



STOICISM AND MENTAL HEALTH

Priscilla S. Synn

Los Angeles, CA, USA

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Stoicism presents a philosophical approach centered on attaining inner peace and leading a virtuous life. This philosophy is organized into three main pillars: logic (logos), physics, and ethics. Logos refers to the rational force governing the universe, often associated with a god-like presence. Physics involves comprehending logos and the universe's workings. Stoic ethics delineate the framework for how individuals should shape their lives (Einzelgänger, 2020).

A key facet of Stoicism involves adopting stoic attitudes to attain happiness. This philosophy serves as a guide, influencing people's perspectives on how they should navigate life's journey. It is a practical philosophy meant for everyday application, mainly to bolster human emotions in the face of challenges. In this context, Stoicism enhances mental well-being by fostering virtues and a sense of purpose in life, fostering healthy emotional regulation, and promoting detachment from specific outcomes.

Background

Stoicism began with Zeno of modern-day Cyprus, who established a philosophical school around 300 BCE in Athens. His exposure to Plato's Academy shaped Zeno's ideas and was infused with the wisdom of Socrates, a prominent Athenian philosopher. The term "Stoicism" is derived from the Stoa Poikile, a public space where Zeno used to engage in discussions and lectures with his followers.

Following Zeno's passing, Cleanthes, one of Zeno's dedicated students, assumed the role of the second leader of the Stoic school after nearly two decades of learning under Zeno's guidance. After Cleanthes, the leadership was taken up by Chrysisippus, who steered the Stoa's direction from 230 to 206 BCE. Within the realm of Stoic philosophy and the broader context of the Hellenistic era, Chrysisippus is renowned as one of the most influential Stoic thinkers (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.).

Chrysisippus' teachings laid the groundwork for the "Old Stoa" to transition into what is known as the "Middle Stoa." During the mid-2nd century BCE, one of Chrysisippus' pupils, Diogenes of Babylon, assumed a prominent role, marking a new phase in the evolution of Stoicism.

Popularization of Stoicism

Stoicism saw its heyday during the Roman Period, particularly as early as the 2nd century CE. A key figure in

popularizing Stoic ideas was Cicero, the powerful Roman statesman, who championed these concepts through his philosophical writings. In his treatise "On Proper Functions" (*De Officiis*), Cicero delved extensively into Stoic theories. Despite his deep engagement with Stoicism, it is worth noting that Cicero did not personally identify as a Stoic.

During this time, other Stoic thinkers gained prominence and contributed to the widespread acceptance of Stoic philosophy. Figures like Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius played significant roles in advancing Stoic doctrines in the Roman context. A notable personality was Diogenes of Babylon, whose public presentations captivated the Roman populace.

However, the increasing popularity of philosophers like these triggered concerns among high-ranking politicians and elites about their potential impact on governance, leading to tensions. In 93 CE, Emperor

Domitian expelled Epictetus from Rome and other philosophers, fearing their influence. Fortunately, Arrian, a student of Epictetus, diligently preserved his teachings for posterity.

Marcus Aurelius, who reigned as the Roman emperor from 161 to 180 CE, stood out as a practicing Stoic philosopher. His strong dedication to Stoic principles marked a departure from the attitudes of previous emperors. Aurelius not only embraced Stoic practices himself but also encouraged others to turn to Stoicism for guidance. Epictetus and Marcus propagated that Stoicism could transform individuals regardless of societal circumstances, enabling them to lead more tranquility.

In his work "Meditations," Marcus Aurelius emphasized fundamental Stoic tenets. These included recognizing oneself as a small component of the vast universe and comprehending one's place within the rational structure of cause and effect, guided by an overarching

force known as "logos" (Study.com, n.d.). According to the Stoics, we aim to perceive events and changes around us. Marcus believed the universe operates in harmony, with the human soul integral to its divine intelligence. As he eloquently expressed in "Meditations, "And among the things you turn to, That things have no hold on the soul. They stand there unmoving, outside it. Disturbance comes only from within — from our perceptions" (Study.com, n.d., paras. 6).

Developing Virtues and Purpose in Life

The age-old query, "What is the meaning of life?" has captivated countless minds throughout history. Some dedicate their lives to seeking answers, while others choose not to. The diversity of experiences that people undergo shapes their perspectives and behaviors, leading to a lack of a single definitive answer. In the eyes of the Stoics, however, the path to a fulfilling life, known as eudaimonia, is illuminated by four cardinal virtues: temperance,

courage, justice, and wisdom. These virtues serve as guiding principles for navigating one's relationship with oneself, others, and the natural world. They form the bedrock of Stoicism, imbuing it with purpose and coherence.

