



A
GUIDE
TO
THE
GOOD
LIFE

{the ancient art of stoic joy}

WILLIAM B. IRVINE

A Guide to the Good Life



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The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy

William B. Irvine

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*In memory of Charlie Doyle,
who taught me to keep my head in the boat
even when I'm not rowing.*

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Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction: A Plan for Living	i

PART ONE

THE RISE OF STOICISM

ONE	
Philosophy Takes an Interest in Life	17
TWO	
The First Stoics	29
THREE	
Roman Stoicism	44

PART TWO

STOIC PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES

FOUR	
Negative Visualization: What's the Worst That Can Happen?	65
FIVE	
The Dichotomy of Control: On Becoming Invincible	85
SIX	
Fatalism: Letting Go of the Past . . . and the Present	102
SEVEN	
Self-Denial: On Dealing with the Dark Side of Pleasure	110
EIGHT	
Meditation: Watching Ourselves Practice Stoicism	119

PART THREE

STOIC ADVICE

NINE

Duty: On Loving Mankind 127

TEN

Social Relations: On Dealing with Other People 134

ELEVEN

Insults: On Putting Up with Put-Downs 142

TWELVE

Grief: On Vanquishing Tears with Reason 153

THIRTEEN

Anger: On Overcoming Anti-Joy 159

FOURTEEN

Personal Values: On Seeking Fame 166

FIFTEEN

Personal Values: On Luxurious Living 173

SIXTEEN

Exile: On Surviving a Change of Place 183

SEVENTEEN

Old Age: On Being Banished to a Nursing Home 188

EIGHTEEN

Dying: On a Good End to a Good Life 197

NINETEEN

On Becoming a Stoic: Start Now and Prepare to Be Mocked 202

PART FOUR

STOICISM FOR MODERN LIVES

TWENTY

The Decline of Stoicism 209

TWENTY-ONE

Stoicism Reconsidered 226

TWENTY-TWO

Practicing Stoicism 250

A Stoic Reading Program	281
Notes	285
Works Cited	297
Index	301

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A Guide to the Good Life



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Introduction

A Plan for Living

WHAT DO YOU WANT out of life? You might answer this question by saying that you want a caring spouse, a good job, and a nice house, but these are really just some of the things you want *in* life. In asking what you want *out of* life, I am asking the question in its broadest sense. I am asking not for the goals you form as you go about your daily activities but for your grand goal in living. In other words, of the things in life you might pursue, which is the thing you believe to be most valuable?

Many people will have trouble naming this goal. They know what they want minute by minute or even decade by decade during their life, but they have never paused to consider their grand goal in living. It is perhaps understandable that they haven't. Our culture doesn't encourage people to think about such things; indeed, it provides them with an endless stream of distractions so they won't ever have to. But a grand goal in living is the first component of a philosophy of life. This means that if you lack a grand goal in living, you lack a coherent philosophy of life.

Why is it important to have such a philosophy? Because without one, there is a danger that you will mislive—that

despite all your activity, despite all the pleasant diversions you might have enjoyed while alive, you will end up living a bad life. There is, in other words, a danger that when you are on your deathbed, you will look back and realize that you wasted your one chance at living. Instead of spending your life pursuing something genuinely valuable, you squandered it because you allowed yourself to be distracted by the various baubles life has to offer.

Suppose you can identify your grand goal in living. Suppose, too, that you can explain why this goal is worth attaining. Even then, there is a danger that you will mislive. In particular, if you lack an effective strategy for attaining your goal, it is unlikely that you will attain it. Thus, the second component of a philosophy of life is a strategy for attaining your grand goal in living. This strategy will specify what you must do, as you go about your daily activities, to maximize your chances of gaining the thing in life that you take to be ultimately valuable.

IF WE WANT to take steps to avoid wasting our wealth, we can easily find experts to help us. Looking in the phone book, we will find any number of certified financial planners. These individuals can help us clarify our financial goals: How much, for example, should we be saving for retirement? And having clarified these goals, they can advise us on how to achieve them.

