

THE MNEME MANUAL

μνήμη

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mneme (nē' mē), n. **1.** *psych.* the retentive basis or basic principle in a mind or organism accounting for memory. **2.** (cap.) *Class. Myth.* the muse of memory, one of the original three Muses.¹

INTRODUCTION

Mnemosyne (nē mos' ə nē' ...), n. the ancient Greek goddess of memory, a daughter of Uranus and Gaea and the mother by Zeus of the Muses.²

I received an email from an unhappy member of the Stoic community who wanted his name removed from the registry of New Stoa. He was looking for a job and didn't want his association with us to compromise his employment prospects. He was an unemployed or underemployed philosophy teacher and wanted a better situation. I tried to reason with him about how a Stoic would approach this problem, but he angrily told me not to preach to him about Stoicism, he had read all the books, and he didn't need my advice. Then he ended our correspondence with this comment. This is an exact quote: “*But I really do have obligations and these must take precedence before stoic principles—just as my Christian duties take precedence before pagan philosophy.*”

Frankly, I was floored and left speechless—for about one minute. I almost answered his ridiculous comment, then thought better of it. Not because I didn't have an answer, but because it is against my policy to argue with anyone who wants to leave the Stoic community. We are not a cult. It's his life, and he can do with it what he chooses.

What I really wanted to say to him is that for a Stoic, *nothing* takes precedence before Stoic principles. Nothing! But, then, he is obviously an academic Stoic, not a practitioner. He is a clear example of the difference between an academic and a real Stoic, all theory and no practice, which was anathema to the classical Stoics. For this disgruntled philosophy teacher, Stoicism is an intellectual parlor game, not a way of life. But he doesn't end there. Here is his final misunderstanding: “... my Christian duties take precedence before pagan philosophy.” Not only does he fail to understand the whole purpose of being a Stoic, he clearly states that his *religious faith* is more important than the *reasoning mind* of the philosopher. And in case there is any doubt about his meaning, he refers to Stoicism as a “pagan philosophy” as if that makes it inferior to his religion.

How unfortunate. How misguided. If you forget everything you ever learn about Stoicism, I hope you remember one thing: being a Stoic is not an intellectual abstraction; it is not a game; it is a way of life. A Stoic's principles take precedence before *everything*. It *is* everything. It is how we live life—and live it well. We do *not* take second place to someone's religious myths and wishful thinking.

The first and most necessary topic in philosophy
is the practical application of principles.....

Epictetus, *Enchiridion* #51

One way to insure that you are not misled into believing our philosophy is some kind of distant, abstract, ancient world-view that doesn't have anything to do with the *real* world we live in is to begin to live like a Stoic right now. You can do that first by understanding and holding tightly to essential Stoic doctrine, then adding specific exercises that bring life and strength to what you know. The following is a summary of that Stoic doctrine condensed into the briefest possible language. This reference point in Stoic thought is the basis for the exercises that follow. If the theory is understood and the exercises are practiced with an open mind and sincerity, you will quickly acquire an insight into what it really means to think like and *be* a real Stoic.

*

Mneme: “Recitation of the DOE”

The greatest tribal warrior who ever lived was probably illiterate, a master of the keen memory and oral tradition that has been with us for all of human evolution. Genghis Khan's 150,000 cavalry warriors didn't move as a single massive column, as was common in his day, the 12th century, but were broken into many units and spread out over great distances. The difficulty in managing such an army was in communication. Virtually all of his soldiers were also illiterate, including most of the officers, which meant that all messages had to be communicated orally. As we all know, the further you are from the source of any oral communication, the more it gets distorted. To prevent misunderstanding, all laws, codes of conduct, and battle orders made by the Great Khan were composed in a commonly known Mongolian poetic style, set to music, and sung by the men as they rode on horseback.³

What follows is written in the form of verse for the same reason: it's easier to remember and less likely to be distorted with repetition. It's meant to be memorized. *Mneme*, or memory exercises, were very much a part of a classical Stoic's education. What you will find here is an extreme synthesis of the Discourses of Epictetus (the DOE), organized and composed into a common poetic style, blank verse. The endnotes that identify Epictetus's various points of theory in this verse, even though numerous, are not all that can be found but are some of my personal favorites. If you have any doubt about the dogma of this *mneme*, I encourage you to look up the references provided. *The DOE* is *mneme*, a memory exercise that can begin each day and/or as often as needed when one wishes or needs to remember Epictetus's marching orders for life.