Temperance, often referred to as self-discipline, proves to be particularly challenging to practice in today's society. The concept of the "golden mean," put forth by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, advocates for striking a balance between excess and deficiency. For Stoics, temperance resides in the middle ground between self-indulgence and insensitivity. They believed excessive desires lead to dissatisfaction and discomfort, deeming them counterproductive (Daily Stoic, 2020). In the lexicon of the Daily Stoics, these tendencies are labeled as "self-defeating impulses." Epictetus suggests that temperance involves restraining oneself from succumbing to such impulses. Seneca, on the other hand, characterizes

temperance as recognizing the true essence of importance and sufficiency. Stoic temperance entails moderating impulses, refraining from mistaking fleeting pleasures for genuine happiness and avoiding yielding to transient pain.

Changing habits is an arduous endeavor, necessitating time and incremental progress. Whether it is the overindulgence in food, entertainment, or other pleasures, practicing temperance liberates one from the burden of guilt, regret, worry, stress, and anxiety that overconsumption begets. Resisting temptations assumes the role of safeguarding inner tranquility. This resilience against life's challenges curbs impulsive behavior, fostering mindfulness in choices such as maintaining a balanced diet and engaging in regular exercise.

The second cardinal virtue, courage, is about confronting life's trials not without fear but despite it. It entails the understanding that fear should not dictate one's actions. Seneca, who advised Emperor Nero, provides a

poignant example. Initially a trusted advisor, Seneca's relationship with Nero deteriorated over time. When a paranoid Nero ordered Seneca to commit suicide, Seneca faced a critical decision. Despite the options of escape or pleading for his life, Seneca's final words, "Nero can kill me, but he cannot harm me," epitomized his profound courage in confronting not just adversity but death itself (Daily Stoics, 2020, paras. 13). While Seneca surely experienced fear, he did not let it dictate his choices. This extreme case underscores the notion that courage empowers individuals to handle difficulties while upholding their principles.

Of the four virtues, Aurelius and Cicero assert that justice is their foundation. Stoic justice transcends contemporary legal concepts, embodying a broader understanding of our responsibilities as social beings. Practicing Stoic justice entails virtuous behavior towards others. Musonius Rufus, the teacher of Epictetus,

encapsulates this as honoring equality, pursuing goodness, and refraining from harming fellow humans. This principle, which cultivates fairness and empathy, finds expression in the Stoic notion of "Sympatheia," which underscores the interconnectedness of all humans. This perspective infuses our societal role with purpose. Embracing justice fosters meaningful connections and a positive impact on the community.

The fourth cardinal virtue, wisdom, embodies the knowledge of discerning between good and evil and recognizing what is indifferent. Wisdom involves assimilating external observations to shape higher-level responses. It is a core tenet that underscores the crucial moment between stimulus and response, where wisdom resides. In this gap lies the capacity to draw from previous experiences and apply reason, avoiding impulsive reactions. It is akin to the adage, "Think before you speak."

Wisdom informs deliberate decisions, propelling personal growth and uncovering deeper layers of meaning.

Collectively, these four virtues form the scaffolding of Stoicism, endowing life with a sense of purpose.

Nevertheless, the human mind is intricate, navigating a complex landscape of abstract thoughts and emotions beyond Stoic foundations. Thus, Stoics have developed techniques and principles that directly manage the vast array of thoughts and feelings we experience.

Developing Healthy Emotional Regulations

Altering one's emotional responses to external circumstances stems not from changing the external triggers but from adjusting one's perception and subsequent reaction. By regulating emotions before taking action, it is possible to influence the extent to which anxiety, stress, and anger are embraced.

In his work "Meditations," Marcus Aurelius delves into logos and its connection to our consciousness or what

we commonly refer to as our core. We are constantly engaged with material aspects and our surroundings throughout our lives. Amid these interactions, we absorb countless impressions that continuously flow through our minds. These impressions result in "Phantasia," which serves as a mental note giving rise to our perceptions or hypotheses. We then shape judgments based on our moral framework of what is categorized as "good" or "bad," even though these value judgments may not truly fit into either category (Aurelius, n.d., paras. 40-41).

For instance, imagine your professor assigns you multiple essays and projects due within the upcoming week, and you still need to start. In simpler terms, the external input here is the looming deadline brought about by your experiences. However, your interpretation of this impression, coupled with the realization that you have not begun, leads you to conclude that you are experiencing stress and anxiety. According to *Meditations* (n.d., paras.

40-41), this interpretation is not merely based on the initial impression; it is an outcome of your perception. Stress represents a mental and physical reaction to external stimuli as perceived by our senses. The deadline is a potential trigger for stress, but it is not directly causing the stress. Nor do you possess the ability to alter the set deadline. Your stress originates from your perception of the situation, as you stress over an external stimulus.

