

A GUIDE TO THE GOOD LIFE BY WILLIAM IRVINE| BOOK SUMMARY

A Guide to the Good Life is an eye-opening read about how to live a happier and more meaningful life. The book challenges you to think about living life as an art. The art of living is a skill to be practiced (rather than “misliving” and failing to acquire the happiness you want).

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.

PART ONE: THE RISE OF STOICISM

Philosophy Takes an Interest in Life

Affiliating oneself with a school of philosophy was a serious business. According to the historian Simon Price, “Adherence to a philosophical sect was not simply a matter for the mind, or the result of mere intellectual fashion. Those who took their philosophy seriously attempted to live that philosophy from day to day.” And just as a modern individual’s religion can become the key element of his personal identity, an ancient Greek’s or Roman’s philosophical association became an important part of who he was.

Readers of this book should keep in mind that although I am advocating Stoicism as a philosophy of life, it isn’t the only option available to those seeking such a philosophy.

The First Stoics

Zeno (333–261 BC) was the first Stoic. Zeno’s father was a merchant of purple dye and used to come home from his travels with books for Zeno to read. Among them were philosophy books purchased in Athens. These books aroused Zeno’s interest in both philosophy and Athens.

Zeno set out to learn philosophical theory. He went off to study with Stilpo, of the Megarian school. He also studied with Polemo at the Academy, and in around 300 BC, he started his own school of philosophy. In his teaching, he appears to have mixed the lifestyle advice of Crates with the theoretical philosophy of Polemo.

Zeno's school of philosophy enjoyed immediate success. His followers were initially called Zenonians, but because he was in the habit of giving his lectures in the Stoa Poikile, they subsequently became known as the Stoics—as.

Roman Stoicism

The most important of the Roman Stoics—and the Stoics from whom, I think, modern individuals have the most to gain—were Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, also known as Seneca the Younger, was born sometime between 4 and 1 BC in Corduba, Spain. Although we have more of his philosophical writings than we have of any other Stoic, he wasn't the most prolific of the Stoics. Nor was he particularly original. Nevertheless, his Stoic writings are quite wonderful. His essays and letters are full of insight into the human condition. In these writings, Seneca talks about the things that typically make people unhappy—such as grief, anger, old age, and social anxieties—and about what we can do to make our life not just tolerable but joyful.

Gaius Musonius Rufus, the least well-known of the four great Roman Stoics, was born in around 30 AD. Because of his family's standing, Musonius could have gone far in politics, but instead he started a school of philosophy. We know little about Musonius in part because he, like Socrates, didn't bother to write down his philosophical thoughts. Fortunately, Musonius had a pupil, Lucius, who took notes during lectures. In these notes, Lucius often begins by talking about what “he,” Musonius, said in response to some question. It therefore seems likely that the lectures Musonius gave in his school weren't monologues; rather, he carried on a two-way Socratic conversation with his students.

Epictetus, the most famous of Musonius's students, was born into slavery sometime between 50 and 60 AD. According to Epictetus, the primary concern of philosophy should be the art of living: Just as wood is the medium of the carpenter and bronze is the medium of the sculptor, your life is the medium on which you practice the art of living.

“Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will, and selfishness—all of them due to the offenders’ ignorance of what is good or evil.” These words were written not by a slave like Epictetus, whom we would naturally expect to encounter insolence and ill will; they were written by the person who was at the time the most powerful man in the world: Marcus Aurelius, emperor of Rome.

As Roman emperors go, Marcus was exceptionally good. For one thing, he exercised great restraint in his use of power. No emperor, we are told, showed more respect to the Senate than Marcus did. He took care not to waste public money.

PART TWO: STOIC PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES

Negative Visualization: What’s the Worst That Can Happen?

Any thoughtful person will periodically contemplate the bad things that can happen to him. The obvious reason for doing this is to prevent those things from happening.

But no matter how hard we try to prevent bad things from happening to us, some will happen anyway. Seneca therefore points to a second reason for contemplating the bad things that can happen to us. If we think about these things, we will lessen their impact on us when, despite our efforts at prevention, they happen.

We humans are unhappy in large part because we are insatiable; after working hard to get what we want, we routinely lose interest in the object of our desire. Rather than feeling satisfied, we feel a bit bored, and in response to this boredom, we go on to form new, even grander desires.

One key to happiness, then, is to forestall the adaptation process: We need to take steps to prevent ourselves from taking for granted, once we get them, the things we worked so hard to get. And because we have probably failed to take such steps in the past, there are doubtless many things in our life to which we have adapted, things that we once dreamed of having but that we now take for granted, including, perhaps, our spouse, our children, our house, our car, and our job.

