

Week 1, 1-22-15, Introduction

“If you work at what is before you, following right reason, vigorously, calmly, without distraction, expecting nothing, fearing nothing, and satisfied with your occupation according to nature and with truth in all you say, you will live happy and none shall be able to prevent this.”

- Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Book III.11.

I am a practicing Stoic. Four years prior, I hardly fit the description. My life circumstances could have been far more harsh, but they were not gentle. I experienced depression for the first three quarters of life as the result of compulsive over-thinking, emotional over-sensitivity, low self-respect, and little self-worth. In a word, I was convinced that I was “nothing,” and I was afraid I would always be “nothing.”

I was certain of very little, but several things. I knew that I didn’t know what I wanted out of life. Too, that I didn’t want the life I was living. I was afraid of the future, that “things would always be this way.” I otherwise possessed a very vague idea of what I wanted to accomplish with my life.

I thought a great deal, and others seemed to often confide in me. My decision to apply to college to become a counselor was based alone on that premise. I did not at that time have a “passion” or “dream.” Once accepted, I chose psychology as my major.

I went through the motions for a couple of semesters until I was required to attend an intro to philosophy course. I had very little interest in philosophy, because I knew little about it. Neither did I believe that it was applicable to me. With this disposition, I had difficulty distinguishing between philosophers and their theories – until Epictetus.

The stance on good and evil of each philosopher was expressed. Few of the theories seemed to declare why it was important to identify with their respective stance, and fewer appeared to describe how. Epictetus did both, and made claims that “hit home” with me. “Virtue is the only good, and vice is the only evil.” “There are things in your control, and things that are not.” “Peace and happiness cannot come from outside, but must come from inside.”

I did not investigate that “hit home” feeling until the following semester, on an otherwise ordinary day. On this day, my work was caught up, my finances were stable and secure, my evening was free, I had the room to myself, and I had plans oncoming. Following this train of thought came a disconcerting realization: “Nothing is wrong, and there is a great deal of good happening, so why am I not happy?”

I tried in vain to console myself. “You’re just thinking too much. This is normal. Everyone feels this way. That’s life. Who says otherwise?” Epictetus.

I pulled my intro to philosophy book from its (figurative) resting place and set to read it front-to-back over the upcoming break. I came to read every major philosophical theory from Plato to Kierkegaard to Nietzsche, but I saved Epictetus’s content for last. I did this, because I wanted to consider as much information as possible in the search for an “answer.”

I often came close to that “hit home” feeling I experienced in my intro to philosophy course, but I could not replicate it. I opened the book to Epictetus’s content: The Enchiridion. In all, it took a little less than an hour to read. Some parts were very bitter to read, much less digest, but I struggled to argue convincingly with them. Epictetus proposed a challenge to me, as the other theories rarely had: If I tried to practice the listed principles, I would have my answer, but it would demand a great deal of time, effort, and focus.

“You have nothing to lose.” “It’s worth a shot.” “If I don’t try to make a change, I know things will continue to be this way.” “At least you would know that you tried.” These thoughts and others influenced my decision. I was going to try to put the principles in the Enchiridion into practice. It is worth mentioning that at that time, I was entirely unaware of Stoicism the system, and that Epictetus was a Stoic. Interestingly, it follows that I was practicing Stoicism without knowing that I was practicing Stoicism.

I dedicated myself to read the Enchiridion in full once a day for the semester. My very simple, initial objective was to try to connect what I read to common, daily experiences. When I recalled phrases that seemed to refer to the circumstances, I found that I could often accomplish this. I attempted this repeatedly, indefinitely. With time and effort came the habit of doing this with relative ease.

I then tried to regularly apply the maxims (phrases); to “really” try to think that way. It was extraordinarily difficult to do, not because I failed to see how the maxims applied, but because I was entirely unaccustomed to willed self-awareness, acceptance, observation, and self-discipline. I was careful not to lose heart, and made frequent use of Epictetus’s recommendation to start small and work my way up. I never before experienced the sensation following the first time that I successfully resisted the feelings of depression that I had been fighting for two decades.

I researched Epictetus and became aware of Stoicism the system, and well-known Stoics such as Marcus Aurelius and Seneca. I decided to pursue Stoicism as a life discipline, so that one day I may become like Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Epictetus, or the other Stoics. I cannot help but believe in what they tried to accomplish, and who they tried to be. “One day, if I become like them, maybe I can inspire others the way they’ve inspired me.”

Stoicism has accomplished for me what no other ethics or system could, conclusively. It convinced me to believe in myself and my abilities. All that I am and have done I attribute

to the Stoics; to the men and women that believed that humans could be more than the prey of their circumstances. It is a practice that will assist you as far as you choose to take it.

Stoicism is by name a philosophy of life, but it is also appropriately thought of as a skill, craft, discipline, and art. You are in every way both the craftsman and material. Like any craft or art, you may have an idea of what you would ultimately like to achieve, but you must start small. It is important not to expect perfection, and instead interpret every (seemingly) small success as significant. In fact, it is entirely appropriate to praise yourself for all progress you make, as you owe it to none else but your own initiative, exercise of choice, and perseverance.

The philosophy of Stoicism has compatibilities with many belief systems, in the sense that the mental techniques were developed with practical ends in mind. In other words, it is not necessary to become a Stoic to make use of Stoicism. This workshop may prove to be useful to you, whether you are simply interested in philosophy, or wish to incorporate elements of Stoicism into your life, or aim to practice Stoicism to become a Stoic yourself.

What Stoicism is, and can do for you: It can reveal to you your mental tools, and guide you in their use. At its most effective, it can continuously afford you a source of peace, happiness, and sense of purpose that is independent of difficult events. At its least effective, it offers stability and contentment that is not easily disrupted. It provides the type of mental fortitude and flexibility that is rare (but everywhere desperately sought for) in our modern age.

What Stoicism isn't, and what it cannot do for you: The philosophy is not a cure-all or a band-aid. It's highly personal nature requires consistent attention and effort that you may or may not be accustomed to. In the practice of Stoicism, you will be tasked with examining your beliefs, judgments, and opinions, including firm and long-standing ones. A great deal of your mental energy will be spent understanding the nature and source of your desires and fears, assessing if they are in your best interests, and then committing yourself to making changes if they are not.

By practicing Stoicism, you are following tracks that are thousands of years old. It is in every way a pursuit of self-mastery and "knowing thyself." This is not to scare, but to be straightforward with the nature of the path to be taken. You must decide for yourself to take up the practice of Stoicism, to what degree, and to what end. In your consideration, keep close the thought that few of the most valuable things in life come easily or cheaply.

Week 2, 1-29-15, Brief History, Popular Stoics, System Synopsis, (Optional) Reading List

“Those who have made discoveries before us are not masters, but guides.”

- Seneca

The philosophy of Stoicism begins with Zeno of Citium. Zeno studied under the Cynics, Platonists, and a school of logicians named the Megarians. He moved to teach his own philosophy to passers-by in a public display area named the “StoaPoikile” or the “Painted Porch.” He eventually attracted a following that initially referred to themselves as “Zenonians,” but came to be known as “Stoics” by many, named after the area itself.

Stoicism combined logic, physics (the nature of the world), and ethics. The objective of the system was to identify what it meant to live a good life, and how to accomplish it. To do this, a practicing Stoic honed their rational skills by incorporating and combining their studies of the three parts of the system. The Ethics component became the primary focus of late Roman Stoics, for the same reasons that most often draw our attention to the philosophy.