Suppose, however, that we want to take steps to avoid wasting not our wealth but our life. We might seek an expert to guide us: a philosopher of life. This individual would help us think about our goals in living and about which of these goals are in fact worth pursuing. She would remind us that

because goals can come into conflict, we need to decide which of our goals should take precedence when conflicts arise. She will therefore help us sort through our goals and place them into a hierarchy. The goal at the pinnacle of this hierarchy will be what I have called our grand goal in living: It is the goal that we should be unwilling to sacrifice to attain other goals. And after helping us select this goal, a philosopher of life will help us devise a strategy for attaining it.

The obvious place to look for a philosopher of life is in the philosophy department of the local university. Visiting the faculty offices there, we will find philosophers specializing in metaphysics, logic, politics, science, religion, and ethics. We might also find philosophers specializing in the philosophy of sport, the philosophy of feminism, and even the philosophy of philosophy. But unless we are at an unusual university, we will find no philosophers of life in the sense I have in mind.

It hasn't always been this way. Many ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, for example, not only thought philosophies of life were worth contemplating but thought the *raison d'être* of philosophy was to develop them. These philosophers typically had an interest in other areas of philosophy as well—in logic, for example—but only because they thought pursuing that interest would help them develop a philosophy of life.

Furthermore, these ancient philosophers did not keep their discoveries to themselves or share them only with their fellow philosophers. Rather, they formed schools and welcomed as their pupils anyone wishing to acquire a philosophy of life. Different schools offered different advice on what people must do in order to have a good life. Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates,

founded the Cynic school of philosophy, which advocated an ascetic lifestyle. Aristippus, another pupil of Socrates, founded the Cyrenaic school, which advocated a hedonistic lifestyle. In between these extremes, we find, among many other schools, the Epicurean school, the Skeptic school, and, of most interest to us here, the Stoic school, founded by Zeno of Citium.

The philosophers associated with these schools were unapologetic about their interest in philosophies of life. According to Epicurus, for example, “Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind.”¹ And according to the Stoic philosopher Seneca, about whom I will have much to say in this book, “He who studies with a philosopher should take away with him some one good thing every day: he should daily return home a sounder man, or on the way to become sounder.”²

THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN for those seeking a philosophy of life. In the pages that follow, I focus my attention on a philosophy that I have found useful and that I suspect many readers will also find useful. It is the philosophy of the ancient Stoics. The Stoic philosophy of life may be old, but it merits the attention of any modern individual who wishes to have a life that is both meaningful and fulfilling—who wishes, that is, to have a good life.

In other words, this book offers advice on how people should live. More precisely, I will act as a conduit for the advice offered by Stoic philosophers two thousand years ago. This

is something my fellow philosophers are generally loath to do, but then again, their interest in philosophy is primarily “academic”; their research, that is to say, is primarily theoretical or historical. My interest in Stoicism, by way of contrast, is resolutely practical: My goal is to put this philosophy to work in my life and to encourage others to put it to work in theirs. The ancient Stoics, I think, would have encouraged both sorts of endeavor, but they also would have insisted that the primary reason to study Stoicism is so we can put it into practice.

Another thing to realize is that although Stoicism is a philosophy, it has a significant psychological component. The Stoics realized that a life plagued with negative emotions—including anger, anxiety, fear, grief, and envy—will not be a good life. They therefore became acute observers of the workings of the human mind and as a result became some of the most insightful psychologists of the ancient world. They went on to develop techniques for preventing the onset of negative emotions and for extinguishing them when attempts at prevention failed. Even those readers who are leery of philosophical speculation should take an interest in these techniques. Who among us, after all, would not like to reduce the number of negative emotions experienced in daily living?

ALTHOUGH I HAVE BEEN studying philosophy for all my adult life, I was, until recently, woefully ignorant of Stoicism. My teachers in college and graduate school never asked me to read the Stoics, and although I am an avid reader, I saw no need to read them on my own. More generally, I saw no need to ponder a philosophy of life. I instead felt comfortable with

what is, for almost everyone, the default philosophy of life: to spend one's days seeking an interesting mix of affluence, social status, and pleasure. My philosophy of life, in other words, was what might charitably be called an enlightened form of hedonism.

In my fifth decade of life, though, events conspired to introduce me to Stoicism. The first of these was the 1998 publication by the author Tom Wolfe of *A Man in Full*. In this novel, one character accidentally discovers the Stoic philosopher Epictetus and then starts spouting his philosophy. I found this to be simultaneously intriguing and puzzling.

