impressions; “Wherein lies the good? – In moral purpose. – Wherein lies evil? – In moral purpose”[[65]](#endnote-52) and “…the nature of the good as well as of the evil lies in a use of the impressions of the senses…”[[66]](#endnote-53) The reason for this unique inward focus is perhaps *the* defining point in Epictetus’ philosophy, namely, that *our moral purpose is the only thing that we control and therefore the only thing that matters*.

Epictetus divides the world into two broad realms; those things that we control and those we don’t. The group of things we control really has only one member; our moral purpose. Since this is the only thing that Epictetus says we have any control over, it is the only place where terms like good and evil, or right and wrong, can be meaningfully applied.

Now to the extent that the moral purpose (the only thing we control) is correctly aligned and focused on the virtues, it is good. To the extent that it is occupied with vice, it is bad.

The group of things we can’t control (everything except our moral purpose) is what Epictetus calls “externals” and, because they are outside of our control they are neither good nor bad; they are “indifferent” with respect to us. As such, they shouldn’t contribute to or detract from our happiness. As you may already notice, this second group (in contrast to the first) includes a great number of things, some of which you might expect; wealth, fame, luxuries, status, etc. but some you may not expect; your body, your possessions, family, friends, even life itself. “…“what did you call exile and imprisonment and bonds and death and disrepute?” “I called them ‘things indifferent.’…” “what things are ‘indifferent?’” “Those that are independent of the moral purpose.”… “Things independent of the moral purpose are nothing to me.””[[67]](#endnote-54) “Of things some are good, others bad, and yet others indifferent. Now the virtues and everything that shares in them are good, while vices and everything that shares in vice are evil, and what falls in between these, namely, wealth, health, life, death, pleasures, pain, are indifferent.”[[68]](#endnote-55)

Epictetus uses the example of a brother to help illustrate this point. You can’t control what your brother does so you shouldn’t let his decisions affect your state of mind. Your brother’s life “is the subject-matter of his own art of living, but with respect to your art of living it comes under the category of externals, like a farm, like health, like good repute.”[[69]](#endnote-56)

This same reasoning applies even if one of your brother’s decisions happens to have some negative impact on your life. His decision (which resulted in harm for you) still falls within the sphere of *his* moral purpose and is therefore good or evil for him only. To you, it is irrelevant, indifferent. But what if his decision is to steal all of my money? Well, what of it? Wealth is also an external to you, and therefore indifferent. Having it isn’t good and losing it isn’t bad. What if he will tie me up? “What is that you say, man? Fetter me? My leg you will fetter, but my moral purpose not even Zeus himself has power to overcome. “I will throw you into prison.” My paltry body, rather! “I will behead you.” Well, when did I ever tell you that mine was the only neck that could not be severed?”[[70]](#endnote-57)

And now, we start to see just why Epictetus’ philosophy is almost obsessively focused on our moral purpose, why he constrains good and evil within our faculty of judgement; because if we allow anything else to be good or bad for us, we give away control of our happiness, leaving ourselves at the mercy of people and events beyond our control. This was a concept that was anathema to the Stoics.

There are four more important points that Epictetus makes about virtue.

First, and hinted at above, is the idea that virtue leads to happiness. Possessing virtue or being virtuous (having a correctly aligned moral purpose) is all that is needed to live the ‘good’ life; “...it is virtue that holds out the promise thus to create happiness and calm and serenity…”[[71]](#endnote-58) This was an idea made popular by Socrates and carried to an extreme position by the Stoics. It promises that no matter what happens to us, as long as our moral purpose is intact, we can be happy. Even physical pain or torture, because they are externals and therefore neither good nor bad, are incapable of influencing our happiness one way or another. I think it is fair to say that Epictetus was of the opinion that as long as we preserve our moral purpose while being tortured we can remain internally undisturbed. This is not to say we won’t be in pain, but as long as we behave honourably, as an upright moral purpose would dictate, then we can preserve our steadfastness.

Second, virtue is not just the only thing in our control but it is completely beyond anyone else’s control. Epictetus reiterates this idea again and again, “Your faithfulness is your own, your self-respect is your own; who, then, can take these things from you? Who but yourself will prevent you from using them?”[[72]](#endnote-59) He is very concerned to place the fount of our happiness beyond the reach of others.

This might seem to be a slightly untenable position and Epictetus himself anticipates and responds to an objection. ““But,” says someone, “if a person subjects me to the fear of death, he compels me [perhaps making me do something against my better moral judgement].” “No, it is not what you are subjected to that impels you, but the fact that you decide it is better for you to do something of the sort than to die. Once more, then, it is the decision of your own will which compelled you…””[[73]](#endnote-60)

This leads to the third point which follows naturally from the preceding discussion. People and events don’t… *can’t*, disturb us; so when we do find ourselves disturbed it is only because our judgements about the external (the ‘indifferent’) are faulty. In the example above, the threat of death isn’t enough to compel us to act against our moral purpose, rather it is our judgement that death is worse than failure to comply with the individual terrorising us. Amend this judgement and there will be no more problem. “And do we not remember that no man either hurts or helps another, but that it is his judgement about each of these things which is the thing that hurts him, that overturns him”[[74]](#endnote-61)

Everything of import happens in our minds for Epictetus which led him to what must surely be one of the earliest formulations of the idea that, “…it is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of hardship or death.”[[75]](#endnote-62) Remove the fear of hardship and death (which is just an internal mental/emotional reaction based on the judgement that the avoidance of these things is important for our happiness) and the physical events themselves also lose their importance.

Fourth, Epictetus claims, in opposition to Socrates and Plato, that virtue can be taught. This is an important point in his philosophy because this entire intellectual edifice is constructed on the premise that virtue leads to happiness. If virtue is then some innate quality that some of us are born with and others aren’t, there is no point in studying philosophy because it can’t help us with the ‘art of living’. And remember, unlike much of today’s philosophy, this is what the ancient philosophers were primarily interested in.

Epictetus also isn’t content to leave it at that regarding externals. There are two more points he raises that I think are of particular interest.

First, Epictetus is clear that we should be equally indifferent towards all externals. Later thinkers have postulated a gradient upon which we can measure individual externals’ ‘worth’. This belief, while holding that all externals are indifferent, nevertheless says that some externals are ‘less indifferent’ than others.

Epictetus isn’t having a bar of this. He thinks that “…when a man once stoops to the consideration of such questions, I mean to estimating the value of externals, and calculates them one by one, he comes very close to those who have forgotten their own proper character.”[[76]](#endnote-63) The value of all externals is the same. They all belong to the category of things we should be indifferent towards. Another analogy used by Epictetus is that of a ball-game. The player exhibits the utmost carefulness towards the game itself, following the rules, trying to succeed in the game’s objectives, etc. while at the same time not having any special care at all for the actual ball used.

However, and this is my second point, Epictetus doesn’t hold that all externals are useless, that is to say, that they have no purpose. He thinks externals are “…materials for the moral purpose, in dealing with which it will find its own proper good or evil…”[[77]](#endnote-64) So, while the externals themselves are of no consequence, indifferent and incapable of directly affecting us, “They must be used carefully, because their use is not a matter of indifference, and at the same time with steadfastness and peace of mind, because the material is indifferent…”[[78]](#endnote-65)

This really goes right to the heart of Epictetus’ philosophy. How we treat external situations and things in our lives, how we make use of them should be our number one consideration. The good life can only be achieved if we focus on our moral purpose and don’t give externals the power to affect our disposition. But since the right use of externals is vital to the art of living, we *need* these externals at the same time.

I want to close this section on Epictetus with two final observations. First, the fact that all other people (even family) fall in the category of externals, in no way implies that they have no intrinsic value or that we should treat them like they have no value. On the contrary, Epictetus believes that everybody has intrinsic worth; it’s just that that worth doesn’t entitle them (or even enable them) to affect our internal state.

He says, “Now another’s grief is no concern of mine, but my own grief is. Therefore, I will put an end at all costs to what is my own concern, for it is under my control; and that which is another’s concern I will endeavour to check to the best of my ability, but my effort to do so will not be made at all costs.”[[79]](#endnote-66) His point here is not that we shouldn’t care about others, but that *we shouldn’t care about them so much that we give them power over our own happiness*. We should always keep in mind where our focus lies (our own moral purpose).

The second point is a commentary on the state of people at the time Epictetus lived. He believed that even though we should show most concern over our own moral purpose and not be affected by externals (which are, by definition, outside our control), most people do the opposite. “For if the evil lies in an evil exercise of the moral purpose, it is only in regard to matters of this kind that it is right to employ caution; but if the things which lie outside the province of the moral purpose and are not under our control are nothing to us, we ought to employ confidence in regard to them… [but] where do we show fear? About the things which lie outside the province of the moral purpose. Again, in which do we behave with confidence as if there were no danger? In the things which lie within the province of the moral purpose.”[[80]](#endnote-67)

Epictetus’ point is that this is completely the opposite approach to take. Instead of admiring our internal sense of morality and striving to make ourselves virtuous, we admire external things and seek to secure things that are beyond our control. As an inevitable result we are subject to fear and anxiety. If my state of mind is dependent on other people then if someone is displeased with me, I am upset. If my happiness depends on getting a certain amount of money, then I don’t get it, I am upset. This is a precarious way to live and guarantees a life full of ups and downs, almost completely beyond our control.

Epictetus sums up his moral philosophy by asserting that the “invincible man” is the one “whom nothing that is outside the sphere of his moral purpose can dismay.”[[81]](#endnote-68)

MARCUS agrees completely with Epictetus’ morality although he doesn’t dwell on it quite so much. He agrees that all of Epictetus’ externals cannot be good or bad in themselves, “Yes, death and life, fame and ignominy, pain and pleasure, wealth and poverty – all these come to good and bad alike, but they are not in themselves either right or wrong; neither then are they inherent good or evil.”[[82]](#endnote-69)

Marcus tends to identify what Epictetus called the moral purpose, as the ‘soul’, but he found, like Epictetus, that, “Things of themselves cannot touch the soul at all.”[[83]](#endnote-70) Although he recognises that all these things are externals and can’t affect the ‘real you’, he still recommends that we be on guard because they “can suddenly take control and carry you away.”[[84]](#endnote-71)

In a tidy summary in book 6 of the *Meditations*, he believes that anything that affects the physical body is necessarily indifferent because the body is incapable of making any distinctions between good and bad. Even pain is “not a moral evil… [because it] does not harm your governing intelligence”[[85]](#endnote-72) Of course, he also holds that pleasure is neither beneficial nor a good; being outside our control, it is an indifferent.

Regarding the mind, he, like Epictetus, looks to control as the key determining factor for what is indifferent; anything that is outside of its control is indifferent, while whatever lies within its sphere of influence (its own activities) is morally important.

He does point out one more thing of interest here adding a temporal dimension to what Epictetus said. “…the mind is only concerned with the present: its activities in the future and in the past are also indifferent at any present moment.”[[86]](#endnote-73) This is important because we often find ourselves anxious about something that may or may not occur in the future or upset and brooding over something that has already happened in the past. Neither of these tenses are directly in our control at any time (because we are permanently in the present) and as such, they fall under the category of indifferents.

We saw that Epictetus stressed the notion that the terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’ only apply to what is in our control because he wanted to ensure that nothing beyond our control could influence our happiness or peace of mind. Marcus also considers another reason for holding to this position. “If you set up as good or evil any of the things beyond your control, it necessarily follows that in the occurrence of that evil or the frustration of that good you blame the gods and hate the men who are the real or suspected causes of that occurrence or that frustration.”[[87]](#endnote-74) So, it is not only beneficial for us in that we control our own happiness but it works to prevent another disturbing state, blame, from upsetting our calm. If good and evil come directly within our province and we slip into vice, we have no one to blame except ourselves. Although this is not necessarily a good state to be in, it is better that the fault is within us, and therefore correctable by us, rather than in a person or situation that we have no control over.

Marcus is in agreement with Epictetus that our judgements are crucial to developing a virtuous moral sense but he is even more enthusiastic about this than his predecessor. He stresses that “*things* cannot touch the mind: they are external and inert; anxieties can only come from your internal judgement”[[88]](#endnote-75) and “…things of themselves have no inherent power to form our judgements.”[[89]](#endnote-76) The buck stops for Marcus with our judgements about things and we are the only ones who have the power to form them. He was so convinced of their power (in tandem with the power of reason) that he believed they controlled our reality; judgement 🡪 thought 🡪 reality; “Remove the judgement, and you have removed the thought ‘I am hurt’: remove the thought ‘I am hurt’, and the hurt itself is removed.”[[90]](#endnote-77)

He reflects that other people’s actions don’t actually trouble us because these come from their own directing minds (Epictetus’ moral purpose); what really disrupts our peace of mind are our judgements about their actions. And, for Marcus, it is easy to remove these judgements; simply “make up your mind to dismiss your assessment of some supposed outrage, and your anger is gone”[[91]](#endnote-78) although he does offer some advice on how to do this; “By reflecting that no moral harm is caused you.”[[92]](#endnote-79)

Marcus succinctly describes his opinion on judgements in his final chapter, “…all is as thinking makes it so – and you control your thinking. So remove your judgements whenever you wish and then there is calm.”[[93]](#endnote-80)

There is one final point I want to include here. In a passage that directly mirrors a similar one from Epictetus, Marcus cautions against letting another person’s grief disrupt our calm while at the same time suggesting that we help them to the best of our ability. “Don’t let the impression of other people’s grief carry you away indiscriminately. Help them, yes, as best you can and as the case deserves, even if their grief is for the loss of something indifferent: but do not imagine their loss as any real harm – that is the wrong way of thinking.”[[94]](#endnote-81)

He also briefly considers an objection to this attitude, “‘Yes, but they [the externals that have caused them grief] are important to these folk.’ Is that any reason for you to join their folly?”[[95]](#endnote-82) The point is that even though other people are upset by indifferent externals, we should not let ourselves get caught up in their emotions. We can help and be supportive but that doesn’t necessarily entail that we get sucked into the drama with them.

SENECA holds a similar position to Marcus and Epictetus and repeats in numerous places and in a multitude of ways that “…virtue itself is the sole good because there is no good without it.”[[96]](#endnote-83) In other places he calls the sole good, the honourable, which is for Seneca, equivalent to virtue. He argues that virtue is the sole good because “the man who possesses it is praised though he lacks all else, and the man who lacks it is condemned and rejected despite his abundance of other qualities.”[[97]](#endnote-84)

But exactly what is virtue? Seneca doesn’t identify it as much as Marcus or Epictetus do in a ‘soul’ or ‘moral purpose’, a kind of central ‘core’ in a human’s being. Rather, he emphasises that reason, and not just reason but *perfect* reason, is virtue. I won’t go too much into reason here because I want to address it in a later section by itself. I will just leave it here by saying that perfect reason, virtue, and honour are all synonyms for Seneca.

Naturally, he believes that virtue, being the most excellent thing in a person cannot be touched by anyone else and is therefore completely free from external influence, i.e. only I control my virtue. He also agrees with Epictetus that virtue can be taught/learned. But he goes a little further here by suggesting that it *must* be taught. “Wisdom is never a windfall… virtue is not an accident.”[[98]](#endnote-85) We aren’t born virtuous, it is something we have to work hard to achieve.

Regarding externals, Seneca says, “Externals have little weight and exert only slight pressure in one direction or the other. The sage is neither elated by prosperity nor depressed by adversity.”[[99]](#endnote-86) He rejects glory, fortune, property, etc. as things unable to secure for us anything of value and considers them to be merely frivolous and transitory.

Like the other Stoics, he considered all things outside our virtue (reason), externals, including our body and our children as in the following passage which he paraphrases from a Demetrius who is holding an imaginary conversation with the gods; “Do you wish to take my children? It was for you I reared them. Do you want some part of my body? Take it; it is no great boon I grant, for soon I shall leave the whole of it. Do you want the breath of my life? Why not? I shall not balk at your taking back what you have given. Whatever you ask you shall obtain from a willing giver… What need was there for you to take it when I would have handed it to you? But even now you will not really be taking it, for nothing can be wrested from a man if he does not cling to it.”[[100]](#endnote-87) This is a revealing quote, particularly the last sentence. Nothing can be wrested away if the person isn’t clinging to it. This perfectly captures the Stoic opinion to externals (that is to say, virtually everything); don’t cling to them.

Seneca, who amassed a considerable fortune in his heyday, has a little bit to say about money in particular. He asks us to consider “how much less a grief it is not to have money than to lose it”[[101]](#endnote-88) although later in the same essay, he does admit that it is best “not to descend to poverty nor yet to be too far removed from it”[[102]](#endnote-89) while also praising thrift “without which, no amount of wealth can satisfy and with which any amount suffices.”[[103]](#endnote-90)

Ultimately though, despite some of what Seneca says, he isn’t necessarily *against* externals, as externals. It is not so much the case that money and possessions are *bad*, but that we shouldn’t invest too much of ourselves in them. If we have them, great, if we don’t, also great. “I do not interdict the possession of wealth, but my aim is for you to possess it fearlessly, and this attitude you can achieve only if you are convinced that you can live happily even without wealth, if you look upon it always as on the point of vanishing.”[[104]](#endnote-91)

He also adds one point on top of what we have seen from the other philosophers. He finds one more good in externals; proper choice. This isn’t actually a new point, it’s more like looking at the same thing from a different perspective. He is saying that there is nothing good about the external itself (a familiar theme), but there is good in *which* external, and even more importantly, *how* we choose the external that we acquire. It is “our modes of action, not the things we do”[[105]](#endnote-92) which are honourable. And this is another familiar theme because *how* we do what we do is entirely up to us, whereas what we achieve is usually dependent, at least partially, on things beyond our control.

*My Two Cents*

The Stoics claim that a life lived cultivating virtue and maintaining indifference towards externals is moral. To them, morality is entirely inward-directed, only manifesting indirectly when the virtuous qualities that make up an excellent character require action, such as in telling the truth, helping a friend, acting nobly, etc.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this section, a modern definition of morality is considerably narrower in scope than what the Stoics had in mind, i.e. ‘living the good life.’ Morality for me is centred primarily on our interactions with others and cashes out as nothing more than the Golden Rule; treat others the way you would have them treat you. The following discussion will try to walk the line between these two concepts.

For the Stoics, ‘living the good life’ centres on a few key concepts:

1. The ‘good life’ exists and is realised through virtue.
2. A totally ‘inward-focused’ approach to the ‘good life’ which gives us full control over our state of mind at any one time.
3. An expansive category of ‘externals’ or ‘indifferents’ that includes not just things we don’t like/want, but things typically considered ‘good’; family, health, etc.
4. The idea that it is possible to control our feelings (internal reaction to externals) in such a way that we don’t suffer distress at things outside our moral purpose.

First up, I want to look at this idea of the ‘good life’ itself. The Stoics hold the ‘good life’ up as an ideal that we should strive to achieve. They identified this ‘good life’ with the Stoic sage who was a living embodiment of their morality. They also acknowledged that this path was not an easily traversed one and few people, if any, had actually gotten there.

If we admit the notion of the ‘good life’ or that it is possible to ‘succeed’ in life, then this automatically means that it must also be possible to live a ‘bad life’ or ‘fail’. When I first made this connection, I immediately realised that this was why the Stoic ideal wasn’t gelling for me. It wasn’t anything like a super-egalitarian, super-PC, (and super-nauseous), “But, everyone is ok the way they are; no one is a *failure*” reaction. It was more the idea that life just doesn’t seem to me to be the kind of thing that one *can* succeed or fail in.

The Stoics did see life like this and it was primarily because they saw a rational, universal, divine, guiding *logos* (as the Stoics used it this meant a divine animating principle pervading the universe) at play in the universe. In this rational universe, all things, including humans, have a clearly defined role to play. In acting morally/virtuously, the Stoics see us fulfilling our destiny, in a sense; or living the way we were designed to.

I don’t think there is any such force and I struggle to see anything rational in this universe. There is no grand design, no plan, and no rational *logos* for us to follow or sculpt our lives on. In the absence of anything like this, we are forced to concede that our lives are meaningless. This may be an unpleasant or uncomfortable revelation, but that is no objection to its truth. No one ever said the truth would be soothing to the palate. This means that no life is bad (shout-out to the feel-good PC folks out there) but it also means that no life is good (retract that shout-out).

Now, this doesn’t mean that some lives can’t be satisfying and others less so. We can all imagine how our lives could be better or worse, but this isn’t what the Stoics were aiming at with their ‘good life’. Some lives may have more ‘good’ or ‘fortunate’ things happen in them than others (growing up with a loving, supportive, family, securing a good job, making a lot of money, etc.) but this isn’t the ‘good life’ the Stoics envisioned. Indeed, all of these so-called ‘goods’ fall under the category of externals. The ‘good life’ was the life lived according to virtue/reason, the life we were ‘supposed’ to live. I am saying such a life doesn’t exist. There just aren’t any universal guidelines that would reasonably allow us to adjudge one life ‘good’ and another ‘bad’.

But, even if we deny that there is a rational *logos* in the universe with which we can/should align, couldn’t we still be satisfied with a standard of our own making? Just because we define the ‘good life’ as X, rather than having it pre-defined by a supra-human force, does that make it invalid? This is a good argument, because in other places I argue that we can still have morality in the absence of a divine law-giver. In these places, I argue that our word on what is right and wrong is sufficient.

The resolution lies in realising that my morality (the Golden Rule) is founded on creating harmonious relations between individuals in a society (even, or *especially*, a global one). This gives it a *practical* aspect first and foremost, rather than the solely inward-focused morality of the Stoics. Of course, we *can* declare living in accordance with virtue is the ‘good life’ and anything else isn’t. We can then observe how closely a subject’s life matches the life of an imaginary sage, and rule on the ‘goodness’ of their life accordingly, but such a judgement seems too artificial and arbitrary to me to have any real meaning.

The Golden Rule also comes with no divine mandate and as such is also arbitrary, but is based on the principles that we are all equal (not the same[[106]](#footnote-14)) and therefore deserving of a basic level of mutual respect and dignity. This gives it more bite and relevance than a standard for the ‘good life’ which, as far as I can see it, is a meaningless term.

So, in rejecting the ‘good life’ do I also reject virtue? Of course not. There is no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Indeed, acting in accordance with the Golden Rule *requires* that one display virtue more often than not. The people I respect and the people I want to be associated with are people who display a number of virtues. Naturally, I also aspire to embody a fair few of these virtues myself.

Where I differ from the Stoics here is in exactly what I consider virtuous or the ‘good person’. When I say ‘good person’ I simply mean someone whom I consider to be a decent human being. The Stoics, on the other hand, include a long list of virtues any would-be sage would have to embody. Naturally, the ‘social’ virtues[[107]](#footnote-15) (that I also see as being important); honesty, kindness, integrity, and so on would feature, but so would other typical virtues (that I perhaps consider less important) such as courage, persistence, humility, etc. To be a Stoic sage one must live one’s life according to strict (and I would imagine fairly onerous) rules of behaviour, cultivating virtue in the process.

Clearly, my standard (a ‘good person’) is far lower than the Stoic standard (the sage) but this doesn’t mean that virtue is unimportant to me; it is just *less* so. First, virtue (as in moral perfection) isn’t the ultimate goal for me (something I rejected earlier with my rejection of any notion of the ‘good life’). If someone acts ‘virtuously’ in my opinion, all I am saying is just that she is a nice person. I’m not making a pronouncement or judgement on her life (i.e. it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’) or her worth as a person; she’s just a person I consider to be nice and perhaps someone I wouldn’t mind spending time with.[[108]](#footnote-16)

Secondly, I don’t think that all of the Stoic ‘virtues’ are important in describing a ‘good person’. If someone isn’t courageous are they a little less ‘good’? How about if someone is a little impatient; is this a blemish on their ‘goodness’? Some particular character traits may even decrease a person’s happiness (i.e. they may be frustrated or even ill as a result of them or the absence of certain virtues) but this has no bearing for me on whether he or she is a ‘good person’. Even though someone is a little greedy at the dinner table or enjoys alcohol just a little too much, I might still really enjoy their company and value their friendship. Perhaps they just give themselves a few too many hangovers or suffer from indigestion.

Ultimately, (some) virtues are important in being a ‘good person’, not because there is something ‘good’ or ‘right’ about possessing them (or ‘bad’ about not possessing them), but because they make one nice. They manifest in the way you treat other people in line with the Golden Rule and show that you respect them as thinking, feeling beings, no different from you. And isn’t that as good a reason as any for possessing them?

My second point here; the completely inward-focused approach to living well is something I can fully endorse[[109]](#footnote-17). If we allow things we have no (or only limited) control over, to influence our state of mind, we essentially consent to a life that will be roller coaster of ups and downs, and one which will, in all probability, pull us every which way *except* where we want to go. This doesn’t sound like a recipe for happiness, or even contentment, to me.

The second point naturally raises two more questions (discussed in my points three and four). First, what do we think of the very wide range of externals that the Stoics point to? Essentially *everything* and *everyone* is an external, except our moral purpose (or ‘character’ might be a better, more modern way to describe it); even friends, family, and other people’s actions, even when they directly affect us.