Regarding logic, one practiced identifying and reducing falsehoods, contradictions, and inconsistencies in thought, action, and speech, to resist manipulation and improve the accuracy of judgments. In the study of physics, one worked to understand the patterns, mechanics, and relationships that made up the order of the universe. Ethics focused on developing one’s understanding of duty, good, evil, and appropriate judgments. It is appropriate to think of the system as a web. Improvement in one part contributes to the understanding and effectiveness of the others.

The ethics component addresses daily human concerns that include the immediate and pressing, and the pervasive and life-encompassing. “What does it mean to be happy?” “How do I become happy?” “Is there a point to being good?” “What does it mean to be good?” “What is the point of life?” “What am I?”

Although the ethics component is commonly the primary draw to Stoicism, it cannot be fully understood at the *total* expense of the logic and physics components. In the least, developing an understanding of the three parts will help you explore the important thought processes behind their formation. I will describe the relationship between the parts over the coming months as it pertains to the focus of the week and to practical application.

- A significant amount of thorough information on the Stoic three-part system can be found in the book “Stoicism (Ancient Philosophies)” by John Sellars, linked here: <http://www.amazon.com/Stoicism-Ancient-Philosophies-John-Sellars/dp/0520249089>

The concept of “cosmopolitanism” attends the philosophy. Cosmopolitanism is the idea that all human beings are citizens of the society of the world, independent of race, nationality, gender, status, and ethnicity. Stoics came from all social circles and occupations, including boxers, water carriers, logicians, soldiers, tutors, politicians, traders,

laborers, and more. This encompassing worldview perhaps most strongly represented itself in the influence Epictetus (the former slave) had on the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Other commonly known Stoics include Cato the Younger, Musonius Rufus, and Seneca. Each Stoic is (very) briefly portrayed below.

Cato the Younger was raised under the bloody rule of Sulla, and later contended politically with Julius Caesar and Pompey. He was famous in his own time for incorruptibility and immunity to bribes in a political landscape rife with corruption, coercion, and manipulation. In the civil war between Pompey and Caesar, Cato chose Pompey's side. After Pompey suffered a decisive loss, Cato was granted command of the remnants of the army.

Cato believed from the beginning that Caesar's move towards civil war was to establish himself as a dictator with tyrannical rule. Cato understood that Caesar was empowered by his policy of forgiving his enemies. In a stronghold based in the desert, Cato worked to secure the well-being and escape of soldiers and townspeople. Once assured that they were accounted for, Cato made the decision to end his life to deprive Caesar the opportunity to "forgive" him and thereby cement his power.

Seneca was a statesman, a playwright, and a tutor to the Emperor Nero. He wrote Stoic advice in letters exchanged with friends, family, and peers. When Seneca was accused of an alleged crime, he was exiled. During his exile, he exchanged letters with his mother, attempting to console her. The letter is now known as the "Consolation of Helvia," and was purportedly the first of its kind, in that the exiled person consoled those that were grieving.

Seneca was permitted to return to Rome some time later. In his instability, Nero turned against many of those closest to him, including Seneca. Nero ordered that he be executed following an accusation of another alleged crime. Seneca requested that he be given the opportunity to take his own life, and Nero accepted it. Seneca's last words were encouragement to friends and family to remember the Stoic pattern that he strived towards.

Musonius Rufus, later nicknamed the "Roman Socrates," was a Stoic schoolmaster. His teaching methods focused primarily on every-day practical application of Stoic techniques, reinforced by theory. He instructed students in the topics of argumentation, gender equality, education, fears and desires, lawsuits, occupations, marriage, proper diet, raising children, and more. The former slave Epictetus came to be his pupil.

Epictetus was raised in slavery (his name itself means "acquired"). For reasons unknown, Epictetus's leg was purposefully broken by his master, permanently preventing him from being able to walk unassisted or without a cane. Musonius Rufus became aware of Epictetus and the manner in which he withstood his circumstances. Epictetus was released by his master to Musonius, becoming his pupil, and eventually a Stoic schoolmaster himself. Late in life, he took in and raised an abandoned child.

Marcus Aurelius was the adopted son of Antoninus Pius, a Roman Emperor. At an early age, Marcus became attracted to Stoic philosophy, developing a reputation for attentiveness to duty. As Emperor on military campaign, he began writing what is now

known as the Meditations. The Meditations (originally named “To Himself”) was a personal journal that Marcus maintained. It contained frequent reminders to consistently practice self-awareness, self-discipline, and compassion.

Marcus succumbed to disease at the age of 59. His last words were: “Do not cry for me; think instead of the sickness and death of so many others.” Niccolo Machiavelli states that Marcus Aurelius was the only emperor to have both “lived and died in honor.” He is considered the last of the “Five Good Emperors,” and the closest living example to Plato’s “Philosopher King.”

These accounts of the lives of the commonly known Stoics are barebones, and do not properly represent their significance as Stoic practitioners. Although less than 1% of all Stoic material survives, enough remains to blueprint what it means to be a Stoic, how to become a Stoic, and why. Holding to that blueprint, in the months to follow I will describe mindsets and techniques that may help improve your understanding and application of Stoicism. As a rule, if possible, I will avoid suggesting advice, examples, thoughts, or exercises that I have not applied myself.

The links below lead to the texts to which I refer. The translations are those that I personally own.

Seneca:

<http://www.amazon.com/Stoic-Philosophy-Seneca-Essays-Letters/dp/0393004597>

Marcus Aurelius:

http://www.amazon.com/Meditations-Everymans-Library-Marcus-Aurelius/dp/0679412719/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1421045897&sr=1-1&keywords=marcus+aurelius+meditations+everyman

Epictetus:

http://www.amazon.com/Discourses-Epictetus-Handbook-Fragments-Everymans/dp/0460873121/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1421045966&sr=1-1&keywords=the+discourses+everyman

Musonius Rufus:

http://www.amazon.com/Musonius-Rufus-Lectures-Cynthia-King/dp/145645966X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1421046029&sr=1-1&keywords=musonius+rufus

Week 3, 2-5-15, Origin & Nature of Desires and Fears

“Ask yourself these questions:

What is my opinion of myself? How do I present myself to the world?

Do I appear to be someone prudent and self-controlled?

Do I present myself as someone who is prepared for every emergency
or am I conscious that I know nothing?

Do I go to my teacher as I go to the oracles, ready to obey,
or do I go as a petty parser of words to learn some history and to understand the books I did
not understand before so that I might show myself to have an advantage before others?

You must first learn to control the fickleness of your mind.

Bring a steady desire to learn to school,
and you will discover how wonderful the power of reason is.”

- Epictetus, Book II, Chapter 21.

It is perhaps most important that you recognize something before you begin practicing Stoicism seriously. You can no longer think as most people commonly think, act as most commonly act, speak as most commonly speak, and behave as most commonly behave. The practice of Stoicism is an agreement with yourself that you will devote every day to understanding who you are, what you are, why you are here, with what people, and in what kind of world. The training that you commit from here on will grant you a kind of insight into the world that will allow you to align yourself with it. Who you are will become your opportunity, your profession, your canvas, and your greatest source of strength.

You will begin by coming to terms with the fact that cultural influences, experiences, upbringing, media, relationships, family, belief systems, wants, advice, expectations, dreams, hopes, and other elements have molded the current way your mind processes the information it receives, composing your worldview. To understand who you are at your core, and bring out what Stoicism would, you must be aware of potential conflicts or misalignments with the things that have long influenced you. Mind them, but do not expect that you can immediately modify or separate yourself from them. One day you will be able to accomplish this and become an agent that can act independently from them, if that is your intention, but not without cautious practice, deliberation, and an awareness of your capacities.