Nevertheless, you are not compelled to accept this state of mind. You possess the agency to alter your perception and control what you can manage in the present moment. In this context, this could involve creating a well-structured schedule leading up to the deadline. Regardless of external stimuli, our responses are our responsibility, not contingent upon anyone else.

Thus, when confronting challenging external factors, allowing emotions such as anger, despair, and anxiety to harm ourselves or others proves

counterproductive. It is vital to realize that how we view things can significantly impact our well-being.

Once we grasp the concept of logos and its place in the timeline of events, we can find solace in believing that things will ultimately unfold positively. By acknowledging what lies within our sphere of control, we can shed unnecessary emotions and focus on taking action in the present. While stress is an inevitable part of life, it can manifest in various forms. However, embracing everything beyond our control and choosing to move forward, directing our focus inward, can fundamentally alter our perception of the world.

Art of Detachment

To gain a deeper grasp of what falls within our sphere of influence and what lies beyond it, Stoics have employed the practice known as the Art of Detachment, which dates back to the 3rd century. This practice is a tool for cultivating emotional stability and resilience, especially

in life's unpredictable challenges. Frequently, we assign excessive significance to momentary setbacks, leading to profound disappointment.

A common misconception tied to the Stoic concept of detachment is that it advocates for indifference and suppression of emotions. However, rather than advocating for completely removing oneself from a situation, Stoic detachment encourages individuals to release their attachments to outcomes and embrace the unexpected. A crucial element in this practice is the concept of "Amor Fati," which translates to "love of fate." Embracing Amor Fati entails welcoming all the highs and lows of life without viewing life as an unending sequence of predicaments. Think of Amor Fati as a pair of lenses that allow you to perceive each challenge as a disguised lesson, one that invariably contributes to your personal growth. When you adopt a stance of loving your fate, you transform obstacles into opportunities for self-improvement.

As you detach yourself from rigid expectations, you forge a steadfast connection with the universe. By doing so, you cultivate a composed demeanor and bolster your ability to navigate life's trials. You liberate yourself from the clutches of anxiety, fear, and stress, liberating yourself from their chains. Embracing this "neutral mindset," you extricate yourself from unforeseen circumstances and relinquish the compulsion to demand more from people or situations. This, in turn, grants you the capacity to make reasoned decisions rooted in an observant understanding of your emotions.

Regardless of external circumstances, detachment safeguards your inner serenity and empowers you to maintain control over your thoughts. Through this practice, you can align your actions with your values and maintain emotional equilibrium amid life's ebb and flow.

Modern Stoicism

The lives of Stoic philosophers contrast with our contemporary experiences. Today, our lives are shaped by technological advancements and the deluge of information we encounter daily. Although issues like war, disease, famine, and slavery, which once loomed large in ancient times, have receded in prominence, humanity still grapples with the shared task of navigating emotions and upholding values in the face of inevitable trials. Despite the evolving challenges across different eras, the human inclination to devise strategies for tackling obstacles remains constant. This is why applying Stoic practices remains as pertinent and beneficial now as it was two millennia ago.

Stoicism traditionally emphasized the cultivation of wisdom, urging individuals to make thoughtful choices and comprehend the process of taking action to acquire knowledge. These teachings are encapsulated in methods like journaling, meditation, and even Cognitive Behavioral

Therapy (CBT). These contemporary tools serve to visualize one's thoughts, emotions, and feelings while also facilitating the observation of personal reactions to external circumstances. Such practices work in tandem to alleviate stress and foster inner tranquility, addressing the demands of our modern lives.

Conclusion

Delving into the realm of the four Stoic cardinal virtues, discerning the boundaries of our control, and mastering the Art of Detachment can significantly enhance mental well-being. These cardinal virtues provide insight into life's purpose and offer a universal framework that others can relate to. As one gains a firm understanding of their sphere of influence, they liberate themselves from the burdens previously imposed by circumstances beyond their reach.

By disentangling oneself from external influences and internal emotions, a pathway emerges to perceive life

beyond isolated instances. This shift in perspective encourages individuals to move beyond past struggles, opening up the possibility of embracing the concept of Amor Fati. Everyone encounters challenges; whether a life marked by privilege or adversity, each person's hardships are deeply personal and should not be weighed against others. Every individual's struggles are valid, and it is innate to human nature to react to these difficulties with emotions like anger, sadness, guilt, regret, fear, or jealousy. However, it is equally crucial to recognize the importance of managing these emotions through healthier channels. Stoicism, as a philosophy, offers a toolkit of practices aimed at enhancing the quality of life. These practices empower individuals to navigate their emotions more effectively, ultimately contributing to improved mental well-being.

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