I actually really like this aspect of the Stoic philosophy. It is a very pragmatic way to view reality. Our friends and family sometimes disappoint us or do things that hurt us (or even *die* on us without our permission). If we grow so attached to them that we *need* them to act a certain way or do certain things (like *not* die) then we have forgotten, or never learned, three very important life lessons; nothing has been vouchsafed ours, we can *never* keep anything forever, and the only thing we can control is ourselves.

I don’t think this necessarily means that we can’t enjoy what we have while we have it or we can’t love our family with all our hearts. It just means that we don’t lose sight of these important lessons because life will test us all on these sooner or later. When (not if) someone doesn’t do what we hoped or something doesn’t work out the way we wanted, if we never forgot ourselves and *expected* things to always work out for us, then we wouldn’t be so disappointed and could just roll with the punches, moving on to the next thing.

But we aren’t robots, right? And here is the second question raised by point two; can we remain unfazed when a loved one dies or not get angry when someone does wrong by us? Isn’t this natural, isn’t it *human* to feel, both the good and the bad? Well, the Stoics would say it isn’t *natural* (that is to say, *rational*) to expose ourselves to the vagaries of life like that.

I however, wouldn’t put it quite like that. Humans do *normally* feel happy and sad in response to good and bad things that happen in their lives but does that make it *natural*? We do an awful lot of things that aren’t *natural* by any stretch of the imagination. What other animal could imagine getting up each morning, travelling via a cramped metal cabin with hundreds of other people, with the goal of entering a concrete building where we sit staring at a monitor under artificial lights all day? Then after the sun has set, we fight the same battle to get back to a house where we in all likelihood, eat a meal packed with artificial ingredients, drink a beverage choked full of sugar, smoke a cigarette that will one day give us cancer, and plant ourselves in front of another box that emits light and displays moving pictures before sleeping on a cushy mattress. Is there anything *natural* in what I just described?

That little story is just an attempt to show that the *natural* is a tricky concept to define. More often than not, what we mean when we say something is *natural* is that it is what is *normally* done or even more self-absorbed, the way *I* have always done it. But this is certainly no guarantee that one particular act is better than another. Appeal to the *natural* isn’t the best argument here.

A typical argument levelled at the Stoics is that to live the good life according to them means to stop feeling. It means that we should eliminate passion and emotion. This certainly sounds terrible. Sure, we might not feel so much pain when things go ‘wrong’ but we also wouldn’t feel any happiness or joy either.

This is quite an extreme Stoic position to adopt and while some things the Stoics say do support this reading, as in Epictetus, “Do not laugh much, nor at many things, nor boisterously… refrain utterly from… great excitement”[[110]](#endnote-93) we don’t necessarily have to take it this far. As I said earlier, Stoic morality is quite onerous but there is nothing to stop us from extracting the gem at the core of their philosophy while rejecting some of the more extreme conclusions.

It is also true that the Stoics advocated that reason should always rule over our passions. We might think of a super logical Spock-type character as personifying this type; hardly a desirable outcome for most of us.

So, what is the valuable core I am hinting at here? Enjoy the good and commiserate the bad but don’t be ‘swept away’ by either of them. Always keep yourself grounded and centred. If you fail to do this, the bad events will upset you too much and the good events will cause you to forget that they too must come to an end, setting you up for a fall later.

I think the Stoics got this one right. You might read the above quote and shudder, “Don’t laugh too much!! – Don’t get excited!! Next thing, they’ll be wanting to ban music and dancing!![[111]](#footnote-18)” But let’s not get carried away. Remember the spirit of the recommendation. It’s not an actual injunction against laughing – it’s an exhortation not to get carried away (by good *or* bad emotions) thereby forgetting yourself and losing your equilibrium.

But, even if we grant that it is ideal to have healthy emotions while not to being ruled by them or letting them get out of control, is it possible in practice?

I have thought about this a lot, and the best answer I can suggest at the moment is that I suspect it is possible, although it is not easy.[[112]](#footnote-19) One observation I can relate is that the times I have felt it to be impossible to control my emotions, I was already caught up in them. At those times, simply removing my judgements and then feeling calm was nigh on impossible. It felt like there was something lodged in the back of my mind that I couldn’t shake. I could deny it to my heart’s content, recite all the maxims I could think of, but it wouldn’t budge. The only thing that alleviated this ‘down’ mood was time.

What I conclude from this is that we have to put in the hard work *before* our emotions get a grip on us. Once they have us in their grasp, regaining equanimity becomes ten times as hard as it was to maintain it in the first place.

The Stoics consider this ‘hard work’, training, and it basically consists of constantly keeping in mind their precepts and ideals, dwelling on them and rehearsing them in your mind so that you ingrain them into your very being and they become (good) habits that you automatically adopt. For me, this is a work in progress, so I will have to report back later on the success (or failure) of this enterprise.

Reason

Reason is another concept absolutely central to Stoic philosophy. The Stoics believed we were rational beings and gave precedence to this aspect of our nature over our affective, emotional side. It is perhaps not surprising that they held this opinion because they observed that it was reason which separated us from other animals. They also believed the universe itself was rational and overseen by a governing *logos* that we also, through our reason, participated in.

EPICTETUS sees reason first and foremost as the thing in us which makes us divine-like, the one thing in which we participate equally with the gods, “…as to the reason you are not inferior to the gods, nor less than they…”[[113]](#endnote-94)

Ultimately, for Epictetus, reason is the faculty which enables us to make the “proper use of external impressions.”[[114]](#endnote-95) As such, it is closely tied in with morality. An important part of Stoic morality is paying attention only to our ‘governing principle’ and disregarding ‘externals’. The tool we use to achieve this is our reason.

Not only this, reason also allows us “to state the true, to eliminate the false, to suspend judgement in doubtful cases.”[[115]](#endnote-96) In this capacity, reason plays an important role in helping us discern the true from the false, a particularly useful trait for a philosopher.

Finally, reason is the art form which allows us to make informed judgements in every other area of life. Epictetus illustrates this by thinking of a person writing a letter. He determines that the art of grammar will help us in knowing what to write, but it won’t tell you whether to write or not. Rather, we must look to reason for this insight. In this way, reason is a faculty which has its own domain (the proper use of external impressions) but also applies to all fields in a more general way.

On the exact nature of reason, Epictetus holds that ‘rationally’ means ‘in accordance with nature’ which ties in with another fundamental Stoic principle. The universe is governed or designed rationally by Zeus and so provides the perfect example of rational behaviour. We merely need to emulate nature to act rationally.

He also claims that reason is “something composed out of a certain kind of external impressions. Thus it comes naturally to be also self-contemplative.”[[116]](#endnote-97) This is a little more obscure. Epictetus seems to be saying that reason is made up of external impressions. This could be taken to mean either that reason is nothing in itself and is only ‘activated’ in a way, when external impressions arise, or that reason is made up of a special “certain kind of external impressions” which are capable of self-contemplation. Either way, I do find it odd that Epictetus equates reason with divinity in one breath while equating it with external impressions (‘indifferents’) in the next.

MARCUS, like Epictetus, gives reason pride of place when he reminds us to “…have no other perspective, even for a moment, than that of reason alone…”[[117]](#endnote-98) This quote highlights the attitude of the Stoics towards the passions (emotions) and in particular, how they viewed emotion negatively as something to be avoided.

Marcus emphasises this point when he implores us to “make a definition or sketch of what presents itself to your mind, so you can see it stripped bare to its essential nature and identify it clearly… subject each element of our experience in life to methodical and truthful examination”[[118]](#endnote-99) In order to live well we need the ability to analyse our lives and the events that happen in it, and reason is the only tool we have which allows us to perceive things clearly and *dis*passionately.

For Marcus this is the only way to “…follow the right path... that is, [make sure] your judgements and actions follow the path of reason.”[[119]](#endnote-100)

SENECA was a little more ebullient in his praise for reason. The other philosopher’s writings tended to view reason more as the tool we use to achieve the good life or become a good person. Seneca sees reason more as *the* good itself. For Seneca, ‘reason’, ‘virtue’, ‘the honourable’, ‘happiness’, and even our souls themselves, are all synonyms.

We are fully rational creatures and it is therefore this that we must strive to perfect. Seneca really takes the importance of reason to an extreme. Reason is what distinguishes us from the animals and is therefore what allows us to partake in the ‘good’, something denied to other animals and even children. “And why is the good not present in tree or dumb animal? Because reason is not. Hence the good is not present in an infant because it lacks reason. It will attain to the good only when it attains to reason.”[[120]](#endnote-101)

Although I think the other Stoics would certainly agree with the above quote, they perhaps wouldn’t be quite so quick to identify us as reason. The difference is that for Marcus and Epictetus we are beings with the *ability* to reason while the way Seneca speaks of it, it is more like we *are* reason.

As to what reason actually is, Seneca says that it is a “mind flawless and pure, which emulates god and raises itself above ordinary humanity, allowing nothing outside to impinge upon itself…”[[121]](#endnote-102) This ideal includes all that we have already seen in Epictetus and Marcus; in accordance with nature, separate from the emotions, etc.

*My Two Cents*

I would certainly agree that reason is essential for humans. It allows us to consider situations dispassionately which is definitely an indispensable skill. Through the appropriate use of reason we can discern truth from mere opinion when it is important to do so and see things clearly when our passions often serve to blind us to certain facts. Certainly science, and philosophy also, would be impossible to even consider without the use of reason.

How much upset could be avoided if we interpreted events in our lives with reason rather than emotion? Emotion is also notoriously unreliable as an indicator of what is happening and I do agree with the Stoic’s representation of reason as a useful analytical tool. It is certainly something we could make much more use of when it comes to determining what ‘external impressions’ should mean to us.

Reason is also somewhat unique because it can be used to compliment and even enhance our other skills in the way Epictetus stresses. Reason can find employ in every area of our lives and contribute to all decisions we have to make.

Having said this though, I cannot share the Stoic’s unswerving loyalty to this aspect of our being. It is certainly the factor that elevates us above our animal cousins (we are inferior to one or more animal in virtually every physical aspect, with the exception of having opposable thumbs) but we shouldn’t forget that it is only one part of our humanity.

I guess my first objection is that I don’t see the universe as being a rational place. Acting ‘rationally’, is therefore most certainly nothing like acting according to nature. I also can’t grant reason a divine precedent and without this it immediately loses much of its lustre, throwing into question the belief that we are naturally ‘rational creatures’, which even a cursory glance at history is sufficient to inform us is undoubtedly false.

Operating purely according to the dictates of reason is how we depict artificially intelligent machines. It is hard to see how having no perspective other than reason could possible lead to a happy or fulfilling life. Ultimately, I think living only from a rational perspective would be just as one-sided and skewed as living only from an emotional one.

Reason is an important tool humans possess but it is not our only one. The Stoics were overzealous in prioritising this aspect of our nature. Reason doesn’t help us enjoy a piece of music or laugh at something funny or indeed cry at something sad (which is not necessarily always a bad thing). Like most things in life, balance is crucial; a life with too little reason is just as impoverished as one with too much.

Happiness

As we have already seen in the section on morality, happiness was a crucial notion for the Stoics. Their morality is essentially nothing more than an extended dialogue about how to be happy and live well. I don’t think it a positive thing that this ideal got lost somewhere near the end of the Roman Empire and was never really picked up again by philosophy.

I think it is Epictetus who defines philosophy as the art of living and such a definition ensures that *eudaimonia* (‘happiness’ or ‘flourishing’) features high on the billing. The further philosophy has drifted from this aim, the less relevant it has become to the average person.

EPICTETUS first assures us that *eudaimonia* is every person’s goal; “For what is it that every man is seeking? To live securely, to be happy, to do everything as he wishes to do, not to be hindered, not to be subject to compulsion.”[[122]](#endnote-103)

Regarding happiness itself, Epictetus goes on to affirm that “it is impossible that happiness, and yearning for what is not present, should ever be united. For happiness must already possess everything that it wants…”[[123]](#endnote-104) This delineates some boundaries around happiness by clarifying what it *isn’t*. Schopenhauer famously took this idea to its logical conclusion equating striving with suffering and concluding that (since we never cease desiring or striving) we are permanently in a state of suffering. So, importantly for Epictetus, we can already see that happiness must involve the elimination of yearning or striving.

He gives another clue as to where happiness lies when he says it occurs when two states are united – “the carefulness of the man who is devoted to material things and the steadfastness of the man who disregards them”[[124]](#endnote-105) This suggests that happiness involves a balance between caring too much for externals and caring too little. We don’t want to let our things own us but nor do we want to completely do away with them either. The key here seems to be having things but not being dependent on them.

Epictetus gives another negative argument for happiness when he asserts that happiness cannot be found outside (in things external). (NB: Myron and Ophellius were athletes or gladiators contemporary with Epictetus, and Croesus was an ancient king whose name became synonymous with wealth) “It does not reside in the body. If you doubt that, look at Myron, or Ophellius. It is not in possessions. If you doubt that, look at Croesus, look at the rich nowadays, the amount of lamentation with which their life is filled. It is not in office. Why, if it were, then those who have been consul two or three times ought to be happy men, but they are not.”[[125]](#endnote-106) This is a classic argument against external things being important for happiness. If money or fame or success or xyz makes one happy, then everybody who has money or fame or success or xyz would be happy, but a quick glance through any tabloid that reports on the rich and famous and their exploits will easily disabuse anyone of the idea that possession of *anything* leads to happiness.

So what is happiness? Well, we’ve already seen Epictetus’ answer to this but here he is again; “There is but one way to serenity… and that is to yield up all claim to the things that lie outside the sphere of the moral purpose, to regard nothing as your own possession; to surrender everything to the Deity, to Fortune… and to devote yourself to one thing only, that which is your own, that which is free from hindrance…”[[126]](#endnote-107) Happiness comes from focusing totally inwards which essentially means 1) not depending on things beyond our control to make us happy and 2) realising that things beyond our control cannot make us *un*happy.

Epictetus takes this to the extreme position holding that we can be happy in any circumstance; “Show me a man who though sick is happy, though in danger is happy, though dying is happy, though condemned to exile is happy, though in disrepute is happy. Show him! By the gods, I would fain see a Stoic!”[[127]](#endnote-108) Clearly, Epictetus isn’t talking here about happiness as we usually understand the word. It seems a contradiction to say that a dying or sick man is happy, and this is the difference between modern and Stoic conceptions of happiness. The Stoic conceptionreflects a deeper sense of well-being than the more trivial emotion we typically experience when we ‘feel’ happy. The one comes and goes and is often externally caused whereas the other is more enduring and less transient.

MARCUS has surprisingly little to say about happiness although this is in keeping with his somewhat more melancholic tone. Marcus spent a lot of his time on campaigns and this probably influenced his attitude towards happiness quite significantly. From what he does say it is clear that his version of happiness is more like a subdued acceptance of a life that is often harsh and entirely meaningless.

Nevertheless, he does assert that tranquillity necessarily involves remaining unaffected by external events and people. Like Epictetus, he advocates a complete inward focus since this is the only direction in which we can exert control.

He also affirms that his understanding of happiness isn’t merely a fickle emotion; “Pick me up and throw me where you will. Wherever I land I shall keep the god within me happy…” This quote encapsulates two positions towards happiness. First, he can be happy no matter what happens to him (i.e. his happiness isn’t dependent on externals) and second, his happiness is completely within his control.

Seneca is very clear about what happiness consists of. It is “self-sufficiency and abiding tranquillity”[[128]](#endnote-109) This seems like a pretty good definition with two main points; 1. Happiness is completely in our control; (“Nature intended that no great equipment should be necessary for happiness; each of us is in position to make himself happy”[[129]](#endnote-110)) and 2. It is a state marked by complete emotional calm and totally free from disturbance.

Further, happiness can only be attained with the inculcation of a perfect reason because “only perfect reason keeps the soul from being submissive and stands firm against Fortune; it assures self-sufficiency in whatever situation… A man is happy, I maintain, when no circumstance can reduce him.”[[130]](#endnote-111) Possessing a perfected reason allows us to correctly perceive truth from falsehood and it follows from this (according to the Stoics) that our subsequent actions will be carried out in accordance with these perceived truths. Seneca goes on to identify the good (which is equivalent to perfect reason) as the “efficient cause of the happy life”.[[131]](#endnote-112)

Seneca also considers an objection to this idea. But wouldn’t a wise man’s life be happier if he lived longer or free from pain? Seneca answers as follows, “Tell me, is he better or more honourable? If not, then neither is he happier. To be happier he must be more upright; if he cannot be more upright then neither can he be happier.”[[132]](#endnote-113) This is a conclusion that follows logically from the inward-focused Stoic definition of happiness as *only* virtue/perfect reason/the good.

*My Two Cents*

I agree with the notion that everyone is seeking happiness. Not everyone finds (or thinks they will find) happiness in the same place so this encompasses everyone no matter how different their objectives. As Aristotle correctly pointed out, happiness is the ultimate good; the only thing we desire for itself. We might want money, fame, a bigger house, a beautiful wife or handsome husband… but none of these are ‘root’ desires. We want money because… we think this will make us happy. The same can be said for any and everything else you care to name. But why do we want happiness? There is no motive under this for which we can say “I want to be happy because…” – this is why happiness is the ultimate goal.

As for happiness and yearning being incompatible, I also agree. The key, as with so much of what the Stoics say, is to correctly identify what they mean. ‘Yearning’ doesn’t mean having a goal you are working towards because I think it is fairly clear that many of us are in fact *very* happy when we are striving for some goal (which we, by definition, don’t currently possess). What Epictetus is getting at here is emotionally ‘leaning’ towards something we don’t have. This emotional disturbance causes us distress. If we are actively progressing towards a goal from an emotionally centred position, this is not ‘yearning’ and therefore isn’t incompatible with happiness.

I very much agree with Epictetus when he says externals can’t provide happiness. I have thought about this before. If money made people happy then every millionaire would be permanently happy, but that is clearly not the case (Robin William’s recent suicide is ample testament to this). Now, this could just mean that externals aren’t *sufficient* for happiness but they could still be *necessary* for happiness. I happen to doubt that this is the case because happiness seems to me to be something which isn’t contingent on external factors at all. We tend to think of happiness as an effect contingent on something else; *if* we get xyz or abc happens, *then* we will be happy. I suspect happiness isn’t the kind of thing which can be attained this way. And this turns on how I define happiness.

I fully endorse the school of thinking which holds that the word *eudaimonia* (and therefore the Stoic way of thinking about happiness) has a deeper, richer account of enduring well-being than what our modern term, *happiness*, has come to mean. We say we are happy when we pass an exam or get a pay raise, but this kind of happiness pales compared to *eudaimonia*. Getting a pay raise may make us happy for thirty minutes or an hour or whatever, but before long not only will we no longer be feeling happy about it, but we’ll be complaining because we don’t get paid more. This species of happiness is a never-ending, emotional, roller coaster ride that takes us up for a temporary time before depositing us back down where we were originally. *Eudaimonia* is like that original level and is more reflective of our contentment and emotional balance *over time* not at any *one time*. I can’t think of a better description for *eudaimonia* than self-sufficiency and abiding tranquillity.

Naturally, this doesn’t mean sitting in meditation all the time or doing nothing, which is perhaps the image the word ‘tranquillity’ conjures up for you. Why can’t we be tranquil while working hard to meet a deadline or taking the kids to soccer practice? Why can’t we be emotionally-balanced while studying or driving to work? We’ve all experienced moments like this; when while actively engaged in some stressful task, we handle things with equanimity and poise. All I am suggesting is making this the norm. I’ll be the first to say this isn’t easy, but no one (least of all the Stoics) said life would be.

Having made this distinction between happy feelings and *eudaimonia*, I think the Stoic claim that we can be ‘happy’ no matter what happens to us is absolutely right. We can still be ‘happy’ even when we are grieving the death of a loved one. How? Because *eudaimonic* ‘happiness’ isn’t restricted to *feeling* happy at any given moment. *Eudaimonia* is more than our emotional state. It is an active acceptance of life founded on correct beliefs about what is ultimately important and what life is. As such it is more like our stance towards life.

Now, it becomes a little clearer why happiness (*eudaimonia*) isn’t contingent on any external situation or event. Positive externals make us *feel* happy and negative externals make us *feel* sad but they don’t have the power to grant or detract from *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is more like the solid, enduring, tranquil foundation our feelings play out on top of. The feelings themselves can’t erode this foundation and therefore neither can the externals which caused the feelings.[[133]](#footnote-20)

So, the take home message at this point is that happiness isn’t contingent on anything either happening or not happening. Whether a man lives longer or free from pain needn’t detract from or add to his happiness.

Where I differ a little from the Stoics (and Seneca, in particular) is that, while I agree externals don’t influence happiness, I disagree with the reason why this is the case. Seneca says that happiness comes from being upright or honourable (what he calls “perfect reason”) and since pain or a long life don’t affect these things, neither do they affect happiness.

I don’t think happiness is necessarily related to honour or uprightness like this. Pain (or a long life) doesn’t affect *eudaimonia* because it just isn’t the kind of thing that *can* affect it. If a person’s *eudaimonia* is low (I am improvising with language here) then good and bad externals will cause a particular effect but this won’t be an increase or reduction in *eudaimonia*. His *eudaimonia* was already low before the event. He may now feel over the moon or down in the dumps but the extent of his emotional swings, rather than altering his *eudaimonic* happiness, only indicates how low his *eudaimonia* was in the first place.

So, there is no causal relation between happiness and external events. We are happy and *then* good (bad) events happen to us; not good (bad) events happen to us, *so* we are happy (sad).

Where reason comes into the picture is in helping us to maintain this balanced perspective. Reason lets us analyse life and come to an understanding of what is fact and what is mere opinion; it also helps us to realise the *un*importance of externals. From this rational, conceptual understanding of life, we can then move on to align our emotions accordingly.

Now, it should be reasonably clear from this that I don’t think *perfect* reason is required for this. As I mentioned above, reason is only half of the picture and we are certainly anything but rational creatures. I also don’t share the Stoic/Platonic predilection for idealising things as *perfect*. In an atheistic universe, nothing is perfect in an absolute sense, least of all human reason (what does that even mean?). Stripping divinity out of the universe makes notions like absolute perfection little more than wishful thinking.

Emotions

The Stoics saw the emotions (or passions) as a completely negative and undesirable aspect of our reality. Since Socrates, the passions had frequently taken a backseat to reason, often being degraded as base or identified as animal-like. Reason was our connection to the divine while we shared our passions and instinct-like emotions with animals.

MARCUS urges us “…never to give the impression of anger or any other passion”, instead recommending that we aim for “complete freedom from passion”[[134]](#endnote-114). This conjures up an image of the calm, tranquil Stoic sage, unfazed by anything.

He compares us to wrestlers competing “for the greatest prize of all, to avoid being thrown by any passion.”[[135]](#endnote-115) This quote reveals Marcus’ opinion of the passions as violent forces which interrupt our lives and cause us distress if we let them. He also talks of the “agents of emotion which make you a mere puppet on their strings”[[136]](#endnote-116) likening the emotions to manipulating forces which try to take control of us and are therefore things to be resisted.

Marcus makes frequent mention of anger as an emotion to be guarded against, describing it as “some sort of pain and involuntary spasm which drives the angry man to abandon reason”[[137]](#endnote-117), again casting reason as the ‘natural’ state which the ‘victim’ is deviated from, almost against his will. Interestingly, he compares anger unfavourably to lust saying “the lust-led offender has given in to pleasure and seems somehow more abandoned and less manly in his wrongdoing”[[138]](#endnote-118) suggesting that the ‘luster’ was seduced or enticed from reason rather than being violently pulled away (giving in rather than being overpowered).

SENECA admits that the “emotions are not under our control, and that none will come to heel”[[139]](#endnote-119) but he apparently thinks that sorrow, at least, can be conquered. He describes how it is better to deal with our sorrow head-on rather than trying to distract ourselves with pleasures or amusements as “the respite refreshes its energy for savage attack.”[[140]](#endnote-120) Again, we see the emotions compared to wild beasts which attack us like we are their prey.

Seneca goes on to say that “a grief which has submitted to reason is appeased forever”[[141]](#endnote-121) perfectly encapsulating the Stoic attitude towards reason and emotion.

*My Two Cents*

As far as the Stoics portray the passions as things which sweep over us and knock us off-balance, I agree that they are undesirable. The Stoic ideal, which I largely share, was perfect calm and tranquillity. Emotions typically undermine this calm disposition (both positively and negatively) thrusting us into moods that we largely have no choice over. To the extent that emotions are disturbing forces that disrupt our equilibrium, they are ‘bad’ and we should work to prevent them having such control over us and pulling our strings like puppet masters.

All too often, our emotions blindside us and hijack our state of mind catapulting us into depression or anger and Seneca is dead right when he says that they are typically not under our control.

However, there is another side to this story.

We are partly emotional beings and to deny this side of ourselves is to deny something that makes us human. Not only do we *naturally* feel emotions but if we manage to feel them without letting them control us, they enrich our lives. We need emotions to enjoy music, or cry at something sad (sometimes an appropriate and healthy response), or laugh at a joke.

So emotions aren’t necessarily all bad; the secret is in not letting them run wild. If we can feel happiness or sorrow without letting them take over completely, then we can fully participate in everything life has to offer. The truth of the matter, I think, is that much of the time we feel too much and our emotions run the show more than we would let them if we actually had a say in the matter.