“The DOE”

One rule to unite us:

*live in agreement with Nature.*⁴

Two maxims to guide us:

Good is virtue that evil lacks;

*all the rest is indifferent.*⁵

Good and evil are in the will;

*only will is in our power.*⁶

Three studies abide us:⁷

Judgments and the inner discourse,

Desires and the rising passions,

Actions and the noble duties.

Hear the sage inside us:

*practice, practice, practice, practice.*⁸

* *

ONE RULE

One rule to unite us:

live in agreement with Nature.

Epictetus remarked that it was a rule in life ... to do what was in accordance with nature. For, if we desire in every matter and on every occasion to conform to nature, we must on every occasion evidently make it our aim Philosophers, therefore, first exercise us in theory, which is the more easy task, and then lead us to the more difficult [1:26].

The actual heading of this chapter of the *Discourses* is entitled, “What the Rule of Life Is.” About this there can be no doubt. From Zeno to the end of the classical period the Stoic motto, which is said a number of ways – in harmony with nature, in agreement with Nature, conformably with nature – all mean the same thing: there is one rule that unites all Stoics and all aspects of Stoic philosophy. This is so important that Epictetus even matter-of-factly states that anyone who does not live by this rule “...will wander up and down, entirely deaf and blind, supposing himself to be somebody, while he is nobody.”⁹

It's important to remember that living in agreement with Nature does *not* mean living by tooth and claw and survival of the biggest, strongest, and fittest among us. That would be a better description of the other creatures in the forest. No, our unique ability given to us by Nature is not bigger teeth and muscles, but bigger brains. Using reason is our way, or should be our way. If there is any doubt in your mind about the one rule of life, read Epictetus.

TWO MAXIMS

Two maxims to guide us:

*Good is virtue that evil lacks;
all the rest is indifferent.*

*Good and evil are in the will;
only will is in our power.*

The First Maxim: Good is virtue that evil lacks; all the rest is indifferent.

The essence of good and evil is a certain kind of moral purpose. What are things outward, then? Materials on which the moral purpose may act, in attaining its own good or evil. How, then, will it attain good? If it be not dazzled by its own materials; for right principles concerning these materials keep the moral purpose in a good state; but perverse and distorted principles in a bad one. This law God hath ordained, who says, “If you wish for good, receive it from yourself.”¹⁰

Epictetus

The first maxim is a continuum, and the second maxim is a polarity. This one, the continuum, connects the good on one end and evil on the other with indifferent things in the middle. “Some things are good, some evil, and some indifferent. Now the good are the virtues ... the evil are vices ... the indifferent lie between these, as riches, health, life, death, pleasure, pain.¹¹ In order to understand what it is we are memorizing, the following will analyze this *mneme* line by line.

Good is virtue that evil lacks. What does this mean? We have already seen from our general principals that the good and only good, is virtue. “Only that which is good and can never be used for undue gain and immoral purposes qualifies unequivocally as good. Only the virtues are good in every situation and on every occasion, and therefore qualify for the name that must always be honorable, the Good.”¹²

So, the good is virtue. The cardinal virtues, as you will recall, are wisdom, justice, courage, and decorum. *Virtue that evil lacks* means that evil is simply a lack of virtue. That's what evil is. That's it. Evil is a lack of virtue. It has nothing to do with committing a frightful sin whispered into your ear by a Prince of Darkness that is calculated to bring about the wrath of a vengeful god. That's a children's story. If evil is a lack of virtue, then it is the *absence* of wisdom, justice, courage, and decorum.