The Stoics recommended that we spend time imagining that we have lost the things we value—that our wife has left us, our car was stolen, or we lost our job. Doing this, the Stoics thought, will make us value our wife, our car, and our job

more than we otherwise would. This technique is, I think, the single most valuable technique in the Stoics' psychological tool kit.

The Dichotomy of Control: On Becoming Invincible

Our most important choice in life, according to Epictetus, is whether to concern ourselves with things external to us or things internal. Most people choose the former because they think harms and benefits come from outside themselves. According to Epictetus he will look “for all benefit and harm to come from himself.”

While most people seek to gain contentment by changing the world around them, Epictetus advises us to gain contentment by changing ourselves—more precisely, by changing our desires.

Besides having complete control over our goals and values, Marcus points out that we have complete control over our character. We are, he says, the only ones who can stop ourselves from attaining goodness and integrity. We have it entirely within our power, for example, to prevent viciousness and cupidity from finding a home in our soul.

It is obviously foolish for us to spend time and energy concerning ourselves with things outside of our control. Because we have no control at all over the things in question, any time and energy we spend will have no effect on the outcome of events and will therefore be wasted time and energy, and, as Marcus observes, “Nothing is worth doing pointlessly.”

Remember that among the things over which we have complete control are the goals we set for ourselves. I think that when a Stoic concerns himself with things over which he has some but not complete control, such as winning a tennis match, he will be very careful about the goals he sets for himself. In particular, he will be careful to set internal rather than external goals. Thus, his goal in playing tennis will not be to win a match (something external, over which he has only partial control) but to play to the best of his ability in the match (something internal, over which he has complete control). By choosing this goal, he will spare himself frustration or disappointment should he lose the match: Since it was not his goal to win the match, he will not have failed to attain his goal, as long as he played his best. His tranquility will not be disrupted.

Fatalism: Letting Go of the Past ... and the Present

One way to preserve our tranquility, the Stoics thought, is to take a fatalistic attitude toward the things that happen to us. According to Seneca, we should offer ourselves to fate, inasmuch as “it is a great consolation that it is together with the

universe we are swept along.”

One might expect the ancient Romans to refuse to participate in life’s contests; why bother, when the future has already been determined? What is interesting is that despite their determinism, despite their belief that whatever happened had to happen, the ancients were not fatalistic about the future. The Stoics, for example, did not sit around apathetically, resigned to whatever the future held in store; to the contrary, they spent their days working to affect the outcome of future events.

When the Stoics advocate fatalism, they are advocating a restricted form of the doctrine. More precisely, they are advising us to be fatalistic with respect to the past, to keep firmly in mind that the past cannot be changed. In saying that we shouldn’t dwell on the past, the Stoics are not suggesting that we should never think about it. We sometimes should think about the past to learn lessons that can help us in our efforts to shape the future.

Notice that the advice that we be fatalistic with respect to the past and the present is consistent with the advice, offered in the preceding chapter, that we not concern ourselves with things over which we have no control. We have no control over the past; nor do we have any control over the present, if by the present we mean this very moment. Therefore, we are wasting our time if we worry about past or present events.

Self-Denial: On Dealing with the Dark Side of Pleasure

Besides contemplating bad things happening, we should sometimes live as if they had happened. In particular, instead of merely thinking about what it would be like to lose our wealth, we should periodically “practice poverty”: We should, that is, content ourselves with “the scantiest and cheapest fare” and with “coarse and rough dress.”

Readers should realize, though, that the Stoics didn’t go around flogging themselves. Indeed, the discomforts they inflicted upon themselves were rather minor. Furthermore, they did not inflict these discomforts to punish themselves; rather, they did it to increase their enjoyment of life. What the Stoics were advocating, then, is more appropriately described as a program of voluntary discomfort than as a program of self-inflicted discomfort.

A person who periodically experiences minor discomforts will grow confident that he can withstand major discomforts as well, so the prospect of experiencing such discomforts at some future time will not, at present, be a source of anxiety for him.

Another benefit of undertaking acts of voluntary discomfort is that it helps us appreciate what we already have. It is, of course, nice to be in a warm room when it is cold and blustery outside, but if we really want to enjoy that warmth and sense of shelter, we should go outside in the cold for a while and then come back in.

