

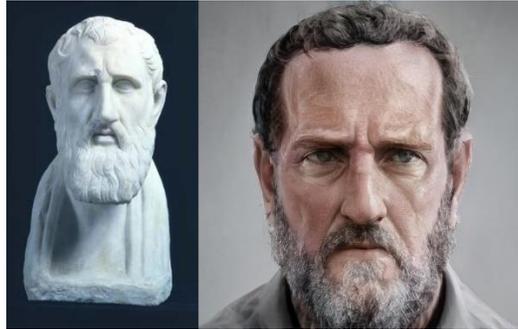
Stoicism and the Stoic Way of Life

by: Giovanni Vines

Stoicism is a philosophical system with roots in the ancient world. It is a practical school, and for that reason, its underlying principles are timeless. In spite of its ancient origins, stoicism is experiencing a resurgence of interest in the twenty-first century.

Its earliest proponents were Greek philosophers who met with their eager young disciples out in the open air, under the porticos of the Agora in Athens, where they shared their thoughts about life, reality, responsibility, and morality. The porticos of the Agora were known as 'stoa'; hence the name stoic.

The revered philosopher, Zeno of Citium, is credited with officially founding the Stoic school in Athens around 300 BCE. But stoicism, as a living philosophical system, predates Zeno's Athenian school. Many scholars view Socrates as the archetype of stoicism, in terms of the ideas he held and as a living embodiment to those ideas. It was, in fact, the teachings of Socrates that initially inspired Zeno to pursue the study of philosophy.



Zeno of Citium

Stoicism has left an indelible impression on the psyche of humanity since its official inauguration in 300 BCE. Stoic ideas and teachers of stoicism were prevalent throughout both the Greek and Roman empires for six centuries. Stoic viewpoints were widely held by many teachers and thinkers throughout this period, and were a feature of general contemporary thought. Stoicism is one of five major classical schools of philosophy that flourished in Greece and Rome during this period; the other four being Platonist, Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Skeptic.

Today, the study of stoicism affords the student of philosophy two opportunities.

1. the opportunity to explore an ancient, practical way of looking at the world and ourselves which is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago
2. the opportunity of exploring the nature of philosophy itself

Stoicism is the art of living a virtuous, ethical life. The road to happiness, for a Stoic, is paved with virtue. It is a system of living in harmony with the natural world and the world's inhabitants.

Happiness, however, is not directly associated with pleasure. Pleasure is acceptable, only if it doesn't interfere with the quest for virtue. Virtue, therefore, should be sought out of a sense of duty, as opposed to pleasure. The four primary stoic virtues are wisdom, morality, courage, and moderation.

While a stoic's ideas and viewpoints are considered relevant, how he lives his life is the primary means by which he expresses his personal philosophy. In the Apology, for example, it is clear that Socrates' main concern was not with argument, but rather with life itself. Socrates was primarily concerned with examining his own life and the lives of others.

Stoicism, therefore, is not a collection of intellectual viewpoints and positions. It is instead, a way of life. The events of our life are indelibly tied to our behavior; tied to what we do and say. Even though there are preferences to what we experience in life – wealth over poverty, health over illness, education over ignorance – the virtuous man accepts them equally and dispassionately. Viewing the events of one's life in terms of good and evil are incongruous to the stoic viewpoint.

The 'Serenity Prayer', attributed to the Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), is right out of the stoic's playbook.

"God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

How we ultimately live our lives is, therefore, the essential component of stoicism. However, how we live our lives is informed by various factors, including the application of logic and reason. The universe is rational and governed by reason. Humans must, therefore, make deliberate choices based on this knowledge. The acquisition of understanding is developed, therefore, not simply for understanding's sake, but as a tool for transforming one's life, making human life of central importance to philosophy.

Logic, for a stoic, means the pursuit of understanding and the quest for truth. This pursuit includes what we today would refer to as psychology and self-awareness. The ancient Greek aphorism, "Man Know Thyself, and You Will Know the Universe and the Gods", was a cornerstone of ancient stoic thinking.

Our life must also be guided by the study and understanding of the natural world and its underlying, immutable laws. This study includes pursuits such as metaphysics, astronomy, and cosmology.

The Nature of Philosophy

Philosophers, both ancient and modern, have long debated whether or not stoicism is actually a school of philosophy at all. The German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, viewed philosophy in more cognitive terms. He saw it as a purely abstract system; a universal, timeless pursuit of truth through thought. Hegel believed that the study of ethics would have little or no impact on how someone conducted their life. For example, he believed that by studying human emotion, little if any therapeutic value could be derived.

Aristotle agreed with Hegel. Aristotle wrote that he doubted Socrates' assertion that knowledge of a thing could impact a person's behavior toward that thing. English philosopher, Bernard Williams, held that philosophy is most accurately understood as a rigorous argument.

But there are others who have embraced the 'art of living' model of philosophy. The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, has stated that while there is value to a philosopher's writings, philosophy is primarily expressed in an individual's behavior. A philosopher's real value is associated with how he goes about teaching and setting an example. He stated;

"A philosopher is an artist, and his life is his work of art."

French philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze have echoed the same viewpoint, stating that practical philosophy is a mode of living or way of life in which philosophy and life are united.

In the ancient world, a person's philosophical label informed others that he lived his life in a specific manner, more so than the fact that he held a particular ideological outlook. The Greek philosopher, Epictetus, stated;

“Just as wood is the material of the carpenter, bronze that of the statuary, so each individual's own life is the material of the art of living. Genuine philosophical understanding will always be expressed in one's actions.”

Some believe that this makes the art of living philosophy (stoicism) indistinguishable from some religious ways of life. However, the two are diametrically different with respect to how they pursue knowledge. Religion seeks understanding through mystical insight, blind faith, and beliefs based partly on myth. Philosophy seeks knowledge through rational understanding, analysis, and argument.

While stoicism was born in ancient Greece, it was enthusiastically imported and embraced by great Roman thinkers, including the emperor Marcus Aurelius, who became the last great stoic philosopher of the ancient world.

Eventually, Rome, by way of the emperor Constantine, would adopt Christianity. Institutional Christianity would adopt many stoic principles, but it would eventually cause the undoing of most previous ancient world schools of thought, both mythological and philosophical.

Bibliography

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