JOURNAL OF THE STOIC GYM

STOIC QUESTIONS ANSWERED

What is your job?
What should be your concern?
How to deal with your thoughts
What should you seek?
What steers your life?
What is success?
What metaphors guide you?
Stoic principles can be used to solve our problems, big and small. But they can also be seen as a way of life, so they are always with us, warding off problems before they arise and offering us help when they still do.

Sometimes we are not facing problems as such, but are seeking a guide to the good life. Our thoughtful contributors consider different aspects of life and offer their thoughts on topics like these in this issue. They touch upon a number of subjects such as courage, duty, thoughts, success, and metaphors we live by.

Here are their Stoic answers:

- **What is our job as human beings?**
  As human beings, our job is to do good and be good, by doing one good deed at a time. Jonas Salzgeber explains why.

- **What should be our concerns?**
  Our concerns should extend beyond our concern for personal well-being, to the world at large and, more specifically, to the environment. As Hierocles explained centuries ago, we are not separate from, but a part of, the world at large. Kai Whiting expands on this theme.

- **How should we deal with our thoughts?**
  Our thoughts get us into trouble. They don’t represent reality, even though they look as though they do. Our thoughts are colored by the glasses we wear and we are not even aware of them. Donald Roberson offers ways of distancing ourselves from our thoughts, so we can make better decisions.

- **What should we seek?**
  Good and bad comes from us. Can a life without challenges really flourish? Can it stand adversity? Meredith Kunz considers these questions and makes a case for speaking up for wise ideas and for justice.

- **What should we consider as “success”?**
  We consider something a success if we manage to get what we go after. But doing so puts us at the mercy of things not under our control. But if we consider that success is doing everything that is under our control, then we decide what is success for us and we can't fail. Using the example of her teenage daughter, Flora Bernard explains why.

- **What steers your life?**
  Although we may not be aware of it, we are guided to act by metaphors. But, as Sharon Lebell points out, metaphors can mislead us. Even to use the principle of dichotomy we need to have a more objective understanding of ourselves than that provided by unexamined metaphors.

If you have been a practicing Stoic, most likely you already know these things. Even so, it is helpful to be reminded of them as often as possible. Hope you enjoy these articles. Please let us know your thoughts.
In this issue

Stoicism as a way of life                      2
CHUCK CHAKRAPANI

Stoicon, Athens 2019. Images  
5

THE STOIC GYM

Stoicon-X, Around the world. Images  
6

THE STOIC GYM

What should you seek? Courage to face the world
Meredith A. Kunz                        7

What’s your job? Being a good person
Jonas Salzgeber                         8

What should be your concern? It’s not all about yourself
Kai Whiting                            9

What steers your life? The unseen metaphors
Sharon Lbell                           10

How should you deal with your thoughts? Distance yourself
Donald Robertson                      11

What is success? Doing what is under your control
Flora Bernard                         12
In this issue

STOICISM IN PLAIN ENGLISH

Don’t be overcome by pleasure 15
Seneca ‘On the Happy Life’

HOW TO BE A STOIC WHEN YOU DON’T KNOW HOW

The importance of judging impressions correctly 16
Chuck Chakrapani

PLUS ...

CONTENTS 3
STOICON 2019 PHOTOS 5
STOICON-X 2019 PHOTOS 6
STOIC EVERYDAY. Stoic thoughts for everyday of the month 13
STOIC FELLOWSHIP AROUND THE WORLD 17
THE STOIC GYM PUBLICATIONS 19
OUR ADVISORY BOARD 24
What should you seek? Courage to face the world

We are all physically vulnerable
Humans have always been physically vulnerable. We are not born with huge teeth, curving tusks, or thick horns. We don’t have the advantage of size or strength compared with other creatures on Earth. And yet, through the use of our flexible brains, we have become the planet’s dominant species. It’s our mental fortitude that carried the day.

The Stoic sense of strength
One of the major themes that draws me to ancient Stoic texts is the sense of strength and power in the individual. Stoic philosophy fosters a kind of courage and mental fortitude that faces down an often-violent world. Stoics cultivate this virtue alongside wisdom, justice, and self-control.