So, what can we do about this? Well, the first problem to note is that if we get swept away by our emotions, it is next to impossible to pull ourselves back out. Reason is quite insufficient for this task. Emotions are immune to an assault by reason because they are not rational in nature. We don’t reason our way into an emotion, in fact, the opposite is often the case; we get angry or depressed even when we know there is no good reason to feel this way.

Nevertheless, I think the Stoics are partially right when they say that reason is the key to breaking the hold that emotions have over us. We just can’t use it when we are in the middle of an emotional storm. What we can do is apply our reason *before* our emotions throw us. This is part of what the Stoics called our training. It’s when we feel in control of our emotions that we should turn to reason to remind ourselves of truths that only reason can illumine (particularly, the truth regarding indifferents and how little they should affect us). If we keep these truths in mind as much as possible then eventually we will set up positive mental habits, or ways of thinking, which will come to our aid when we need them.

Emotional reactions are learned and that is why it takes time to *un*learn them and learn new responses in their place. It’s also why we have to learn new responses; they are *automatic* and the only way to beat them out is to replace them with different *automatic* responses.

In summary, emotions are positive things when controlled and felt properly. If we give them too much rope, they will hang us time and time again. And the only way to get a hold on them is through ‘training’. We must analyse life using our reason (when we feel good) and reinforce certain truths about the world. The result will be that when things which used to upset us crop up, we will automatically react differently, with less rampant emotion but not necessarily like Spock.

Living in Accordance with Nature

The Stoics grounded their whole philosophy in the natural. They attempted to discern what the universe was like in truth and then they modelled their thought around this.

MARCUS has a lot to say about this topic. He identifies two kinds of ‘nature’; “…both universal nature, in what happens to you, and your own nature, in what you must do yourself.”[[142]](#endnote-122) So, universal nature is essentially the universe as it has been created (and therefore everything that happens in it), while individual nature is more ‘local’ in focus, my personal nature. I will adopt this distinction in the discussion that follows, but it is important to bear in mind that Marcus sees the latter (our individual natures) as being a reflection of the former (universal nature) so the distinction between the two is perhaps not as absolute as my treatment of it makes it seem.

*Universal Nature*

An important principle Marcus highlights early on is that “…nothing harmful is in accordance with nature.”[[143]](#endnote-123) This betrays his thought that the universe is ultimately beneficent and conducive to our happiness or well-being.

Another principle in universal nature is that, “If… nature governing all… then the lower in the interests of the higher, and the higher for each other.”[[144]](#endnote-124) How this cashes out for humans (rational beings) is that “the rest of creation is constituted to serve rational beings… but rational beings are here to serve each other.”[[145]](#endnote-125) Marcus here commits to the notion that there is a hierarchy inherent in Nature and it peaks with the rational. This perfectly fits in with what we have already seen of Stoic philosophy.

Marcus actually takes this notion a step further claiming that this realisation is the origin of justice. Presumably, he means that just actions are those that respect this hierarchy. The ‘lower’ (which seem to be animals and plants, that is, non-rational things) are made for humans, that is rational beings. And more importantly, rational beings (all sitting at the top of the hierarchy together) are made to “serve each other”. This is how Marcus gets to the idea that we should be nice to and care for each other; because we are all equal according to this ‘universal’ ranking system.[[146]](#footnote-21)

Marcus takes a fairly extreme turn next claiming that injustice is sin in a long passage that I will reprint here in full:

*“Injustice is sin. When universal Nature has constituted rational creatures for the sake of each other – to benefit one another as deserved, but never to harm – anyone contravening her will is clearly guilty of sin against the oldest of the gods: because universal Nature is the nature of ultimate reality… Lying, too, is a sin against the same goddess… The conscious liar sins to the extent that his deceit causes injustice: the unconscious liar to the extent that he is out of tune with the nature of the Whole… Moreover, the pursuit of pleasure as a good and the avoidance of pain as an evil constitutes sin. Someone like that must inevitably and frequently blame universal Nature for unfair distribution as between bad men and good… Further, anyone who fears pain will also at times be afraid of some future event in the world, and that is immediate sin. And a man who pursues pleasure will not hold back from injustice – an obvious sin… So anyone who is not himself indifferent to pain and pleasure, death and life, fame and obscurity – things which universal Nature treats indifferently – is clearly committing a sin.”*[[147]](#endnote-126)

Before, we analyse this passage in any detail, let me point out that Marcus’ ‘sin’ is nothing to do with the Christian notion of sin as guilt before the eyes of God. For Marcus, ‘sin’ means acting in a way that goes against our nature; doing or being something that conflicts with our natural inclinations or tendencies; where ‘natural’ means who we are *as a part of Nature*, or the Universe, or the Whole (all synonyms for Marcus).

You might point out here that Marcus was religious and so ‘natural’ had a lot to do with the way Zeus crafted this universe. He even says, anyone harming another is “guilty of sin against the oldest of the gods”. This is true but we have to remember that Marcus was living in a time when Christianity was a heretic and minority religion. ‘Guilt’ in the Christian sense that we have wronged God (Zeus) and need to atone for our sins, would have been almost inconceivable to Marcus. Our ‘guilt’ for our sins cashes out in the sense that we have failed to live up to our natural potential, albeit it a natural potential implanted in the universe by Zeus.

Now, on to the extract itself. There is quite a bit in there so let’s take a moment to unpack it. Specifically, Marcus says that rational beings harming each other is a sin, lying is a sin, hedonism is a sin, and failing to act indifferently towards externals is a sin.

We have already seen how harming each other is a sin according to Marcus’ ‘natural’ hierarchy which has all of humanity sharing the top spot by virtue of their rational capabilities and the principle that nature is beneficent, that is, not harmful.

Lying is also sinful for the same reasons; i.e. in the face of a rational universe naturally constituted to enable happiness and well-being, deceit just can’t figure as a reasonable part.

Hedonism (the idea that pleasure is a good and pain is an evil) is a sin[[148]](#footnote-22) for a few reasons; 1. The hedonist will end up blaming universal Nature when bad men get more pleasure than good men; 2. Fearing pain means that one will be nervous about future events (this is a sin because the Stoics believed that events in our lives were Providentially ordained and therefore automatically good); 3. Anyone who pursues pleasure alone will not be afraid of obtaining that pleasure through unjust means.

Finally, anyone who doesn’t act indifferently towards *all* externals is committing a sin. This last section reveals a little more about what universal Nature is. Universal Nature (or “ultimate reality” as he also calls it) is indifferent to individual pain and pleasure, death and life, and fame and obscurity. This is where the idea of a personal Christian God who cares about our personal happiness falls away and Marcus reveals the broader scope of his thought.

Universal Nature sometimes seems callous to the individual (even the just and virtuous one), delivering her capriciously into pain or suffering or poverty. There are two ways to resolve this. The first is to conclude that universal Nature is therefore cruel and capricious. The second is to maintain the belief that universal Nature is benevolent and argue that the pain or suffering or poverty suffered by the individual isn’t actually bad; it is in fact, something we should be indifferent towards. Obviously, Marcus opts for the second option.

There is one more thing in that passage I have sidestepped until now. Marcus says, “the conscious liar sins to the extent that his deceit causes injustice: the unconscious liar to the extent that he is out of tune with the nature of the Whole”. Wilfully, or knowingly, causing injustice (or harm) to befall another is a sin for the reasons we have already seen (universal Nature is not harmful and rational beings are equally at the top of the Natural hierarchy), but even doing so unconsciously is also a sin.

This last phrase confirms for us the general reason why Marcus considers lying, harming others, etc. to be bad (sins). It is because they mean one is “out of tune with the nature of the Whole”. Our individual natures should conform to the universal Nature, which Marcus sees as prior and more important. The Whole is benevolent and harmonious, and we should reflect this. To the extent that we don’t, we are ‘sinners’.

*Individual Nature*

First of all, “every living organism is fulfilled when it follows the right path for its own nature”[[149]](#endnote-127). Since humans are first and foremost rational beings, “to act in accordance with nature is also to act in accordance with reason.”[[150]](#endnote-128) Throughout the *Meditations*, Marcus outlines exactly what ‘rational’ means. It includes:

* Being directed to social action (care for others including “benevolence to his own kind”[[151]](#endnote-129)) (this is very important to Marcus; he even calls this the “main principle in man’s constitution”[[152]](#endnote-130) at one point)
* “Resistance to the promptings of the flesh”[[153]](#endnote-131) (since we share these with other animate beings, they can’t be central to our nature; at one point he chastises the man who oversleeps by saying that “sleep is something you share with dumb animals”[[154]](#endnote-132))
* A clear judgement (which seems to have two features)
	+ Withholding assent to anything false or obscure
	+ Only desiring or averring what is in our power (i.e. maintaining indifference towards externals)
* Welcoming “all that is assigned to it by universal nature”[[155]](#endnote-133) (even things that seem to cause us suffering, as we saw in the section on universal Nature, for we should defer to the Whole, which is harmonious and benevolent)
* “Disdain for the stirrings of the senses”[[156]](#endnote-134) (which means not overvaluing the physical, in particular, over the mental)
* Contemplation of universal nature

Marcus employs the analogy of our eye and foot which were both made for specific purposes. Man, he continues, was made to do good: and whenever he does something good or otherwise contributory to the common interest, he has done what he was designed for”[[157]](#endnote-135).

EPICTETUS shows concern mainly for our individual nature (as Marcus would define it) and although he does acknowledge a division between the “general” and the “individual”, this is quite different to the one Marcus identifies. “There are two standards to go by, the one general, the other individual. First of all, I must act as a man. What is included in this? Not to act as a sheep, gently but without fixed purpose; nor destructively, like a wild beast. The individual standard applies to each man’s occupation and moral purpose. The citharoede is to act as a citharoede, the carpenter as a carpenter…”[[158]](#endnote-136) So, let’s look at what Epictetus has to say in a little more detail.

*Individual Standard*

Epictetus’ individual standard is quite different from Marcus’ individual nature. As we saw above Epictetus takes individual standard to be related to each persons’ occupation and moral purpose. A carpenter should act like a carpenter (his or her nature should be that of a carpenter) and more specifically, that is the standard we are to judge him or her by. This is really a little off-topic for us here so let’s rein him in a bit.

*General Nature*

Now general nature (as Epictetus defines it) is essentially Marcus’ individual nature because both address human nature as it applies to humans in general, as a group, i.e. not specific unique individuals (despite Marcus’ use of the word ‘individual’ here). Now, Epictetus takes general nature (or standard) to mean that we ought to behave like humans (or the less politically correct “men”), as opposed to animals, who are either gentle but without purpose or destructive.

Epictetus goes into more detail regarding what this general human nature is and I have summarised this in the following:

* To do good[[159]](#endnote-137)
* To act in socially constructive ways; after all “Do we not have a natural sense of fidelity, a natural sense of affection, a natural sense of helpfulness, a natural sense of keeping our hands off one another?”[[160]](#endnote-138) and are we not naturally inclined “to work together, and to pray for the success of others”[[161]](#endnote-139)?
* To be “gentle, and affectionate, and faithful…”[[162]](#endnote-140)
* To embody “…the character with which nature endowed him – reverent, faithful, high-minded, undismayed, unimpassioned, unperturbed.”[[163]](#endnote-141)
* We are all born with “an innate concept of what is good and evil, honourable and base, appropriate and inappropriate, and happiness, and of what is proper and falls to our lot, and what we ought to do and what we ought not to do”[[164]](#endnote-142). Epictetus thinks this is true because we all intuitively use these terms to describe people calling some “good” and others “bad” seemingly without needing to be taught what they mean.

As this list stands, it is very similar to Marcus’ and we probably don’t need to elaborate too much on it but he says one more thing that is a little puzzling. Epictetus claims that it is also “the nature of the animal man; everything that he does is for himself.”[[165]](#endnote-143) How can this square with what we have just read about our affectionate and helpful nature?

Surprisingly, Epictetus then goes on to claim that Zeus himself is the same. Zeus does everything for himself. The key thing though is what Zeus desires for himself. “But when Zeus wishes to be “Rain-bringer,” and “Fruit-giver,” and “Father of men and of gods,”… he cannot achieve these words, or win these appellations, unless he proves himself useful to the common interest.”[[166]](#endnote-144) So, what Epictetus thinks is that for Zeus to get what he wants (for himself), he needs to be a benevolent, caring god. It’s a curious twist – although having selfish aims, Zeus actually ends up being quite selfless.

Now because this is how things are for Zeus, “in general he has so constituted the nature of the rational animal man, that he can attain nothing of his own proper goods unless he contributes something to the common interest.”[[167]](#endnote-145) It is the same for us. In order to achieve our goals (our “proper goods” – which aren’t ‘externals’ remember) we must be good, kind, helpful, etc. and care for other people.

Epictetus repeats this refrain again and again. “Every living thing is to nothing so devoted as to its own interest.”[[168]](#endnote-146) What this means, Epictetus illustrates in a fitting analogy, is that if we place our interest in in one scale and righteousness, honour, family, friends, etc. in the other, we will never do the right thing because all these will always be outweighed by our self-interest. “If, therefore, I [my interest] am where my moral purpose is, then, and then only, will I be the friend and son and the father that I should be.”[[169]](#endnote-147)

And just in case you’re wondering why our goals should be “proper goods” and not rather more money or more power, Epictetus reminds us, “…this is the nature of every being, to pursue the good and to flee from the evil…”[[170]](#endnote-148) and as we saw in the section about morality, the only thing that can lay claim to the ‘good’ is our moral purpose.

It seems that this is an attempt by Epictetus to reconcile two disparate notions; the observable fact that humans are naturally self-interested and the Stoic belief that honour, righteousness, and sociability are our innate qualities. The method he uses here to get to the latter is a little bit suspicious though. He does it by twisting the meaning of the former (self-interest) so he ends up claiming that what we are *really* interested in is being good. Unsurprisingly the only way to be ‘good’ is to be nice and caring and… well, to be ‘good’. This doesn’t strike me as a particularly lucid argument though.

SENECA also has similar remarks to make about universal and individual nature and although he doesn’t explicitly separate them, I will adopt Marcus’ schema below. Before we look at what he has to say I want to point out some general comments by way of introduction. First, Seneca reinforces that, “Our principle, you remember, is “life according to nature””[[171]](#endnote-149) identifying this as a key Stoic idea. He also links this principle to both reason and happiness. He claims that reason (that ubiquitous Stoic principle) demands that we live according to our nature;[[172]](#endnote-150) this logically follows if you believe there is some kind of organising *logos* in the universe. He also states that “…“happy” is what is in accordance with nature”[[173]](#endnote-151) adding a little more dimension to *eudaimonia*. If we do what we are *naturally* born to do, then we will be happy. One last introductory point; Seneca claims that “what is in accordance with nature is directly obvious…”[[174]](#endnote-152) suggesting that no special insight is required in order to know how we are to live. We can ascertain this using nothing more than our naturally-endowed reasoning capacities.

*Universal Nature*

Seneca believes that “Nothing that Nature has made necessary for man has she made difficult.”[[175]](#endnote-153) This links back to the idea that there is some kind of benevolent Creator of the universe who has designed things so that they are favourable for us.

He affirms a principle similar to one we have already encountered in Marcus’ thought, “It is the way of nature for the inferior to submit to the stronger.”[[176]](#endnote-154) This again, implies some kind of hierarchy in nature where the ‘better’ are naturally superior. I would suggest that “stronger” here means rational capability as opposed to physical strength.

In one more point, Seneca appeals to the natural animal world to learn what is right. “It was Nature that devised the institution of kingship, as we may learn from bees and other creatures.”[[177]](#endnote-155) Natural examples of animals submitting to the rule of one of their own kind and living in a highly structured, hierarchical community provide a kind of precedent that Seneca thinks should inform us in our own communities.

*Individual Nature*

Moving into a more particular focus, Seneca recommends love for our fellow man as coming with a natural sanction, “Nature has begotten me to love all mankind”[[178]](#endnote-156) and also emphasises the same thing from the opposite direction, “The vice of cruelty is not innate to man and is unworthy man’s kindly temper; it is a bestial kind of madness to delight in blood and wounds, to cast off humanity and be transformed into a creature of the forest.”[[179]](#endnote-157) This second expression of the same sentiment appeals to an argument we have already seen several times in Stoic philosophy, the fundamental difference between man and beast. Violence is something we see occurring naturally in wild animals but has no place in human nature.

Another important point Seneca raises endorses a kind of balance to our individual natures, again with a natural sanction, “…the easygoing man should act, the active man should take it easy. Consult Nature: she will tell you that she created both day and night.”[[180]](#endnote-158) Here, Seneca appeals to the balance that occurs in the natural world to recommend that humans should observe a similar kind of balance in what they do.

*My Two Cents*

Well, first of all, lacking a belief in any divine order or divine creator, I consider this universe to be completely and utterly random in nature. There is certainly observable order in the universe through the physical laws that govern matter but this is significantly different from what the Stoics are talking about. The Stoics’ claims about ‘universal nature’ (nothing harmful is in accordance with nature, there is a natural hierarchy with rational beings at the top, nothing necessary for man is difficult, etc.) all rely on some kind of benevolent Creator or universal *logos* to lend a rational element with a soft spot for rational humans. Take away this divine foundation to the universe and there is absolutely no need to believe any of these things.

Of course, there is a ‘nature’ to the universe in the sense that the universe is ‘like something’; things with mass attract other things with mass, helium is lighter than oxygen, etc., but these are quite different from Stoic claims. They are different because they are empirical and can be observed; Stoic Universal Nature is not like this. Nothing harmful is in accordance with nature, nothing necessary for man is difficult; these are conclusions that can only be reached if one accepts that there is some kind of rationally inclined order the universe is predicated on.

My insidious refusal to believe in any cosmic, rational, guiding *logos* also prevents me from accepting what the Stoics have to say about individual nature as well. I immediately recoil from the notion that we were born to ‘do something’ or ‘be’ a certain way, because this not just *implies*, but *requires*, some kind of supra-human force that has a ‘grand plan’ in mind. It’s putting essence before existence, but like Sartre, I think existence precedes essence; that is to say, we are ‘thrown’ into life without any natural purpose or essence to live up to.

Essentially, the Stoics are just saying that it is our intrinsic nature to be good, to be nice people, to be rational, etc. Now, there is nothing wrong with aspiring to be any of these things; all I am saying is that they aren’t ‘natural’ or ‘built-in’ to our existence in some intrinsic way. We aren’t ‘born to be’ any of these things. If we are kind, affectionate, or rational we aren’t fulfilling a destiny inherent in each of us.

I particularly think Epictetus is wrong with his assertion that we are all born with an innate knowledge of right and wrong. I think this is manifestly false. If it were even remotely true, we would never argue about anything because we would all have this natural ‘sense’ to turn to. We wouldn’t need to argue about abortion or euthanasia because we would all agree.

You could argue that even though we are born with this innate knowledge, it can be twisted or obscured through environmental influences. This is a possible position to take but is also quite weak because although it takes something that looks like A (no innate knowledge; only external influences) and claims it is actually B (we *are* born with innate knowledge) but because of C (environmental influences) the truth is concealed. Occam’s razor dictates that we adopt the simplest explanation and without more compelling evidence for B, it is hard to see why we should believe it to be true.

You will also have noticed the double standard in Seneca’s thought. In one breath, he finds natural validation in the natural world for monarchical rule (“bees and other creatures”) but in the next he claims that enjoying fighting and war reduces us to a mere “creature of the forest”. In this way, that is, by cherry picking the ‘natural world’, we can justify virtually any behaviour we want.

Pretty much the only thing I do agree with in this section is Epictetus’ idea that we are self-interested by nature. However, this doesn’t require any divine *logos* to imbue us with a certain nature; rather it follows just from the fact that we are physically embodied beings, physically separated from each other. Even though we can sympathise and even empathise with each other, we ‘naturally’ look out for ourselves first because there is no one we share such an intimate bond with. It’s natural not because ‘reason’ dictates so; it’s natural because it’s what we see in real life and it gels with any reasonable intuition.

So, all in all, there is no universal or individual nature that we all inherit just by being born. We do have natural tendencies (as does the universe we inhabit) due to our circumstances (physical beings in a physical world) but these are nothing more than basic descriptions (which everything that exists has); not signposts we can follow to fulfil some ‘true nature’ in us just waiting to be realised.

Providence / Causal Determinism

At first glance it might seem that these two notions are opposites. Providence suggests that what happens has been specially selected for you. The events in your life occur at the perfect time for you – ‘the teacher appears when the student is ready’. The truth of this idea requires either a designer or some rational *logos* at work in the universe. Either way, it tends to put the individual at the centre of events and makes the universe a much friendlier place where things are customised or tailored to him or her.

Determinism, on the other hand, tells of a colder, almost mechanical, certainly more indifferent universe where effects follow causes inexorably in an unbroken chain that stretches back supposedly to the beginning.

The Stoics however, attempted to make room in their philosophy for both of these notions.

MARCUS seems to be trying to cover all his bases in the *Meditations*. He suggests more than once that we should, “Revisit the alternatives – providence or atoms…”[[181]](#endnote-159) By this, he means that life is either governed by order and providentially orchestrated by an “intelligent source” for our benefit or it is nothing more than the mechanical or random movement of a “stew” of atoms. “The Whole is either a god – then all is well: or… purposeless – some sort of random arrangement of atoms or molecules”[[182]](#endnote-160)

He goes into a little more detail later giving three options, “Either the compulsion of destiny and an order allowing no deviation, or a providence open to prayer, or a random welter without direction…”[[183]](#endnote-161) This formulation is basically the same as the one above; providence (which we can influence through supplication to the intelligent source) or atoms which is divided into two further subcategories; a deterministic “compulsion” presumably governed by rules (laws of nature) or a complete random arrangement of atoms.

Now, even if you can’t decide which of the above options is true, Marcus goes on to recommend how we should act in all three cases. “Now if undeviating compulsion, why resist it? If a providence admitting the placation of prayer, make yourself worthy of divine assistance. If an ungoverned welter, be glad that in such a maelstrom you have within yourself a directing mind of your own: if the flood carries you away, let it take your flesh, your breath, all else – but it will not carry away your mind.”[[184]](#endnote-162) If providence, you can avail yourself of all the Stoic principles. If absolute determinism, there is no point in resisting it and you should just accept whatever happens because you can’t do anything about it (another Stoic principle). If a random collection of atoms, then you at least have a rational, directing mind you can use to exert some control (over yourself, if nothing else). The important thing is that whichever way you are inclined to lean, Stoicism can cater for you.

Despite it looking as though Marcus has hedged his bets a little here, he actually does take a stand on this issue. He is absolutely unequivocal about the universe being deterministic in nature, “What comes after is always in affinity to what went before”[[185]](#endnote-163); but he doesn’t leave it there. He flavours his causal determinism with a personal, providential theme, “All that happens has been fated by the Whole from the beginning and spun for your own destiny.”[[186]](#endnote-164) For Marcus, the universe is deterministic, but not cold for being so; rather, it has been “prepared for you from everlasting, and the mesh of causes was ever spinning from eternity both your own existence and the incidence of this particular happening.”[[187]](#endnote-165) So, even though cause and effect is an ironclad feature of our universe and we can’t escape this, the causes “from everlasting” were enacted with you in mind and especially for you. There is nothing random or meaningless about Marcus’ deterministic universe.

But Marcus’ universe is not just a destiny-weaving machine for individuals; it is also a harmonious Whole in itself. “In the whole of things there is one harmony: and just as all material bodies combine to make the world one body, a harmonious whole, so all causes combine to make Destiny one harmonious cause.”[[188]](#endnote-166)

This is also Marcus’ answer to the problem of evil in the world. “So even the lion’s gaping jaws, poison, every kind of mischief are, like thorns or bogs, consequential products of that which is noble and lovely.”[[189]](#endnote-167) Looking at things in isolation can give the impression that parts of this Whole are decidedly less than harmonious but Marcus maintains that the universe is an ordered, harmonious Whole in which even the bad parts derive some attraction; “…looked at in isolation these things are far from lovely, but their consequence on the processes of Nature enhances them and gives them attraction.”

Essentially, Marcus’ description of the universe can be encapsulated in the following quote, “Think always of the universe as one living creature, comprising one substance and one soul: how all is absorbed into this one consciousness; how a single impulse governs all its actions; how all things collaborate in all that happens; the very web and mesh of it all.”[[190]](#endnote-168)

This conception of the ‘friendly universe’ yields at least two important insights. First, it recommends, “Calm acceptance of what comes from a cause outside yourself…”[[191]](#endnote-169) since everything, although determined, is designed for our benefit. Seen this way, resistance to what happens is not just futile but irrational, “…to resent anything that happens is to separate oneself in revolt of Nature…”[[192]](#endnote-170) And second, this close, intimate, intertwining of the whole and the individual calls us to realise that “anything which benefits the Whole is always fine and ripe”,[[193]](#endnote-171) meaning essentially, that the whole is not just more important than the parts but that if the whole benefits, then “I too have benefitted.”[[194]](#endnote-172)

First, SENECA confirms that we *are* looking at a designed universe, not some random or malicious whole; “Such was the design, believe me, of whatever force fashioned the universe, whether an omnipotent god, or impersonal Reason as artificer of vast creations, or divine Spirit permeating all things great and small with uniform tension, or Fate with its immutable nexus of interrelated causes…”[[195]](#endnote-173) This is an interesting passage as it shows the range of possible causes or foundations of the universe as Seneca sees it. God, impersonal Reason (there is no real modern day equivalent of this but I see it is a kind of fundamental ordering principle intrinsic to the whole), divine Spirit (a pantheistic belief), or Fate (a deterministic web of cause and effect). What is interesting about this list is that each option involves some kind of rational, organising principle; the possibility that the universe is not guided or meaningful in some way just doesn’t feature here.