Two years later I started doing research for a book about desire. As part of this research, I examined the advice that has been given over the millennia on mastering desire. I started out by seeing what religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, Sufism, and Buddhism (and in particular, Zen Buddhism), had to say about desire. I went on to examine the advice on mastering desire offered by philosophers but found that only a relative handful of them had offered such advice. Prominent among those who had were the Hellenistic philosophers: the Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics.

In conducting my research on desire, I had an ulterior motive. I had long been intrigued by Zen Buddhism and imagined that on taking a closer look at it in connection with my research, I would become a full-fledged convert. But what I found, much to my surprise, was that Stoicism and Zen have certain things in common. They both, for example, stress the importance of contemplating the transitory nature of the world around us and the importance of mastering desire, to

the extent that it is possible to do so. They also advise us to pursue tranquility and give us advice on how to attain and maintain it. Furthermore, I came to realize that Stoicism was better suited to my analytical nature than Buddhism was. As a result, I found myself, much to my amazement, toying with the idea of becoming, instead of a practicing Zen Buddhist, a practicing Stoic.

Before I began my research on desire, Stoicism had been, for me, a nonstarter as a philosophy of life, but as I read the Stoics, I discovered that almost everything I thought I knew about them was wrong. To begin with, I knew that the dictionary defines a *stoic* as “one who is seemingly indifferent to or unaffected by joy, grief, pleasure, or pain.”³ I therefore expected that the uppercase-S Stoics would be lowercase-s stoical—that they would be emotionally repressed individuals. I discovered, though, that the goal of the Stoics was not to banish *emotion* from life but to banish *negative* emotions.

When I read the works of the Stoics, I encountered individuals who were cheerful and optimistic about life (even though they made it a point to spend time thinking about all the bad things that could happen to them) and who were fully capable of enjoying life’s pleasures (while at the same time being careful not to be enslaved by those pleasures). I also encountered, much to my surprise, individuals who valued joy; indeed, according to Seneca, what Stoics seek to discover “is how the mind may always pursue a steady and favourable course, may be well-disposed towards itself, and may view its conditions with joy.”⁴ He also asserts that someone who practices Stoic principles “must, whether he wills or not, necessarily

be attended by constant cheerfulness and a joy that is deep and issues from deep within, since he finds delight in his own resources, and desires no joys greater than his inner joys.”⁵ Along similar lines, the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus tells us that if we live in accordance with Stoic principles, “a cheerful disposition and secure joy” will automatically follow.⁶

Rather than being passive individuals who were grimly resigned to being on the receiving end of the world’s abuse and injustice, the Stoics were fully engaged in life and worked hard to make the world a better place. Consider, for example, Cato the Younger. (Although he did not contribute to the literature of Stoicism, Cato was a practicing Stoic; indeed, Seneca refers to him as the perfect Stoic.)⁷ His Stoicism did not prevent Cato from fighting bravely to restore the Roman republic. Likewise, Seneca seems to have been remarkably energetic: Besides being a philosopher, he was a successful playwright, an advisor to an emperor, and the first-century equivalent of an investment banker. And Marcus Aurelius, besides being a philosopher, was a Roman emperor—indeed, arguably one of the greatest Roman emperors. As I read about the Stoics, I found myself filled with admiration for them. They were courageous, temperate, reasonable, and self-disciplined—traits I would like to possess. They also thought it important for us to fulfill our obligations and to help our fellow humans—values I happen to share.

In my research on desire, I discovered nearly unanimous agreement among thoughtful people that we are unlikely to have a good and meaningful life unless we can overcome our insatiability. There was also agreement that one wonderful

way to tame our tendency to always want more is to persuade ourselves to want the things we already have. This seemed to be an important insight, but it left open the question of how, exactly, we could accomplish this. The Stoics, I was delighted to discover, had an answer to this question. They developed a fairly simple technique that, if practiced, can make us glad, if only for a time, to be the person we are, living the life we happen to be living, almost regardless of what that life might be.

The more I studied the Stoics, the more I found myself drawn to their philosophy. But when I tried to share with others my newfound enthusiasm for Stoicism, I quickly discovered that I had not been alone in misconceiving the philosophy. Friends, relatives, and even my colleagues at the university seemed to think the Stoics were individuals whose goal was to suppress all emotion and who therefore led grim and passive lives. It dawned on me that the Stoics were the victims of a bum rap, one that I myself had only recently helped promote.