In ancient times, during the rise of Stoic thinking, the world was a harsh place. The Greek city states battled often with each other and outside powers. Later, politically dominant Rome suffered adversity, too. Plague decimated the population, and Rome was often rife with unrest, civil war, and slavery. Many “bad” things happened to good people…and still do today.

Why does this happen? How can we make sense of it? The Stoics made a complex argument about how to describe “good” and “bad” that is worth exploring.

“Bad” refers to what is under our control
Stoics argued that “bad” should carry a different meaning from that in our common language. Rather than saying, “It’s bad that she broke her leg,” a Stoic might point out that this is not a morally “bad” event. Rather, we should reserve the word “bad” for our thoughts, choices, desires, and behaviors that stray from our moral and ethical sense. Similarly with “good.” Winning the lottery, for example, is not Stoically-speaking “good.” What’s “good” is a rational use of one’s impressions, sound judgments, and moral choices. What’s “good” is how we advance the virtues in our lives and the lives of other people.

But we are ready to face challenges
That doesn’t mean we should take hard challenges lying down, however. One very “good” thing is how we can develop our character in trying times. Seneca believed that adversity and hardships make people strong and brave. In fact, he felt that these difficulties are a necessary ingredient for developing courage. Seneca explored the concept how to have “valor without adversity.” Seneca explored this concept in his essay De Providentia (On Providence) and says “valor withers without adversity.” He writes

Unimpaired prosperity cannot withstand a single blow; but he who has struggled constantly with his ills becomes hardened through suffering; and yields to no misfortune; nay, even if he falls, he still fights upon his knees.

Seneca, De Providentia 2.6

I think this means fighting not just physically, but mentally, too. Even if we do not necessarily believe in ancient ideas about the plan of “Providence” for our lives, we can solidify courage to fortify ourselves in an unpredictable world.

Speak up for wise ideas
Ponder this: Could we do that by taking on more difficult tasks in our jobs, our communities, and with our families? By finding ways to speak up for wise ideas and bring justice to everyday interactions? By shining a light on lies, and becoming a role model of self-control?

I say yes. And that we could always do more.

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What are you reading this magazine for?
You won’t get a badge of honor or some other award for learning about Stoicism. Nobody cares what books you read or what you know about ancient philosophy.
And you don’t care either because you read it for yourself. Because you want to be the best you can be. Because you want to be able to deal effectively with life’s challenges. Because you want to live a happy and smoothly flowing life.
And that’s what it’s all about.

_Philosophy doesn’t consist in outward display but in taking heed to what is needed and being mindful of it._

_Musonius Rufus, Lecture 16_

It’s who you are and what you do that matters
It’s human excellence that makes a human being beautiful, says Epictetus.
If you develop qualities such as justice, tranquility, courage, self-discipline, kindness, or patience you will become beautiful. Nobody can cheat themselves to true beauty.

_Good and bad lie in our choices_
It’s what we choose to do with the given cards that matters. If you try to be good, if you try your best, the outcome doesn’t matter.
You can get good from yourself. “The fortunate person is the one who gives themselves good fortune,” says Marcus. “And good fortunes are a well-tuned soul, good impulses, and good actions.”

_Joy comes from your choices_
Well-intentioned actions will bring peace of mind. It’s your best chance for happiness.
Do good because it’s the right thing to do. Don’t look for anything in return. Do it for yourself. So you can be the person you want to be.

Don’t be the guy who shouts from the rooftops when doing a just act. “Simply move on to the next deed just like the vine produces another bunch of grapes in the right season.” Marcus reminds us to do good for its own sake.
It’s our nature. It’s our job.
It’s childish behavior to tell what good you’ve done. As a child, when I did something that benefitted our whole family, I made sure everybody knew what I’d done. But my mom? My dad? They did those exact things day in, day out without anyone noticing. We kids took everything for granted.
As we ripen, we understand that doing the right thing and helping others is simply what we have to do. It’s our duty as smart, responsible, and mature human beings. Nothing else. It’s just what leaders do—not for the thanks, recognition, or the badge of honor.

