Stoicism and the Art of Happiness

Ancient Stoic Philosophy and Modern Psychological Therapy

Introduction to Stoicism: The Three Disciplines

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An Introduction to Stoic Practice: The Three Disciplines of Stoicism

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From its origin Stoicism placed considerable emphasis on the division of philosophical discourse into three topics called “Ethics”, “Physics” and “Logic”. Philosophy itself was unified but theoretical discussions could be broadly distinguished in this way and the Stoics were particularly known for their threefold curriculum. Epictetus is the only Stoic teacher whose work survives in significant amounts, we have four volumes of his *Discourses*, recorded from his public lectures by his student Arrian, although another four volumes have apparently been lost. We also have a condensed version of his teachings compiled in the famous Stoic “Handbook” or *Enchiridion*. Although Epictetus lived about four centuries after Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, and by his time the formal institution of the Stoic school had apparently ceased to exist, he appears to have been particularly faithful to the early teachings of the school’s main founders: Zeno and Chrysippus.

However, Epictetus also describes a threefold division between aspects of lived philosophical practice, which scholars can find no trace of in previous Stoic literature. (Hence, another famous Roman Stoic, Seneca, won’t come into this discussion because he basically lived before Epictetus and never mentioned these three disciplines.)
1. “The Discipline of Desire”, which has to do with acceptance of our fate
2. “The Discipline of Action”, which has to do with philanthropy or love of mankind
3. “The Discipline of Assent”, which has to do with mindfulness of our judgements

The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic best-known to modern readers, was taught by philosophers who possibly studied with Epictetus, although he never met him himself. One of Marcus’ teachers gave him a copy of notes from Epictetus’ lectures, almost certainly the Discourses recorded by Arrian. Indeed, Marcus refers to the teachings of Epictetus repeatedly throughout The Meditations and it’s clear that he’s primarily influenced by this particular form of Stoicism. He also makes extensive use of the Three Disciplines described in the Discourses, which provide one of the main “keys” to interpreting his own writings.

So how are we to interpret these Stoic practical disciplines? The French scholar Pierre Hadot wrote a very thorough analysis of Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations called The Inner Citadel (1998), in which he explores the Three Disciplines in detail, employing them as a framework for his exposition. If we follow Hadot’s interpretation, it actually provides a fairly clear and simple model for understanding the teachings of Stoicism. The way of Stoic philosophy was traditionally described as “living according to nature” or “living harmoniously” and Hadot suggests that all three disciplines are intended to help us live in harmony in different regards, and that they combine together to provide the secret to a serene and harmonious way of life, practical philosophy as the art of living wisely.

1. The Discipline of Desire (Stoic Acceptance)

According to Hadot, the discipline of “desire” (orexis) is the application to daily living of the Stoic theoretical topic of “physics”, which in-
includes the Stoic study of natural philosophy, cosmology, and theology. The discipline of desire, according to this view, is the virtue of living in harmony with the Nature of the universe as a whole, or in the language of Stoic theology, with Zeus or God. This entails having a “philosophical attitude” toward a life and acceptance of our Fate as necessary and inevitable. It’s tempting to see this discipline as particularly entailing the cardinal virtues associated with self-control over the irrational passions, which are “courage”, or endurance in the face of fear and suffering, and “self-discipline” (temperance), or the ability to renounce desire and abstain from false or unhealthy pleasures. (Hence, Epictetus’ famous slogan: “endure and renounce.”) Hadot calls the goal of this discipline “amor fati” or the loving acceptance of one’s fate. This discipline is summed up in one of the most striking passages from the Enchiridion: “Seek not for events to happen as you wish but wish events to happen as they do and your life will go smoothly and serenely.” But Stoics are not “doormats”. The Stoic hero Cato of Utica famously marched the shattered remnants of the Republican army through the deserts of Africa to make a desperate last stand against the tyrant Julius Caesar, who sought to overthrow the Republic and declare himself dictator of Rome. Although he lost the civil war, he became a Roman legend and the Stoics dubbed him “the invincible Cato” because his will was completely unconquered – he tore his own guts out with his bare hands rather than submit to Caesar and be exploited by the dictator for his propaganda. Centuries later, the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius, despite a devastating plague and countless misfortunes beyond his control, led his weakened army repeatedly into battle to defend Rome against invading barbarian hordes. He prevailed despite the many obstacles to victory. If he’d failed, Rome would have been destroyed. As we’ll see, the discipline of action explains this strange paradox: how can the Stoics combine acceptance with such famous endurance and courageous action in the name of justice? I’ve described this
discipline simply as “Stoic Acceptance”, meaning *amor fati*.