So what does Seneca think? Unsurprisingly, Marcus and he are in agreement that “…all things proceed according to a law that is fixed and eternally valid… Cause is linked with cause, and a long chain of events governs all matters public and private… events do not, as we suppose, happen but arrive by appointment.”[[196]](#endnote-174) Seneca favours a deterministic universe ruled by cause and effect but at the same time he sees the whole as favourable to humans (rational beings).

Seneca also specifically affirms two principles we have already encountered in Marcus’ thought; first, acceptance of whatever fate throws our way; “Whatever happens to him he will bear with serenity because he knows it has happened by the divine law which governs the universe.”[[197]](#endnote-175) Second, the whole is more important than the individual; “…they [eventualities] benefit the whole of mankind, for which the gods are more concerned than they are for individuals…”[[198]](#endnote-176)

*Freewill side note:* Interestingly enough, the great freewill / determinism debate isn’t addressed by the Stoics at all. However, I think we can be fairly certain that they believed in an unyielding, deterministic universe where effects follow with complete certainty from causes. This vision extended to everything physical. They managed to avoid the conflict contemporary philosophy and science feels so acutely though, because there was one thing they believed to be completely unaffected by determinism. This one thing they thought was a piece of the divine placed in us by Zeus himself and as such stood beyond the laws of cause and effect which governed the physical universe… mind/soul. Indeed, they maintained that the mind/soul wasn’t just one thing we had free control over, it was the *only* thing we had control over. This will be the subject of the next section.

*My Two Cents*

The Stoic position on this boils down to two statements; the universe is deterministic but has been shaped or designed for our individual benefit. I completely agree with the first but completely disagree with the second.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about determinism and freewill and I just can’t see any way to escape the undesirable conclusion that everything is absolutely determined, even the human mind; i.e. freewill is an illusion. As physical beings in a materialistic, causally determined universe, with minds that are completely derived from a physical organ (the brain)[[199]](#footnote-23), it just seems ridiculously unlikely to me that *anything* could be immune to the causal laws that govern the rest of the universe. I don’t share the Stoic’s optimism that our mind is a slice of divinity (something we will see in the next section) and as such I can’t grant it a determinism ‘free-pass’.

And as you can probably imagine by now, because I don’t believe in any governing or organising force in the universe, I can’t see my way clear to accepting that the universe cares one way or another about what happens to us by spinning us a “destiny” from the beginning.

Mind / Soul

The human mind and soul are concepts that still enjoy much (polarised) discussion even today. Two thousand years ago, they were just as hotly contested. Plato thought the soul and the mind were different with the soul directing the mind and the body like a charioteer. He divided the soul into three parts (reason, emotion, and desire). Aristotle thought of the soul as the ‘form’ of the body and maintained that it perished when the body did. He divided the soul into two, rational and irrational, but then divided the irrational part into two further parts, vegetative and appetitive). ‘Mind’ was a part of the soul but it could survive the death of the body. The Roman Stoics, who never really systematised their philosophy in writing (at least not in works that have survived), weren’t terribly clear about how they treated the distinction between the soul and the mind, nevertheless we can glean some useful insights from the works we do have.

MARCUS is particularly ambiguous in his discussions of mind and soul, almost always treating them as one and the same thing. With that said, I will treat the two concepts as identical for the remainder of this section. So, what is this mind/soul thing then?

Well, for Marcus it is clear that the mind/soul is the very core of our being. It is not just the most important thing; it is the *only* thing of importance. While he doesn’t give an explicit definition he does tell us quite a lot about it. Probably the most revealing thing he says is that it is “…that fragment of himself which Zeus has given each person to guard and guide him. In each of us this divinity is our mind and reason.”[[200]](#endnote-177) Our mind/soul is a piece of divinity itself given to us by God himself. Another key thing revealed in this passage is the mind/soul’s link to reason.[[201]](#footnote-24) To reinforce this idea, Marcus frequently prefixes the words ‘soul’ or ‘directing mind’ with the word ‘rational’ even writing in one place, “‘What self?’ Reason.”[[202]](#endnote-178) One last thing we can learn from this quote is that the purpose of the mind/soul is to “guard and guide” us. This is quite a typical ancient notion which we have already seen in Plato and was fully accepted by the Stoics.

Another feature of the mind/soul is that it is “immune to any external impediment”[[203]](#endnote-179) and “untroubled and unhindered, unless it troubles or hinders itself.”[[204]](#endnote-180) We have already seen this basic notion earlier; externals have absolutely no power to harm us because the mind is completely self-determining and self-sufficient. “…no one else will impede the proper functions of the mind. The mind cannot be touched by fire, steel, tyranny, slander, or anything whatever…”[[205]](#endnote-181)

Of course, having the power to keep itself ‘pure’, it also has the power to harm itself. In the second book of the *Meditations*, Marcus lists five ways the mind/soul harms itself; 1. Resenting anything that happens, 2. Turning away or intending to harm another human, 3. Giving in to pleasure or pain, 4. Whenever it dissimulates, and 5. Acting at random without a clear goal. It is also clear that giving the emotions too much free rein causes harm for the mind/soul.

I want to drop one more excellent quote which captures how passionately Marcus believed in this untouchable nature of the mind/soul; “Remember that your directing mind becomes invincible when it withdraws into its own self-sufficiency… a mind free from passions is a fortress: people have no stronger place of retreat, and someone taking refuge here is then impregnable.”[[206]](#endnote-182) There is also another hidden gem in this quote; our lives are fundamentally solitary and it is only by turning away to a certain degree that we can attain ‘invincibility’.

Another feature about the soul/mind is that it will “take on the character of your most frequent thoughts: souls are dyed by thoughts.”[[207]](#endnote-183) So the soul/mind isn’t something we are born with – it is moulded by the thoughts that we put into it. In common parlance we might say, ‘you are what you think’.

What is the ultimate good for soul/minds? What do they desire? “…the good they seek resides in a just disposition and just action, with this the limit of their desire.”[[208]](#endnote-184) Soul/minds only want one thing; to cultivate and perfect themselves. They don’t care about externals; money, power, fame, etc. they are completely inward focused. This is a familiar theme, isn’t it?

Marcus also extols the ability of the soul/mind to transcend the limitations of its physical container; “the rational soul traverses the whole universe and its surrounding void, explores the shape of it, stretches into the infinity of time, encompasses and comprehends the periodic regeneration of the Whole.”[[209]](#endnote-185) By this, it seems that Marcus has in mind the ability of thought to… well, to ‘think’ about anything it wants. Nothing is inaccessible to our minds, we can imagine the very edge of the universe, or what it was like at the beginning of time, or what it will be like at the end of time.

There is one more thing that Marcus has to say about the soul/mind. “…the soul can preserve its own clear sky and calm voyage by not assessing pain as an evil. Every judgement, every impulse, desire and rejection is within the soul, where nothing evil can penetrate.” In this, Marcus is affirming the ability of the soul/mind to preserve its tranquillity no matter what is happening ‘outside’. It can remain completely unaffected just by choosing not to assess pain as evil. In keeping with the Stoic bias towards the mental and rational, Marcus here lets this inclination carry him to the conclusion that the mind can overcome physical pain by simply denying that it is a bad thing.

An important prerequisite to achieving this level of calm is constant examination of our thoughts and the sense impressions that come to us. We must constantly ask, “To what use, then, am I now putting my soul?... Examine yourself. ‘What do I now have in this part of me called the directing mind?’”[[210]](#endnote-186) for remember, we are or, at least, we will become what we most frequently think about. Throughout the *Meditations*, Marcus constantly reminds us of this rule, “See things for what they are”[[211]](#endnote-187), “go straight to the component parts of anything…”[[212]](#endnote-188) and “Constantly test mental impressions – each one individually, if you can: investigate the cause, identify the emotion, apply the analysis of logic.”[[213]](#endnote-189) It certainly brings to mind, Socrates’ famous line, the unexamined life is not worth living. For Marcus, there seem to be two main reasons for advocating we analyse our lives and our thinking; 1. It is through our most frequent thoughts that we shape our directing mind, and 2. Without a correct understanding of events and how much importance (if any) they should have for us, we can’t even hope to maintain a balanced, tranquil mind.

SENECA seems to separate the mind from the soul a little more clearly than Marcus. As near as I can tell, he tends to associate soul with reason (i.e. our *core*) and mind with wisdom (i.e. the intellectual).

The soul, for Seneca, is very Aristotelian in nature having both “an irrational factor and also a rational [one]”[[214]](#endnote-190) and he even divides the irrational into two parts; “one spirited, ambitious, headstrong, swayed by passion, and the other passive, unforceful, devoted to pleasure.”[[215]](#endnote-191)

He also claims that the soul is the true core of a person; that is to say, the thing we should judge their worth by; “If you wish to arrive at a true estimate of a man and understand his quality, look at him naked. Make him lay aside his inheritance, his titles, Fortune’s other specious trimmings; make him lay even his body aside and look at his soul to ascertain its quality and size and whether its greatness is its own or detachable.”[[216]](#endnote-192) The soul is the ‘real’ person.

As for the mind, Seneca also holds that the mind is completely unrestricted in its wanderings. It won’t “tolerate a restricted time span… no era is closed to great intellects, no epoch impassable to thought”[[217]](#endnote-193) “for it is free, kin to the gods, adequate to all space and all times, for thought ranges through all heaven and has access to all time, past and future…”

He also maintains that “the mind itself is sacred and everlasting, and not subject to violence”[[218]](#endnote-194), like Marcus, placing the mind beyond harm.

Whereas reason is the perfect good of the soul, “Wisdom is the perfect good of the human mind…”[[219]](#endnote-195) This gives the distinct impression that the mind is more ‘intellectual’ and more concerned with thought than the soul. It is probably not too much of a leap (given the similarities to Aristotle’s thoughts here) to speculate that Seneca sees mind as a part of soul, probably located in the rational part.

There is one more interesting insight Seneca makes; “Beasts avoid the dangers which confront them, and when they have avoided them they stand at ease; we are tormented alike by the future and the past. Our superiority brings us much distress; memory recalls the torment of fear, foresight anticipates it.” There is a negative side that comes with our enhanced mental faculties. Memory and foresight, while allowing our mind to transcend the present and therefore broaden our horizons, can also occupy our thoughts without our approval, thereby impeding our enjoyment of that present.

*Freewill side note:* From the preceding, it is clear that the directing mind is completely free and unhindered. While we might see this as being in conflict with the Stoic belief in Providence or determinism “with its immutable nexus of interrelated causes”, I don’t think this would have been the case for the Stoics.

The reason is that the idea that our mind/soul is the kind of thing that can be subject to this universal causal chain is a fairly recent one. Mind/soul (perhaps we would call this ‘consciousness’ today) was naturally, and almost universally, assumed to be non-physical and separate from the body (this is a ‘truth’ that would have been as obvious to pre-scientific philosophers as the fact that the sun revolves around the earth). Only with the advent of science would the idea that our minds are caused by our physical brains take hold, and in doing so run straight into the clutches of determinism.

*My Two Cents*

First, I would like to separate mind quite clearly from soul. ‘Soul’, to my way of thinking, is nothing more than a confused, ambiguous, religious term which has only one justification; we can’t accept that we are just another physical animal on a material planet in a deterministic universe. The soul is our ticket out of this impoverished, impotent, existence. We *are* special after all, we have a *soul*. But what is it exactly? No one has ever adequately defined it. Why? Because it doesn’t exist (not unlike God himself).

Of course, the flipside is that if you can get enough people to believe in it, you can say anything you like about it because no one can ever produce evidence against you. So we hear things like, the soul is the ‘inner you’, it’s the ‘core of your being’, and other platitudes that have absolutely no content whatsoever.

The soul is out. The mind however, is very much in.

When I say ‘mind’, I essentially mean the cognitive activity of our brain. Although this is, in its own way, also a fiendishly difficult thing to describe (a task I won’t attempt here), it does have one definite advantage over the ephemeral ‘soul’; namely, it is real. We know we have minds, because the word simply describes the activity of our brains, one of which is thinking. If we can think, we must also have a mind.

I will leave the definition of ‘mind’ at that and focus instead on some of the descriptions the Stoics give and the consequences they draw from them. I do like the notion that the mind is untouchable by any ‘external’. There isn’t a necessary connection between any external event and our internal reaction. If someone hurts or insults us, it doesn’t *necessarily* follow that we must feel bad or lose our own calm disposition. Of course, this *does* often happen to many of us, but it need not. This is in many ways, the defining point of Roman Stoic philosophy.

I completely agree with Seneca that our capacity for higher thought is a double-edged sword. It allows us to cast our thoughts far and wide, both over space and time, but it also carries with it a burden in the form of memory (dwelling on the past) and anticipation (fear of what would/could or just might possibly, happen). However, they both tell us that nothing can harm our mind unless we let it and one of the primary ways we can safeguard it makes up my next point.

Another very useful insight is that the state of our mind reflects the thoughts we most frequently think. If we are constantly making negative observations, this will inevitably ‘colour’ our disposition until we ‘become’ negative, which essentially means that negativity will have become our basic or default state. It will be the position from which we interact with the world and just as importantly, this type of mental conditioning will determine how we automatically react to ‘externals'.

Another extremely useful idea to come from this is that we should constantly analyse ourselves, our thoughts, and external events. This might sound a little onerous, and perhaps like it might make for a particularly dull personality. But this needn’t be the case. All Marcus is recommending is that we not go through life passively reacting to everything. With a little focus, we can learn why we do the things we do, why we react the way we do, and we can also investigate what these things really are that we are reacting to and therefore discover whether our reactions are appropriate. It is nothing more than going through life with full awareness of *how* we are living. And I can’t think of a better definition of philosophy than that.

Society / The Individual

In Athens, society, in the sense of the *polis*, or city-state, assumed primary importance for the individual. In the years following the Athens-led, Greek victory over Persia, Athens exploded outwards. The Greek concept of *arête*, or virtue, had always contained more of ‘glory’, as in performing deeds that were song-worthy, than we would admit these days, but in the post Persian-war period, what had been conceived of as a Homeric, individual trait (and mark of individual greatness) became something that every citizen in Athens could participate in.

This love of glory and extraordinary acts was bequeathed to classical Greece from the achievements of the Bronze Age Greeks (this was what had inspired Homer), whom they lived in the shadow of. The wealthy, cultured, literate, Mycenaeans had established a truly impressive society which had somehow collapsed and whose ruins had been left to awe those who came after. In establishing, what Rebecca Goldstein calls the ethos of the extraordinary (Goldstein, 2014), the classical Greeks were actually looking back to the past, to the glory days of yesteryear.

This ethos of the extraordinary valued courage, beauty, and strength and saw in the great deeds that these traits engendered, a way to secure glory and fame, thereby overcoming death and finding a measure of immortality. In the glory days of Athens (around the time Socrates lived), these traits became descriptors of, not just individuals, but Athens itself, thereby transferring their benefits to the individuals who lived there. In this way, society (and by extension, the people who made it up) became important (even *more* important than the individuals who made it up).[[220]](#footnote-25)

Socrates and Plato ushered in a quite different interpretation of *arête*, one that wasn’t reliant on glory and other people’s opinion or performing great deeds. Plato conceived of human excellence (another translation of *arête*) in intellectual currency, specifically, philosophy. It was still an ethos of the extraordinary, just with a different understanding of what extraordinary meant. Rather than being about performing song-worthy deeds, it was about piercing the veil of untruth that surrounds us and seeing through to the reality of things (a goal that saw completion through Plato’s theory of the forms) and could only be achieved through contemplation and rousing philosophical discussion. The point is that this was a principally individual goal and totally independent of society at large (it may even draw the ire of society, as in fact, happened for Socrates).

Plato’s myth of the cave captures the solitary nature that is the climb out of ignorance towards truth. But, at the end of that parable, after achieving ‘enlightenment’ outside the cave, Plato’s protagonist returns to the dark interior to try to lift those he was previously shackled with, out of their ignorance, even though he realises that he will probably be mocked or treated as a madman. This underscores the appreciation that Plato retained of the importance of society to the individual.

The Roman Stoics adopted and built on these ideas in a way that some might find result in a somewhat uneasy balance. At times we see a clear injunction to treat other people with respect based on the very humanist notion that they are no different from us, but at others we find an almost contemptuous scorn directed towards those same people who lack the philosophical knowledge necessary to allow them to perceive truth from illusion.

EPICTETUS, like all Stoics, placed a lot of value in the state and thought that the individual should be active in political affairs. There are perhaps three things of significance to take from the *Discourses*. Epictetus asserted that we should remember that our slaves are our “kinsmen, that they are brothers by nature, that they are the offspring of Zeus”.[[221]](#endnote-196) It is probably true that this notion didn’t extend to the barbarians (non-Greeks) or women but was nevertheless a remarkable step in the direction of true equality.

More centrally, Epictetus held that a crucial part of what it meant to be a man was to be part of a state. “Do you not know that as the foot, if detached, will no longer be a foot, so you too, if detached, will no longer be a man? For what is a man? A part of a state…”[[222]](#endnote-197)

But we not just a part of the state; Epictetus goes on to claim that the state is more important than the individual. Epictetus adopts a ‘big picture’ perspective seeing a kind of perfection in the whole that may not necessarily entail corresponding perfection for all the individual parts of that whole. A citizen should “treat nothing as a matter of private profit… [nor] plan about anything as though he were a detached unit”[[223]](#endnote-198); rather “if the good and excellent man knew what was going to happen, he would help on the processes of disease and death and maiming, because he would realise that this allotment comes from the orderly arrangements of the whole, and the whole is more sovereign than the part, and the state more sovereign than the citizen.”[[224]](#endnote-199)

Again, Epictetus’ philosophy comes back to the notion of acceptance of what happens. Regarding externals, we have already been urged to accept everything outside our control (which is everything except our moral purpose) and now we are given another reason not to resist events; because whatever happens, happens as part of the “orderly arrangements of the whole”.

SENECA also asserts that “man is a social animal born for the common good”[[225]](#endnote-200) suggesting that our first obligation is to the whole rather than our individual selves. Seneca saw value in the state for at least staving off boredom and keeping a focus in our lives; “You ask what remedy I would prescribe against this tedium. The best course… is to be employed in some active career, in political activity and civic functions”[[226]](#endnote-201) and “if we give society up altogether, renounce the human race, and live wrapped up in ourselves, solitude with no serious objective will beget a vacuum for activity of some sort.”[[227]](#endnote-202)

Like Epictetus would later, Seneca also maintained that all people were equal, even slaves; ““They are slaves” – no, men. “They are slaves” – no, comrades. “They are slaves” – no, humble friends. “They are slaves” – no, fellow slaves”.[[228]](#endnote-203) That same letter builds on this premise driving the message home; “Remember, if you please, that the man you call slave sprang from the same seed, enjoys the same daylight, breathes like you, lives like you, dies like you.”[[229]](#endnote-204) It is also the place where we see one formulation of the Golden Rule;[[230]](#footnote-26) “Treat your inferior as you would wish your superior to treat you.”[[231]](#endnote-205)

Despite this praise for society, Seneca also had serious misgivings about other people. Although “nothing can equal the pleasures of faithful and congenial friendship… we must choose friends who are, so far as possible, free from passions. Vices are contagious; they light upon whoever is nearest and infect by contact.”[[232]](#endnote-206) He also says that “contact with the crowd is deleterious; inevitably vice will be made attractive or imprinted on us or smeared upon us without our being aware of it.”[[233]](#endnote-207) These quotes betray a slightly deprecating attitude towards the ‘crowd’ who don’t share the values and ideals of the Stoics.

To this end Seneca notes that “it is important to withdraw into one’s self.”[[234]](#endnote-208) He also points out that it “shows more austerity to stay dry and sober when the crowd is puking drunk”[[235]](#endnote-209) in a reference to other people which is less than flattering. He continues this thought in the same sentence by saying that it takes “more control not to make oneself an exception, not to be markedly different nor yet one of the crowd, but to do as others do, only not in the same way.”[[236]](#endnote-210) This intimates that we are to be more like role models, which requires maintaining some accessibility, rather than standing out in a way that people would find it hard to relate to. In further support of this, Seneca says, “Neither become like the bad because they are many, not hostile to the many because they are different.”[[237]](#endnote-211)

Ultimately, like so much good advice, Seneca suggests that balance is the natural state of things here; “Solitude will give us an appetite for people, society for ourselves, and the one is a cure for the other.”[[238]](#endnote-212)

We have already seen how important other people are to MARCUS in the section on human nature. It is clear that Marcus felt a very keen sense of duty to his fellow human beings. This isn’t wholly unsurprising considering his position as emperor. Although, what *is* a little surprising considering his position, is the way he, like his fellow Stoics, continually emphasises a fairly broad notion of equality which he often describes as our kinship with others; “the nature of the offender himself is akin to my own… a sharing in the same mind, the same fragment of divinity.”[[239]](#endnote-213)

It is no overstatement to say that the *Meditations* is absolutely packed with similar sentiments about how “all men are brothers”[[240]](#endnote-214) and testifies to how central this notion was to Marcus. What is interesting is what he bases this kinship on. A humanist might point out that we all share a common humanity, a Christian might say we are all children of God, but Marcus (a Stoic) found his common principle in our minds and the reason we all partake in calling this the “kinship of all rational beings”[[241]](#endnote-215); “…a human being has close kinship with the whole human race – not a bond of blood or seed, but a community of mind.”[[242]](#endnote-216)

Naturally, Marcus places immense importance on community and our fellow man; “we are born above all for the sake of each other”[[243]](#endnote-217) and “…the good of a rational creature is community.”[[244]](#endnote-218) He even goes so far as to say that, “If any action of yours, then, does not have direct or indirect relation to the social end, it pulls your life apart and destroys its unity.”[[245]](#endnote-219)

Making the community and other people this important leads to some conclusions. First, “…it is our duty to do good to men and tolerate them.”[[246]](#endnote-220) Even stronger than this however, Marcus simply recommends, “Love mankind.”[[247]](#endnote-221) We ought to, and are indeed born to, care for each other.

Closely tied with this is the second point that we have a responsibility to “If he is going wrong, teach him kindly and show him what he has failed to see.”[[248]](#endnote-222) Or more simply; “either teach or tolerate.”[[249]](#endnote-223)

One principle that follows from prioritising the whole over the individual is that “what benefits one person benefits other people too...”[[250]](#endnote-224) This recognises that we aren’t just isolated individuals acting in a vacuum; rather we are parts of an interconnected whole, and parts whose actions mutually benefit or harm each other in the same way.

We are so closely interconnected in fact, that we can derive some happiness from just thinking about the positive qualities of those around us, “Whenever you want to cheer yourself, think of the qualities of your fellows – the energy of one, for example, the decency of another, the generosity of a third, some other merit in a fourth.”[[251]](#endnote-225)

Like Seneca however, despite this strong tendency to community and kinship, Marcus also expresses an equally strong desire to safeguard his private domain from others. He advises that, “The way nature has blended you into the compound whole does not prevent you drawing a boundary around yourself and keeping what is your own in your own control.”[[252]](#endnote-226)

Again, we see Marcus’ thoughts revolving around the idea that we stand (in our directing mind) completely independent and separate from others. Even though we are “born above all for the sake of each other”, we should also remember that we exist in another sense as well; a sense where other people are indifferents to us; “To my determining will my neighbour’s will is as indifferent as his breath and his body… the directing mind of each of us has its own sovereignty. Otherwise my neighbour’s wickedness would be my own harm: and this was not god’s intention, to leave my misfortune up to another.”[[253]](#endnote-227) Marcus ties this up with reference to god. We can and should care for each other but ultimately our virtue depends only on our own mind.

Marcus doesn’t just advocate the importance of boundaries from the inward-looking point of view that the ‘directing mind’ keep focus on what is its own; he also has a particularly low opinion of other people in general. The *Meditations* is full of often scathing references about other people; perhaps Marcus’ position as emperor saw him surrounded by and forced to deal with the less-virtuous characters Roman society had to offer.

He recommends that you, “Say to yourself first thing in the morning: today I shall meet people who are meddling, ungrateful, aggressive, treacherous, malicious, unsocial”[[254]](#endnote-228) in order to prepare you for what is to come and allow you to maintain your equilibrium in the face of it. And again, regarding “…the characters of your fellows: it is hard to tolerate even the best of them…”[[255]](#endnote-229)

Not only are these people around you not that nice, “Most of the things valued by the masses come under the categories of what is sustained by cohesion (minerals, timber) or natural growth (figs, vines, olives)”[[256]](#endnote-230) by which Marcus is reproaching them for valuing externals (money, property, land, etc.) and emphasising the lonely path the Stoic (who values only virtue) must walk.