After long practice, you will find your own conclusions as to what degree Stoicism will influence you. There are many people that appreciate and apply some Stoicism, without holding it to be their core belief system. In my own case, I made the decision from the beginning to make Stoicism my fundamental philosophy of life. My advice, suggestions, and examples stem from that concentration.

Understanding desires and fears and how to better control them depends on identifying their function, nature, and origin. The Stoics held that there was a rational,

organizing, generative force that pervades throughout the universe, composing the universe itself and everything within it. This force was called “pneuma,” and closely resembles modern scientific principles of energy. All things are said to be comprised of “pneuma” at varying degrees of “tension,” or complexity.

At the lowest degrees of tension is the inanimate, such as rocks and dirt. At the second lowest is what is living, but non-impulsive, such as grass, trees, and flowers. At the third degree is the living and impulsive, such as fish, birds, and other mammals. At the fourth and highest degree is what is living, impulsive, and rational, specifically humans. Human beings are arranged with all four levels of complexity, but alone possess the rational element.

All impulsive, living things have “self-love,” which is a compulsion/drive/proclivity towards what is perceived to be conducive to one’s constitution, and a disinclination towards what is perceived not to be. In other words, any sentient thing has an ingrained desire to do what seems to increase the chances that it will survive, and avoid what seems to decrease those chances. For all creatures with the third degree of “tension,” including humans, this manifests itself as a life-long pursuit for shelter, comfortable temperature, food, water, and reproduction.

The presence of the rational element includes an additional tier of demands particular to humans, alongside basic survival. The namesake for this rational element is “Reason,” and provides the capacity for humans to identify its presence, the new tier of demands associated with it, and the ability to formulate courses of action in an attempt to meet these demands. The failure to properly meet these demands, whether or not basic survival is met, results in misery. Every act of war, cruelty, manipulation, greed, vanity, and hatred follows from erroneous or ineffective applications of reason. Alternatively, accurate and appropriate courses of action that meet one’s needs as a rational, social animal offer a sense of fulfillment, tranquility, satisfaction, and motivation.

One may ask “why?” Due to the ostensible human design by the powers that be (Nature). Each thing is assessed by the quality that chiefly defines it. For birds, this is the ability to fly. For fish, it is the ability to swim. For humans, it is the use of reason. The appropriate use of reason reinforces the virtues, which are characteristics that are beneficial to a human’s constitution as a social and rational animal. The inappropriate use of reason reinforces vices, which are opposing characteristics that are harmful towards the same end.

Whereas self-love is the base driving force compelling a human to satisfy their basic needs as a living animal, reason is the counterpart capable of identifying the balance that is appropriate to humans. The virtues are conducive to the constitution of a human being as a rational animal, and self-love is conducive to the constitution of a human being simply as an animal. Virtue is necessary for a human being to ‘flourish’ and achieve ‘eudemonia,’ excellence, the good life, happiness, peace, and tranquility. Self-love is necessary for a human being as far as accounting for basic survival.

It is possible to live without the deliberate exercise of virtue or resistance to vice. It is not possible to live a fully impulsive, animalistic existence literally entirely absent of

reason, in the way other animal species do. Through the mutual possession of the faculty of reason, it is argued that all humans are citizens of a world community. This same faculty drives us toward one another to form communities of our own, and to refer to ourselves and one another as having this or that virtue or vice according to witnessed actions and dispositions.

Human desires and fears are of a different composition then, compared to other animal species. The desire to have enough to drink, eat, sleep, and reproduce is there, and the fear of their absence is present. In addition is the desire to be known to be compassionate, trustworthy, courageous, patient, and humble by others, and the fear of being regarded as being vain, selfish, vengeful, cowardly, and cruel. The faculty of reason is accompanied by the ability to use foresight, and make predictions regarding our desires and fears.

If the faculty of reason has been insufficiently exercised, a human beings moment-to-moment experience is shaped by an uneven mixture of many compulsions to satisfy bodily, social, and rational needs. This confusion gives rise to imbalances and shifts in priority between the needs. In an effort to suppress the fears associated with improperly meeting these needs, a person may go to great efforts over long periods to “ensure” that they will never have to “go without” the objects of their desire, or experience their fears.

The desire to be well-known and possess symbols of material wealth incentivizes a celebrity to spend two hundred thousand dollars on a diamond and gold watch emblazoned with an image of their own face. The desire to be feared to control the flow of community compels a general to overthrow their government, and while reigning, to demand the lives of thousands by name. In a claimed desire for a relatively quiet environment, a prominent business owner purchases multiple adjacent mansions, and proceeds to fortify them. A model spends tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands in the desire (their own, or anothers,) to reach and hold for as long as possible an unsustainable ideal of beauty.

These examples are some of the most extreme representations of imbalances in one’s desires and fears, yet daily one sees and overhears envy of the power, wealth, fame, and beauty of these very people. The imbalances and their consequences arise from a misinterpretation of what is and is not within one’s individual control, and to what degree either sphere should be valued. As a practicing Stoic, it is imperative that you work to understand the distinction, as it will come to directly influence your ability to properly assess what to desire or fear, where, when, and to what degree. It follows that it will make the greatest difference as to whether you will be contented or distraught, courageous or cowardly, patient or impulsive in each situation.

Week 4, 2-12-15, Desires, Fears, and Perspective

“Would you really know what philosophy offers to humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. Death calls away one man, and poverty chafes another; a third is worried either by his neighbor’s wealth or by his own. So-and-so is afraid of bad luck; another desires to get away from his own good fortune. Some are ill-treated by men, others believe the gods are responsible.

It is no occasion for jest; you are retained as counsel for unhappy mankind. What time is there for these games? You have promised to help those in peril by sea, those in captivity, the sick and the needy, and those whose heads are under the poised axe. Where are you straying? What are you doing?”

- Seneca, letter to Lucilius #48

As mentioned at the end of the 3rd week content, we assign value according to our disposition across two spheres: Things within our power, and things outside our power. Things within our power include our desires, fears, opinions, thoughts, and judgments. Things outside our power include our body, possessions, reputations, and roles. Whether we attain and hold onto virtue, and the peace and fulfillment that follows, depends on the proper management of things within our power and our approach to what lies outside.

When this idea is explained to us, we seem to intuitively understand it, although some amount of resistance to it may be there at the same time. The resistance is the product of living in a world in which it is heavily suggested to us that the keys to happiness, satisfaction, contentment, and peace lies outside us. These “keys” are suggested to be “the next big thing,” such as a new car, a new and improved face, a slimmer body, a bigger house, a vacation, a cushy office job, and so on.

We have lived all of our lives under these influences. Though we wish for something “more,” we see those around us reacting to those influences, and so we often come to assume that that is “just the way it is.” This wish for something “more,” never leaves, no-matter how many things are accumulated, or how much power is gained, or how well-known we become. So comes the fear that what one currently has is insufficient, alongside the fear that the “keys” we’ve been gathering aren’t keys at all.

In order for us to escape this cycle, we must learn to identify how we frame things inside and outside of ourselves. We must then assess if that framing matches reasonably with the patterns and mechanics that make up the natural order of the world. If the framing does not match reasonably, then we must make a choice: Either to remain framing things as we have, and everything that that entails, or to work hard to adjust the way we frame things.

If you wish to become a Stoic, or to practice Stoicism effectively, you will want to choose the latter option: to work hard to adjust the way you have become accustomed to framing things. This will be your first step, and it is among the most important ones, as nearly every other Stoic practice depends in some degree on it. Your aim is to be able to one

day frame things that happen to you or within you from the “perspective” of the natural order, or in other words, from the perspective of “Nature.”