_Do now what nature demands of you. Get right to it if that’s in your power. Don’t look around to see if people will know about it._

_Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 8.5_

As Roman Emperor, Marcus certainly had more power than we have, and his actions had a bigger impact than yours and mine. Yet, even the most powerful man on earth at that time reminded himself to “be satisfied with even the smallest step forward and regard the outcome as a small thing.”
Let’s take a small step forward whenever possible. What comes from it? It doesn’t matter.
“What is your profession? Being a good [person].”
That’s the simplest job description there is. Which doesn’t mean it’s easy. But if we make it our goal to be good, then I’m positive we can get there. One good deed at a time.

Do good, be good.
All human beings are equal

In Stoicism a slave is no less human than a free person, a woman is not inferior to a man, and there are no intrinsic differences in the humanity of members born to different tribes, nations or tongues, or those who are educated and those who are not.

All humans have the capacity for virtue and can use reason to lead a fulfilled life. This is manifested through their virtuous thoughts and actions towards themselves and others. This understanding led to the conviction that all human beings belong to and participate in a cosmopolitan society. This is graphically illustrated by the Stoic Hierocles through a set of “circles of concern”, which began with the self and expanded outwards to family, friends, and wider society. We should bring each circle of concern inward to reflect the healthy aspects of humanity. This provides the foundation for a society built on harmony while also accepting that humans naturally feel a more direct connection or a sense of responsibility towards some people than they do with others.

Stoic concern is not self-centered

Many modern Stoics have consistently made the case that the present environmental crisis represents the biggest threat to humanity’s ability to flourish. After all, how can Stoics hope to strive towards *eudaimonia* if polluted air means we cannot breathe? How can we expect to use our reasoning faculties if we have no clean water to drink? How can we uphold the virtue of justice if our desire to burn fossil fuels to maintain our SUV or meat-heavy diet means that the poorest people among us (and the least responsible for climate breakdown) lose their homes and ability to grow crops due to preventable sea level rises? This concern for Earth and its natural processes led us to draw an additional circle of concern to encompass the “environment”.

By integrating this circle into your daily practice, you acknowledge your connection to the living Earth, as the environment that necessarily sustains and supports all preceding circles. You provide yourself with the conceptual basis to tackle the environmental crisis and in doing so you align your thoughts with the ancient Stoic understanding that happiness is attained by living according to Nature.

**Stoic concern is based on justice**

Seeking unity with natural processes and extending our care towards animals, plants and their habitats helps us to re-evaluate our priorities. Our concern for justice extends to those human beings and other living creatures who cannot defend their communities and way of life against the Western world’s encroachment. It can help us reconsider the role of consumerism’s perceived link to happiness, if that “happiness” causes us to destroy pristine rainforest only to construct expansive landfill sites once we are sufficiently bored with what we were told would make us happy. Thinking on a planetary level can also cause us to make wiser decisions about how we view and reconcile those attitudes and actions that have resulted in climate breakdown or widespread plastic pollution.

**Towards collective wellbeing**

Finally, and as argued by Chris Gill at this year’s Stoicon in Athens, extending the circles of concern to include the environment explicitly highlights the moral obligation we have to use our capacity on behalf of the plants, animals, and the planet generally, to ensure our collective wellbeing (theirs and ours). This is even more necessary given that humankind has—through intensive fossil fuel extraction and mass deforestation, amongst other things—negated, or sufficiently reduced, Nature’s ability to offer providential care and support our ability to flourish.

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What steers your life? The unseen metaphors

Let’s get back to basics.

Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one principle: Some things are within our control, and some things are not. It is only after you have faced up to this fundamental rule and learned to distinguish between what you can and can’t control that inner tranquility and outer effectiveness become possible.

So begins my interpretation of Epictetus’ manual for living, the Enchiridion. When people ask what Stoicism is, I always return to this essential teaching. For if we fully embrace this precept, our lives can instantly and enduringly change for the better. Suffering, dysfunction, and insanity are inevitable outcomes of obsessing over or otherwise focussing on trying to manipulate or change that which you can’t control.