Besides periodically engaging in acts of voluntary discomfort, we should, say the Stoics, periodically forgo opportunities to experience pleasure. We might, for example, make a point of passing up an opportunity to drink wine—not because we fear becoming an alcoholic but so we can learn self-control. For the Stoics—and, indeed, for anyone attempting to practice a philosophy of life—self-control will be an important trait to acquire.

Meditation: Watching Ourselves Practice Stoicism

To help us advance our practice of Stoicism, Seneca advises that we periodically meditate on the events of daily living, how we responded to these events, and how, in accordance with Stoic principles, we should have responded to them.

He attributes this technique to his teacher Sextius, who, at bedtime, would ask himself, “What ailment of yours have you cured today? What failing have you resisted? Where can you show improvement?”

Something else we can do during our Stoic meditations is judge our progress as Stoics. There are several indicators by which we can measure this progress. For one thing, as Stoicism takes hold of us, we will notice that our relations with other people have changed. We will discover, says Epictetus, that our feelings aren’t hurt when others tell us that we know nothing or that we are “mindless fools” about things external to us. We will shrug off their insults and slights. We will also shrug off any praise they might direct our way. Indeed, Epictetus thinks the admiration of other people is a negative barometer of our progress as Stoics: “If people think you amount to something, distrust yourself.”

Other signs of progress, says Epictetus, are the following: We will stop blaming, censuring, and praising others; we will stop boasting about ourselves and how much we know; and we will blame ourselves, not external circumstances, when our desires are thwarted. And because we have gained a degree of mastery over our desires, we will find that we have fewer of them than we did before; we will find, Epictetus says, that our “impulses toward everything are diminished.”

The most important sign that we are making progress as Stoics, though, is a change in our emotional life. We will find ourselves experiencing fewer negative emotions. We will also find that we are spending less time than we used to wishing

things could be different and more time enjoying things as they are. We will find that we are experiencing a degree of tranquility that our life previously lacked.

PART THREE: STOIC ADVICE

Duty: On Loving Mankind

On examining our life, we will find that other people are the source of some of the greatest delights life has to offer, including love and friendship. But we will also discover that they are the cause of most of the negative emotions we experience.

Because the Stoics valued tranquility and because they appreciated the power other people have to disrupt our tranquility, we might expect them to have lived as hermits and to advise us to do the same, but the Stoics did no such thing. They thought that man is by nature a social animal and therefore that we have a duty to form and maintain relationships with other people, despite the trouble they might cause us.

If we do the things we were made for, says Marcus, we will enjoy “a man’s true delight.” But an important part of our function, as we have seen, is to work with and for our fellow men. Marcus therefore concludes that doing his social duty will give him the best chance at having a good life. This, for Marcus, is the reward for doing one’s duty: a good life.

Social Relations: On Dealing with Other People

To begin with, the Stoics recommend that we prepare for our dealings with other people before we have to deal with them. Thus, Epictetus advises us to form “a certain character and pattern” for ourselves when we are alone. Then, when we associate with other people, we should remain true to who we are.

Besides advising us to avoid people with vices, Seneca advises us to avoid people who are simply whiny, “who are melancholy and bewail everything, who find pleasure in every opportunity for complaint.” He justifies this avoidance by observing that a companion “who is always upset and bemoans everything is a foe to tranquility.

When we find ourselves irritated by someone’s shortcomings, we should pause to reflect on our own shortcomings. Doing this will help us become more empathetic to this individual’s faults and therefore become more tolerant of him.

Insults: On Putting Up with Put-Downs

When dealing with insults, one strategy is to pause, when insulted, to consider whether what the insulter said is true. If it is, there is little reason to be upset. Suppose, for example, that someone mocks us for being bald when we in fact are bald: “Why is it an insult,” Seneca asks, “to be told what is self-evident?”

Another strategy is to consider the source of an insult. If I respect the source, if I value his opinions, then his critical remarks shouldn't upset me.

So, how should you deal with insults? By laughing off an insult, we are implying that we don't take the insulter and his insults seriously. To imply this, of course, is to insult the insulter without directly doing so. It is therefore a response that is likely to deeply frustrate the insulter.

Refusing to respond to an insult is, paradoxically, one of the most effective responses possible. For one thing, as Seneca points out, our nonresponse can be quite disconcerting to the insulter, who will wonder whether or not we understood his insult. Furthermore, we are robbing him of the pleasure of having upset us, and he is likely to be upset as a result.

Grief: On Vanquishing Tears with Reason

Although it might not be possible to eliminate grief from our life, it is possible, Seneca thinks, to take steps to minimize the amount of grief we experience over the course of a lifetime.