We can use *bad* and *evil* interchangeably. “What we commonly call bad (*kakon*) is not really bad. Sickness, poverty, and exile are the *indifferents* to the wise. Even death, because it is the inevitable and natural process of change, is neither good nor bad and must be one of the indifferents. There is no evil in Nature, only in human

beings when they act without virtue. Just as virtue is the only good, so it is that the acts of persons who are lacking in virtue are the only sources of evil in this world.”¹³

Now we come to the end of the first maxim: *all the rest is indifferent*. This is one of the most important concepts in Stoicism, and one we must all learn, remember, and return to time and again. These are what Epictetus constantly refers to as “externals.” Good and evil come from inside, internal, not from outside of us, the externals. The externals are matters that belong to others as well as the inevitable consequences of Nature. “All those things we *commonly* call good or bad [see above] are neither good nor bad and are only indifferent. Only virtue is good, and only the lack of virtue is bad.”¹⁴ So, except for wisdom, justice, courage, and decorum, or the lack thereof, all the rest are indifferents. What *are* indifferents? What does that mean exactly?

For years I placed little value on the indifferents, simply because I didn't really understand them. The Epictetus quote about the indifferents as materials upon which the moral purpose may act, finally sunk into my thick skull and rearranged my thinking on the matter altogether. In looking over what I have written on the subject in the past, I could see I was saying all the right words, but not really knowing them in my gut. It's so easy to gloss over the indifferents when you learn that you must be indifferent to everything but your ethical behavior. That's what I did, and that's not what it means at all.

To isolate virtues *without* indifferents is to exist in a vacuum, which is impossible and absurd. Without the indifferents to work on, you have no virtues. In fact, you don't even exist. Indifferents give you something to *do* in life. They *are* your life. Everything that happens *to* you is an external, an indifferent, and what you *do* with everything is what defines your character as noble or ignoble, good or evil. To say you're not going to have anything to do with externals is ridiculous. You really don't have a choice. You're only choice is *what* you do with them, and *how* you act upon the materials you have been given.

*In order for good to be always obtainable, or an evil always avoidable, they must depend exclusively on man's freedom; but the only things which fulfill these conditions are moral good and evil. They alone depend on us. Here, 'everything else,' which does not depend on us, refers to the necessary linkage of cause and effect, which is not subject to our freedom. It must be indifferent to us: that is, we must not introduce any differences into it, but accept it in its entirety, as willed by fate. This is the domain of nature.*¹⁵

Epictetus

It's like the potter sitting at his wheel. The indifferents are like the clay. How can the potter be indifferent to his clay? Without the clay he has nothing to do but watch the wheel spin around. The potter *cares* about his clay. The skill of the potter in working with his hands to form a beautiful and useful vessel from this lump of clay is like the skill of the Stoic in working with the cardinal virtues in forming a noble character. The Stoic's clay is made up of the indifferents. Without the clay and without the indifferents, the potter and the Stoic have nothing upon which to practice their skills. Don't be afraid of your clay, the indifferents; don't avoid them. Use them, enjoy them, work with them. Practice, practice, practice.

*The principle of all Stoicism is, moreover, precisely indifference to indifferent things. This means, in the first place, that the only value is moral good, which depends on our freedom, and that everything that does not depend on our freedom—poverty, wealth, sickness, and health—is neither good nor bad, and is therefore indifferent. Second, it means that we must not make any distinction between indifferent things; in other words, we must love them equally, since they have been willed by universal Nature.*¹⁶

Pierre Hadot

* *

The Second Maxim: Good and evil are in the will; only will is in our power.

*Seek not good from without; seek it within yourselves, or you will never find it.*¹⁷

Epictetus

To keep the first and second maxims from being entangled with each other, it may be helpful to remember that the first maxim is a continuum and the second is a polarity. In the continuum, Epictetus is saying that good and evil are at opposite ends, and the indifferents are in between. In the second maxim, good and evil are not at opposite ends of a polarity, they are together at the same end with our will. They are choices of our will. At the other end of this polarity are the externals, the indifferents, those things not in our power. So, we now have a polarity of internals and externals. On one side are the choices of the will, what things are in our power; and on the other side are those things that are not in our power, everything else. If this isn't entirely clear, perhaps the following discussion will make it so.