However, there is a problem with this sorting of life into the two piles of what we can control and what we can’t. We don’t know what we don’t know. In other words, unless we are willing to be deeply curious about our motivations, vanities, and fears, that which “makes us tick,” we don’t have anything meaningful to sort into those two piles from which to act accordingly.

Our life is guided by our thinking in metaphors

Metaphors We Live By by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson is a brilliant investigation of the powerful yet largely unseen metaphors that organize our perceptions, ambitions, interpretations, conclusions about what is true and what isn’t or what is valuable and what isn’t. These embedded cognitive organizing principles are what marshal our actions. They are the ways we understand and navigate our moments.

Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical.” A classic example of a metaphor some live by: An argument is a war. Many of us consciously or not embrace this metaphor. We approach argument as war; the other party is seen as an enemy whose position should be vanquished. We “attack” the “opponent’s” position. But arguments are not necessarily or intrinsically wars. Arguments are merely verbal discourse between parties with different interests. Do we want to view argument as war? Is it true? Is it useful?

What does this all mean? If we are to honestly investigate ourselves and the circumstances of our lives to determine what we in fact control and what we don’t, we have to first disinter the metaphors that have taken up tacit residence inside us.

Beware, metaphors can mislead us

I realized that for years I operated from a metaphor probably inherited from my parents whose own ways of thinking were likely shaped by ancestral trauma. I call it “life is an old rickety boat.” This boat is always developing holes that must be patched lest it sink. A good day would be when I “kept my head above water.” Or when I didn’t have “that sinking feeling.” If this just seems like language play, it’s not. I was never thinking about boats per se. Still, my actions were organized around preventing my “ship” from sinking. I was always running around trying to, in some sense, keep my boat from developing leaks. Everything I did was to prevent or postpone the dire possibility of sinking altogether. Well, that makes for a pretty frantic and miserable life. Picture it: my primary stance was defensive (not creative), fearful (not curious), overly vigilant (bereft of trust), running around so to speak with duct tape and putty trying to prevent misfortune or calamity. When I came to see this metaphor’s existence, I was able to examine it in the light of day and decide whether it was true or useful. It was neither, and I pitched it.

There is too little space here for a full explanation of the hold metaphor has on our imagination. The important message is to remember that we inhabit metaphors and they inhabit us. They steer us. And the reason we should care is that they disguise themselves as the true parameters of existence, as “the way things really are.” Above all, we actually have control over the metaphors that structure our thinking and behavior if we are willing to do the necessary investi-
How should you deal with your thoughts? Distance yourself

All psychological techniques described in the surviving Stoic writings are grounded in one continual practice, paying attention to the way we use our judgment to form opinions, particularly our value judgments.

Attention (prosoche) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. Thanks to this attitude, the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he wills his actions fully. (Hadot, 1995, p. 84)

Many people find it natural to refer to this continual attention to their own thought processes as the practice of “Stoic mindfulness” (not necessarily the same as “mindfulness” in Buddhism).

Epictetus explains that what Stoics should pay continual attention to is the principle that good and evil reside in their own choices. Whenever we notice ourselves becoming upset we should pause to ask whether the thing we’re concerned about is up to us or not. If not, then we shouldn’t assign value to it in a way that causes us to become upset.

We are often unaware of this because our thoughts become fused with our perception of external events. If I’m very upset with someone, I just view them as an awful person. Being good or bad is a quality they appear to possess. In order to be mindful, we first have to realize that the “awfulness” I perceive is a quality projected onto the other person by me and not something I’m passively observing that somehow exists apart from me.

Distancing” refers to the ability to view one’s own thoughts (or beliefs) as constructions of “reality” rather than as reality itself. (Alford & Beck, 1997, p. 142)

Realizing that the outside world itself is neither completely pink nor blue but that it’s being coloured by the lenses through which you’re looking is cognitive distancing—the ability to notice the distinction between the lens through which you’re looking and the events at which you’re looking.

Epictetus says that whenever you’re troubled emotionally by an impression concerning external events that’s a warning sign that you’ve fused it with a value judgement. It’s not a true objective representation of events.