As a result of the inferior nature of the “masses”, it is important that we don’t a) concern ourselves with them and b) worry about their opinions.

He recommends that we “not look around at the directing minds of other people, but keep looking straight ahead to where nature is leading you…”[[257]](#endnote-231) This really shows the strength and solidarity Marcus thought could be gained from keeping focused on one’s own centre. In another place he says, “Do not waste the remaining part of your life in thoughts about other people… I mean, thinking about what so-and-so is doing, and why, what he is saying or contemplating or plotting, and all that line of thought, makes you stray from the close watch on your own directing mind.”[[258]](#endnote-232)

Regarding other people’s criticisms or negative opinions Marcus recommends complete indifference. “When another blames you or hates you, or people voice similar criticisms, go to their souls, penetrate inside and see what sort of people they are. You will realise that there is no need to be racked with anxiety that they should hold any particular opinion about you.”[[259]](#endnote-233) The person who’s criticising you is not the kind of person whose opinion you should value and so their criticism should mean nothing to you.

“Someone despises me? That is his concern. But I will see to it that I am not found guilty of any word or action deserving contempt. Will he hate me? That is his concern. But I will be kind and well-intentioned to all…”[[260]](#endnote-234) Again, Marcus refuses to let someone’s hatred affect him, but here he also goes one step further in advocating kindness even in the face of that hatred. The image is of a mountain standing firm and unmoved despite the storm raging around it and not being drawn into the drama or lowering itself to respond to the turbulence in like fashion.

*My Two Cents*

First, I cannot fault the drive that all the Roman Stoics showed towards treating everybody as equals simply because we are all human beings. The recognition that one person (even a slave) is fundamentally no different from another and deserves the same respect that you expect from other people is a very admirable position.

It is also notable that the Stoics founded this equality in our shared humanity (and human traits, such as reason) and not in affiliation to any group thereof. This doesn’t make it impossible to discriminate against others but it certainly makes it harder.

I’m not sure I share their opinion about the importance of the whole (particularly the State) over the parts though, an idea that Epictetus seems particularly fond of and one that I suppose Hegel carried to its limits in the Western philosophical tradition. We *are* all part of a whole and no doubt this makes up an important part of our identities (especially as humans, who are inherently social by nature) but we must be careful not to *over*value this part of ourselves. Our inclusion in the whole *is* important to us but it shouldn’t be the *most* important thing.

I see each of us as individuals first and foremost and then, as a part of how we define that ‘individual’, a part of the whole. Placing too much emphasis on the whole (and correspondingly not enough on the individual) sounds like a perfect description of an ant colony; highly efficient and successful as a group, but the individuals who make up this group derive almost no satisfaction as individuals; their identities are completely subsumed by the whole.

That kind of attitude might fly for ants but it just doesn’t work with humans. Look at the countries that have tried communism; their citizens are not known for their high quality of life and contentment. Even if the whole group was immensely successful, the only way individual humans can enjoy that is for them to feel satisfaction *as* individuals. At bottom we are individuals, and although we might identify with the successes of our group, we do so as individuals. Take that away and it doesn’t matter how successful the whole is because we just won’t care.

I also tend to agree with the Stoics that there are many unsavoury characters out there who we will inevitably butt heads with. Keeping a boundary up or withdrawing into one’s self; as in maintaining our own equanimity in the face of others’ *non*-equanimity (not as in cutting oneself off from others, which I think no Stoic was advocating), seems to me excellent advice.

To me, this seems to complement my assertion that we are individuals first and parts of a whole second. If other parts of the whole (or even the whole itself) become deleterious then it is important that we be able to maintain our own path with our own principles.

As a final point, I just want to note that although it might seem that the Stoics hold contradicting opinions about this topic (on the one hand they value the whole over the individual, but on the other they seem particularly unimpressed with the ‘masses’ that make up the whole), I don’t think they do.

Valuing the whole doesn’t necessarily entail that one must value the other individuals who make up much of that whole. I suspect the Stoics saw the whole in an idealised form and the individual as part of this greater good. The actual whole might be made up of people who are meddling, ungrateful, and so on, but this doesn’t detract from the importance of the whole; perhaps it just means we need to work on making the whole (the State) better.

And on the flipside, neither is turning away from such meddling individuals, a rejection of the importance of the whole.

Death

The Roman Stoics spent what the reader might consider an inordinate amount of time discussing and thinking about death. To the modern mind, this preoccupation with death might seem excessively morbid but considering the important and conclusive role death plays in all of our lives, the Stoic might consider our avoidance of this topic a failure to live life authentically. Indeed, the way many of us live our lives it seems as if we think we will live forever; hence our shock, or even outrage, when death rears its head in our lives. How could we fail to be surprised when we spend our whole lives denying that death will happen to us?

Considering the practical nature of Stoic philosophy and its emphasis on ‘living the good life’ in a state of tranquillity and serenity, it is in some sense no surprise they treat death so exhaustively. Death is after all, the paramount fear every human faces. Death brings life to an end and if one hasn’t made peace with this extinguishing force, inherent in the very concept of life, the Stoics felt that one couldn’t live properly; at least certainly not a completely realised and tranquil life.

MARCUS in particular among our three philosophers, was quite preoccupied with death, and his existential leanings feature strongly in this topic. He makes a number of comments about death, most of which use reason to dispel the fear of death, and it is clear that for Marcus that this is (or should be) one of our most deeply existential concerns.

Strangely, the Stoic emperor encourages us to think about death often. “You may leave this life at any moment: have this possibility in your mind in all that you do or say or think.”[[261]](#endnote-235) And again, “Consider any existing object and reflect that it is even now in the process of dissolution and change, in a sense regenerating through decay or dispersal: in other words, to what sort of ‘death’ each thing is born.”[[262]](#endnote-236) This might seem morbid and depressing but again, this injunction is aimed at a practical benefit.

In a general sense, keeping our death forefront in our minds ensures that we don’t ‘forget’ about our true nature and ‘slip into’ ways of living that are inauthentic; that is, based on a lie; the lie being that we will live forever or death is not a big issue for us. Ignoring death is not the same as accepting it, although both stances may look identical from the outside.

One immediate benefit of reminding ourselves of the reality of (our) death is that it allows us to value life, in the sense that it ensures we never ‘forget’ that because we will die all too soon, each moment is precious. This is also a theme that appears in the pre-modern writings of Dostoevksy.

Another point Marcus takes pains to stress is that death is inevitable and should be accepted with grace and dignity and welcomed as an easy release. Fighting against it is futile and pointless. “So one should pass through this tiny fragment of time in tune with nature, and leave it gladly, as an olive might fall when ripe…”[[263]](#endnote-237)

One should note that this is not a defiant/heroic, “I’m not afraid of death!” position, nor is it a ‘stoic’ (as the word has come to mean), almost arrogant, indifference to death as if it were but a trivial concern. Rather it reflects an underlying attitude of calm acceptance. “Even if release must come here and now, he will depart as easily as he would perform any other act that admits of integrity and decency.”[[264]](#endnote-238) If one’s time has arrived (as one knew it would, for death is inextricably bundled with life), the noble thing is to accept it, rather than bitterly clinging to life or heading into the abyss screaming one’s defiance against the forces of nature.

Having accepted the reality and inevitability of death, Marcus offers a number of reasons why we shouldn’t fear death, for it isn’t the evil that we think it is:

1. If the gods exist, they wouldn’t have created death for they wouldn’t visit such a harmful event on humans. And if there are no gods and no Providence, then life is meaningless and the cessation of something meaningless is no great evil.
2. Related to number 1, “If it [death] is to another life, nothing is empty of the gods, even on that shore: and if to insensibility, you will cease to suffer pains and pleasures, no longer in thrall to a bodily vessel which is a master as far inferior as its servant is superior.”[[265]](#endnote-239) If there is an afterlife of some sort, then death is clearly nothing to fear but if there is no afterlife, then death is a release from the physical and mental trials that constitute any life. “Death is relief from reaction to the senses, from the puppet-strings of impulse, from the analytical mind, and from service to the flesh.”[[266]](#endnote-240)

In the absence of an afterlife, then there will also be no consciousness and without consciousness there won’t be any*one* to suffer making death a non-experiential event (we won’t suffer anything after we die so how can it be bad?). “He who fears death fears either unconsciousness or another sort of consciousness. Now if you will no longer be conscious you will not be conscious either of anything bad. If you are to take on a different consciousness, you will be a different being and life will not cease.”[[267]](#endnote-241)

1. Elsewhere, in keeping with his ambivalent attitude towards other people, Marcus notes that death is an escape from the many unpleasant characters around, “…you will find it quite easy to face death if you stop to consider the business you will be leaving and the sort of characters which will no longer contaminate your soul… remember that the deliverance death brings is not deliverance from the like-minded.”[[268]](#endnote-242)
2. Death is just another function of nature and given the Stoic reverence of nature as the ideal state or process, identifying death as something natural automatically renders it good, or at least morally neutral (neither good or bad). Nothing natural can be harmful in the Stoic universe. “Nature’s aim for everything includes its cessation just as much as its beginning and its duration…”[[269]](#endnote-243)

In another place, Marcus reduces death to its physical consequences as “nothing more than the dissolution of the elements of which every living creature is composed”[[270]](#endnote-244) thereby taking the sting out of it.

1. Marcus observes that the termination of any activity is a kind of death. In our lives we will experience many instances of dissolution, change, and termination, none of which are anything to fear. Even entire eras of our lives ‘die’, when we move from childhood into adolescence, for instance. Generalising from the parts to the whole, Marcus claims that the termination of all of these events is also nothing to fear.
2. For those who are worried about death overtaking them too early, Marcus offers three consolations. First, the longer we live, the more we just repeat the same experiences over and over again. Prolonging something like this isn’t a good (and so terminating it isn’t a bad). Second, this fear hinges on us losing future experiences but Marcus is quick to point out that in death we only ever lose the present moment because that is all we ever have. We live our lives in the present and so this is the only thing that can be taken from us. Third, a long life gains nothing in the long run, “…run over the list of those who have clung long to life. What did they gain over the untimely dead? At any rate they are all in their graves by now…”[[271]](#endnote-245) Death cancels everything and as more time goes by, a longer life (which is still virtually insignificant in the grand scheme of things) won’t matter in the slightest.
3. Finally, Marcus quotes Plato when the latter says that since our individual lives are of no importance, the termination of them can hardly be considered an evil.

Most of Marcus’ commentary regarding an afterlife is couched in uncertainties which can make it difficult to discern his real opinion on the subject. There is however, one passage in which Marcus states his opinion quite clearly, “You may ask how, if souls live on, the air can accommodate them all from the beginning of time. Well, how does the earth accommodate all those bodies buried in it over the same eternity? Just as here on earth, once bodies have kept their residence for whatever time, their change and decomposition makes room for other bodies, so it is with souls migrated to the air. They continue for a time, then change, dissolve, and take fire as they are assumed into the generative principle of the Whole.”[[272]](#endnote-246) The component parts of our body will steadily dissolve until eventually being absorbed into the fiery ether that Stoics believed powered the universe.

EPICTETUS said much the same as Marcus regarding death. It is inevitable and outside our control. Epictetus has a curious argument here for why death is not an evil. Since death is inevitable and unavoidable it can’t be an evil for it is our life’s purpose to avoid evil (that is, to perfect the moral purpose). If we can’t avoid death (by natural design) then it must not be evil.

He also recommends accepting death with nothing less than total calm; it shouldn’t even disrupt our meal times; “I must die. If forthwith, I die; and 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. How? As becomes the man who is giving back that which was another’s”[[273]](#endnote-247)

This quote reveals another attitude Epictetus holds towards death and life. Like all things beyond his control (everything except our moral purpose), Epictetus doesn’t even desire possession over his own life. Since life and death fall outside his moral purpose (he had no control over his birth and death can take him anytime, equally without his permission), he accepts these things with equanimity and dignity *as if he was merely borrowing them*. Epictetus recommends we treat all indifferents as though they were things we were borrowing, rather than as things we own. This way we won’t be thrown off-balance when we lose them. This applies to money, property and possessions as much as it does to less tangible indifferents such as health and even life itself.

Epictetus also feels that the timing of our death should make no difference to us. “The paltry body must be separated from the bit of spirit, wither now or later, just as it existed apart from it before. Why are you grieved, then, if it be separated now? For if it be not separated now, it will be later.”[[274]](#endnote-248)

For Epictetus, the important thing is not *when* death will occur but rather what you will be doing when it does. “For no matter what you do you will have to be overtaken by death. If you have anything better to be doing when you are so overtaken, get to work on that. As for me, I would fain that death overtook me occupied with nothing but my own moral purpose, trying to make it tranquil, unhampered, unconstrained, free.”[[275]](#endnote-249) In this way, death serves as a call to action, for our time here on earth is limited and we should make the most of it.

Another curious thing Epictetus says is that it would be a curse to never die. He compares us to grain which naturally grows, ripens, and then is harvested. He asks, “If, therefore, they had feeling, ought they to pray that they should never at all be harvested?”[[276]](#endnote-250) The only difference between us and the grain is that we know we will be harvested while the grain is blissfully ignorant. It is this knowledge that causes us unnecessary grief regarding death. This is another argument from the inherent ‘rightness’ of nature and an injunction that we should follow her in all we do.

Epictetus, it seems, also doesn’t believe in any afterlife to speak of; ““It is now time for the material of which you are constituted to be restored to those elements from which it came.” And what is there terrible about that?”[[277]](#endnote-251) He also says, “Shall I, then, be no more? – No, you will not be, but something else will be, something different from that of which the universe how has need.”[[278]](#endnote-252)

These quotes seem to support the naturalistic belief that our bodies simply decay after death and the constituent parts (bones, flesh, etc.) change into something else. And so the cycle continues. “What there was of fire in you shall pass into fire, what there was of earth into earth, what there was of spirit into spirit, what there was of water into water.”[[279]](#endnote-253)

SENECA notes that our “very conception was conditional upon death…”[[280]](#endnote-254) This makes complaining or resisting death seem like a foolish thing to do, comparable to borrowing money and agreeing to pay it back in instalments but then complaining when the first payment falls due.

He also notes the imbalance inherent in “fearing so long a thing that happens so quickly”[[281]](#endnote-255). In a person’s life, death will strike but once and will typically be swift in carrying out its purpose. In light of this does it make sense to worry and fear it the entire time leading up to it?

Keeping death in mind at all times is also important for Seneca; “…old and young alike should have death before their eyes; we are not summoned in the order of our birth registration.”[[282]](#endnote-256) We never know when death will claim us and in order that we not be surprised (thereby having our calm equanimity disturbed) or forget the realities of our human existence, we should remember our mortality at all times. He emphasises this injunction more than once in his letters.

Seneca, like Marcus and Epictetus, sees an early or late death as being irrelevant. “Dying early or late is of no relevance, dying well or ill is. To die well is to escape the danger of living ill.”[[283]](#endnote-257) Dying well (that is, with dignity and in a state of calm) means that we avoid the only thing that is truly bad in this world, and that is acting without virtue. If we are dead, we have no more chances to tarnish our virtue and are therefore no longer in danger of failing to live properly as virtue dictates. The fact that we are not able to live at all is, to Seneca, neither a good nor an evil, therefore death can count as a positive in this way.

Regarding the possibility of an afterlife, Seneca says, “What is death? Either end or transition. I do not fear ceasing to be, for it is the same as not having begun to be; nor am I afraid of transition, for no alternative state can be so limiting.”[[284]](#endnote-258) We have seen similar themes before, but I think Seneca is tempted by more of a personal, individual survival post-mortem than his fellow Stoics were; “…so in the span extending from infancy to old age we are ripening for another birth. Another beginning awaits us, another status. We cannot yet bear heaven’s light except at intervals; look unfalteringly, then, to that decisive hour which is the body’s last but not the soul’s… The day which you dread as the end is your birth into eternity.”[[285]](#endnote-259) This sounds less like a naturalistic dissipating into nature and more like a ‘de-physicalising’ in which the soul transitions into ‘heaven’.

*Suicide side note:* All three philosophers condone suicide as a valid alternative if the individual should encounter external conditions that will prevent him or her living as they intend (in accordance with nature, following the moral purpose, etc.). Seneca says, “He will always think of life in terms of quality, not quantity. If he encounters many vexations which disturb his tranquillity, he will release himself.”[[286]](#endnote-260)

Epictetus urges that we “wait upon God, When He shall give you the signal and set you free from this service, then shall you depart to Him; but for the present endure to abide in this place, where He has stationed you,”[[287]](#endnote-261) but in the appropriate circumstances, he also acknowledges that “the door stands open”[[288]](#endnote-262). Each of the Roman Stoic philosophers refers to suicide in the same way; as an exit from a building; Epictetus’ ‘door’ standing open, Seneca with his ‘exits’ and Marcus’ analogy of the fire smoking and him leaving the house.

*My Two Cents*

Perhaps first up I need to clarify that, as a naturalist, I disbelieve in any kind of afterlife. Consciousness arises from the brain; once that organ ceases to work, so does consciousness; the lights just get turned off.

I agree with the Stoics that a (what we would typically consider today, strange) preoccupation with death is important for a genuine and authentic life. Only through facing death in its fullness can we truly live well. Far too few people bother to think about death as a personal event that will happen to them; we acknowledge death at an intellectual level but deep down in our ‘bones’ we haven’t truly processed this extinguishing event.

At bottom, the Stoics are saying that death is inevitable and this alone is reason for us not to be perturbed by it. We have no control over it (aside from influencing the timing a little by eating well, exercising, etc.) and so it falls into the category of externals, which shouldn’t affect our tranquillity. I think this is right, but the catch is to get beyond a surface, intellectual understanding of this to a real, visceral understanding which then informs our very being, delivering real equanimity.

I also like some of the ways of thinking about death outlined in the above summary. Treating life as something borrowed rather than something we own is nice and stops the mental anguish we might feel when *our* live is ripped away from *us* without *our* permission.

The idea that death strips away consciousness is also comforting in a strange way because it means that we *can’t* suffer in death. Death is only terrifying up until it happens; at that point all experience ends and with it so do all opportunities for suffering.

In another way, although one I suspect will be quite polarising, death is a release. In many ways, Marcus was right when he said that (at least after a certain age) life is essentially just a repetition of the same experiences. This will immediately draw the criticism of being too pessimistic but I don’t consider this a real objection; it is just a preference but one that has absolutely no bearing on reality. We go to the same job every day, meet the same people, chase a few fun experiences in the weekends (movies, picnics, an outing or two…), but essentially we just run (often mechanically) through similar variations on a theme until we die. If you think about life deeply, I can see that this interpretation is almost unavoidable.

Some of the Stoics’ consolations for death seem a little shakier though. The non-conscious nature of death might eliminate suffering *after death* but the flipside is that it also ends the chances for any more positive experiences *while still living*. Death is not just a nothing; it is also a loss and the most profound loss we can imagine.

The changes and losses we encounter throughout our lives (including the ‘death’ of childhood as we pass into adolescence, etc.) *can* be thought of as ‘deaths’ in a sense, but the death of the self is quite a different kettle of fish. The fact that we are not so distraught over the ‘death’ of a relationship, or a job (although we often are) does not logically mean that we shouldn’t be worried over our actual death. The former are ‘deaths’ of a part, the latter is the death of the whole and is far more consequential.

I’m also not sure about the Stoic opinion that the timing of our death is irrelevant. In one, kind of ‘big picture’, sense it is true because our lives are so short and quite literally meaningless, but this path results in an almost infinite depreciation of the value of life. In another sense, our lives have an almost infinite phenomenological value, that is value *to us* as the experiencers of these lives, because without them we are literally nothing. According to the former interpretation more life is meaningless but according to the latter more life is not just everything, it’s the *only* thing. But both interpretations seem valid to me. Perhaps it is our choice which one we want to enact then.

Regarding suicide, the central question is should it be allowed or not? I tend to agree with the Stoics that there is nothing wrong with suicide. One can quite easily imagine circumstances where more life could be the least desirable thing in the world for a person (euthanasia falls into this category, too).

We naturally recoil at the idea of someone taking their own life because it goes against our most basic evolutionary drive; the drive for self-preservation, but this drive is nothing more than an instinct and is therefore amenable to and by reason. If someone truly cannot face continued life as it is for them and in full possession of their mental faculties really desires to die, there is no reason we should not allow it.

In the West, we have also been unduly swayed by Christianity which has taught that suicide is a mortal sin and will buy for us a one way ticket to hell. The ‘reason’ is that our lives are supposedly not ours, they’re God’s. Obviously, such doctrine only serves to confuse the issue.

Philosophy

What is philosophy? In our modern age so dominated by science, this is a question that cries for an answer just as loudly as it did in Ancient Rome (if not more so). These days, scientists lambast philosophy for not making any actual progress (indeed, philosophers are still discussing issues that Socrates and Plato raised) and philosophers scurry to justify themselves in scientific terms (a mistake in my opinion).

In the time of the Roman Empire, philosophy (and philosophers themselves) enjoyed more credibility and public support than today but it was also subject to the whims of individual (and sometimes capricious) emperors who had the power to close down philosophy schools and banish the philosophers who taught there, an event which happened more than once in these unstable times (we already saw how philosophers (including Epictetus himself) were banished from Rome by Domitian in 89 BCE).

Of course, back then philosophy was much broader than it is nowadays. Philosophy, as defined by the early Stoics was divided into three categories; logic, physics, and ethics. In this, it *included* the natural sciences and so there was no conflict between the two. However, we have already seen that the Roman Stoics favoured this last category almost to the exclusion of the other two, and it is to this we now turn in more detail.

EPICTETUS succinctly defines philosophy as the art of living. In a memorable passage he outlines the “doctrine of the philosophers” as saying, “Men, if you heed me, wherever you may be, whatever you may be doing, you will feel no pain, no anger, no compulsion, no hindrance, but you will pass your lives in tranquillity and in freedom from every disturbance.”[[289]](#endnote-263)

This definition crucially identifies philosophy as a practical and active endeavour rather than a pedantic analysis of ‘philosophical problems’ that are completely divorced from reality. Epictetus is quite clear about this; “If you do not learn these things so as to be able to manifest them in action, what did you learn them for?”[[290]](#endnote-264) and highly scornful of those who take pride in understanding “philosophical quibbles”; “…someone says, “I wish to know what Chrysippus means in his treatise on The Liar. If that is your design, go hang, you wretch! And what good will knowing that do you?”[[291]](#endnote-265) (‘The Liar’ was a well-known problem often discussed in philosophy at the time).

In another passage, Epictetus compares the philosopher to a builder; “The builder does not come forward and say, “Listen to me deliver a discourse about the art of building”; but he takes a contract for a house, builds it, and thereby proves that he possesses the art.”[[292]](#endnote-266) And in another memorable aphorism, he condemns contemporary philosophers as, “Lions in the school-room, foxes outside.”[[293]](#endnote-267)

The philosopher is not someone who aspires to detailed knowledge about abstract concepts and convoluted chains of reasoning; it is the person who refines his impressions, thereby building his character so that he or she attains an unshakeable sense of tranquillity. In another place, Epictetus defines philosophy in the following way, “Does it not mean making preparation to meet the things that come upon us?”[[294]](#endnote-268)

This is not to say that Epictetus completely disregards the logical/analytical side of philosophy; he just insists that it be made to serve a greater purpose than analysis for the sake of analysis. To this end, he says, “it is impossible to adjust our preconceived ideas to the appropriate facts without having first systematised them and having raised precisely this question – what particular fact is to be classified under each preconception.”[[295]](#endnote-269) The systematising aspect of philosophy involves correctly perceiving what is important in life. Logic and analysis (reason) can inform us that the only thing of value is the moral purpose, but this knowledge itself is worthless. Philosophy also requires that one actually implement these principles and in doing so, attain the serenity that they promise.

This second, practical focus of philosophy entails training so that the principles the theory has revealed become second nature in us; “Have thoughts like these [the principles reason has revealed] ready at hand by night and by day; write them, read them, make your conversation about them… Then, if some one of those things happens which are called undesirable, immediately the thought that it was not unexpected will be the first thing to lighten the burden…”[[296]](#endnote-270)

Literally translated, ‘philosophy’ breaks down into philo = love and sophia = wisdom. SENECA sticks close to this literal interpretation when he says philosophy is the, “love of wisdom and progress towards it… The one [wisdom] is the result and prize; it is the goal, to which the other [philosophy] is en route.”[[297]](#endnote-271) The sole function of philosophy is to discover the truth and grant us wisdom. Ultimately, “…it is toward happiness that philosophy aims”[[298]](#endnote-272).

Seneca is nowhere near as critical as Epictetus of philosophy’s ostensibly impractical disputations. ““Why,” say you, “do you choose to waste time on questions which do not banish passions or master concupiscence? It is as a valid means for pacifying the mind that I deal with these problems and discuss them; first I scrutinise myself, and then the universe. Not even now am I wasting time, as you suppose. All these questions, provided they are not minced and fragmented into futile hair-splitting, uplift the soul…”[[299]](#endnote-273) Rather, Seneca seems to see benefit in the abstract arguments and wanderings that philosophical discussions often produce, as they ‘lift’ the soul and presumably give an individual a broader perspective from which to locate him or herself in.