What we choose to value, why, and how deeply determines our reactions when the things in question are received, are present, or become absent. The barometer that we must practice to go by is our power, control, will, or judgment - all variously but appropriately named. Everything that falls under our (internal) power, control, will, and judgment is appropriately considered ours, and our responsibility. Everything that falls outside this sphere is not appropriately considered ours, and is never within ownership.

If you will a storm to stop, it will not stop until it resolves. If you wish an illness to cease, it will not hear you. If you hope to be a millionaire by 40, the money will not assemble itself and make its way to you. If you will to live forever, it will not be so.

We may reasonably make the argument that we might influence how these things impact us by degrees. By taking outward action, we might put on a raincoat to shield ourselves from the wind and cold. We may go to the doctors, have the illness checked out, and take the medication we receive as directed. We may balance our checkbooks, and come up with an articulate yet adaptable business plan. We may strengthen our bodies through vigorous exercise, attempt to access the best possible care, and maintain a well-balanced diet. Yet in each of these cases we are the reacting party, and the primary element to which we are concerned is ultimately independent of us.

What ultimately depends on us are our judgments, and how we choose to act upon those judgments. In other words, it is not the things outside of us that warrant our greatest concern in and of themselves, but our choices in behavior regarding them. It is the choices we make in reference to our roles that are our true responsibility. We may influence the things outside of us as far as one individual may, but the end result is itself composed of any number of influences independent of us, however powerful or influential we are.

Paraphrasing the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, the objects of which we are concerned are indifferent, but the use we make of them is not. Every situation is appropriately thought of as a source of fuel (training) for virtue. In order to understand how we may do this, we should think of ourselves as fulfilling roles in relation to the situation. It is entirely appropriate to form a goal to do our job well at a retail store, because its successful completion is entirely within our power. It is a goal that “begins” and “resolves” within ourselves, independent of the external results.

We can expand this thought process outward. It is entirely appropriate to have as our goal the desire to be a good sister to our brother. How our brother treats us is up to him, because he has as his goal to make the world “just so” through force of his behavior. It follows that even if we treat him well, it may not be enough for him to react in kind. Whether or not you are a good sister to such a brother however is within your power, and whether you succeed in this or not is independent of your brother’s behavior.

We can expand this yet further. It is appropriate to have as our goal the desire to be a benevolent and merciful human being, and a good example to others. It is appropriate because we can accomplish this whether we are rich or poor, powerful or powerless, wealthy

or impoverished, influential or virtually unknown. We are able to exercise virtue in any situation whatever, and form goals intended to strengthen it. As mentioned in the past, learning to form and complete goals within ourselves is crucial to our development as social, rational animals.

There are nuances to this type of thinking that you will learn to recognize and account for with practice. For example, it is important that we practice compassion towards others, because it is important to our role as a human being in relation to other human beings, and because it is a goal that begins and resolves into itself. The benefit and fulfillment in the accomplishment remains with us, and the exercise of compassion is independent of how our compassion is received, or whether it is even noticed.

It should be stressed that turning the formation of our objectives inward does not come at the cost of “feeling nothing” towards the things outside ourselves. It is not possible, and if it were, it would be unhelpful. It is not possible, for example, for us to fulfill the role of a social and rational being without acting compassionately towards others with the aim of improving their quality of life. The objective is to learn to frame things as they are, not as we desire them to be, and to know where and how to make the distinction clear to ourselves.

The very act of being compassionate necessitates that we feel something towards others. The end result of the compassion falls outside our ownership; if the end result is as we’d like, it is because various events came together that enabled it to be so. If it is not as we’d like, it is because said events did not enable it to be so. Yet the fact remains that our goal was to be compassionate, and its resolution was ours to fully own. Consistently accomplishing these types of goals is possible and desirable, because it allows us to draw appreciation and strength from within ourselves in reference to virtually any situation, but it will take time, practice, and patience with yourself.

Learning to think of things in this way will earn you the ability to come to terms with an uncomfortable but necessary fact: That things may not turn out as you wish, but as they will. However, because your goals will be self-formed and self-realized, your resistance to non-preferable circumstances will increase alongside your self-sufficiency. In tandem, the increased focus on fulfilling your roles well will thereby improve the chances that things will turn out as you’d prefer anyway.

In a word, the aim is not to depend your peace of mind upon the result, but on your actions leading up to the result, and your reactions to the result. The objective is not to disconnect yourself, but to come to terms with what you have and do not have reasonable control over. The goal is to fashion yourself into a person that can give their all independent of the circumstances, and draw satisfaction and value from that mindset. From this, it becomes possible to benefit from very difficult circumstances where others may stumble, and to avoid being swept away or caught off guard in very facile circumstances, where others may pride themselves on the good fortune and are left vulnerable when it ends.

Week 5 & 6, 2-19&26-15, Judgments, and the Good Emotions

“You can pass your life in an equable flow of happiness if you go the right way,
and think and act in the right way.

Hold good to consist in the disposition and practice of justice.”

- Marcus Aurelius

There are two “categories” of the emotions: Emotions that result from rational judgments, and those that do not. The terms for the emotions that result from rational judgments are “joy,” “caution,” and “wishing.” “Joy” is a feeling of cheerfulness and gladness, caution is a feeling of humility and prudence, and wishing is a feeling of kindheartedness and friendliness. The objective of the practicing Stoic is to continually attempt to found actions on rational judgments, as they are conducive to the virtues they’re intended to improve. The knowledge that one has purposefully benefited one’s virtue results in these “good emotions,” which are entirely appropriate to fully embrace.

The misconception that Stoics seek to become devoid of all emotions is untrue. Instead, a Stoic intends to observe and guide the process that results in the emotions. This affords the Stoic the ability to more effectively discern what is or is not appropriate to feel regarding things in question. Ultimately, this means that the consistent, deliberate practice of forming and acting on rational judgments results in persistent positive and constructive emotions.

Many today refer to the emotions as being in the domain of the “heart/gut” while judgments are in the domain of the “head/mind/brain.” They are regularly suggested to be separate entities that compete for attention and are often both granted near-equal credence. The “mind” and “heart” are more accurately depicted as being interconnected at the very least. The type and severity of the emotions that one experiences results from the content of the judgments from which they form. It is important to recognize the separation of heart and mind as an illusion.

Understanding the process of the formation of judgments allows the practicing Stoic to assess, interpret, and improve the process’s accuracy. The process, explained: A person collects data from their senses (the “impression”), which combines nearly simultaneously with an involuntary value judgment (the “first movement”). When combined, they form a “proposition,” which is a framing that contextualizes the “thing that is happening” so that it makes sense. A person then grants or withholds “assent,” which is the agreement or belief that the “thing that is happening” is accurate, true, and real. If the person assents that the “thing that is happening” is true, the emotions associated with the content of the proposition result.

An example: A person is informed (sight/hearing) that they should receive a sizeable check in the mail any day now. The value judgment that “this is good” follows closely

behind, fashioned from the belief that money is a good. The impression and value judgment are combined together into the proposition “I’m going to get money soon, and this is good.” If the person chooses to believe that the proposition is accurate - that they will receive a check and that this is good - they will experience pleasurable emotions. If the check gets lost in the mail or is otherwise denied the person, the person will experience negative emotions. This is because the person assented (believed) that money is a good, that receiving the check was assured, and that they were therefore denied a good thing.

Another example: A person observes that a backpack is left unattended in a public place. Whether the person acts on prior knowledge of the backpacks contents, discovers the contents accidentally, or approaches the backpack with the intention to steal, the person discovers a laptop inside the backpack, and decides to take it. The impression is: “I see a backpack left alone for some time, and it looks like there’s something inside of it.” The value judgment is: “There may be something worth taking that I could use.” Combined together fashions the proposition: “I see a backpack. I should look inside it. There may be something worthwhile that I can use.” The person discovers a laptop inside and chooses to take it after assenting to the proposition that it is something valuable and worth taking, and thereby seen as a good.