Here are some common ways of gaining cognitive distance:

* Translating your feelings into words by stating the thoughts that are causing them, e.g., “I feel as though everyone hates me and that’s awful.”
* Referring to your thoughts in the third person, e.g., “He is currently viewing this situation as if it were catastrophic.”
* Counting the frequency of certain thoughts or feelings so that you increasingly view them as independent events.
* Writing your thoughts down in a journal or on a whiteboard and viewing them in a detached manner, literally from a distance.
* Imagining that your thought is written on a pane of glass through which you’re looking at the event, a bit like looking through rose-tinted glasses but with words such as “This is a catastrophe” scrawled on them.
* Repeating the thought several times with greater awareness of it being an activity in which you’re engaged, e.g., by saying it aloud very slowly or very quickly.
* Imagining how you might view the same situation differently years from now, e.g., if you encountered it many times and got used to dealing with it to the best of your ability or were looking back on it with the benefit of hindsight.

Describing the same situation to yourself in a more matter-of-fact way, without using any emotive language or strong value judgments. Sometimes, considering the consequences of viewing a situation in a particular way can help you to separate your thoughts from external events and envisage other ways of looking at the same situation. The Stoics frequently reminded themselves of the paradox that, according to their philosophy, passions such as fear and anger do us more harm than the things we’re upset about. Viewing them in this way requires seeing the beliefs underlying them as, in a sense, arbitrary and unhelpful—we could easily look at the situation in a more helpful way.

Donald Robertson is an author and Cognitive Behavior Therapist. His latest book is How to Think Like a Roman Emperor (https://amzn.to/2Swfj1)
What is success? Doing what is under your control

Zoe’s Choice

Just before summer, my 16-year-old daughter Zoe decided she wanted to change schools. She was an average student, in an average school, surrounded by teenagers not particularly motivated by schoolwork or giving their best. She wasn’t frustrated with the situation but had a wake-up call in the spring and decided she wanted to change for a better school, one she had asked for the previous year, but hadn’t got into.

“My entire life will change”

In the French public school system, you can’t just change schools if you want to. You need to have a very specific reason, and we hadn’t. Following the usual administrative process would probably fail to respond to her wishes. So she declared, “I’ll write to the headmaster.” She spent the next five days (hand)writing, reading out loud what she wrote, re-writing, using a mix of reasonable arguments and emotion (“My entire life will change if I can get into your school”). She took the letter directly to the school secretary and didn’t have to wait long for the headmaster’s response the next day, who offered to meet the following week. The meeting went well, and the headmaster said he would defend her case at the commission that was meeting in a few weeks.

Achieving what’s under your control

“You will never have to experience defeat if you avoid contests whose outcome is outside of your control.

Epictetus, Enchiridion, Ch19

Of course, we all tend to focus on the result of our actions. That is how we measure success. If we aim for something, we hope to attain it. But focusing on the intention, on the preparation, thinking out-of-the-box about what you could do to reach your goals, is really where we should focus our energy and time. It seems to me that most of the time, if we don’t get what we aim for, it is because we misplace our responsibility. Many of Zoe’s friends also wanted to change schools, but they just went through the usual process, not realizing there was much more under their control, or in their power, than they thought.

But beyond changing schools, there was another outcome in what she initiated: proving to herself that if she put the right energy and intention into what she sincerely wanted, she could change the course of things and get someone to help her reach her goals. Developing a clear view of what is in our power extends our freedom and our range of action.

This story could have ended either way. I guess a refusal from the commission would have given Zoe (and me) the opportunity to work on detaching from outcomes. But the commission accepted, so I guess we can keep that for our next level of Stoic practice.