In the section that follows on from this (and which also echoes the sentiment expressed in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*), Seneca also claims that, “…philosophy comes to its [the soul’s] support by prescribing contemplation of nature as a refreshment and directs it away from the earthy to the divine.”[[300]](#endnote-274) Philosophy is seen as some supra-natural endeavour that lifts humans above their mortal limitations.

MARCUS adds little to this topic besides exclaiming his agreement with Epictetus that, “…for all my love of philosophy, I did not fall in with any sophist, or devote my time to the analysis of literature or logic, or busy myself with cosmic speculation.”[[301]](#endnote-275)

It seems that philosophy was for Marcus, a solace for a life that was not particularly easy; “So return to philosophy again and again, and take your comfort in her: she will make the other life seem bearable to you, and you bearable in it.”[[302]](#endnote-276)

*My Two Cents*

I probably fall closer to Epictetus in my thoughts about philosophy than I do Seneca, but having said that, I don’t think that philosophy must *only* be practical or must be solely devoted to how to live the good life. Some complex disputation and ‘philosophical quibbling’ can indeed be interesting and productive even if only to satisfy a curiosity.

I disagree with Seneca when he takes philosophy a bit too seriously, as an activity capable of lifting us above mortal shores and carrying us to the divine, and I disagree with Epictetus in his outright dismissal of everything not related to practical matters.

I do think however, that modern philosophy has totally abandoned this practical concern that used to permeate philosophy. Philosophy used to be meaningful to everyone, not just philosophy professors who enjoy hair-splitting. There is room for both the practical *and* the more abstract in philosophy but if I had to favour one extreme, it would be the practical. Unfortunately, modern philosophy has done exactly the opposite.

Religion

Wherever we find civilisation, we find religion. Every culture that has ever existed on the planet has entertained some kind of religious beliefs… until now. For the first time in history it has become possible not to believe in a god and to reject the existence of the supernatural. Many bemoan this loss of the ‘sacred’ and the supposed loss of values that must inevitably follow; but others embrace the freedom and possibility inherent in this heresy.

The Stoics, being products of their times, were very much believers. I should mention, however, their religious beliefs were nothing like those of Christianity. You won’t find any reference to Christ in their writings nor to any of the metaphysical standards that everyone in the West is familiar with; God incarnated on earth, the Garden of Eden, original sin; even hell is completely absent from their discourses. In relation to this complex theology founded on salvation, the religious beliefs of the Stoics were quite simple.

EPICTETUS was a deeply religious philosopher and his devotion to a god (that is, Zeus) who cares very much for our wellbeing comes across very strongly in some of his writings; “…ought we to be doing anything else, publicly and privately, than hymning and praising the Deity, and rehearsing His benefits?”[[303]](#endnote-277) He also believed that we were closely and intimately tied to divinity; “you are a fragment of God; you have within you a part of Him.”[[304]](#endnote-278)

God was very real and important for Epictetus, but exactly what did he mean when he said, “God”? First of all, it is quite clear that ‘God’ (in the singular) for Epictetus is Zeus, not the Yahweh of Moses.

Second, his god is essentially Reason in divine form, rather than the blatantly personified Christian God. “What, then, is the true nature of God?... It is intelligence, knowledge, right reason. Here, therefore, and only here, shall you seek the true nature of the good.”[[305]](#endnote-279)

Third, even though Epictetus frequently identified god with a single figure, Zeus, he also subscribed to what we would call a pantheistic conception of divinity; “…He who has created the sun, which is but a small portion of Himself in comparison with the whole…”[[306]](#endnote-280) And again, “…but everything is filled with gods and divine powers.”[[307]](#endnote-281)

Interestingly, Epictetus rejected hell; “There is no Hades, nor Acheron, not Cocytus, not Pyriphlegethon”[[308]](#endnote-282) (Hades was the Greek god of the underworld (which also came to be the name of the underworld itself) and the other three names mentioned were rivers and their associated gods; also from the underworld). The Stoics unanimously rejected the notion of hell since their religious beliefs weren’t motivated by punishing unbelievers or purifying an eternal soul through suffering, and as we saw in the section on ‘death’, they were naturalists so had no need of an afterlife at all.

One more key concept in Epictetus’ concern with religion is the idea of complete surrender to (although ‘acceptance of’ might be a more accurate way to think of it) the will of God; “I have submitted my freedom of choice unto God. He wills that I shall have fever; it is my will too. He wills that I should choose something; it is my will too. He wills that I should desire something; it is my will too. He wills that I should get something; it is my wish too. He does not will it; I do not wish it. Therefore, it is my will to die; therefore, it is my will to be tortured on the rack.”[[309]](#endnote-283)

There are two reasons Epictetus advocates this ‘submission’ and it is important to point them out to avoid interpreting him through a Christian lens which depicted God as a bit of a tyrant (if you don’t believe this, read the Old Testament). First, Epictetus regards “God’s will as better than my will”[[310]](#endnote-284) He defers to this higher power precisely because it is a higher power. This aspect has obvious correlates with Christianity. The second reason, however, is related to Epictetus’ thoughts on desire which we will come to later (and quite decidedly non-Christian), but briefly, he thought that desire lay at the root of all suffering and was the central impediment to happiness. Desiring that events (‘indifferents’) happen a certain way opens us up to disappointment because we only have limited (if any) control over these things. This is basically giving up control of our happiness to random influences. Aligning one’s desires with what actually happens, that is, what Zeus deems (because nothing happens against the will of Zeus), ensures that we secure for ourselves that highly valued Stoic imperturbable calm.

Epictetus gave what must be one of the earliest formulations of an argument for the existence of God known as the argument from design; “Yet, how can it be that, while it is impossible for a city or a household to remain even a very short time without someone to govern and care for it, nevertheless this great and beautiful structure should be kept in such orderly arrangement by sheer accident and chance? There must be, therefore, One who governs it.”[[311]](#endnote-285)

He also gave two (really three) solutions to the problem of evil (how can there be so much evil and suffering in the world if a good God exists?):

1. The first solution is actually a two for one. The first point depends on realising that for any difficulty we can think of, we have also been adequately equipped to deal with it. The idea is that the existence of the latter justifies the existence of the former. The second point claims that without any hardships we wouldn’t have the opportunities to rise above them. Another way to state this is that without the bad, there couldn’t be any good. Both of these solutions are captured in the following quote; “”Yes, but my nose is running.” What have you hands for, then, slave? Is it not that you may wipe your nose? “Is it reasonable, then, that there should be running noses in the world?”… what do you think Heracles would have amounted to, if there had not been a lion… and wicked and brutal men, whom he made it his business to drive out and clear away?”[[312]](#endnote-286)

2. The second solution was made famous by Leibniz in the seventeenth century and holds that vice when viewed as a part of the complete picture actually makes a harmonious whole. Taken out of context and isolated, evil seems terrible and unjustified but, Epictetus contends, in the bigger picture, all of this suffering somehow cashes out in harmony; “And he has ordained that there be summer and winter, and abundance and dearth, and virtue and vice, and all such opposites, for the harmony of the whole…”[[313]](#endnote-287)

MARCUS was just as devoted to the gods as Epictetus although he tended to speak of gods, plural, more than Epictetus, who tended to focus on Zeus more. He urges that you, “Go through the remainder of your life in sincere commitment of all your being to the gods…”[[314]](#endnote-288) and asserts that, “It [our directing mind] was constituted… no less for the reverence and service of god…”[[315]](#endnote-289)

He also sees the gods as entities we can turn to in difficult times and derive some kind of support or strength from; “…and in all things call on the gods.”[[316]](#endnote-290) Marcus’ gods care quite specifically for mankind (as in Epictetus), hence their willingness to help us in times of trouble. He specifically mentions two of the ways they help us – dreams and divination; revealing perhaps the extent of his mystical beliefs.

He derives the fact that the gods care for us by acknowledging that they think about us and then appealing to the common sense notion that the gods (being as powerful and complete as they are) could have no possible reason for harming us; “Now if the gods took thought for me and for what must happen to me, they will have taken thought for my good. It is not easy to conceive of a thoughtless god, and what possible reason could they have had to be bent on my harm? What advantage would there have been from that either for themselves or for the common good, which is the main concern of their providence?[[317]](#endnote-291)

He also offers a (relatively weak) argument for their existence; “To those who ask, ‘Where then have you seen the gods? What conviction of their existence leads you to this worship of them?, I reply first that they are in fact visible to our eyes. Secondly, and notwithstanding, that I have not seen my own soul either, and yet I honour it. So it is with the gods too: from my every experience of their power time after time I am certain that they exist, and I revere them.”[[318]](#endnote-292) Marcus’ first claim that the gods are visible probably refers to the heavenly bodies, but he also draws an analogy (probably convincing in his time – much less so in ours) between the belief in a soul we can’t see but can feel and the gods who fall into the same category.

Finally, Marcus betrays something of his pantheistic inclinations, a mainstay in the Stoic tradition, when he refers to the “…governor of that universe of whom you constitute an emanation”[[319]](#endnote-293) We are parts of god in some quite mystical and ill-defined manner.

SENECA also has a very pantheistic conception of god identifying god as being everywhere and in everything, almost synonymous with the universe; “The totality in which we are contained is one, and it is god; and we are his partners and his members.”[[320]](#endnote-294) And again; “…god is near you, with you, inside you.”[[321]](#endnote-295)

Interestingly, he also sees evidence of god in any good action going so far as to claim that we *can’t* be good without his guidance and assistance; “No man is good without god. Could any man rise above Fortune without his help? It is he that imparts grand and upstanding counsel.”[[322]](#endnote-296)

Like Epictetus (although before him), Seneca also gives an argument from design for the existence of god; “…so mighty a structure does not persist without some caretaker… multitudes of objects on land and sea and of brilliant lights shining forth according to a fixed plan; that this orderliness is not a property of matter moving at random…”[[323]](#endnote-297)

He also tackles the problem of evil giving three specific explanations, all based on a simple premise which we have seen earlier in the metaphysics section from Marcus; “It is not possible that any evil can befall a good man. Opposites cannot combine.”[[324]](#endnote-298) Securing this metaphysical base, we head into his three justifications for evil:

1. What we typically think of as bad, actually isn’t bad at all. We complain about this bad thing that happened to us but Seneca argues that it was actually of benefit to you. The main way these ‘bad’ things are good for us is in that they make us strong and allow us to test ourselves so that we can see our true strength. ““Let them be harassed by toil and sorrow and loss,” says he, [god] “that so they may acquire true strength.” Pampered bodies grow sluggish through sloth…”[[325]](#endnote-299) And ““No one is more unhappy, in my judgement,” says he, “than a man who has never met with adversity.” He has never had the privilege of testing himself.”[[326]](#endnote-300)

Closely related to this is the notion that we need struggle and challenge in order to maintain the virtues we cherish; “Without an antagonist prowess fades away.”[[327]](#endnote-301)

1. The bad things that befall one person are a benefit to everyone because the ‘crowd’ can then see a mighty example of how one should live in the face of difficulties and hardship; “Why do they suffer certain hardships? To teach others to endure them; they were born to serve as models.”[[328]](#endnote-302)
2. In what sounds quite odd when I say it (but will make sense after you read the quote), Seneca also says that it gives the gods pleasure to see humans struggle (although not in the sadistic way you are probably thinking); “I myself do not find it strange that the gods are sometimes moved to enjoy the spectacle of great men wrestling with some disaster. It gives us pleasure, on occasion, when a young man of steadfast courage meets a wild beast’s charge with his hunting spear or faces a rushing lion without flinching.”[[329]](#endnote-303) So, Seneca here is talking about the exhilaration that comes from watching someone overcoming obstacles; when the chips are down, the hero(ine) rallies him/herself and pushes through to victory. A premise just about every action movie ever made is based around.

*My Two Cents*

Well, I don’t have much to say about this. Being a strict atheist, there is actually nothing from this section of any value to me. As I said at the start of this section the Stoics, like everyone, were products of their time, and their primitive time happened to be one in which not believing in a god (or gods) was almost impossible to conceive of.

Their arguments for the existence of god(s) and the explanations they give for the problem of evil are equally unconvincing but since I have investigated these in great detail elsewhere, I won’t go into them again here.

The Philosophy (Special Cases)

Epictetus

Freedom

When we think of freedom, we typically imagine being unrestricted in any way. We imagine no one telling us what to do, no one (including the State) interfering in our lives. This means that any system of rules which stipulate how we are to live come to be seen by us as a terrible burden which we immediately seek to break free from.

Epictetus disagrees completely.

That state of being allowed to do whatever we want without restraint, is a form of freedom but only in the coarsest sense of the word. Epictetus calls this state one of desiring “at haphazard” whatever seems best to us. There are no rules concerning our lives, or perhaps better, we make our own rules.

Epictetus compares this (life) to writing; “For how do we act in writing? Do I desire to write the name “Dio” as I choose? No, but I am taught to desire to write it as it ought to be written…”[[330]](#endnote-304) In writing, we don’t desire complete ‘freedom’ in the sense that we demand it in living. We agree that there are rules we have to follow and we desire to follow them or else the world would become a Wittgenstein nightmare where no one could understand anyone else. Of course, writing and living are quite different but the principle is the same. We desire that we write according to rules without feeling ‘restricted’ or ‘dictated to’ but we rebel fiercely if anyone dares to suggest a ‘code for living’; that there are rules we can follow which will make our life better. The general principle here is that rules are not always a restriction.

So, if having complete freedom in what we desire isn’t freedom, what is? Let’s look at what freedom isn’t; “But if you gape open-mouthed at externals, you must needs be tossed up and down according to the will of your master. And who is your master? He who has authority over any of the things upon which you set your heart or which you wish to avoid.”[[331]](#endnote-305) And again; “…you have delivered yourself into slavery, you have bowed your neck to the burden, if you admire anything that is not your own, if you conceive a violent passion for anything that is in subjection to another and mortal.”[[332]](#endnote-306)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Epictetus returns to his distinction between externals and the moral purpose. Attempting to satisfy whatever we desire, without admitting or considering the utility of any guidelines about what we *should* desire, is a recipe for suffering which will put us in twofold slavery; once to whatever it is we desire and again to whomever controls what we desire.

Now, we can answer the question we posed earlier, what is freedom? “…freedom is not acquired by satisfying yourself with what you desire, but by destroying your desire.”[[333]](#endnote-307) Eliminating ones desire (or the same thing in a different voicing, ‘aligning your desire to whatever actually happens’) is the only way to achieve true freedom. When you don’t desire that things happen ‘this way’ instead of ‘that way’, you have completely safeguarded your serenity not just from the vagaries of fortune, but also from people who might happen to possess or control the elements that comprise ‘this way’. “…no one who lives in error is free… whoever is rid of sorrows and fears and turmoils, this man is by the self-same course rid also of slavery.”[[334]](#endnote-308)

This is a theme central to Epictetus’ philosophy and he accords it the appropriate importance; “Does freedom seem to you to be a good? – Yes, the greatest. – Is it possible, then, for a man who has this greatest good to be unhappy, or to fare ill? – No. – When, therefore, you see men unhappy, miserable, grieving, declare confidently that they are not free.”[[335]](#endnote-309) Freedom is the greatest good because it leads directly to that goal of tranquillity and happiness. The link between freedom and happiness is so tight that if you see someone who is unhappy, you can be assured that he or she is also not free. It is no great stretch of the imagination to equate the two terms.

I will let Epictetus conclude this section with his own summary of freedom, “…he is free for whom all things happen according to his moral purpose, and whom none can restrain… freedom is a noble and precious thing… for me to desire at haphazard that those things should happen which have at haphazard seemed best to me, is dangerously near being, not merely not noble, but even in the highest degree shameful.”[[336]](#endnote-310)

*My Two Cents*

When I first thought about freedom, I was of the opinion that having complete freedom in my desires was the only way to define it. “I want to be free to do whatever I want.” But, I must admit I am now completely converted to Epictetus’ way of thinking.

Being ‘free’ in the sense that our desires are completely unregulated isn’t real freedom at all. It is precisely slavery to the degree that we let our unregulated desire control our thoughts and actions. Regulating (even extinguishing) our desires is the only way to break free from the hold external things have over us.

You might argue that this means we don’t have freedom anymore because we are being told what we are allowed to desire. All of a sudden there are rules and restrictions. You can desire this but not that. Eat this, don’t eat that.

That is a misleading way to think about it and it’s misleading because it only considers external (not ‘externals’) forces imposing these restrictions on us from ‘outside’, as it were. There are other forces directing our actions and they come from inside; our desires. If you refuse to let rules set boundaries in your life, then ironically, you are not living ‘freely’, you are living in complete submission to your desires.

Of course, no one lives a life completely devoid of rules, but there are varying degrees of slavery. To the extent that you haven’t used reason to place bounds on your desires (or extinguished them completely), you are a slave to them.

Three Spheres of Human Activity

This is another central feature of Epictetus’ thought and relates our activity to three categories; desire and aversion, choice and refusal, and giving and withholding assent of judgement. I will investigate each of these categories in turn.

*Desire and aversion*

Desire and aversion refer to the will to get what we want and avoid what we don’t want. Epictetus says of this sphere that, “this is the strongest proof of trouble and misfortune. I want something, and it does not happen; and what creature is more wretched than I? I do not want something, and it does happen; and what creature is more wretched than I?”[[337]](#endnote-311) Nothing affects our happiness more than a frustrated desire.

He also says it is the most important of the three because when our desire is thwarted (we get what we don’t want or fail to get what we want), our passions are automatically aroused and this leads to a whole host of troubles. Once emotion overrides cool, calm reason, the prospects for equanimity reduce dramatically.

We have already seen time and again how Epictetus advises that we adjust our desires to, “keep our will in harmony with what happens”[[338]](#endnote-312) (which is the same as eliminating individual desire) and his pointed advice to “direct your aversion towards the things that lie within the sphere of the moral purpose, and these things only…”[[339]](#endnote-313) but he makes two more additional points worth noting here.

First, he maintains that no one can influence our will without our assent, “…And what can overcome one desire or aversion but another desire or aversion?”[[340]](#endnote-314) Our will falls completely within our control (as opposed to all the externals we talked about earlier). We can override one desire (aversion) only by enacting a stronger one and this particular desire (aversion) can’t be forced on us from outside.

Second, Epictetus points out the insatiable nature of desire; “Everything that you already have seems small in your sight, but everything that I have seems important to me. Your strong desire is insatiate, mine is already satisfied”.[[341]](#endnote-315) Desire, left unchecked, will never abate. Satisfying one desire will only open the door to another or a bigger desire. Desire must take a back seat to reason or even better, eliminated altogether so that one ends up willing nothing more than what actually happens.

This first sphere relates to the internal, to states of the mind. Epictetus’ second sphere takes a more practical point of view…

*Choice and Refusal*

The first sphere relates to what we should and should not desire but this tells us nothing about *how* we are actually to live with these principles. Here the second sphere comes in and details the specifics regarding *how* we carry out our choices and refusals in life.

There are three key concepts to be aware of in discussing this sphere. First, Epictetus stresses (as always) the fact that our choices should be determined by *reason*; “Here the object is to be obedient to reason, not to choose or to refuse at the wrong time, or the wrong place, or contrary to come other similar propriety.”[[342]](#endnote-316)

The above quote also links into my second point which is concerned with *appropriateness*; acting at the right time, in the right place, the right way… and all the other ‘rights’ you can think of.[[343]](#footnote-27) This practical focus intuitively recognises the fact that virtue isn’t a formula one can apply in any and every situation, but rather a skill that one must cultivate. The Greeks called this skill *phronesis* or ‘practical wisdom’ and it consists in knowing how to act appropriately in the given circumstance.

Third, choice and refusal refer to *duty*. Specifically, Epictetus says that he “ought not to be unfeeling like a statue, but should maintain my relations, both natural and acquired…”[[344]](#endnote-317) Again, we see the agent’s relations to the community at large play an important role in Epictetus’ thought, to the extent that maintaining proper relations with others is a duty for the virtuous agent.

There is one last point to note here. As he did with the first sphere, Epictetus asks again, “what can overcome one impulse but another impulse?”[[345]](#endnote-318); the implication being that no one can force us to choose or refuse certain acts. Our impulse to action is completely within our own control.

*Giving and withholding assent of judgement*

This final sphere has to do with our response to sense impressions. Specifically, Epictetus is here concerned with the judgements we make on sense impressions; i.e. those we give our assent to (determine to be true) and those we withhold our assent from (those we determine to be false).

The primary directive in “giving and withholding assent of judgement, [is] that you may not be deceived.”[[346]](#endnote-319) This sphere actually cycles back to the first one in a way, because the correct alignment of desire and aversion can only be effected when one understands which sense impressions represent truth and which represent falsehood. In fact, Epictetus states that “…the first and greatest task of the philosopher is to test the impressions and discriminate between them, and to apply none that has not been tested.”[[347]](#endnote-320)

In other words, judging truth is all about discerning those sense impressions (the responses aroused in us by objects or perceptions of the world) that belong to ‘indifferents’ and therefore should not concern the agent. Anyone who cannot apply this third sphere correctly, will find himself strengthening his or her desire/aversion in the wrong ways.

Epictetus asserts the importance of refining this ability “so that even in dreams, or drunkenness, or a state of melancholy-madness, a man may not be taken unawares by the appearance of an untested sense-impression.”[[348]](#endnote-321) We need to refine our skills in this area to the point where we never react to sense impressions without first having subjected them to examination. In this way, no false impressions can slip past our defences and taint our governing principle.

As he does for the first two spheres, Epictetus takes pains to remind us that we are also in full control this faculty; ”And who can compel you to assent to that which appears to you to be false?” “No one.” “And who to refuse assent to that which appears to you to be true?” “No one.”[[349]](#endnote-322)

*My Two Cents*

For me, there is nothing to object to in this section. In many ways it is a summary of what we have already heard Epictetus say all throughout this essay. In correctly understanding which sense impressions concern our virtue, that is maintaining indifference to all ‘indifferents’, (sphere 3) we adjust our will so that we are not led into desiring/averting the latter (sphere 1), and ensure that our actions are shaped by *phronesis* and guided by reason. An unassailable happiness is the result.

Marcus Aurelius

Reflections on Life

Marcus is the most pessimistic of the Stoic philosophers and, in my opinion, shared a lot in common with the thinkers who would, in the late 19th and especially 20th centuries, come to be known as existentialists. Existentialism was a philosophical movement that took as its core subject of interest, ‘being’, that is to say, existence. Of particular concern was the ‘being’ of the type of subject we ourselves are, the *human* being. Existentialism was largely defined by the fact that its proponents took this as the starting point for philosophical inquiry; the human subject – not just the rational, thinking subject, but the acting, feeling, living human *being*. This starting point is further characterised by the “existential attitude” which refers to a sense of disorientation and confusion the human *being* feels in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world.

The *Meditations* is full of passages that reflect Marcus’ thoughts about life and perfectly embody this existentialist attitude.

*The Nature of Life – Short, Cheap, and Meaningless*

A lot of Marcus’ thoughts revolve around the realisation of “human life as short and cheap. Yesterday sperm: tomorrow a mummy or ashes.”[[350]](#endnote-323) Life is indeed brief but Marcus also finds it ultimately meaningless; “Think of the whole of existence, of which you are the tiniest part; think of the whole of time, in which you have been assigned a brief and fleeting moment…”[[351]](#endnote-324) We make up such a minute part of the physical universe and endure for such a brief amount of the time that stretches endlessly before and behind us, it is hard to consider this while at the same time endowing human life with the importance and significance we tend to attribute to it; “each individual thing is, on the scale of existence, a mere fig-seed; on the scale of time, one turn of a drill.”[[352]](#endnote-325)

In a somewhat surprising passage, Marcus even *recommends* that we analyse every event into its parts so as to appreciate its meaningless more completely; “…go straight to the component parts of anything, and through that analysis come to despise the thing itself. And the same method should be applied to the whole of life.”[[353]](#endnote-326) Although seeing life in all its meaningless ‘glory’ robs it, and therefore us, of any sort of higher purpose or overarching meaning, applying this kind of brutally honest dissection has the benefit of allowing us to distance ourselves more easily from events and people which might otherwise upset our Stoic equanimity. When we realise that this person’s betrayal or that person’s death are *intrinsically* meaningless events, we will find it easier to let them go without impacting us as they otherwise might have.

Having forced us to acknowledge just how meaningless life is, Marcus does however offer a couple of consolations against this; “The Whole is either a god – then all is well: or if purposeless – some sort of random arrangement of atoms or molecules – you should not be without purpose yourself.”[[354]](#endnote-327)

If there is a god (which clearly Marcus believes) then life can’t be completely meaningless or if it is, at least it’s still an activity we can derive some kind of benefit from and which does take part according to some kind of overall order/structure (“all is well”). If, on the other hand everything is random and disordered, then there is nothing stopping us from creating our own purpose, presumably, in line with the Stoic principles outlined in this essay.