### 2. The Discipline of Action (Stoic Philanthropy)

According to Hadot, the discipline of “action” (*hormê*, which really means the inception or initial “impulse” to action) is the application to daily living of the Stoic theoretical topic of “ethics”. Stoic “ethics” which includes the definition of what is good, bad, and indifferent. It also deals with the goal of life as “happiness” or fulfilment (*eudaimonia*). It includes the definition of the cardinal Stoic virtues (wisdom, justice, courage, and self-discipline). According to the central doctrine of Stoicism, virtue is the only true good and sufficient by itself for the good life and fulfilment (*eudaimonia*). Likewise, Stoic ethics covers the vices, opposing virtue, and the irrational and unhealthy “passions”, classified as: fear, craving, emotional pain, and false or unhealthy pleasures. The discipline of action, according to Hadot’s view, is the essentially virtue of living in harmony with the community of all mankind, which means benevolutely wishing all of mankind to flourish and achieve “happiness” (*eudaimonia*) the goal of life. However, as other people’s wellbeing is outside of our direct control, we must always wish them well in accord with the Stoic “reserve clause” (*hupexairesis*), which basically means adding the caveat: “Fate permitting” or “God willing.” (This is one way in which the philosophical attitude toward life reconciles vigorous action with emotional acceptance.) In other words, Stoics do their best to act with virtue while accepting the outcome of their actions in a somewhat detached manner, whether success or failure. Moreover, Stoics must act according to their rational appraisal of which external outcomes are naturally to be preferred. Hence, Marcus Aurelius appears to refer to three clauses that Stoics should be continually mindful to attach to all of their actions:
1. That they are undertaken “with a reserve clause” (hupexairesis)
2. That they are “for the common welfare” of mankind (koinônikai)
3. That they “accord with value” (kat' axian)

It’s tempting to see this discipline as particularly associated with the cardinal virtue of “justice”, which the Stoics defined as including both fairness to others and benevolence. Hadot calls this discipline “action in the service of mankind”, because it involves extending the same natural affection or care that we are born feeling for our own body and physical wellbeing to include the physical and mental wellbeing of all mankind, through a process known as “appropriation” (oikeiosis) or widening the circle of our natural “self-love” to include all mankind. I’ve described this as “Stoic Philanthropy”, or love of mankind, a term they employed themselves.

3. The Discipline of Assent (Stoic Mindfulness)

According to Hadot, the discipline of “assent” (sunkatathesis) is the application to daily living of the Stoic theoretical topic of “logic”. Stoic “logic” actually includes elements of what we would now call “psychology” or “epistemology”. The discipline of assent, according to this view, is the virtue of living in harmony with our own essential nature as rational beings, which means living in accord with reason and truthfulness in both our thoughts and speech. It’s tempting to see this discipline as particularly associated with the cardinal Stoic virtue of “wisdom” or truthfulness. Hadot calls the goal of this discipline the “inner citadel” because it involves continual awareness of the true self, the faculty of the mind responsible for judgement and action, where our freedom and virtue reside, the chief good in life. According to Hadot’s analysis, although the Stoics refer to “judgement” in general (hypolêpsis), they’re primarily interested in monitoring and evaluating their own implicit value-judgements. These form
the basis of our actions, desires, and emotions, especially the irrational passions and vices which the Stoics sought to overcome. By continually monitoring their judgements, Stoics are to notice the early-warning signs of upsetting or unhealthy impressions and take a step back from them, withholding their “assent” or agreement, rather than being “carried away” into irrational and unhealthy passions and the vices. The Stoics call this prosochê or “attention” to the ruling faculty of the mind, to our judgements and actions. I’ve described this as “Stoic Mindfulness”, a term that can be taken to translate prosochê.

The Goal of Life (Follow Nature)

As you can probably see, these three disciplines overlap considerably and are intertwined, just like the three traditional topics of Stoic philosophy, which Hadot claims they’re based upon: Logic, Ethics, and Physics. However, in unison, they allow the Stoic to work toward a harmonious and consistent way of life, in accord with nature. By this, the Stoics meant a life in the service of the natural goal of human nature, the attainment of fulfilment “eudaimonia”, the good life, achieved by perfecting moral reasoning and excelling in terms of the cardinal virtues: wisdom, justice, courage, and self-discipline.
About Donald Robertson

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7 thoughts on “Introduction to Stoicism: The Three Disciplines”

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Jake Fischer

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Very interesting and a good overview. Just one question, why did you choose to mention Marcus Aurelius’ “Meditations”