Flora Bernard co-founded the Paris-based philosophy agency, Thae, in 2013. Flora now works to help organisations give meaning to what they do.
1 If one wants to be a philosopher, one should first become aware of one's governing principle. (Epictetus, D1.26)

2 Don’t imitate the opinions of the arrogant and don’t let them dictate. Look at things as they really are. (Marcus Aurelius, M4.11)

3 You act like mortals in all that you fear, and like immortals in all that you desire. (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life)

4 An educated person should judge impressions correctly in all cases. (Epictetus I.27)

5 You need two kinds of readiness: To do only what reason tells you is for the common good; and to reconsider your position, when someone corrects you and shows that your judgment is incorrect. (Marcus Aurelius, M4.12)

6 It is not that we have so little time but that we lose so much. ... The life we receive is not short but we make it so; we are not ill provided but use what we have wastefully. (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life)

7 If we find it difficult to judge impressions, we need to use the right kind of resources to find a solution. (Epictetus, D1.27)

8 If reason does what it is supposed to do, what more do you want? (Marcus Aurelius, M4.13)

9 They lose the day in expectation of the night, and the night in fear of the dawn. (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life)

10 If we are troubled by our habits, let’s find a remedy for that. What aid can we find against habit? The contrary habit. (Epictetus, D1.27)

11 You are a part of the whole. You will become a part of what created you. (Marcus Aurelius, M4.14)

12 Ignorance is the cause of fear. (Seneca, Natural Questions.)

13 I cannot escape death. Can’t I escape the fear of it? Or do I have to die moaning and groaning too? (Epictetus, D1.27)

14 Many lumps of incense fall from the same altar. Some sooner, some later. It makes no difference. (Marcus Aurelius, M4.15)

15 A gift consists not in what is done or given, but in the intention of the giver or doer. (Seneca, Moral Letters, Volume 3)
It is not as though if you go astray, someone else will pay the penalty. If you keep this in mind, you will not be angry or upset with anyone, won’t insult, criticize, hate, or be offended by anyone. (Epictetus, D1.28)

Those who see you now as a monkey or an animal will be calling you a god within a week. All you have to do is discover your principles and reverence for reason. (Marcus Aurelius, M4.16)

Often a very old man has no other proof of his long life than his age. (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life)

Surely, if piety is incompatible with self-interest, no one will be pious. Aren’t you convinced? (Epictetus, D1.27)

Death is at your elbow. Be good while you are still alive and able. (Marcus Aurelius, M4.17)

Life is long, if you know how to use it. (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life)

Why do we accept something to be true? Because it appears so to us. If something appears to us to be false, it would be impossible for us to accept it. (Epictetus, D1.28)

If you do not worry about what others think, say, or do, but only about whether your actions are just and godly, you will gain time and tranquillity. (Marcus Aurelius, M4.18)

The greatest obstacle to living is expectancy, which hangs upon tomorrow and loses today. You are arranging what lies in Fortune’s control, and abandoning what lies in yours. What are you looking at? To what goal are you straining? The whole future lies in uncertainty: live immediately. (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life)

We take pity on the blind and lame. Why don’t we pity those who are blind and lame in their ruling faculty? (Epictetus, D1.28)

Don’t look for faults in others. Run straight towards your goal without looking left or right. (Marcus Aurelius, M4.18)

But life is very short and anxious for those who forget the past, neglect the present, and fear the future. (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life)

Remember that our actions are the result of our impressions, which can be right or wrong. If right, you are innocent and if you are wrong, you pay the penalty. (Epictetus, D1.28)

People want to be famous after their death. They forget that those who remember them will die soon too. (Marcus Aurelius, M4.19)

You live as if you were destined to live forever, no thought of your frailty ever enters your head, of how much time has already gone by you take no heed. You squander time as if you drew from a full and abundant supply, though all the while that day which you bestow on some person or thing is perhaps your last. (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life)
Don’t be overcome by pleasure

Key ideas
1. A wise person is not overcome by anything, least of all by pleasure.
2. Someone who excessively indulges in pleasure cannot face life’s challenges.
3. You cannot combine virtue with pleasure, because virtue is supreme.
4. Those who indulge in extravagant pleasures are ill at ease with themselves.

A wise person is not overcome by pleasure

When I say I do nothing for the sake of pleasure, I have in mind only that wise person who is capable of pleasure. I do not call a person wise who is overcome by anything, let alone pleasure. How can those who are immersed in pleasure guard themselves against toil, danger, want, and all the problems that surround and threaten their lives? How will they bear the sight of death or of pain? How will they endure the chaos of the world, overcome so many active enemies, if they are defeated by such weak attackers? They will do whatever pleasure advises them to do! Don’t you see how many things it will advise them to do?