Another feature of human life Marcus identifies with distaste is its gross, dirty ‘physicality’; “Just as you see your bath – all soap, sweat, grime, greasy water, the whole thing disgusting – so is every part of life and every object in it.”[[355]](#endnote-328)

*Change*

Marcus embraces the Heraclitean doctrine (as did all Stoics) that everything is in flux. “Constantly observe all that comes about through change, and habituate yourself to the thought that the nature of the Whole loves nothing so much as to change one form of existence into another, similar but new.”[[356]](#endnote-329) Nothing is permanent, but rather, everything changes and what’s more, it changes so rapidly that almost as you are looking at it (a person, a situation, etc.), it is becoming something else.

Given the temporary nature of everything around us, Marcus struggles to find something of value in life; “In all this murk and dirt, in all this flux of being, time, movement, things moved, I cannot begin to see what on earth there is to value or even to aim for.”[[357]](#endnote-330) Anything we manage to find value is just going to change anyway, so there is a sense in which valuing things is pointless.

Just in case one was hoping to secure some measure of the eternal through some heroic deed or virtuous life, Marcus dashes this as well; “All is ephemeral, both memory and the object of memory.”[[358]](#endnote-331) Not only objects change and disappear but even memories people may have of us, the one thing that might have stood a chance of some immunity to the ravages of time, will fade away until nothing is left.

Despite this, Marcus does manage to find value in one place; the only place that would make sense in the Stoic philosophy, i.e. the only place in our control… “In this world there is only one thing of value, to live out your life in truth and justice, tolerant of those who are neither true nor just.”[[359]](#endnote-332) Ensuring that we live our lives according to Stoic principles of virtue is the only endeavour worth valuing for Marcus, which he affirms in another passage; “The one harvest of existence on earth is a godly habit of mind and social action.”[[360]](#endnote-333)

In the face of this constant change, Marcus expresses surprise at people who act otherwise; “All things are short-lived – this is their common lot – but you pursue likes and dislikes as if all was fixed for eternity.”[[361]](#endnote-334) When we don’t align our thoughts to the fact that all things change (including those things we like and those we don’t) we fail to treat reality as it really is and this sets us up for problems later on.

Change can easily be seen as a negative thing (and often is in the *Meditations*) but in a somewhat uncharacteristic passage, Marcus does a one eighty and points out that this needn’t always be the case. Without change, nothing in life would be possible and since change is the essence of Nature, it follows that we should embrace it; “Is someone afraid of change? Well, what can ever come to be without change? Or what is dearer or closer to the nature of the Whole than change? Can you yourself take your bath, if the wood that heats it is not changed? Can you be fed, unless what you eat changes? Can any other of the benefits of life be achieved without change? Do you not see then that for you to be changed is equal, and equally necessary to the nature of the Whole?”[[362]](#endnote-335)

*Time*

Regarding time, Marcus only affords the present any measure of reality since, “…each of us lives only in the present moment, a mere fragment of time: the rest is life past or uncertain future.”[[363]](#endnote-336) He even goes so far as to relegate the past and future to the status of indifferents, which is to say they shouldn’t cause us any distress since they are out of our control; “the mind is only concerned with the present: its activities in the future and in the past are also indifferent at any present moment.”[[364]](#endnote-337) The past is done and can’t be changed and the future hasn’t happened yet and is very much uncertain. On that basis neither should concern us.

*Everything Repeats*

You will remember this as one of Marcus’ consolations of death – the idea that a long life is not better because every event is merely repeated anyway. “He who sees the present has seen all things, both all that has come to pass from everlasting and all that will be for eternity: all things are related and the same.” Things continually change into different forms but these changes essentially amount to a variation on a theme; and once you’re familiar with the theme, the variations aren’t of much interest.

“Look back over the past – all those many changes of dynasties. And you can foresee the future too: it will be completely alike, incapable of deviating from the rhythm of the present. So for the study of human life forty years are as good as ten thousand: what more will you see?”[[365]](#endnote-338) Presumably Marcus had in mind that individual things, methods, techniques, etc. might change but the overall pattern remains the same. This idea is perhaps best captured in the following passage; “All the same as now: just a different cast.”[[366]](#endnote-339)

*The Art of Living is a Struggle*

This might seem to be an overly pessimistic accounting of life, especially when Marcus likens it to a battle; “The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing, in that it stands ready for what comes and is not thrown by the unforeseen.”[[367]](#endnote-340) A closer look at this passage however, reveals that Marcus is not saying it is ‘life’ that is the struggle, but the ‘art of living’. This implies that Marcus is not just talking about a life, but a life *lived well* that is a struggle… and now we can understand why Marcus compares it to wrestling.

Life is continually throwing us curve balls, each with the potential to upset our Stoic equilibrium; and preserving our calm in the face of these trials is a not an easy task. And it is this that Marcus identifies as a struggle.

*A Consolation for Life*

We have already seen how all three philosophers regard suicide as a viable option when circumstances truly stand in the way of allowing one to live the good Stoic life but even when he doesn’t go so far as to actually advocate suicide, Marcus still encourages keeping one eye on death as a token which can provide some kind of solace; “one should console oneself with the anticipation of natural release, not impatient of its delay…”[[368]](#endnote-341)

*Heroism*

Despite the very sombre, almost oppressive tone of the *Meditations*, Marcus also infuses it in places with a proud, steadfast note; an almost heroic sense of standing strong against a turbulent universe frequently hostile and often uncaring towards the insignificant creatures who occupy one tiny corner of it; “Be like the rocky headland on which the waves constantly break. It stands firm, and round it the seething waters are laid to rest.”[[369]](#endnote-342)

There is a sense of honesty and authenticity in Marcus’ writings which is important to note as this balances the less positive, very much existentialist aspect that nevertheless pervades much of his thought.

*My Two Cents*

Much of this section actually resonates with me quite strongly. I see it as an unflinching, honest acceptance of reality, as it really is, not as we would like it to be. It also seems to me to be quite a humbling approach; important for a species that has frequently found itself at the opposite end of the spectrum.

Seen as it is *intrinsically* (that is, without any interpretation on our part), human life (like all life, of which we are just another species, albeit a cognitively advanced one) is indeed brief, cheap, and ultimately meaningless. Being aware of this, not only makes us authentic in our approach to life (which makes our lives noble at the same time), it also allows us to keep things in perspective, thereby remaining unfazed and happy, even in the midst of turbulence. Marcus is also surely right to point out that just because there is no intrinsic meaning to life, this doesn’t mean we cannot create meaning ourselves and this may be the greatest difference between us and our other animal cousins.

Much of this section can be crudely categorised as coping strategies for life; life is brief and meaningless (so don’t worry when something goes wrong), everything changes (so don’t worry when something changes for the worse – it will soon change again), we only live in the present (so don’t dwell on the past and don’t worry about the future), etc. This is true but also not a bad thing, particularly when those strategies aren’t attempts to avoid the truth of reality. And I don’t think any of Marcus’ thoughts above are inauthentic or what we might call, ‘comforting lies’. To that end, virtually the whole of the Stoic philosophy these three Romans espoused was precisely about how to change one’s perspective and attitude towards life so that one can preserve that sense of tranquillity at all times.

One issue that probably deserves treatment is the way Marcus seems to contradict himself at various places above. He comments on the ephemeral nature of things but then chastises anyone who can’t see that without change nothing would happen and how change is a fundamental feature of the Whole. He says life is meaningless but then invokes god to bring order to the cosmos or challenges us to create our own purposes.

I think the first thing to note here is that the *Meditations* is a diary, not a systematic exposition of a philosophical position. Marcus was recording his thoughts as he was living them, sometimes while on campaign somewhere and they were probably never intended for publication. Rather than arguing for a sustained conclusion, Marcus was writing his thoughts about life, while in the midst of it. Some days (perhaps the days he makes his most pessimistic remarks), he may have seen incredible carnage on the battlefield, while others he may have come to his pen and paper with a more neutral disposition.

Second, I think the opposite viewpoints Marcus gives on certain topics are very much resolvable. Take the issue of change, for example, by nature we tend to seek and value permanence, we want things we like to stay the same, feelings we like to be impervious to change, people we love to be untouchable by death, and so on. Yet all too often, just as we find happiness change seems to thwart all of our best laid plans.

But on the other hand, as Marcus reminds us, change allows for new things to come into being and at any rate, is something we can’t alter, so we should accept its role, even if it is one we might not always agree with.

The same can be said for the meaninglessness of life. Intrinsically, life is meaningless; but there is nothing contradictory in admitting a god to grant some order to the lives we live out on his watch. There may be no heaven (Marcus certainly doesn’t think so) and so no truly grand aim in that sense, for death is the end for all of us, but that doesn’t mean we can’t take it on ourselves to create a little meaning in an otherwise purpose-less existence.

There are two sides to every coin and it doesn’t take much to flip Marcus’ over and see that both can exist in the same idea.

Seneca

Fortune

Seneca talks about Fortune as though she were an existing entity, which is not that surprising considering ‘Fortuna’ was the Roman goddess of luck. He doesn’t speak of appeasing her however or trying to win her favour so she smiles on him; rather he recommends steeling oneself against her capricious whims. It is quite clear that ‘Fortune’ as Seneca calls it, is the equivalent of ‘luck’ for us.

Seneca spends no time hoping that we will be lucky. Instead he depicts Fortune (luck) as an adversary who attacks us at will; “…forestall Fortune’s every sally or attack in force long before it occurs.”[[370]](#endnote-343)

Neither is Fortune something to be relied on; “Never have I trusted Fortune, even when she seemed to be at peace; all her generous bounties – money, office, influence – I deposited where she could ask them back without disturbing me. Myself I kept detached and remote from those bounties, and so Fortune has merely taken them away, not wrested them from me.”[[371]](#endnote-344)

That last passage captures the fickle nature of life. Through sheer bad luck, all that you have can be taken from you, at any time. To avoid the shock that would follow such bad luck, Seneca recommends keeping in mind that all the things you have and value (money, reputation, fame, power, etc.) are not vouchsafed to you forever. You have them today but you may lose them tomorrow. All in all, he counsels against emotional attachment to ‘indifferents’. To emphasise just how devastating the whims of Fortune can be, Seneca says it is better to never have been lucky than to have had luck favour then spurn you; “…people upon whom Fortune never has smiled are more cheerful than those she has deserted.”[[372]](#endnote-345)

Seneca also tells us that none of us are immune to the whims of Fortune. In quite a long passage which I will reprint in full, Seneca says:

*We are all chained to Fortune. Some chains are golden and loose, some tight and of base metal; but what difference does it make? All of us are in custody, the binders as well as the bound – unless you suppose the left end of the chain is lighter. Some are chained by office, some by wealth; some are weighed down by high birth, some by low; some are subject to another’s tyranny, some to their own; some are confined to one spot by banishment, some by a priesthood. All life is bondage. Man must therefore habituate himself to his condition, complain of it as little as possible, and grasp whatever good lies within his reach. No situation is so harsh that a dispassionate mind cannot find some consolation in it.[[373]](#endnote-346)*

This passage reminds me of Sartre’s notion of *facticity* which refers to the unchangeable circumstances which constrain our lives. We are born in a certain place, to certain parents, with certain physical ailments, etc. It is to this *facticity* that we are all bonded, by pure, random chance. Seneca seems to be extending this concept a little and saying here that most of our lives are conditioned by Fortune and they all represent bondage, even things we typically think of as good (office, wealth, etc.). Because, remember, these things are neither good nor bad; at best they are completely indifferent to our happiness, at worst, they are distractions from the Stoic path and can lead to attachment and a disruption of our Stoic calm.

In the face of this, he advocates Stoic calm and clear reasoning to help one eventually come to a place of contentment.

*My Two Cents*

Seneca is very right to counsel detachment and caution wherever ‘good things’ are concerned. How many people has a cruel twist of fate suddenly ruined? This is yet another version of that central Stoic theme, do not become attached to indifferents (and everything is an indifferent).

Luck factors into so much of what happens (this is one reason why the Stoics recommend detachment towards externals, because we have limited control over them) so we should always be prepared to surrender to her whatever it is that we have and value. If we develop an attachment (“I can’t live without x”, “I need my x”), then we make our happiness vulnerable to the vagaries of fortune.

Desire

Seneca shared much the same view of desire as Epictetus did. Perhaps the best place to start here is with Seneca’s belief that desires should be constrained; “Our desires, moreover, must not be set wandering far afield; since they cannot be wholly confined, we may give them an airing in the immediate vicinity…”[[374]](#endnote-347) If we give our desires free reign, it won’t be long before we find ourselves in thrall to them.

Seneca grouped our desires into two distinct categories; needs and extras. The former are basic and easily satisfied, food, shelter, clothing, etc. whereas the latter are just what their name suggests, unnecessary accoutrements; “The wants of the body are a bagatelle; it wishes cold kept off and food to quench hunger and thirst. If we crave extras it is vice we work for, not need.”[[375]](#endnote-348) Seneca even goes so far as to call effort in the service of these ‘extras’ as vice. To emphasise this he also adds; “That poverty is no disaster is understood by everyone who has not yet succumbed to the madness of greed and luxury which turns everything topsy-turvy. How little a man requires to maintain himself! And how can a man who has any merit at all fail to have that little?”[[376]](#endnote-349)

Another important point to make about desire is that it can never be sated, which means that one never comes to a place of peace and contentment. Instead one is always reaching, striving to fill a lack; “For greed nothing is enough; Nature is satisfied with little.”[[377]](#endnote-350) And even more emphatically; “For necessities even exile is sufficient, for superfluities not even kingdoms are. It is the mind which makes men rich…”[[378]](#endnote-351)

A prime reason for curtailing desire according to Seneca is that it will eliminate many of our fears. Most of our fears relate to the future; “this will happen”, “that won’t happen”, “he will do this”, “she will say that”; and are therefore necessarily wrapped up in our desires that the future will turn out one way rather than another. Freeing ourselves from desire also frees us from fear; “…curtailing desire serves as a specific against fears; “You will cease to fear,” says he [Hectaton], “if you cease to hope… Fear keeps pace with hope… each belongs to a mind in suspense, a mind hanging on what the future might bring.”[[379]](#endnote-352)

In one final point that reminds us again of Epictetus, Seneca likens those who are gripped by their desires to slaves; “Thatch protected free man; under marble and gold dwells slavery.”[[380]](#endnote-353) Giving in to our desires without subjecting them to some form of rational inspection first enslaves us to them.

*My Two Cents*

I agree with everything Seneca says regarding desires, for the same reasons as I endorsed Epictetus regarding the same subject.

Reflections on Life

There are probably three central insights Seneca makes concerning life that are of interest to us. First, he asserts that, “Life is long enough and our allotted portion generous enough for our most ambitious projects if we invest it all carefully. But when it is squandered through luxury and indifference, and spent for no good end, we realise it has gone… before we were aware it was going.”[[381]](#endnote-354)

Life is long enough for all we might want to do, Seneca says, but most of us waste the time we have. He says, ““Slight is the portion of live we live.” All the residue is not living but passing time.”[[382]](#endnote-355) From my readings of Seneca, I picked up five ways he thinks we squander our lives:

1. We give our time to other people; “Nobody on earth is willing to distribute his money, but everybody shares out his life, and to all comers.”[[383]](#endnote-356) This obviously doesn’t mean that time spent with friends is wasted, but rather that we probably spend too much time on other people. In Seneca’s day, this would have meant something slightly different but for us today, consider how much time you waste surfing through completely unimportant and trivial facebook posts about how an attractive friend of your friend fell over ice skating and hurt his/her ankle this morning or how a friend is on a bus now and reports feeling bored :(
2. We waste too much time on drink, lust, and glory. All of these Seneca considers unimportant but he was particularly disinclined towards the first two.
3. We also waste a lot of time indulging in unhelpful and destructive pursuits/emotions.
4. We squander too much time living in expectation of the future; “Expectancy is the greatest impediment to living: in anticipation of tomorrow it loses today.”[[384]](#endnote-357) Although the phrase ‘live in the now’ has become trite and clichéd, and in truth, been bastardised by the new age movement; there is still an important point to take away from it. Planning is useful but if you are always ‘waiting’ – waiting for that raise, or to meet that perfect partner, or until you buy that new car, etc. – then you will spend your whole life ‘waiting’.
5. We spend too much time on frivolous, meaningless things during our leisure time (Seneca mentions things like our hairstyle, sports, and possessions). We need some downtime but most of us spend a disproportionate amount of time on such empty pursuits.
6. Interestingly, Seneca includes in this list, time wasting acquiring useless knowledge. This is in keeping with the Stoic belief that useful knowledge is only that which is practical and concerned with our happiness (*eudaimonia*).

The second point it is important to include in this section is Seneca’s assertion that, “Living is not the good, but living well. The wise man therefore lives as long as he should, not as long as he can.”[[385]](#endnote-358) Seneca is making a distinction between ‘living’ and ‘existing’. The latter happens automatically but is no great achievement. The former requires effort but brings with it a sense of meaning to our lives. Emphasising this point, Seneca says, “You cannot, therefore, accept a hoary head and wrinkles as proof of a long life; the man has existed a long time, he has not lived a long time. Would you think a man had travelled a long voyage if he had been caught in a savage gale immediately on leaving port and had been buffeted to and fro by alternate blasts from opposite directions so that he was running circles in the same spot? That man has had not a long voyage but a long floundering.”[[386]](#endnote-359)

Finally, Seneca observes that a life well-spent or wasted is something we seldom realise while we are living it and have time to change it. Such a realisation typically only comes when our life is drawing to a close; “Only then [on their death beds] do they reflect how futile was their acquisition of things they would never enjoy, how vain was all their labour.”[[387]](#endnote-360) This passage is a call to awareness. We should ask ourselves the important questions while we are living, not when we have almost finished.

*My Two Cents*

I agree with Seneca that most of do waste too much of our lives on fruitless and meaningless endeavours, however I find myself a little conflicted here because I also lack the strict conception of the ‘good life’ that Seneca has. It is easy for Seneca (and the other Roman Stoics) to point to the cultivation of virtue as the ‘good life’ and therefore to point to anything else and condemn it as the opposite. For someone like me, who doesn’t share that strong and singular conception about what makes the ‘good life’ it isn’t quite so clear-cut as that. The problem for me is that I think, ultimately, everything we do is meaningless. Why should one action (reading Seneca, for example) have more value than another (getting drunk, for example)?

There are two ways to confirm the meaninglessness of our actions (lives). Look at the lives of other animals on earth. Does it matter what a lion does on the plains of the Serengeti? Do we think a lion ‘wastes’ its life if it does a particular thing or fails to do something else? Of course not. You might argue that a lion’s life (because it is just a lion) can’t mean anything and therefore can’t be wasted. But that’s exactly my point. At bottom, we are just animals too. If a lion’s life doesn’t mean anything, then neither does ours.

The objection is that we are different enough from other animals, by virtue of our intelligence, self-awareness, etc., for our lives to be measured to by different standards and in different ways. But I don’t think that is a strong enough case. We *are* different, that much is clear, but we are far more similar than we are different. If science has taught us anything, it is that humans are not as special as we used to believe.

But even if I give you that argument, there is another way of looking at this that renders our lives meaningless. In any conceivable future, the one thing that is nearly 100% certain is that the human race will be wiped out. Even if we don’t kill ourselves off or plunge ourselves into a second iron age through nuclear war or global warming, or suffer a major natural catastrophe that will have the same effect (such as an asteroid impact like the one that killed off the dinosaurs), the long-term prognosis is equally bleak. In about a billion years, as the sun ages and grows in size, the habitable zone will expand beyond Earth and our planet will become molten once more. If that wasn’t bad enough, in four billion years the Andromeda and Milky Way galaxies will collide stretching our resources once more. And even if we dodge every conceivable threat in those billions of years and somehow beat the odds to survive, the universe will eventually expand so much that the fabric of space-time will tear apart the bonds that hold molecules and even atoms together, reducing our universe to a lifeless, soup of subatomic particles. In the face of all this, what does it matter whether I have sex tonight or watch a documentary about Epictetus?

Your first reaction in reading the above paragraph was probably to scoff. The state of our universe millions of years from now is completely irrelevant to us and our lives here and now. That’s true, but the point of looking out to a time when the human race will become extinct is that it puts our individual lives into perspective. Whatever you are doing now will probably have no impact on anyone in just a month’s time, let alone a year, or ten years, and in a hundred years no one will even know you existed except a few great grandchildren who remember you as nothing more than a name in a family tree. Does it really matter what we do?

But without you and your actions, those great grandchildren wouldn’t even exist to remember your name in the family tree. True again, but the same thing can be said about them; their lives have no more meaning than yours does. It’s just one great big chain of meaninglessness.

To bring things back to my point at the beginning of this section, I feel that most people waste much of their time doing meaningless things… but *every* option open to them is meaningless in the end.

I think there is a resolution to be made here though. Not all meaningless acts are equally meaningless. While it is true that all of our lives are completely meaningless in the sense that there is no grand purpose or ultimate aim, they lack any ‘universal value’, we can still derive some ‘localised value’ from our lives by being happy, being kind to each other, and generally, doing things which, while meaningless, nevertheless serve to enrich our lives as much as possible.

From this point of view, we can see two things; 1) there has to be a certain amount of leeway regarding things that bring happiness; not everyone can find happiness in the same endeavour, but nevertheless 2) there are still many activities which are not conducive to happiness in any shape or form and a few others without which happiness is impossible to achieve (this essay has largely been about mining Roman Stoic philosophy for just these things).

For example, drinking oneself into a stupor every night, no matter how much you might *think* it makes you happy, clearly doesn’t. This is one activity that I can comfortably claim qualifies as a waste of time.

On the other hand, realising that suffering stems from desire and subsequently learning to constrain those desires is not only conducive to happiness but something without which, happiness is difficult, if not impossible, to attain. This is an activity that is a pre-requisite for the ‘good life’ as much as I said I don’t believe in such a thing.

I also fully endorse Seneca’s observation that it is foolishness of the highest sort to spend our whole lives feverishly doing things, achieving goals, making money, raising kids, and so on, and only at the end of those lives to stop and reflect on them. This is completely backwards and an almost fool-proof plan for disappointment.

Too many people don’t think about their lives like this, they have no interest in philosophy which, to me, is primarily about our lives and enriches the lived experience when that life is looked at through a philosophical lens[[388]](#footnote-28). It was Socrates who told us that the unexamined life is not worth living, but while everyone quotes this proverb with approval and nods sombrely for a second before heading out to the movies, no one is actually heeding it.

Time

Seneca had a somewhat unique perspective on time. He appeared to value the past over both the present and the future. We have already seen how Seneca devalues the future as something which primarily brings us anxiety and in any case is not real because it hasn’t happened yet, but he is also unimpressed with the present. “It is only with the present that busy men are concerned, and the present is so transitory that it cannot be grasped”[[389]](#endnote-361)

The present is of no value to us because it is too fleeting to have any substance. Only “busy” people are concerned with it because they are always rushing around trying to make the most of it. The present is the only time we have to actually accomplish anything, but this is not enough for Seneca to find value in it. Despite our being forever locked in the present, its existence is nothing more than a sliver between an eternal past and an eternal future. I think Seneca saw it as a too fleeting to be real; more like something forever *becoming*, but never *being*.

The past on the other hand; “…that is the part of our time which is hallowed and sacrosanct, above the reach of human vicissitudes and beyond the sway of Fortune, impregnable to the vexations of want and fear and the assaults of disease… its possession is everlasting and free from anxiety.”[[390]](#endnote-362) The past cannot be affected by humans nor can Fortune interfere with it anymore. Our memories of the past possess an untouchable, permanent kind of being we can call on at any time.

*My Two Cents*

I can see Seneca’s insistence here for why the past is special, but I just can’t agree with it. It is true that the past is immutable and exists permanently in our memories but I don’t think that this fact alone is enough to make it any better than the present.

Seneca seems to be labouring under the Parmenidean/Platonic conception that permanence and being (as opposed to transitoriness and becoming) are perfect. Plato saw in ‘change’ something imperfect and inferior and considering how the present is constantly changing, forever converting the future into the past, Seneca interprets this as being something inferior.

I don’t share that Platonic bias for permanence and as such, I don’t see the past as deserving of any special significance.

The Stoic Practice

The core of Stoic philosophy, particularly as approached by the three Roman philosophers discussed here, was wholly practical in nature. Any essay on the Roman Stoics that failed to include a section on *how* to implement the principles they taught would be so incomplete as to almost be construed as a misrepresentation of their philosophy.

The three philosopher’s approaches to the Stoic life were all very similar and they all had very similar recommendations to make. As such, this section won’t be divided by philosopher, but will rather be a compilation of practices and guidelines extracted from all three that attempt to realise that core goal of Stoicism, the moulding of the self into the Stoic sage. I also won’t be discussing or justifying any of what follows, the idea is to condense the Stoic philosophy of the ‘good life’ into a useful set of maxims/principles that you can mentally carry with you in life or incorporate into your daily life.

Habit

All of what follows turns on the importance of habit. I used to think that we couldn’t change who we fundamentally are (a consequence of my firm belief that we are physically determined in every aspect and what Schopenhauer calls the ‘intelligible character’ that lies beneath our ‘empirical character’ and is unchangeable) but I have since come to believe that we can change even our most deeply ingrained thought, inclinations, and prejudices through habit; after all, what are those initial thoughts, inclinations, and prejudices based on but prior habits and conditioning? We can allow our character to be shaped unconsciously or we can consciously shape it ourselves; but either way, it is being shaped.