This realization alone might have been sufficient to motivate me to write a book about the Stoics—a book that would set the record straight—but as it happens, I came to have a second motivation even stronger than this. After learning about Stoicism, I started, in a low-key, experimental fashion, giving it a try as my philosophy of life. The experiment has thus far been sufficiently successful that I feel compelled to report my findings to the world at large, in the belief that others might benefit from studying the Stoics and adopting their philosophy of life.

READERS WILL NATURALLY be curious about what is involved in the practice of Stoicism. In ancient Greece and Rome, a

would-be Stoic could have learned how to practice Stoicism by attending a Stoic school, but this is no longer possible. A modern would-be Stoic might, as an alternative, consult the works of the ancient Stoics, but what she will discover on attempting to do so is that many of these works—in particular, those of the Greek Stoics—have been lost. Furthermore, if she reads the works that have survived, she will discover that although they discuss Stoicism at length, they don't offer a lesson plan, as it were, for novice Stoics. The challenge I faced in writing this book was to construct such a plan from clues scattered throughout Stoic writings.

Although the remainder of this book provides detailed guidelines for would-be Stoics, let me describe here, in a preliminary fashion, some of the things we will want to do if we adopt Stoicism as our philosophy of life.

We will reconsider our goals in living. In particular, we will take to heart the Stoic claim that many of the things we desire—most notably, fame and fortune—are not worth pursuing. We will instead turn our attention to the pursuit of tranquility and what the Stoics called *virtue*. We will discover that Stoic virtue has very little in common with what people today mean by the word. We will also discover that the tranquility the Stoics sought is not the kind of tranquility that might be brought on by the ingestion of a tranquilizer; it is not, in other words, a zombie-like state. It is instead a state marked by the absence of negative emotions such as anger, grief, anxiety, and fear, and the presence of positive emotions—in particular, joy.

We will study the various psychological techniques developed by the Stoics for attaining and maintaining tranquility,

and we will employ these techniques in daily living. We will, for example, take care to distinguish between things we can control and things we can't, so that we will no longer worry about the things we can't control and will instead focus our attention on the things we can control. We will also recognize how easy it is for other people to disturb our tranquility, and we will therefore practice Stoic strategies to prevent them from upsetting us.

Finally, we will become a more thoughtful observer of our own life. We will watch ourselves as we go about our daily business and will later reflect on what we saw, trying to identify the sources of distress in our life and thinking about how to avoid that distress.

PRACTICING STOICISM WILL obviously take effort, but this is true of all genuine philosophies of life. Indeed, even “enlightened hedonism” takes effort. The enlightened hedonist’s grand goal in living is to maximize the pleasure he experiences in the course of a lifetime. To practice this philosophy of life, he will spend time discovering, exploring, and ranking sources of pleasure and investigating any untoward side effects they might have. The enlightened hedonist will then devise strategies for maximizing the amount of pleasure he experiences. (Unenlightened hedonism, in which a person thoughtlessly seeks short-term gratification, is not, I think, a coherent philosophy of life.)

The effort required to practice Stoicism will probably be greater than that required to practice enlightened hedonism but less than that required to practice, say, Zen Buddhism.

A Zen Buddhist will have to meditate, a practice that is both time-consuming and (in some of its forms) physically and mentally challenging. The practice of Stoicism, in contrast, doesn't require us to set aside blocks of time in which to "do Stoicism." It does require us periodically to reflect on our life, but these periods of reflection can generally be squeezed into odd moments of the day, such as when we are stuck in traffic or—this was Seneca's recommendation—when we are lying in bed waiting for sleep to come.

When assessing the "costs" associated with practicing Stoicism or any other philosophy of life, readers should realize that there are costs associated with *not* having a philosophy of life. I have already mentioned one such cost: the danger that you will spend your days pursuing valueless things and will therefore waste your life.

Some readers might, at this point, wonder whether the practice of Stoicism is compatible with their religious beliefs. In the case of most religions, I think it is. Christians in particular will find that Stoic doctrines resonate with their religious views. They will, for example, share the Stoics' desire to attain tranquility, although Christians might call it *peace*. They will appreciate Marcus Aurelius's injunction to "love mankind."⁸ And when they encounter Epictetus's observation that some things are up to us and some things are not, and that if we have any sense at all, we will focus our energies on the things that are up to us, Christians will be reminded of the "Serenity Prayer," often attributed to the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

Having said this, I should add that it is also possible for someone simultaneously to be an agnostic and a practicing Stoic.