You cannot combine pleasure with virtue

Our challenger replies:

But pleasure, when combined with virtue, will not prompt us to do shameful things.

What kind of “highest good” is it if it needs a guardian to make sure it is any good? If virtue follows pleasure, how can it rule pleasure? What follows is subordinate to the commander. Would you put something that commands in the background? According to your school, virtue is a dignified preliminary tester of pleasures. We will see if virtue can still remain virtue when you treat it with such contempt. Virtue cannot be virtue if it leaves its place.

People who indulge in excessive pleasures are ill at ease

Meanwhile, let me show you many people, on whom Fortune has showered all her gifts, overcome by pleasures. You have to admit that they are bad people. Look at those who digest all things they call good—things of the sea and land—and have the entire animal kingdom on their dining table. Look at them as they lie on beds of roses rejoicing over their feast. Delighting their ears with music, their eyes with carnivals, their palates with flavors. Their whole body is titillated with soft and soothing applications. Even their nostrils, the place in which they solemnized the rites of luxury, are not left idle but is scented with various perfumes. You will say these people live in the midst of pleasures. Yet they are ill at ease because they take pleasure in what is not good.

Think about this

I do not call a person wise who is overcome by anything, let alone pleasure. How can those who are immersed in pleasure guard themselves against toil, danger, want, and all the problems that surround and threaten their lives? How will they bear the sight of death or of pain? How will they endure the chaos of the world?
HOW TO BE A STOIC WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW HOW

The importance of judging impressions correctly

Key takeaways
1. Our mistaken judgments create our unhappiness, because they clash with reality.
2. Practical wisdom shows us how to judge our impressions correctly.
3. There is no point in trying to fix what is beyond our control. The road to happiness lies in acting on what is under our control.
4. The importance of judging impressions correctly

When we misjudge an impression, we distort reality. Decisions that follow from mistaken impressions tend to be unwise. Misunderstanding can poison friendships, punish the innocent, reward the guilty, destroy opportunities, and breakup marriages. We cannot flourish if our life is not aligned with reality.

Judging impressions wisely

For this reason, we need the special skill of wisdom to tell us how to judge impressions the right way. The Stoics considered the skill of wisdom as one of the four cardinal virtues. Judging impressions correctly so we think and act the right way is a major part of wisdom.

We tend not to challenge our judgments. We don’t pause to think whether they are right or wrong.

We don’t distinguish them from reality. We think they are the same.

If someone avoids us, we may consider him arrogant. It doesn’t occur to us he may just be shy. If someone is not paying attention to us, we assume that she does not care for us. We don’t consider the possibility she may just be going through a difficult period in her life. If a couple of things go wrong in the morning, we generalize it for the entire day: “Today is not my day. Nothing is going well today.” For the remainder of the day we go looking for instances where things did not go well for us.

How to judge impressions correctly

To judge impressions correctly, we must be rational in our thinking. In the previous four lessons, we talked about rationality from a Stoic perspective. To be rational, we should be clear about the four principles of reality.

Our mistaken judgments create our unhappiness.

When our judgments clash with reality, our life doesn’t flow smoothly.

There is no point in trying to fix what is beyond our control.

The road to happiness lies in acting on what is under our control.

So, whenever you feel unhappy, apply the four principles, before coming to a judgment and acting upon it.

Principle 1. Stop and think: It is your judgment about the event that is causing you unhappiness.

Principle 2. Therefore, it stops you from having a smoothly flowing life.

Principle 3. Ask yourself if the event is under your control. If it is not, it is nothing to you. Move on.

Principle 4. If it (or any part of it) is under your control, decide to act on that.

A large part of wisdom is to think and act rationally. Therefore, wisdom is the consolidation of what we learned and practiced in the earlier four lessons.

The importance of wisdom

The special skill of wisdom is the first of four cardinal virtues. It can also be considered the most critical because it brings rationality with it and feeds into the other three special skills: justice, moderation, and courage. Wisdom and rationality are at the core of Stoic ethics. We need both rationality and wisdom to achieve happiness.
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**WHAT THE READERS SAY**

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