Another important reason for setting up what we might call, Stoic habits in the mind is that they are a kind of preventative measure to fortify us against future upsetting events. When a harmful event occurs, the unprepared and untrained mind reacts automatically with self-destructive emotions and self-damaging thoughts. The prepared mind however, is able to meet such occurrences with Stoic calm and composure remaining happy and unaffected no matter what happens in life.

All of the advice that follows should be treated as a form of mental training. You are training your mind to truly and deeply *know*, not just understand, the Stoic principles I have outlined above because once the principles seep into your being they will allow you to respond to life as a Stoic and rise above the cares and concerns that afflict most people and attain the goal of becoming the Stoic sage.

Actions/Thoughts – Do’s and Don’ts

Do meditate each morning on one or more of these principles

Do examine every impression before reacting to it – does this affect your moral purpose or not?

Do question why you are upset – it is because you are valuing things outside your moral purpose

Do be wary of events which can throw you off balance

Do accept everything that happens

Do keep things in perspective – consider other people in worse situations; remember you won’t care about this in a day, a week, a month…; look at your life as if from a great height/distance

Do remember no one and nothing can harm you

Do remember the phrase “It’s nothing to me” and use it frequently

Do remember that you can’t control other people’s actions/opinions – “what are they to me?”

Do be resolute and firm in what you do

Do respond to unfortunate events the way you would respond if they happened to someone else

Do express gratitude for everything, good and bad, in your life

Do ask yourself, “What would Socrates do in this situation?”

Do constantly self-reflect and use other people’s behaviour as a chance for self-reflection

Do remind yourself of the worst case scenarios before any endeavour (including what might happen to you each day) so you won’t be surprised if they happen

Do be moderate in everything you do

Do remember everything you do is your choice

Do be quick to reconcile after a disagreement

Do always keep these doctrines ready to hand

Do regularly take a mental retreat and renew yourself with these doctrines

Do extinguish all desire

Do help others but don’t “join their folly”

Do treat animals kindly

Do *genuinely* love those whom you are surrounded by – we are all connected

Do be *genuinely* kind to others – we are all connected

Do remember you will die

Do imagine you are now dead – the rest of your life is a bonus

Do live each day as if it is you last – it may well be

Do remember that it is impossible for there to be no bad people/events in the world

Do remain a little detached from the world

Do allow time for recreation and relaxation

Do live simply

Don’t let other people’s opinions disturb you – what are their opinions to you?

Don’t blame or complain – accept life as it happens

Don’t get angry – remind yourself, “He thought that way about it”

Don’t harm others – for you are harming yourself

Don’t resent anything that happens

Don’t be carried away by extremes – always maintain a balance

Don’t gossip or make idle chatter

Don’t talk about yourself too much

Don’t use pretentious language

Don’t lie/dissimulate

Don’t expect anything in return for kindness

Don’t form attachments – Live as if everything is on loan and can be taken at any moment

Don’t worry about the past – it is finished and no more

Don’t worry about the future – you will deal with it when it comes

Don’t let your imagination run away with you

Don’t delay things – you may die tomorrow

Don’t take things to seriously

Principles to Keep in Mind/Meditate On

Desire and attachment cause suffering

We are all connected

You will die and this may happen anytime

Everything is temporary

The universe is change

Life is judgement

1. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (2.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., (3.16.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., (12.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., (10.38). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., (2.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., (10.38). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., (11.19). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Seneca, (CH.9). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Seneca, (L65). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., (L102). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (2.9.2-5/p261-263). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., (3.1.3-9/p7-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., (3.23.3-5/p171). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., (3.14.12-14/p99). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Seneca, (L76). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (8.19). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., (6.40). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., (2.16). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (1.26.6-7/p165). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., (2.26.1-7/p423-425). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., (1.28.1-9/p175-177). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., (1.18.4/p121). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (7.22). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., (2.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., (11.18.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., (2.13). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., (12.12). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (2.10.15-19/p273). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., (2.13.18-19/p295). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., (2.10.15-19/p273). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. We will look at both of these issues a little later. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
38. Ibid., (4.1.127/p287). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
39. This is incidentally something that a certain religion often makes an arrogant claim of ownership over. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
40. Ibid., (2.10.24-27/p275). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
41. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (8.55). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
42. Ibid., (9.4). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
43. Ibid., (7.22). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
44. Ibid., (2.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
45. Of course, that is not to say that we agree with their reasons or that their reasons are necessarily good ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
46. Depending on how you view morality. I don’t want to go into any detailed discussion about what is right and what is wrong just yet. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
47. I’m not sure just how ‘normal’ our rational decisions actually are. One could probably pretty easily make the case that it is much more normal for us to make irrational decisions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
48. Because they believed our rational directing minds were always in control. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
49. I suspect this happens more than we believe and I also think the brain is remarkably proficient at self-deception. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
50. Sometimes literally. In some cases people suffer mental breakdowns to avoid shattering beliefs or confronting uncomfortable truths. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
51. We will look at this later. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
52. We will discuss this in more detail later. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
53. Something we are delaying defining for the moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
54. Although the way she *reacts* would. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
55. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (11.20.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
56. Ibid., (9.28). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
57. Ibid., (12.30). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
58. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
59. Seneca, (OP.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
60. Bentham, Jeremy (1776). “A Fragment on Government” [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
61. Kant, Immanuel; translated by James W. Ellington [1785] (1993). *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals 3rd ed*. Hackett. p.30. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
62. The ‘good life’ for the Roman Stoic philosophers essentially meant tranquillity and freedom from fear, anxiety, and other such disturbing states. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
63. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (1.30.2-5/p201-203). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
64. Ibid., (2.23.9-11/p399). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
65. Ibid., (2.16.1-2/p313). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
66. Ibid., (2.1.4-5/p207-209). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
67. Ibid., (1.30.2-5/p201-203). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
68. Ibid., (2.19.13-14/p355). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
69. Ibid., (1.15.3/p105). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
70. Ibid., (1.1.22-24/p13). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
71. Ibid., (1.4.3/p29). [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
72. Ibid., (1.25.4/p155). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
73. Ibid., (1.17.25-26/p117). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
74. Ibid., (4.5.28-29/p343). [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
75. Ibid., (2.1.13/p211). [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
76. Ibid., (1.2.14-16/p19). [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
77. Ibid., (1.29.2-3/p183-185). [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
78. Ibid., (2.5.1-7/p233). [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
79. Ibid., (3.24.22-24/p191). [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
80. Ibid., (2.1.6-12/p209-211). [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
81. Ibid., (1.18.21/p125). [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
82. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (2.11.4). [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
83. Ibid., (5.19). [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
84. Ibid., (3.6.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
85. Ibid., (7.64). [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
86. Ibid., (6.32). [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
87. Ibid., (6.41). [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
88. Ibid., (4.3.4). [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
89. Ibid., (6.52). [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
90. Ibid., (4.7). [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
91. Ibid., (11.18.7). [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
92. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
93. Ibid., (12.22). [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
94. Ibid., (5.36). [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
95. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
96. Seneca, (L76). [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
97. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
98. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
99. Ibid., (CH.5). [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
100. Ibid., (OP.5). [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
101. Ibid., (OT.8). [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
102. Ibid., (OT.8-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
103. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
104. Ibid., (L18). [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
105. Ibid., (L92). [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
106. Nietzsche railed against ‘equality’ with the understanding that it meant ‘sameness’. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
107. By this I mean character traits that are relevant to our social relationships. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
108. It is also important to point out this doesn’t preclude me from saying that if someone breaks a law, they should be punished. We aren’t discussing morality from a political or state perspective here. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
109. Remember, this is different from my Golden Rule morality, which is necessarily outward-looking. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
110. Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, (33.2-16/p517-521) [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
111. Some schools of Buddhism and Christianity recommend this; although each for different reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
112. The Stoics always maintained virtue was no easy task. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
113. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (1.12.26/p95). [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
114. Ibid., (1.20.4-5/p135). [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
115. Ibid., (1.7.5/p51). [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
116. Ibid., (1.20.4-5/p135). [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
117. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (1.8.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
118. Ibid., (3.11.1-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
119. Ibid., (5.34). [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
120. Seneca, (L124) [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
121. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
122. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (4.1.46/p257-259). [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
123. Ibid., (3.24.17/p189-191). [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
124. Ibid., (2.5.9.10/p235). [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
125. Ibid., (3.22.2628/p139-141). [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
126. Ibid., (4.4.39-40/p327-329). [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
127. Ibid., (2.19.23-27/p357-359). [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
128. Seneca, (L92). [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
129. Ibid., (CH.5). [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
130. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
131. Seneca, (L124). [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
132. Seneca, (L92). [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
133. It is true that I am here granting more importance to the passions than the Stoics would but I will talk more about this later. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
134. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (1.9.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
135. Ibid., (3.4.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
136. Ibid., (12.19). [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
137. Ibid., (2.10). [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
138. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
139. Seneca, (CH.17). [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
140. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
141. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
142. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (7.55). [↑](#endnote-ref-122)
143. Ibid., (2.17.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-123)
144. Ibid., (11.18.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-124)
145. Ibid., (7.55). [↑](#endnote-ref-125)
146. This is actually very reminiscent of Plato’s version of justice as outlined in the Republic where justice turns out to be everyone in society keeping to their class and fulfilling the duties that are demanded from that class (Plato divides his Republic into three classes). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
147. Ibid., (9.1.1-5). [↑](#endnote-ref-126)
148. This would have been a direct reference to Epicurus and his hedonistic philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
149. Ibid., (8.7). [↑](#endnote-ref-127)
150. Ibid., (7.11). [↑](#endnote-ref-128)
151. Ibid., (8.26). [↑](#endnote-ref-129)
152. Ibid., (7.55). [↑](#endnote-ref-130)
153. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-131)
154. Ibid., (8.12). [↑](#endnote-ref-132)
155. Ibid., (8.7). [↑](#endnote-ref-133)
156. Ibid., (8.26). [↑](#endnote-ref-134)
157. Ibid., (9.42.4). [↑](#endnote-ref-135)
158. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (3.23.3-5/p171). [↑](#endnote-ref-136)
159. Ibid., (4.1.122/p287). [↑](#endnote-ref-137)
160. Ibid., (2.10.23/p275). [↑](#endnote-ref-138)
161. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-139)
162. Ibid., (4.1.126/p287). [↑](#endnote-ref-140)
163. Ibid., (2.8.23/p259). [↑](#endnote-ref-141)
164. Ibid., (2.11.3-5/p277). [↑](#endnote-ref-142)
165. Ibid., (1.19.11-15/p129-131). [↑](#endnote-ref-143)
166. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-144)
167. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-145)
168. Ibid., (2.22.15-16/p387). [↑](#endnote-ref-146)
169. Ibid., (2.22.18-20/p389). [↑](#endnote-ref-147)
170. Ibid., (4.5.30/p343). [↑](#endnote-ref-148)
171. Seneca, (L.5). [↑](#endnote-ref-149)
172. Ibid., (L.41). [↑](#endnote-ref-150)
173. Ibid., (L.124). [↑](#endnote-ref-151)
174. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-152)
175. Ibid., (CH.11). [↑](#endnote-ref-153)
176. Ibid., (L90). [↑](#endnote-ref-154)
177. Ibid., (OC.19). [↑](#endnote-ref-155)
178. Ibid., (L102). [↑](#endnote-ref-156)
179. Ibid., (OC.25). [↑](#endnote-ref-157)
180. Ibid., (L5). [↑](#endnote-ref-158)
181. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (4.3.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-159)
182. Ibid., (9.28). [↑](#endnote-ref-160)
183. Ibid., (12.14). [↑](#endnote-ref-161)
184. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-162)
185. Ibid., (4.45). [↑](#endnote-ref-163)
186. Ibid., (4.26). [↑](#endnote-ref-164)
187. Ibid., (10.5). [↑](#endnote-ref-165)
188. Ibid., (5.8.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-166)
189. Ibid., (6.36). [↑](#endnote-ref-167)
190. Ibid., (4.40). [↑](#endnote-ref-168)
191. Ibid., (9.31). [↑](#endnote-ref-169)
192. Ibid., (2.16). [↑](#endnote-ref-170)
193. Ibid., (12.23). [↑](#endnote-ref-171)
194. Ibid., (11.4). [↑](#endnote-ref-172)
195. Seneca, (CH.8). [↑](#endnote-ref-173)
196. Ibid., (OP.5). [↑](#endnote-ref-174)
197. Ibid., (L76). [↑](#endnote-ref-175)
198. Ibid., (OP.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-176)
199. If you don’t believe this you shouldn’t object too much to my removing your brain from your body to see if this affects your consciousness at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
200. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (5.27). [↑](#endnote-ref-177)
201. We have already seen how all-important reason is to the Stoics. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
202. Ibid., (8.40). [↑](#endnote-ref-178)
203. Ibid., (5.34). [↑](#endnote-ref-179)
204. Ibid., (7.16). [↑](#endnote-ref-180)
205. Ibid., (8.41). [↑](#endnote-ref-181)
206. Ibid., (8.48). [↑](#endnote-ref-182)
207. Ibid., (5.16). [↑](#endnote-ref-183)
208. Ibid., (5.34). [↑](#endnote-ref-184)
209. Ibid., (11.1.1-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-185)
210. Ibid., (5.11). [↑](#endnote-ref-186)
211. Ibid., (12.10). [↑](#endnote-ref-187)
212. Ibid., (11.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-188)
213. Ibid., (8.13). [↑](#endnote-ref-189)
214. Seneca, (L92). [↑](#endnote-ref-190)
215. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-191)
216. Ibid., (L76). [↑](#endnote-ref-192)
217. Ibid., (L102). [↑](#endnote-ref-193)
218. Ibid., (CH.11). [↑](#endnote-ref-194)
219. Ibid., (L89). [↑](#endnote-ref-195)
220. As dictated in a speech made by Pericles in the second year of the Peloponnesian War. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
221. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (1.14.4-5/p99). [↑](#endnote-ref-196)
222. Ibid., (2.5.25-26/p239-241). [↑](#endnote-ref-197)
223. Ibid., (2.10.4-6/p269). [↑](#endnote-ref-198)
224. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-199)
225. Seneca, (OC.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-200)
226. Ibid., (OT.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-201)
227. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-202)
228. Ibid., (L47). [↑](#endnote-ref-203)
229. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-204)
230. This is a principle many Westerners often mistakenly believe was unique to Jesus. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
231. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-205)
232. Ibid., (OT.7). [↑](#endnote-ref-206)
233. Ibid., (L7). [↑](#endnote-ref-207)
234. Seneca, (OT.17). [↑](#endnote-ref-208)
235. Ibid., (L18). [↑](#endnote-ref-209)
236. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-210)
237. Ibid., (L7). [↑](#endnote-ref-211)
238. Ibid., (OT.17). [↑](#endnote-ref-212)
239. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (2.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-213)
240. Ibid., (7.22). [↑](#endnote-ref-214)
241. Ibid., (3.4.4). [↑](#endnote-ref-215)
242. Ibid., (12.26). [↑](#endnote-ref-216)
243. Ibid., (8.56). [↑](#endnote-ref-217)
244. Ibid., (5.16). [↑](#endnote-ref-218)
245. Ibid., (9.23). [↑](#endnote-ref-219)
246. Ibid., (5.20). [↑](#endnote-ref-220)
247. Ibid., (7.31). [↑](#endnote-ref-221)
248. Ibid., (10.4). [↑](#endnote-ref-222)
249. Ibid., (8.59). [↑](#endnote-ref-223)
250. Ibid., (6.45). [↑](#endnote-ref-224)
251. Ibid., (6.48). [↑](#endnote-ref-225)
252. Ibid., (7.67). [↑](#endnote-ref-226)
253. Ibid., (8.56). [↑](#endnote-ref-227)
254. Ibid., (2.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-228)
255. Ibid., (5.10.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-229)
256. Ibid., (6.14). [↑](#endnote-ref-230)
257. Ibid., (7.55). [↑](#endnote-ref-231)
258. Ibid., (3.4.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-232)
259. Ibid., (9.27). [↑](#endnote-ref-233)
260. Ibid., (11.13). [↑](#endnote-ref-234)
261. Ibid., (2.11.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-235)
262. Ibid., (10.18). [↑](#endnote-ref-236)
263. Ibid., (4.48.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-237)
264. Ibid., (3.7). [↑](#endnote-ref-238)
265. Ibid., (3.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-239)
266. Ibid., (6.28). [↑](#endnote-ref-240)
267. Ibid., (8.58). [↑](#endnote-ref-241)
268. Ibid., (9.3.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-242)
269. Ibid., (8.20). [↑](#endnote-ref-243)
270. Ibid., (2.17.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-244)
271. Ibid., (4.50). [↑](#endnote-ref-245)
272. Ibid., (4.21.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-246)
273. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (1.1.32/p15). [↑](#endnote-ref-247)
274. Ibid., (2.1.17-18/p213). [↑](#endnote-ref-248)
275. Ibid., (3.5.5-8/p41). [↑](#endnote-ref-249)
276. Ibid., (2.6.11-15/p245). [↑](#endnote-ref-250)
277. Ibid., (4.7.15/p365). [↑](#endnote-ref-251)
278. Ibid., (3.24.94/p215). [↑](#endnote-ref-252)
279. Ibid., (3.13.14-15/p93). [↑](#endnote-ref-253)
280. Seneca, (OT.11). [↑](#endnote-ref-254)
281. Ibid., (OP.6). [↑](#endnote-ref-255)
282. Ibid., (L12). [↑](#endnote-ref-256)
283. Ibid., (L70). [↑](#endnote-ref-257)
284. Ibid., (L65). [↑](#endnote-ref-258)
285. Ibid., (L102). [↑](#endnote-ref-259)
286. Ibid., (L70). [↑](#endnote-ref-260)
287. Epictetus, Discourses, (1.9.16/p69) [↑](#endnote-ref-261)
288. Ibid., (2.1.19-20/p213) [↑](#endnote-ref-262)
289. Ibid., (3.13.10-11/p91). [↑](#endnote-ref-263)
290. Ibid., (1.29.35-36/p193). [↑](#endnote-ref-264)
291. Ibid., (2.17.34/p339). [↑](#endnote-ref-265)
292. Ibid., (3.21.1-5/p123-125). [↑](#endnote-ref-266)
293. Ibid., (4.5.37/p345). [↑](#endnote-ref-267)
294. Ibid., (3.10.6/p73). [↑](#endnote-ref-268)
295. Ibid., (2.17.1-8/p327-331). [↑](#endnote-ref-269)
296. Ibid., (3.24.103-107/p217-219). [↑](#endnote-ref-270)
297. Seneca, (L89). [↑](#endnote-ref-271)
298. Ibid., (L90). [↑](#endnote-ref-272)
299. Ibid., (L65). [↑](#endnote-ref-273)
300. Ibid., (L65). [↑](#endnote-ref-274)
301. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (1.17.9) [↑](#endnote-ref-275)
302. Ibid., (6.12). [↑](#endnote-ref-276)
303. Epictetus, Discourses, (1.16.15-16/p111). [↑](#endnote-ref-277)
304. Ibid., (2.8.10-11/p255). [↑](#endnote-ref-278)
305. Ibid., (2.8.2-3/p253). [↑](#endnote-ref-279)
306. Ibid., (1.14.10/p101-103). [↑](#endnote-ref-280)
307. Ibid., (3.13.15-16/p93). [↑](#endnote-ref-281)
308. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-282)
309. Ibid., (4.1.89/p275). [↑](#endnote-ref-283)
310. Ibid., (4.7.20/367). [↑](#endnote-ref-284)
311. Ibid., (2.14.25-27/p307). [↑](#endnote-ref-285)
312. Ibid., (1.6.30-33/p47). [↑](#endnote-ref-286)
313. Ibid., (1.12.16/p91-93). [↑](#endnote-ref-287)
314. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (4.31) [↑](#endnote-ref-288)
315. Ibid., (11.20.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-289)
316. Ibid., (6.23). [↑](#endnote-ref-290)
317. Ibid., (6.44.1-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-291)
318. Ibid., (12.28). [↑](#endnote-ref-292)
319. Ibid., (2.4). [↑](#endnote-ref-293)
320. Seneca, (L92). [↑](#endnote-ref-294)
321. Ibid., (L41). [↑](#endnote-ref-295)
322. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-296)
323. Ibid., (OP.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-297)
324. Ibid., (OP.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-298)
325. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-299)
326. Ibid., (OP.3). [↑](#endnote-ref-300)
327. Ibid., (OP.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-301)
328. Ibid., (OP.6). [↑](#endnote-ref-302)
329. Ibid., (OP.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-303)
330. Epictetus, *Discourses*, (1.12.8-15/p91). [↑](#endnote-ref-304)
331. Ibid., (2.2.25-26/p225). [↑](#endnote-ref-305)
332. Ibid., (4.1.77/p269). [↑](#endnote-ref-306)
333. Ibid., (4.1.174-176/p305). [↑](#endnote-ref-307)
334. Ibid., (2.1.24-25/p215). [↑](#endnote-ref-308)
335. Ibid., (4.1.52/p261). [↑](#endnote-ref-309)
336. Ibid., (1.12.8-15/p91). [↑](#endnote-ref-310)
337. Ibid., (2.17.17-18/p333). [↑](#endnote-ref-311)
338. Ibid., (1.12.17-18/p93). [↑](#endnote-ref-312)
339. Ibid., (4.4.33/p325). [↑](#endnote-ref-313)
340. Ibid., (1.17.24-25/p117). [↑](#endnote-ref-314)
341. Ibid., (3.9.21-22/p71). [↑](#endnote-ref-315)
342. Ibid., (3.12.13/p85). [↑](#endnote-ref-316)
343. This has obvious parallels with Aristotle’s theory of virtue which states that the virtuous agent acts in the right way, at the right time, with respect to the right people, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
344. Ibid., (3.2.4/p23). [↑](#endnote-ref-317)
345. Ibid., (1.17.23-24/p117). [↑](#endnote-ref-318)
346. Ibid., (1.4.11-12/p31). [↑](#endnote-ref-319)
347. Ibid., (1.20.7-8/p135). [↑](#endnote-ref-320)
348. Ibid., (3.2.5/p23). [↑](#endnote-ref-321)
349. Ibid., (3.22.42/p147). [↑](#endnote-ref-322)
350. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (4.48.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-323)
351. Ibid., (5.24). [↑](#endnote-ref-324)
352. Ibid., (10.17). [↑](#endnote-ref-325)
353. Ibid., (11.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-326)
354. Ibid., (9.28). [↑](#endnote-ref-327)
355. Ibid., (8.24). [↑](#endnote-ref-328)
356. Ibid., (4.36). [↑](#endnote-ref-329)
357. Ibid., (5.10.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-330)
358. Ibid., (4.35). [↑](#endnote-ref-331)
359. Ibid., (6.47). [↑](#endnote-ref-332)
360. Ibid., (6.30.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-333)
361. Ibid., (10.34). [↑](#endnote-ref-334)
362. Ibid., (7.18). [↑](#endnote-ref-335)
363. Ibid., (6.32). [↑](#endnote-ref-336)
364. Ibid., (6.32). [↑](#endnote-ref-337)
365. Ibid., (7.49). [↑](#endnote-ref-338)
366. Ibid., (10.27). [↑](#endnote-ref-339)
367. Ibid., (7.61). [↑](#endnote-ref-340)
368. Ibid., (5.10.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-341)
369. Ibid., (4.49.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-342)
370. Seneca, (CH.5). [↑](#endnote-ref-343)
371. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-344)
372. Ibid., (OT.8). [↑](#endnote-ref-345)
373. Ibid., (OT.10). [↑](#endnote-ref-346)
374. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-347)
375. Ibid., (CH.10). [↑](#endnote-ref-348)
376. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-349)
377. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-350)
378. Ibid., (CH.11). [↑](#endnote-ref-351)
379. Ibid., (L5). [↑](#endnote-ref-352)
380. Ibid., (L90). [↑](#endnote-ref-353)
381. Ibid., (SL.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-354)
382. Ibid., (SL.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-355)
383. Ibid., (SL.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-356)
384. Ibid., (SL.9). [↑](#endnote-ref-357)
385. Ibid., (L70). [↑](#endnote-ref-358)
386. Ibid., (SL.7). [↑](#endnote-ref-359)
387. Ibid., (SL.11). [↑](#endnote-ref-360)
388. I am not saying everyone should be a professional philosopher. What I am saying is that philosophy is the only subject that approaches life from the inside, as it were; that puts the human being at the centre and looks out from the first person perspective; it is the only one that asks questions that matter and then prompts us to think about the answers. Philosophy *is* reflection and specifically, a reflection on the human life. Anybody who has ever asked why they are here or what happiness is, is doing philosophy. So while we don’t all need to major in philosophy at university, it is a subject that I think should feature more prominently in society and basic education because while studying business or IT might make you a lot of money and studying one of the sciences could win you fame and a spot at the forefront of innovation/discovery, none of these things will make you happy or teach you what happiness is. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
389. Ibid., (SL.10). [↑](#endnote-ref-361)
390. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-362)