

Applying Stoicism: The Stoic Career

By Travis Hume



We live in a world in which events constantly interplay. Our circumstances are a product of this world process; of things coming, interacting, and going. Many of the systems of which we are a part are directed by individuals acting upon various motivations. These systems result in conventional occupations: teaching, business, medicine, writing, soldiering, the arts, sciences, and others.

The conditions in which we are born and raised account for some roles we hold. In addition to these are roles gained through our pursuits. Roles may seem to complement, contradict, or rarely influence one another. The available means and methods to fulfill our roles vary. We alone choose the manner in which we make use of the means, and which methods to employ. In short, the roles we possess may be the result of forces entirely outside our control (e.g., being a brother or sister), or from pursuits facilitated by others (e.g., becoming a manager); individually, we choose our approach to the duties entailed in these roles.

The conventional challenges and rewards of roles serve as material for the practicing Stoic's ultimate pursuit: "Living in accordance with Nature." I.e., "*Eudaimonia*." – a state of tranquility, fulfillment, and intellectual and emotional self-sufficiency. Our duties, entailed by our roles, may be used to cultivate the Virtues:

characteristics that are beneficial to human beings as social and rational animals. “Living in accordance with Nature,” i.e. attaining *Eudaimonia*,” is accomplished through consistent, deliberate self-improvement.

With time, care, and effort in applying Stoic philosophy, it will become clear that many current and potential roles may be used for this self-improvement. The collective, conventional challenges entailed in our duties lose much of their bite, and peace of mind is no longer gained or lost as fortunes change. With conscious practice, a Stoic moves the locus of control and value from externals to within themselves, binding it to their exercise of choice. The difficulty of maintaining this control varies according to the severity of difficulties at hand, the number and extent of currently held roles, and the practicing Stoic’s skills in understanding and applying their philosophy to given circumstances.

Prior to pursuing a new role, the practicing Stoic makes an assessment of their current relevant skills, the type of interactions between the role in question and currently held roles, and the characteristics that may be improved through the potential role. The Stoic understands that human beings have physiological limits, and will take care to balance their roles to ensure free time is available. The Stoic Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius expressed this in book VIII of *The Meditations*: “Be not a sluggard in action, nor confused in conversation, nor wandering in imagination. Briefly, neither contract into yourself, nor boil over in spirit, nor in your mode of life leave no room for leisure.”

If very little free time is available due to holding excessive numbers of roles (regardless of good intentions), it undermines the Stoic’s ability to properly fulfill their duties, and the overall quality of their efforts will suffer. At best, the consequence is an increased risk of improperly applying Stoic philosophy. At worst, the physiological strain will compromise the Stoic, greatly limiting their ability to help themselves, much less others. This idea was adhered to even among the most industrious ancient Stoics, such as the Stoic statesman and military official Cato the Younger, who drank socially during discussions on philosophy, and reserved time for vacations.

The primary motivation behind pursuing new roles will be self-improvement – learning to “live in accordance with Nature.” External considerations, such as an increase in pay, authority, or notoriety may be considered preferentially, but will never rival or supersede this core motivation. The Stoic schoolmaster Epictetus stresses this, as put in writing by his student Arrian in Book IV of *The Discourses*: “I don’t call a man industrious just because he reads or writes a great deal, not even if he works all night, unless I know what he is working at. If the object of his work is his Governing Principle, if he is working to make his life a natural one, then I call him industrious.” It falls to the practicing Stoic to identify whether self-improvement

remains a core motivation, concerning their pursuits. External rewards are meant to serve as tools for self-improvement, and not as ends in themselves.

In the course of a role, a Stoic will choose speech, behaviors, and actions that prioritize philosophical consistency and appropriate intention over personal comfort and external advantages. For example: A workplace accident occurs ten minutes before the current shift is supposed to end, and a Stoic and their coworker witness it. According to workplace rules, due to the nature and severity of this particular accident, a lengthy document must be submitted. The coworker suggests cleaning up the accident without documenting it, to save time. While it is possible that the accident will still be discovered after being cleaned up, it is very unlikely.

There are several considerations in this situation. It is clear that the coworker prefers “saving time” over fulfilling this particular job expectation. The full, true motivation of the coworker, however, is known only to them. The Stoic may find that they too would prefer to head home on time. In this circumstance, the philosophically consistent choice is to follow through with the documentation, while briefly explaining the basis of the decision to the coworker. Personal integrity is a fundamental moment-to-moment consideration, as detailed by the Stoic advisor and playwright Seneca in book V of the *Epistles*: “Every action in life is regulated with consideration of the honorable and the base. The rationale for acting or not acting is controlled by this consideration. A good man will do what he thinks honorable even if it is laborious, he will do it even if it be damaging to him, even if it be dangerous to him. On the other hand he will not do what is base, even for money, for pleasure, or power. Nothing can deflect him from the honorable, nothing tempt him to what is base.” If it is the case that the negligent behavior of the coworker may result in a dangerous situation being mishandled for the sake of convenience, it falls to the Stoic to inform a supervisor in addition.

Choosing to document the accident despite having the option of avoiding it serves several purposes. The first, the act of following through with the duty despite a preference to do otherwise earns the Stoic experience in acting upon deliberate choice. Acting in the face of the preference in order to do something difficult also builds corresponding characteristics: Fortitude, patience, and courage. The act of doing something difficult despite being able to avoid it is a reward that will remain with the Stoic in the form of having “consciously done the right thing for its own sake,” i.e. a deliberate act to cultivate Virtue. The Stoic schoolmaster (and Epictetus’ teacher) Musonius Rufus touches on this in “XLXI” of the fragments of his lectures, as put down by his pupil Lucius: “If one accomplishes some good though with toil, the toil passes, but the good remains; if one does something dishonorable with pleasure,

the pleasure passes, but the dishonor remains.” The coworker may be moved by the approach to make a similar choice in the future.

In the previous example, the Stoic overcame a desire to avoid a challenge, choosing instead to make use of it as material for self-improvement. Other examples include: (1) Approaching a supervisor over concerns about unsafe workplace conditions, despite potentially drawing negative attention from the supervisor themselves. (2) Gathering data on questionable decisions by one’s organization’s administration –decisions that may lead to significant job losses – and presenting an argument for the defense of the positions if the data does not reflect a need for the losses. (3) Taking it upon oneself to complete a personal project intended to streamline a part of one’s organization to ease others’ work, even if it proves time-consuming.

As social and rational animals, effective self-improvement depends in large part on conduct in relation to others. With very rare exceptions, most roles concern other persons, and the roles held by those persons. The role of the Stoic is to use conventional roles for self-improvement, while simultaneously aiding others. The Stoic becomes a leader by example as the result of fulfilling duties to the best of their ability – potentially inspiring others to aim for the same.

The Stoic career is one of life-long self-development. The work centers on cultivating Virtue and reigning in personal Vice (Virtue’s opposite) through careful self-management. External rewards and difficulties ultimately serve as material for philosophical practice. The Stoic pursues opportunities that will provide further means to test, refine, and apply their grasp of their philosophy. Further, the practicing Stoic comes to see their efforts as contributions to the well-functioning of the universe of which they are a part. As a result, success ceases to depend on increasing fame, wealth, or power, instead resting squarely on self-improvement, appropriate intentions, and deliberate exercise of choice.

Travis Hume is a special education paraprofessional, and the creator, administrator, and writer of the facebook group [Applying Stoicism](#). He writes daily on practicable applications of Stoic philosophy for the modern day, based upon first-hand real-world experiences.