Thoughts may occur in this person depending on their disposition; their prior experiences, judgments, and immediate concerns. These thoughts help provide or withhold justification, or in other words, the provision or withholding of assent that “this is something I could use (“need”), and taking it would be a good thing.” Examples of such thoughts and justifications are: “I don’t have the money for a new laptop and I need one for classes. I feel sorry for doing this, but I don’t really have a choice.” Or: “If this person is stupid enough to leave their laptop in the open, it should be taken.” Or it may be as deceptively simple a course of thought as: “Nice. Free laptop,” without much thought paid to the owner.

I will provide a final example. While refueling at a gas station, a person accidentally drops an envelope with money. Unaware, they finish refueling and drive off, leaving the money behind. A person in the area observes the envelope as it is dropped, or otherwise becomes aware of the envelope now left behind. The person investigates and sees the money that is inside. The person decides that it is appropriate to take the money, because of a prior judgment that money is a good, and assents to the proposition that it is therefore appropriate to take. They provide justification to themselves, known only to them.

“If the person is so careless, the money may as well be mine.” “How do I know the person that left behind the money isn’t wealthy or an asshole? Or both? I’m neither, so the money is better left with me.” “I don’t feel entirely okay taking this, but I could use the money. If they knew me they would understand.” If the person values the object(s) higher than the potentially harmful effects of their actions on others, they will act accordingly. If they value the prevention of the potentially harmful effects of their actions on others over rewards, they will act accordingly. This is the basis for the Stoic perception that a person’s actions necessarily follow from the judgments they agree and hold to.

Now, if a similar situation happens to persons in the backpack and money envelope examples, and something they hold to be good is taken from them, they will react negatively. They will blame, hate, and decry those that they perceive to have denied or taken away the good (even if the persons they accuse were not responsible, or possibly not even involved). If external things are valued above virtue and the community, it becomes necessary to guard and be guarded from and to lash out at obstacles or perceived obstacles. If virtue and the community is valued above external things, the justification to blame, hate, decry, manipulate, or take advantage of other persons is extinguished.

By making distinct to yourself what is and what is not in your control during the process of forming your judgments, you will make one of the most important connections as a practicing Stoic: That you are capable of observing how you form judgments, and increasingly of exercising control over your granting or withholding of assent to each new proposition. The purpose of this is to develop a habit of viewing each situation in this light, so as to avoid error, and to forge and act on secure, accurate, and appropriate judgments – judgments that account for the distinction between what is and is not in one’s control, that refer to one’s “design” as a social and rational animal, and accommodate as much information as possible. It is these types of judgments that result consistently in joy, caution, and benevolence (“wishing”).

Week 7, 3/5/15, The Stoic’s Role Towards the Self

“You are both the craftsman and the material, what do you lack to make yourself a Stoic?”

- Epictetus

Self-mastery forms the core of Stoic practice. You are your greatest potential enemy or ally to your own progress. The difference in which of the two roles you take in reference to yourself will depend on your choices and the judgments that founded them. A Stoic aims to continuously shape themselves to be accountable, self-aware, benevolent, consistent, emotionally and mentally independent, courageous, patient, and calm-spirited. Accomplishing this moment-to-moment does not happen immediately, but it will become second nature with care, diligence, and self-reflection.

As a result of your efforts, your ability to self-monitor, self-analyze, and self-assess will improve. In kind, your skill will sharpen in evaluating your desires, fears, opinions, judgments, and beliefs for accuracy and content. Understanding your intentions behind what you do is pivotal in discerning whether your actions are beneficial or harmful to your progress as a Stoic. Occasionally you may err, but it is then your responsibility to determine whether you remain in error, or recover yourself. Recovering yourself is always possible. That said, carelessness is to be avoided.

You will learn how to withstand great, unavoidable duress without being inwardly compromised or losing perspective. You are seeking to maintain peace of mind, integrity, and self-determination in the presence of others that are in positions of power. You are learning to be appreciative for all you have in times of prosperity and difficulty. You are honing your ability to accept everything with a frame of mind that accounts for the cause of each experience, its composition and parts, its relationship to the world, its duration, and your role in relation to it.

Every hardship is an opportunity for you to improve the characteristics best suited to addressing it. Every situation is an opportunity to progress, whatever the context. With every passing moment, you are seeking to identify the human role in nature and act in accordance with it. The whole of the human race is a commonwealth linked by reason, and it is within you to never lose sight of this. With this link in mind, your goal is to perceive others – as far and often as possible – as brothers and sisters; not by blood, but by design by whatever forces that be.

Your role towards yourself is influenced by your approach in your roles toward others. Although the wills of others make them capable of the understanding you are working to establish in yourself, they may or may not share it. Regardless, you are seeking to become an example to these others through your conduct, wherever you are and whatever you are doing. Their will and progress is not your responsibility, but it is your responsibility to be mindful and kind toward them. In many cases you will be able to accomplish this with ease. In others, it will require more strength than you've ever asked of yourself, particularly in cases where you felt previously, severely wronged by the person – So much more will you gain by trying to approach them as a bigger brother or sister.

One of your most critical and crucial tasks is the reassignment of value from external things in themselves into forming appropriate judgments in relation to those things. Whether the things concerning your attention are preferable or not, you are learning to continually make best use of what is preferable, while calmly bearing what losses occur. In so doing, you're enabling yourself to better understand, account for, and better weather saddening but unavoidable life events, such as death - though you must always be mindful of what you can or cannot yet process effectively. In a case in which you are not, seek out those who may be able to help you; a Stoic is never without allies of some kind that they can trust and discuss with.

The desires and fears that most persons experience relate to being able to afford this or that thing, or to avoid a difficult talk with someone, or whether or not they'll get this or that job, and so on. Your desires and fears will slowly change in composition the more often and sincerely you practice. Eventually, you will find that you no longer desire this or that thing in itself, but that your judgments and opinions about that thing are appropriate. Neither will you fear those things for themselves, but whether or not you're attempting to react appropriately to your fears. While the things you are desiring or fearing are not entirely within your will to achieve or avoid, your choice of action and reaction is.

Your goals will become self-realizable, because their completion will depend upon you and you alone. The reward in doing this is the achievement of virtue, the knowledge

that you are developing it, and all that follows. A happiness that is more complex than the modern notion named eudemonia necessarily attends this knowledge, and is indefinitely sustainable. This state of eudemonia enables you to embrace your human nature to its deepest degree. This state is what allowed the ancient Stoics to do the manner of things they did, for the reasons that they did, to the extent that they did, independent of material gain or loss. It is also what you and I are seeking to embody some 2,000 years later: to act in accordance with Nature.

Week 8, 3/12/15, The Stoic's Role Towards the World

“Do not be carried along by the appearance of things, give help to all according to your ability and their fitness, and if you have sustained loss in things that are indifferent do not imagine this to be damage. Fortune is assigned to a man by himself; it consists of a good disposition of the soul, good emotions, and good actions.”

- Marcus Aurelius

It is the first and primary responsibility of the Stoic to assess and place value in appropriate judgments. Once a Stoic has established meaningful communication and understanding with themselves, they are capable of reaching outward without fear of erring. Being a Stoic necessarily entails an attitude of active participation in the world around you. You are capable of drawing lessons from all things that are presented in front of you. It is important to your progress to willfully take advantage of this when and where possible.