The stoics primary grief-prevention strategy was to engage in negative visualization. By contemplating the deaths of those we love, we will remove some of the shock we experience if they die; we will in a sense have seen it coming.

In normal, prospective negative visualization, we imagine losing something we currently possess; in retrospective negative visualization, we imagine never having had something that we have lost. By engaging in retrospective negative visualization, Seneca thinks, we can replace our feelings of regret at having lost something with feelings of thanks for once having had it.

Anger: On Overcoming Anti-Joy

Seneca offers lots of specific advice on how to prevent anger. We should, he says, fight our tendency to believe the worst about others and our tendency to jump to conclusions about their motivations. We need to keep in mind that just because things don't turn out the way we want them to, it doesn't follow that someone has

done us an injustice. In particular, says Seneca, we need to remember that in some cases, the person at whom we are angry in fact helped us; in such cases, what angers us is that he didn't help us even more.

To avoid becoming angry, says Seneca, we should also keep in mind that the things that anger us generally don't do us any real harm; they are instead mere annoyances. By allowing ourselves to get angry over little things, we take what might have been a barely noticeable disruption of our day and transform it into a tranquility-shattering state of agitation.

Marcus also offers advice on anger avoidance. He recommends, as we have seen, that we contemplate the impermanence of the world around us. If we do this, he says, we will realize that many of the things we think are important in fact aren't, at least not in the grand scheme of things.

When angry, says Seneca, we should take steps to "turn all [anger's] indications into their opposites." We should force ourselves to relax our face, soften our voice, and slow our pace of walking. If we do this, our internal state will soon come to resemble our external state, and our anger, says Seneca, will have dissipated.

Personal Values: On Seeking Fame

Epictetus advises us not to seek social status, since if we make it our goal to please others, we will no longer be free to please ourselves. We will, he says, have enslaved ourselves.

If we wish to retain our freedom, says Epictetus, we must be careful, while dealing with other people, to be indifferent to what they think of us.

One way to overcome the obsession of caring what people think, is to realize that in order to win the admiration of other people, we will have to adopt their values. More precisely, we will have to live a life that is successful according to their notion of success. Consequently, before we try to win the admiration of these other people, we should stop to ask whether their notion of success is compatible with ours.

Personal Values: On Luxurious Living

Seneca says it is folly "to think that it is the amount of money and not the state of mind that matters!" Musonius agrees with this assessment. Possessing wealth, he observes, won't enable us to live without sorrow and won't console us in our old age. And although wealth can procure for us physical luxuries and various pleasures of the senses, it can never bring us contentment or banish our grief.

There is indeed a danger that if we are exposed to a luxurious lifestyle, we will lose our ability to take delight in simple things.

When people become hard to please, a curious thing happens. Rather than mourning the loss of their ability to enjoy simple things, they take pride in their newly gained inability to enjoy anything but “the best.” The Stoics, however, would pity these individuals. They would point out that by undermining their ability to enjoy simple things, these individuals have seriously impaired their ability to enjoy life. The Stoics work hard to avoid falling victim to this kind of connoisseurship. Indeed, the Stoics value highly their ability to enjoy ordinary life—and indeed, their ability to find sources of delight even when living in primitive conditions.

How much wealth should we acquire? According to Seneca, our financial goal should be to acquire “an amount that does not descend to poverty, and yet is not far removed from poverty.” We should, he says, learn to restrain luxury, cultivate frugality, and “view poverty with unprejudiced eyes.” The lifestyle of a Stoic, he adds, should be somewhere in between that of a sage and that of an ordinary person.

Exile: On Surviving a Change of Place

To endure and even thrive in exile, Musonius says, a person must keep in mind that his happiness depends more on his values than on where he resides.

Even though readers of this book are unlikely to be exiled by their government, they run a considerable risk, if current social trends continue, of being exiled by their children—exiled, that is, to a nursing home. It is a transition that, if they let it, can severely disrupt their tranquility.

Old Age: On Being Banished to a Nursing Home

Old age, Seneca argues, has its benefits: “Let us cherish and love old age; for it is full of pleasure if one knows how to use it.” Indeed, he claims that the most delightful time of life is “when it is on the downward slope, but has not yet reached the abrupt decline.

The proximity of death, rather than depressing us, can be turned to our advantage. In our youth, because we assumed that we would live forever, we took our days for granted and as a result wasted many of them. In our old age, however, waking up each morning can be a cause for celebration. As Seneca notes, “If God is pleased to add another day, we should welcome it with glad hearts.” And after celebrating having been given another day to live, we can fill that day with appreciative living.