Good and evil are in the will. Stoics believe we choose either good or evil by exercising the power of our will. In fact, not only do we have this choice, it is our only *real* choice, and it is our choice alone. Friends, enemies, tyrants, no one, not even a god can take away the power of choice to do good or evil that we have in the will. As Epictetus said of tyrants, “You will fetter my leg, but not even Zeus himself can get the better of my free will.”¹⁸ Such a great power we have. Think about that. Think about what a great discovery the Stoics made about the power of the will to choose to do good or evil.

Before we go on, perhaps we should make sure we know what our will is. When in doubt, we can always consult a dictionary. Here's what mine says:

1.a. The mental faculty by which one deliberately chooses or decides upon a course of action; volition. **b.**

The act of exercising the will...¹⁹

When we say that virtue and the lack of virtue are in the will, we are talking about the “mental faculty by which one deliberately chooses or decides upon a course of action.” When we say that only will is in our power, we are saying that good and evil only exist in our mental faculty as a choice, and *only this choice between good and evil is in our power* – nothing else. That's where our power ends. Everything else is either in the will of another individual or in the Will of Nature.

*But now, although it is in our power to care for one thing, and apply ourselves to one, we choose rather to care for many, and to encumber ourselves with many—body, property, brother, friend, child, and slave—and, by this multiplicity of encumbrances we are burdened and weighed down...²⁰
What, then, is to be done? To make the best of what is in our power, and take the rest as it occurs. And how does it occur? As God wills.²¹*

Epictetus

Is that right? The one power that we have seems right, but do we not have *any* power over anything else? I mean, what about the potter and his clay as a simile for the Stoic working with his indifferents, the externals? Don't I have some power over my health, for example, if I eat right, exercise, avoid destructive habits, et cetera? Statistically, my chances of living a long life increase if I take care of my health, right? True, but you could be struck by lightning, get run over by a truck, or die of lung cancer at the age of 30 without ever smoking (as my wife's friend did a couple of years ago).

One of the first surprises you discover when you are in the medical profession, or close to someone in that profession, is that people at the peak of health can acquire disabling physical conditions and can die at all ages of diseases that they should never have gotten. Or so we commonly believe. The truth is that we *are* able to take care of ourselves, and prudence says that we *should*, but in the end, a life of good health and the proximity of death are *not* in our power.

The same can be said of all other externals. People who have amassed a fortune want us to believe it was done by their own power, by their superior intelligence and exceptionally hard work. That's just a form of denial and lack of self-awareness. Fate and destiny work twice as hard in the accumulation of wealth as any individual, and it can work to put an end to that wealth overnight.

To begin with, people are born with certain talents that others do not possess. They didn't create these innate talents any more than a genius is responsible for his or her superior intellect. They were born with certain talents as certainly as one child is born into crushing poverty and another is to the manor born. Even of those born into poverty one will struggle night and day to rise above his station and another will succumb to the first drug dealer that knocks on his door. Why? We are born into certain environments and with certain talents that tell much more about us and what our future holds than any other factor.

Here's a story to illustrate my point. Aristotle Onassis, a Greek shipping magnate, amassed one of the greatest fortunes of the 20th century. He was also born into poverty, but he was born with a special talent: he somehow got the best of every deal he made. When he was a small child he would find one marble and trade it for two. Then he would take his two marbles and an old, discarded pair of gloves and trade them all for a broken tricycle with a missing wheel. And so on, until he ended up with the finest bicycle in town. It was always like this for Ari, as his friends called him.