In practicing Stoicism you are additionally serving as an example to others through your conduct. Others may be watching, and if they come to understand that you do what you do for none else but its own sake, they may be inspired. If they are inspired, they may seek advice from you. The respect that you gain through your efforts will pervade beyond the scope of your immediate objectives.

You have the opportunity to show such persons that it is possible to draw contentment and peace from nearly any situation. If you stumble, you may show how you've regained yourself. If you deliberately make no show of either case, the benefit will be two-fold: You will be combatting any reliance you may have on the praise of others, and you will nevertheless draw attention from persons who may wish to develop their independence of self. Giving advice is not a matter to be puffed up about, but should be relaxed, well-considered and purposeful, as you would try in accomplishing anything else.

You are working to first help yourself by building a mental groundwork from which to operate, and then to help others. It does not matter the number of persons you help, whether one thousand, five hundred, a dozen, one, or just yourself; it matters only that you

try. It is always possible to try, and the attempt does not require any resources. It depends on your attitude, and your best use of what resources are available to you, even if they are very limited.

Every occupation you take up is an opportunity to exemplify by conduct the type of person you are working to be. This holds true whether you are working minimum-wage or in government. The objects and events involved are indifferent in themselves, but the use that you make of them is not. If you are daily set on making the most of what you have, with an eye kept on reducing the suffering of others and improving their quality of life, you are making progress. If this is your mindset from the time that you wake up to the time that you go to bed, you are embracing your human potential fully.

It follows that even if you arguably have no free time at all, you can yet improve yourself and facilitate the improvement of others. If you happen to have free time, consider volunteering. It is a true test of yourself if you devote your time willfully to improving lives (by any degree) while knowingly expecting nothing in return. Extend this mentality elsewhere, e.g. by prompting yourself to help others that may be struggling with heavy objects, or picking up trash on your walk home. It is appropriate to inwardly acknowledge praise you receive along the way if you perceive it as a barometer with which to gauge the manner and degree of impact you are making.

Stoicism is anything but passive or reclusive, as persons unfamiliar with it may too quickly suggest. It affords you the discipline, will, and mindset that is uncommon – even rare – but vital to the well-functioning of the human community. You are setting yourself to try to improve the world around you without ever expecting or depending on a material return. You are founding leadership qualities within yourself that are founded and maintained on the basis of your conduct, merit, and intention. It could be argued that being a Stoic itself spurs active and responsive engagement, mental and otherwise.

Each of the Stoics were actively engaged in facilitating the positive growth of their communities. They accounted for the intent and potential result of each of their actions, and committed to them while keen to changing conditions. They were adaptive in their methods and with their resources, yet consistent in their goals. You have within you the capacity to be a Marcus Aurelius, a Cato, a Musonius Rufus, an Epictetus, a Seneca, a Zeno, a Socrates; the type of person that is rare, but sorely needed. You have only to be observant of your nature, mindful of your capacities, and diligent in your self-training.

Week 9, 3/22/15, The Nature of Nature

The Stoics contemplated the nature of Nature. They assessed how to act in accordance with the implications of their considerations, and why. Although there were internal (within the system) disagreements about which consideration to hold as the standard, there was one aspect that was consistent across them: Nature as an entity

consists simultaneously of all events and things. The terms “God,” “Gods,” “Jupiter,” “Zeus,” “Reason,” “Universal Reason,” that are variously mentioned in Stoic texts are synonymous with Nature (with a capital N).

The position held by Stoicism’s founder, Zeno of Citium, was that the universe is rationally ordered and animate. This “version” of the universe was said to be the best possible version; that there could not have been an alternative. Events were suggested to be inextricably interwoven in an ordered series of patterns of causes and effects. In short, Zeno claimed that the nature of Nature is of an active, intelligent, self-organizing and self-regulating biological system. He went further, proposing that Nature was conscious in addition, capable of perceiving and arranging itself to assure that it maintained its self-harmony.

Many Stoics adopted Zeno’s position, while other Stoics adopted an alternative. The digressing Stoics held that Nature was indeed an active, organized, and regulated system, but that it lacked the conscious element. A Stoic may choose to adopt one of these considerations or an alternative without risk of compromising themselves because of the flexibility afforded by the system. In fact, the Stoics that we are most commonly familiar with (Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca,) each adopted a position, but expressed to themselves and others that authenticity as a Stoic is independent of one’s choice of position on the nature of Nature.

It is possible that the nature of Nature was correctly assessed by Zeno; the universe is rationally ordered, animate, intelligent, self-organizing, self-regulating, self-perceptive, and providentially arranges events within itself according to what is most conducive for its self-harmony. This appears to run counter to experience, in that there are many disturbing circumstances that arise in the world. This is addressed in the argument given by a Stoic named Chrysippus, framing the Stoic claim that human free will coexists with a providentially-ordered universe.

Chrysippus suggested that events are “fated” and “co-fated.” The things that are “fated” are events that necessarily occur as the result of the nature of the things concerned. The things that are “co-fated” are events that are influenced through the exercise of free will. Both types of events are incorporated into the indefinite chain of causes and effects. An example of a “fated” event is that a human being will one day die. An example of a “co-fated” event is taking a sick friend to a doctor.

This position asserts that you are a member of the greater whole; a part of Nature. Acting in accordance with your social, rational nature as a human being means necessarily contributing to Nature’s well-being (therefore acting in accordance with Nature as a whole). Acting apart from your social, rational nature is akin to severing yourself off from Nature, considered to be wholly self-destructive. It is suggested that the world’s human-induced cruelties and miseries such as war, theft, abuse, and manipulation are the result of co-fated events instigated by persons that do not properly understand their nature – for if they did, they would not act in such a way. It is the responsibility of the Stoic to be an exemplar for such persons; to stand the best chance of teaching them, while contributing beneficially to Nature’s well-being in tandem to their own.

The Stoics argued that the elements in the previous paragraphs remain true whether you hold Zeno's position to be standard or not. For example, for Zeno's position, you can be sure that because you are an extension (if you may call it that, as you are still a part) of Nature, your intentions and actions are assessed/accounted for by Nature when you commit to them. If Nature is observant of its parts, and is capable of influencing things in order to aid, strengthen, and test the abilities of its parts, by practicing Stoicism meaningfully, you are doing exactly what you "should" be doing. You are making the most of each moment of your life, testing and expanding your limits, and maximizing your potential as a human being.

If it is true that Nature is a self-regulating, self-organizing, and active system but lacks consciousness, you are still acting as you "should" in the practice of Stoicism. You have within you a reasoning property that can account for your apparent design as a human being. From that, you can draw understanding of the things that lead to peace and contentment, and what do not. It does not "matter" in this case that you are not being actively observed by Nature or not; you are self-observing, and capable of aiding, strengthening, and testing your abilities yourself. The duties that you assume, for what reason, and to what degree remain unchanged.

A third consideration: Nature is not active, self-regulating, or self-organizing, but all things take place as a series of causes and effects trailing and extending indefinitely, perhaps from an "original" cause. Although there are things outside of your control, there remain things within your control. Namely, this position maintains that you are capable of influencing this series of causes and effects. You have the capacity to understand why things happen, what may influence future events, and what resources you have available to instigate positive influence. Each individual action you take - independent of wealth, power, or notoriety, - contributes to the flow of events. Your nature remains rational and social, and actions tending towards these ends maintain their benefit and fulfillment.

