

## Symposium: Stoicism Reconsidered

### Choose the Hyundai

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Jules Evans shares a telling anecdote in one of his books on the practical uses of philosophy. After asking a scholar of Stoicism whether he follows the ideas in his own life, he is told, “Oh God no, I hope things never get that bad.”<sup>1</sup> I have had a similar experience, though things had gotten “that bad.” In an attempt to reassure a colleague, an excellent Stoic scholar, that I was doing okay after the sudden death of my beloved sister, I said, “Some of the Stoic lines are helping.” He replied with a bit of panic, “Oh I think you will want to see a professional!” I did see a professional, but all of these years later, it still seems like a waste of money and time. All she did was ask curious questions about my sister. I left her office, after paying two hundred dollars, wondering whether it could be possible that such a highly recommended therapist had nothing to say about the meaning of death. And so I stuck with the Stoics.

To me and others, there is no question that Stoicism is practical. We use it, after all, not because it is in any way trendy, but for its effects. Let me quickly point to some of these.

(1) Stoicism makes it difficult to justify being selfish, as it does not encourage us even to think of ourselves in such a way. Contrary to the impression that the phrase “preferred indifferents” makes, Stoicism emphasizes that other people are permanently part of my circle of concern. My main ethical task is to manage my care for others. One of the authors in this symposium, Brian Johnson, explains that when the Stoics tell us to know ourselves, that is as much about

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Evans, *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012), p. 12.

“paying attention” to others and “harmonizing with them” as it is about self-control.<sup>2</sup>

(2) Stoicism encourages me to refuse to do things. We get endless advice from friends, the media, and family about what we can do. So many courses of action and various ways of reacting can be considered prudent, justified, and practical, but many of them are unsavory. Also, it is difficult to know when to stop scheming, once you start. Stoicism, by placing integrity above other hoped-for outcomes, guides me to bite my tongue, pass on the cheap shot, and aim for self-control.

(3) Rather than offering a set of criteria which we are told to consult as needed, Stoicism makes ethics a fully engaging and ongoing project. I figure out something about virtue each day, by watching others and tracking my own mistakes. Despite the impression it can give, Stoicism is not overly demanding. Seneca describes a daily ritual of self-pardon, where you review the inevitable mistakes of your day and then say to yourself, “See that you do not do it again, but this time, I pardon you.”<sup>3</sup>

An example of how Stoicism can make ethics livable is the case of General James Stockdale. When captured and kept as a prisoner of war (POW) for seven years during the Vietnam War, recalling Stoic lines he had once learned in school was of some help. He replaced the wholly unrealistic and terminally demoralizing guidelines the Army had issued for POWs (e.g., “Give up no information”) with new guidelines, still too demanding for most of us, but realistic enough for him and his fellow soldiers (e.g., “Give up inaccurate information”).<sup>4</sup>

(4) Despite common misconceptions, accepting Stoicism can also lead to nice emotional effects, such as the joy they prescribe. The stakes involved in Stoic ethics do not involve being jealous of other people’s happiness or suspicious of their virtue. Whether someone is “virtue signaling” or not does not matter. Nor does the view encourage

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Johnson, *The Role Ethics of Epictetus: Stoicism in Ordinary Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Seneca, “On Anger,” in *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca: Essays and Letters*, trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Norton, 1958), III.36.

<sup>4</sup> James Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1995).

you to take personally other people's moral mistakes. These, and so many other concerns, are not germane to someone who believes that she has her own "work to do."

It is possible that these kinds of benefits might be offered by all sorts of other sources. Even Martha Nussbaum, who has found much to borrow from the Stoic account of emotion, explicitly recommends that we read widely and find inspiration from as many ethical sources as we can.<sup>5</sup> The first challenge put to any modern Stoic is: Why adopt an ancient account? The response to this is to point out that we now have updated, wholly modern versions of Stoicism.<sup>6</sup> The next challenge, one that Nussbaum regards as unmet, is: Why commit to Stoic ethical theory as if it were necessary or exclusive?

One response might be that we are more or less philosophical, and some of us will not be satisfied with handy bromides. For such people, further explanation will be sought. For them, modernized versions of Stoic ethics are useful.