Dying: On a Good End to a Good Life

Those who have lived without a coherent philosophy of life, though, will desperately want to delay death. They might want the delay so that they can get the thing that—at last!—they have discovered to be of value. (It is unfortunate that this dawned on them so late in life, but, as Seneca observes, “what you have done in the past will be manifest only at the time when you draw your last breath.”)

When Stoics contemplate their own death, it is not because they long for death but because they want to get the most out of life. As we have seen, someone who thinks he will live forever is far more likely to waste his days than someone who fully understands that his days are numbered, and one way to gain this understanding is periodically to contemplate his own death.

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

The most important reason for adopting a philosophy of life, is that if we lack one, there is a danger that we will mislive—that we will spend our life pursuing goals that aren’t worth attaining or will pursue worthwhile goals in a foolish manner and will therefore fail to attain them.

What will be our reward for practicing Stoicism? According to the Stoics, we can hope to become more virtuous, in the ancient sense of the word. We will also, they say, experience fewer negative emotions, such as anger, grief, disappointment, and anxiety, and because of this we will enjoy a degree of tranquility that previously would have been unattainable. Along with avoiding negative emotions, we will increase our chances of experiencing one particularly significant positive emotion: delight in the world around us.

PART FOUR: STOICISM FOR MODERN LIVES**The Decline of Stoicism**

Stoicism was also undermined by the rise of Christianity, in part because the claims made by Christianity were similar to those made by Stoicism. The Stoics claimed, for example, that the gods created man, care about man’s well-being, and gave him a divine element (the ability to reason); the Christians claimed that God created man, cares about him in a very personal way, and gave him a divine element (a soul). And Marcus’s advice that we “love mankind” was certainly echoed in Christianity.

Because of these similarities, Stoics and Christians found themselves competing for the same potential adherents. In this competition, however, Christianity had one big advantage over Stoicism: It promised not just life after death but an afterlife in which one would be infinitely satisfied for an eternity. The Stoics, on the other hand, thought it possible that there was life after death but were not certain of it, and if there was indeed life after death, the Stoics were uncertain what it would be like.

Stoicism Reconsidered

Our evolutionary ancestors who had reasoning ability were more likely to survive and reproduce than those who didn't. It is also important to realize that we did not gain the ability to reason so that we could transcend our evolutionarily programmed desires, such as our desire for sex and social status. To the contrary, we gained the ability to reason so that we could more effectively satisfy those desires—so that we could, for example, devise complex strategies by which to satisfy our desire for sex and social status.

We have the abilities we do because possessing them enabled our evolutionary ancestors to survive and reproduce. From this it does not follow, though, that we must use these abilities to survive and reproduce. Indeed, thanks to our reasoning ability, we have it in our power to “misuse” our evolutionary inheritance. e.g. using your sense of hearing to enjoy music instead of to avoid danger.

Although our evolutionary programming helped us flourish as a species, it has in many respects outlived its usefulness.

If our goal is not merely to survive and reproduce but to enjoy a tranquil existence, the pain associated with a loss of social status isn't just useless, it is counterproductive. As we go about our daily affairs, other people, because of their evolutionary programming, will work, often unconsciously, to gain social status. As a result, they will be inclined to snub us, insult us, or, more generally, do things to put us in our place, socially speaking. Their actions can have the effect of disrupting our tranquility—if we let them. What we must do, in these cases, is use—more precisely, “misuse”—our intellect to override the evolutionary programming that makes insults painful to us. We must, in other words, use our reasoning ability to remove the emotional sting of insults and thereby make them less disruptive to our tranquility.

Practicing Stoicism

The first tip I would offer to those wishing to give Stoicism a try is to practice what I have referred to as stealth Stoicism: You would do well, I think, to keep it a secret that you are a practicing Stoic. By practicing Stoicism stealthily, you can gain its benefits while avoiding one significant cost: the teasing and outright mockery of your friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers.

My next piece of advice is not to try to master all the Stoic techniques at once but to start with one technique and, having become proficient in it, go on to another.

Practicing Stoicism doesn't take much effort; indeed, it takes far less effort than the effort one is likely to waste in the absence of a philosophy of life. One can practice Stoicism without anyone's being any the wiser, and one can practice it for a time and then abandon it and be no worse off for the attempt. There is, in other words, little to lose by giving Stoicism a try as one's philosophy of life, and there is potentially much to gain.