A fourth consideration: Nature is not ordered, and all things happen randomly; a series of happenstance patterns that mold together to produce varying events. This is intuitively the least desirable case in terms of its implications, but the Stoic position is maintainable, and arguably the most beneficial. Events may be considered random, but the properties of your reasoning faculty are not; they are directed by you, and your capacities to make the most of random events remain so. It occurred by chance that you are capable of catching, interpreting, and choosing your behaviors by degrees. Even if there is chaos outside you, order is attainable within you, and holding to it perhaps affords the best chance of remaining peaceful, content, and resolute in such a world.

In each of the four considerations, your human potential remains; to make the most of yourself, to improve the quality of life for other beings, and reduce the suffering of others. In all cases you have the capacity to be virtuous, whether by design or accident, and to draw benefits from its application. Whatever position you hold as the standard, you are necessarily a benefit to all those that interact with you, and to the world about you, when you practice Stoicism in earnest. Remember this whenever you are called to action.

Week 10, 3/26/15, Foresight, and Independence of Self

“Unbroken prosperity cannot endure a single blow; but he who has constantly battled misfortunes has gained tough skin through experience, and yields to no evil; even if he falls, he continues fighting on his knee.”

- Seneca

It is most easy for us to believe in our skills to handle things appropriately when few misfortunate things are happening to us, and when the impact of the consequences of the misfortunes are light. It is less easy when the misfortunes are numerous in more than several parts of our lives, and when the consequences appear moderate or severe. Foresight is an ability in the human mental toolset that is easy to effect but enormously difficult to properly, constructively control. Humans have the advantage of observing patterns, founding predictions regarding these patterns, and plotting courses of action in light of the predictions.

The intended steps and goal of the course of action are molded by previously held beliefs of what is or is not to be valued. These beliefs are themselves founded on judgments of what is to be pursued or avoided, as might affect the perceived constitution (well-being) of the person. In other words, a person's beliefs about what is helpful and good, and harmful and bad, determines how that person contends and processes changing circumstances. For example, a person that believes fortunate circumstances are necessary to their well-being will be pleased as they come about, and displeased should they not. They will additionally be less likely to constructively weather, come to terms with, or overcome misfortunes.

Our (Stoic) objective is to continually assess and improve the clarity and accuracy of our judgments, and by extension, the beliefs that are based upon them. The appropriate use of foresight depends upon our consistent, purposeful exercise of it. When used correctly, it is a valuable tool that can help account and plan for numerous scenarios - without anxiety. It is an ability with limitations that are not readily apparent; predictions of courses of events involving other people are not always accurate. Accuracy improves with careful and conscientious practice.

A Stoic invests value firmly and consistently in their intentions, the exercise of their virtues, and the accuracy, clarity, and proper foundation of their judgments, independent of circumstances and outcomes. When employed towards these ends, foresight becomes and remains a useful tool. A Stoic will do all that they can to fulfill a given role to the best of their ability - so long as it aims at a rational and social benefit. Nomatter the predicted outcomes, the Stoic understands that they will be “okay,” and that their “true good” (virtue) remains in their ability to maintain and progress.

This understanding extends indefinitely outward, for as long as the Stoic themselves persists. Although events outside the Stoic are transient, shifting, and combining as often as they mutually fall away, a Stoic is consistent within and adaptive without. Whatever is to come, fortunate or misfortunate, accurately predicted or totally unforeseen, has the potential to become fuel for practice. It is in this way that Stoicism's claim to an enduring state of peace and contentment is realized.

Week 11, 4/2/15, Perception, Self-Guidance, and the Stoic Aim

“The best way to mend a bad habit is to replace it with a new and contrary habit.

You must practice setting reason against false arguments.

Train yourself to be familiar with the use of reason and keep your primary conceptions clear and ready to use against the appearances of things.”

- Epictetus

If you closely observe the things that have happened around you, and what is currently happening either to you or another person, you will notice that each event mirrors countless others, past and present, that have concerned innumerable other people. The persons that are involved in each event are not identical to those others of the past and present, but even so, the intentions and actions of each person may (and often do) resemble these countless others in their desires and fears. If you are continually mindful of this, events and persons “lose” their power to surprise you, and you circumvent the greater ramifications of being surprised. This is so, because you have only to remind yourself that “these things are more common than first appearances suggest.”

Each of the things in the world do not incite distress or delight in you until you become aware of them, and form a judgment toward them. When these sentiments strike you, prompt yourself: “Where was my elation and anxiety before? My hoping? My fearing? Nowhere, not even a thought, or only a thought in passing.” The things that would now concern you have “been” before you became aware of them. In the case of delight, the purpose of this exercise is not to suppress appreciation, but undue pleasure drawn from the sense of ownership over the appearance of the “new good thing.” In the case of distress, the purpose is not to promote inaction, but to prevent your agency from being arrested by the “new bad thing.”

When you knowingly act as a good man or woman, and do good acts for their own sake, you will find that you are resilient, converting each difficulty into opportunities for training your rational and social faculties. Should you merely act or react for the sake of a desired response or material benefit, this opportunity is lost, and bending, yielding, and fearfulness replace the motivation. The objects of fears that manage to steal past you will

one day pass, and new ones may surface. These too will fade, and the sequence will continue without careful diligence in the management of interpretations of each event.

The grasp of Stoic techniques can fade from ill-use, negligence, or from lack of practice, but the knowledge that they have proven useful does not fade. The risk of misstepping scales in tandem with the number and severity of counter-intuitive presences. In such cases it is that much more important that you take care to remind yourself of your principles, and the type of person you are setting yourself to become. Be mindful not to expect to master these principles quickly, but instead set yourself to do your best to act continuously upon them – Something that is irrevocably possible, whatever your condition.

The product of this careful, deliberate transformation of your perceptions (in the pursuit of developing virtue) is the complex emotion of Stoic “joy.” Joy is the sensation of alignment with the world, as opposed to merely existing within it, or existing in conflict with it. It is a feeling of self-acceptance; the result of the “mind” and “person” being consistently in agreement. All value is refocused from external goals to internal goals, where their successive completion entails a life of continuous progress and fulfillment. This all tends towards “Eudemonia;” the blended state of happiness and tranquility brought upon by the willful embodiment of a virtuous life.

Week 12, 4/9/15, Roles and Habits

“You must learn that there are things we can control and things that we cannot. We can control our thoughts, conceptions, choices, desires, aversions, and everything that is subject to our judgement. We cannot control our body, possessions, reputation, position and everything that is not subject to our judgement. We cannot control Nature nor the acts of others and they are free to hinder us.

The things under our control are free and unhindered, they are our own, while those not under our control are changeable and subject to hindrance, they are not our own. Remember that so long as you confuse the dependent with the free and what is not yours with what is yours, you will be frustrated and blame others and the gods. Conversely, if you properly distinguish what is your own from that which is not, no one will ever be able to compel you, hinder you or steal from you and you will blame no one. You will do nothing against your will, have no personal enemies, and generally be beyond harm.”

- Epictetus

It is easy enough to say that the things that are within our control should be our principal concern, and that externals pertain to us as our apparent roles concern them. The end of thinking this way is mental self-sufficiency and independence of self from circumstances, which is a concept that attracts us. Actually thinking this way is difficult,

because it requires consistent, deliberate retraining of habits and thought processes. Stoicism affords the practitioner incredible and lasting fortitude, willpower, patience, courage, compassion, and insight, but not without time and care.

You and I have both been raised in a culture that instills in us a pattern to follow. As others around us observe and accommodate this pattern into their lives in tandem with us as we grow, the pattern is mutually reinforced. Exposure to this pattern imprints information in previously “blank” spaces, articulating what is or is not to be feared or desired. The judgments concerning what we desire and fear become the driving force behind our actions, or the withholding of actions. The “pattern” is a synthesis of influences from our upbringing, media, word of mouth, casual observation, events of varying severity, philosophical or religious influences, among others.