Another response might be that all of us, if we are to maintain a counter-cultural view concerning the goods of life, need the assistance of Stoic insights. The theory, in other words, provokes us to recognize things that would otherwise likely remain hidden. For example, I once asked the students in a class each to turn to their neighbors and discuss which car they would choose, given the choice of being gifted an equally reliable Mercedes or a Hyundai. They stayed silent, which meant something was wrong. As I turned from the board, I realized what I had forgotten to say: "Sorry, we are reviewing the Stoics!" After I uttered the prompt, they stopped looking puzzled and the classroom quickly filled with the usual argumentative din. I thought that this was remarkable evidence of how Stoic proposals are so counter-cultural that we cannot recognize without assistance the questions Stoicism puts to us. The way we should value material goods is so commonly considered a settled and unphilosophical matter, that it is difficult even to imagine that people might believe a Hyundai could be better for you than a Mercedes.

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<sup>5</sup> "Interview with Martha Nussbaum: The Renowned Philosopher on Stoicism, Emotions, and Must-Read Books," *Daily Stoic*, February 6, 2018, accessed online at: <https://dailystoic.com/martha-nussbaum/>.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence C. Becker, *A New Stoicism*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Yet the Stoics argue that if you get accustomed to driving a fancy car, when a less fancy one would do, your self-identity gets weakened a bit, as it comes to depend on the car. Have some of you had a nice car? Did you ever, in that time, have to take a ride in a not-so-nice car, and hesitate a bit before getting in, worried about the impression you would now be making? Have you ever had an inexpensive car? Was it any trouble getting into a nicer one for a ride? Do you really believe that you are a better person if you have a Mercedes? Do you want to convince yourself of that? It is easy to, but Stoicism will point out that you have lost something when you hesitate to ride in a car that you consider embarrassing.

While we can all test the usefulness of Stoic ideas, some of their claims (e.g., that highly prized objects and even our loved ones are “preferred indifferents”) are hardly intuitive. Modern-day Stoics are going to need to make use of, and continue to develop, their theory. This is desirable and possible, as Massimo Pigliucci points out<sup>7</sup> when rejecting Johnson’s view that “preferred indifferents” cannot be sold to a modern audience. Their exchange in this symposium concerning this issue parallels similar debates throughout the history of Stoic thought.<sup>8</sup>

Let me end with one more example, this one on how Stoicism sometimes gets associated with seeing life in a darker and colder way than is necessary. In one of her class lectures that I attended as an undergraduate, Nussbaum memorably described how researchers had described those living in western Alaska as “stoic,” after observing their burial rituals when the tundra was frozen and they could not bury their dead.<sup>9</sup> The class discussed whether we would choose this option (i.e., looking upon our unburied deceased loved ones) or an alternative, Aristotelian one. She illustrated the alternative with the story of

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<sup>7</sup> Massimo Pigliucci, “Stoicism, Friendship, and Grief: A Response to Johnson,” *Reason Papers* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2018), pp. 37-38.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Anthony A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Anthony A. Long, *Stoic Studies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. II, Books 6-10, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/Loeb Classical Library, 1925); Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Clark M. Garber, “Some Mortuary Customs of the Western Alaska Eskimos,” *The Scientific Monthly* 39, no. 3 (September 1934), pp. 203-20.

American G.I.s coming upon the Dachau concentration camp. They were so shaken by what they saw that they violated military law by shooting some of the German prison guards on site.<sup>10</sup> The answer, to us at the time, seemed obvious. When it came to who you would rather be—a soldier cursing with outrage and emotion or an Eskimo facing unburied, frozen loved ones—we opted for the former. That’s how inhumane and cold the Stoic option appeared to us at the time.

But had we thought through Nussbaum’s examples? If I could return to that classroom, I would have more to say in our discussion group. It can seem as if accepting Stoicism means that we are somehow choosing terrible things, being asked to prepare for them even when days are sunny. Such musings violate a lot of taboos, but is it really more humane to pretend that people, including children, do not die in the Alaskan tundra?

Stoicism emphasizes that we are mortal because we are. It does nothing to create that fact. However, that it acknowledges this fact, makes all the difference. It is not as if learning about Stoicism lessens our grief, but it does offer what I could find no place else: useful advice on how to move forward by focusing on the only things that we can control: “sin and crime and wicked thoughts and greedy schemes and blind lust and avarice.”<sup>11</sup> This is something, when you feel left with nothing. Nor does it need revision when your world fills again with bright value.

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<sup>10</sup> “Dachau Liberation Reprisals,” Wikipedia, accessed online at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dachau\\_liberation\\_reprisals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dachau_liberation_reprisals).

<sup>11</sup> Seneca, “On Providence,” in *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca*, ed. Hadas, p. 43.