THE REMAINDER OF this book is divided into four parts. In part 1, I describe the birth of philosophy. Although modern philosophers tend to spend their days debating esoteric topics, the primary goal of most ancient philosophers was to help ordinary people live better lives. Stoicism, as we shall see, was one of the most popular and successful of the ancient schools of philosophy.

In parts 2 and 3, I explain what we must do in order to practice Stoicism. I start by describing the psychological techniques the Stoics developed to attain and subsequently maintain tranquility. I then describe Stoic advice on how best to deal with the stresses of everyday life: How, for example, should we respond when someone insults us? Although much has changed in the past two millennia, human psychology has changed little. This is why those of us living in the twenty-first century can benefit from the advice that philosophers such as Seneca offered to first-century Romans.

Finally, in part 4 of this book, I defend Stoicism against various criticisms, and I reevaluate Stoic psychology in light of modern scientific findings. I end the book by relating the insights I have gained in my own practice of Stoicism.

My fellow academics might have an interest in this book; they might, for example, be curious about my interpretation of various Stoic utterances. The audience I am most interested in reaching, though, is ordinary individuals who worry that they might be misliving. This includes those who have come to the realization that they lack a coherent philosophy of life and as a result are floundering in their daily activities: what they work to accomplish one day only undoes what they accomplished

the day before. It also includes those who have a philosophy of life but worry that it is somehow defective.

I wrote this book with the following question in mind: If the ancient Stoics had taken it upon themselves to write a guidebook for twenty-first-century individuals—a book that would tell us how to have a good life—what might that book have looked like? The pages that follow are my answer to this question.

PART ONE

The Rise of Stoicism



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ONE

Philosophy Takes an Interest in Life

THERE HAVE PROBABLY always been philosophers, in some sense of the word. They were those individuals who not only asked questions—such as Where did the world come from? Where did people come from? and Why are there rainbows?—but more important, went on to ask follow-up questions. When told, for example, that the world was created by the gods, these proto-philosophers would have realized that this answer didn't get to the bottom of things. They would have gone on to ask why the gods made the world, how they made it, and—most vexatiously to those trying to answer their questions—who made the gods.

However and whenever it may have started, philosophical thinking took a giant leap forward in the sixth century BC. We find Pythagoras (570–500 BC) philosophizing in Italy; Thales (636–546 BC), Anaximander (641–547 BC), and Heracleitus (535–475 BC) in Greece; Confucius (551–479 BC) in China; and Buddha (563–483 BC) in India. It isn't clear whether these individuals discovered philosophy independently of one another; nor is it clear which direction philosophical influence flowed, if it indeed flowed.

The Greek biographer Diogenes Laertius, from the vantage point of the third century AD, offered an eminently readable (but not entirely reliable) history of early philosophy. According to Diogenes, early Western philosophy had two separate branches.¹ One branch—he calls it the Italian branch—began with Pythagoras. If we follow through the various successors of Pythagoras, we ultimately come to Epicurus, whose own school of philosophy was a major rival to the Stoic school. The other branch—Diogenes calls it the Ionian branch—started with Anaximander, who (intellectually, pedagogically) begat Anaximenes, who begat Anaxagoras, who begat Archelaus, who, finally, begat Socrates (469–399 BC).

Socrates lived a remarkable life. He also died a remarkable death: He had been tried for corrupting the youth of Athens and other alleged misdeeds, found guilty by his fellow citizens, and sentenced to die by drinking poison hemlock. He could have avoided this punishment by throwing himself on the mercy of the court or by running away after the sentence had been handed down. His philosophical principles, though, would not let him do these things. After his death, Socrates' many followers not only continued to do philosophy but attracted followers of their own. Plato, the best-known of his students, founded the school of philosophy known as the Academy, Aristippus founded the Cyrenaic school, Euclides founded the Megarian school, Phaedo founded the Elian school, and Antisthenes founded the Cynic school. What had been a trickle of philosophical activity before Socrates became, after his death, a veritable torrent.