As we age, long-standing habits are entrenched more deeply for every action we commit that refers to them. Some of these habits may have been founded very early in our lives. There are many persons in old age that act and react to circumstances in much the same way they did when children. We (Stoics) seek to recognize the presence, foundation, formation, and implications of these habits within ourselves. We do this, so we might break away from habits that are harmful, and nurture new ones that are helpful.

Work to identify and approach each circumstance through the lens of the ostensible role that concerns it. This will allow you to depict and found new, helpful habits. With time, it will enable you to break down and act apart from old, unhelpful tendencies. Whatever the situation, there is a role that concerns it. The fulfillment of each role to the best of your ability, while taking into account your capacities and experience, will further your progress as a Stoic. Examples include your role as a son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother, mediator, caretaker, leader, healer, humanitarian, teacher, mentor, student, worker, friend, athlete, among others.

An example: Our own body is external, and is affected by many things that collectively impress upon it. It is nevertheless “in our care,” because we are inextricably bonded with it. As it is in our care, we take on the role of a “caretaker.” As caretaker, we are tasked with doing what we can to constructively and positively influence the well-being of our body. Our body may become sick or injured despite our reasonable efforts to protect and care for it (such as eating well and exercising), but to assume ownership of this outcome is to overextend. Performing the role of a responsible caretaker is within our control, while sickness and injury lie outside it.

Continuously ask yourself, regarding each of your thoughts, actions, and spoken or written words, what judgments lead you to them. Assess whether these previously or currently held judgments conflict with your current aim. If the judgments are conducive to your encompassing role as a social and rational animal (in other words, a virtuous human being), retain them, and concentrate on refining them. If the judgments are harmful towards this end, aim to replace them through deliberate, contrary thoughts, words, and actions. Accomplishing this may appropriately be thought of as bending a crooked stick straight.

Week 13, 4/16/15, The Beginning of Testing Impressions

“In using our impressions without purpose or profit and quite at random and failing to follow argument, demonstration, or reason, and completely missing what is to one's advantage or disadvantage in question and answer - are none of these wrongs?”

- Musonius Rufus

We have received impressions all of our lives, and will continue to. How we process them affects the manner of judgments that follow closely behind them. In turn, our beliefs are molded. Paying close attention to each impression is of the utmost importance, day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute, even moment-to-moment.

Few of us receive training to understand and guide the way we perceive circumstances, and so few of us live believing that such training exists. It is training that is fundamental to our development as Stoics. Loss and elation, anger and sadness, guilt and envy, jealousy and vengeance, depression and joy, kindness and compassion; these all are affected by perception, and are not immune to our influence as they may first appear. The willful changes to our perception do not occur instantly or easily, but require thorough self-training, self-discipline, and a willingness to reassess contrary habits.

Where do we begin? We must first make an account to ourselves of the type of person that we wish to be. Identify why you have become interested in Stoicism through question-and-answer with yourself. Ask yourself your goal in practicing Stoicism; do you want to be like the Stoics? Or do you wish to gain some of their traits? Do you aim to be able to come to terms with hardships? Or do you wish to be someone that believes virtue is enough for its own sake – and truly have that be enough?

Take time for this. Sit with yourself in whatever environment you are most comfortable in. Put on music if you like, whatever calms or centers you, and think seriously and deeply about these questions and their answers. Give this process as much time as it needs, because nothing else is so necessary. This is so, because these questions and answers address life itself.

If you have decided you wish to practice Stoicism in whatever degree, for whatever purpose, petition to yourself that you must *really* try to put it into practice. Set to ask yourself what you value, why you value it, what you are afraid of, and why you are afraid of it. Trace these desires and fears by searching back into your memory as far as you may, and network each of the events you've experienced to the present day. Ask yourself whether the manner of things you have desired and feared have secured you lasting peace. If the answer is “they haven't,” then you have the first and perhaps most important acknowledgement.

“Posit that you must begin carefully and start small, and never demand more of yourself than you can reasonably give. An awareness of your own capacities is a difficult thing to

discern, particularly very early, requiring significant introspection. You must be cautious with yourself, and ask yourself in each instance why you do what you do, why you think what you do, and why you say what you say. Place a check against your behaviors, speech, and actions by consistently introducing the thought “Am I saying or doing this because it is true, or right, or because I want to be heard saying it or seen doing it?” Or “Am I doing this or that for its own sake, or for an ulterior motive?”

Imagine yourself from a third party perspective whenever you say, think, or do something. Try to put yourself into the minds of others when such and such happens to them, and try to identify their reasoning when they react as they do. Consider how you feel towards them; are you feeling as they do towards their circumstances? Are you pained, saddened, elated to the degree they are, as it is happening? The only distinction is the judgments that are being formed. Practice peering into the root of others judgments, while looking deeply into your own.”

Consider purchasing some of the traditional Stoic texts, such as the Meditations by Marcus Aurelius, the Essays and Letters of Seneca, and the Discourses by Epictetus (online versions are also available, but a book may be more effective). If you choose to do this, make it a point to read any one of them for an hour, or as long as you choose. Whether you read in order, or look into each randomly and in random sections, the objective remains the same: to look into the thought process of the Stoics, and eventually adopt the elements conducive to your goal. Habituate yourself to associating acts and events of the Stoics with those in your day-to-day life. You may or may not be surprised with how many cross over.

Battle contrary habits with newly founded ones. Continuously analyze your beliefs, their origin, and the judgments that founded them. Consistently ask yourself when the objects of your desires and fears are in front of you whether the first response is the correct one. Remind yourself always of the person you are aiming to become through these practices, and if you choose, use that concept as a guide. Cultivate patience and discipline in yourself, and you will one day become that guide.

Week 14 (Final), 4/23/15, TheStoic Calling

“To the Stoic, friend and man are coextensive since he is a friend to all and his motive in friendship is to be of service.”

- Seneca

The Stoic’s life-pervading, ultimate objective is to act in accordance with Nature, that is, to live in a manner that is conducive to the constitution of a social and rational animal. The Stoic aims to achieve this through the cultivation of the Virtues. The Virtues are characteristics articulated into four headings: Wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation

(variously translated). This objective – acting in accordance with Nature, – influences the formation, handling, and resolution of the Stoic’s thoughts, speech, actions, and goals.

A Stoic believes that Virtue is the sole good, and Vice is the sole evil. Vice is held to be the source of all intentional human-induced suffering, including acts of murder, stealing, abuse, cruelty, and greed. Virtue is held to found each intentional act of compassion, mercy, generosity, moderation, courage, and humility. Whatever the Stoic’s task, they hold themselves accountable to subdue habits within themselves that are conducive to vice, and facilitate habits that cultivate Virtue.

The Stoic deliberately integrates these beliefs into each of their crafts and careers, independent of age, skill, station, status, reputation, and wealth. Prior to tasking themselves to expend all reasonable effort towards the goal at hand, the Stoic accounts for the following conditions: 1. The effort expended cultivates virtuous habits and subdues vicious ones within themselves. 2. The manner and degree of potential impact intends to contribute to the well-being of the world community. 3. Each action is purposeful, intentional, and assessed for missteps.

The Stoic thinks, speaks, and acts in such a way that if all the laws binding them were to fall away, they would not seek to take advantage of another, or abuse their strength or skill to other’s expense. They seek to be self-motivated and self-sufficient, so as to account for but not depend upon good fortune. These elements come together to fashion the Stoic into a person that is inclined to make the most of life, whatever their condition or resources. They seek always, mindfully, to encourage the cultivation of Virtue in others through conscientious guidance and genuine example.