When he was a teenager, his parents moved to a Latin American country, and they could no longer afford to send him to school. So, where did Ari go to work? As an office boy in a trading and shipping company. Before he had been there a year, he overheard a deal that he believed could make him rich. Only, it would require some capital, and he had none. Did that stop him, as it would have stopped 99.9% of the office boys in his city? No. Did he have boundless courage and energy that aggressively put together the capital he needed? No. Actually, he was a bit shy, and didn't really impress anyone as being especially hard-working.

(Albert Einstein was told by his graduate school physics professor that he was very bright but so lazy he would never amount to anything.)

Ari sought out the name of the richest man in town and got his address. Then he went to the man's house and found out at what time he left his estate for work each day. Every morning, Ari stood just outside the man's gate and quietly watched as the rich man's chauffeur-driven limousine turned out of the gate on its way. He made no motion to stop the rich man; didn't beg, didn't call out, just stood there watching as the limo drove by. At first, the man ignored this strange teenager standing there looking at him every day, but then his curiosity got the better of him.

He told his driver to stop, and he asked the boy what he was up to. Ari told him of the great deal he had heard about at his trading company and that he would need two ships to make it work. If the rich man would lend him the money, he would make the deal and split the profits with him. The rich man was convinced, and the Onassis fortune and legend was born.

The choice of good and evil is in the power of *our* will – and ours alone. Everything else is in the will of Nature. We are responsible for one thing; fate is responsible for everything else. Was Aristotle Onassis wasting his time working with all those indifferents that made up his colossal shipping empire? No. Was he bound to be evil in managing all those externals that were not in his power? Of course not. Nature made Aristotle Onassis. Nature gave this poor and shy boy an extraordinary talent. It also gave him the same thing it gave each of us: absolute power over one thing, the choices of the will. If Ari employed virtue to consistently choose good over evil in his work with indifferents, then he was able to build both great wealth *and* a noble character with what he was given.

THREE STUDIES

Three studies abide us:

*Judgments and the inner discourse,
Desires and the rising passions,
Actions and the noble duties.*

*There are three fields of study in which he who would be wise and good must be exercised: that of [1] desires and aversions ... [2] pursuits and avoidances, and in general, the duties of life ... [and, 3] whatever belongs to the judgment.*²²

Epictetus

You'll notice the order in which these class notes were written down by Arrian places desires first and judgments last. Assuming Arrian wrote them down in the given order, Epictetus apparently believed that the thing he needed to emphasize to his students was, first and foremost, the desires. Then, it naturally followed that the actions would proceed from the desires. However, I have taken the liberty of beginning with the judgments that form in the mind, because that's chronologically more accurate. I'm more comfortable starting at the beginning of an event rather than in the middle, and we have seen time and again that what we think about a thing is where it all begins.

The passage above appears to be used by Epictetus for a specific teaching purpose, because as he points out elsewhere that desires and aversions *begin* in the mind. "Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things. Thus death is nothing terrible, else it would have appeared so to Socrates. But the terror consists in our notion of death, that it is terrible."²³ It is the judgment we have learned and reinforced with our inner discourse, what we tell ourselves about death, that creates the fear of death.

And from desire, action surely follows. An impression comes to the mind from outside stimuli, external or internal discourse, and a judgment is made. From this judgment, one feels desire or aversion, and the motivation for action has begun. Epictetus knew this. Listen to what he says: "If what the philosophers say be true, that all men's *actions* [my emphasis] proceed from one source, namely feeling...."²⁴ And what is that feeling? Desire or aversion. We either desire something to be or we desire it not to be.

What Epictetus refers to as "pursuits and avoidances" we can more easily remember as *actions*. Just as we narrowed down the idea of desires and aversions to the single word, "desire," so too can we encompass pursuits and avoidances with a single word. It is important to bear in mind that actions include acts of omission and acts of commission. As Marcus said, "A man does not sin by commission only, but often by omission."²⁵

If you have trouble with such changes, forgive me. I, too, am loathe to take liberties with the word of Epictetus, but such exercises as these require a certain amount of streamlining. Marcus did that,²⁶ and that's what we have done here. The meaning is the same; the words are variously translated according to the light of the translator, and in this case I believe we can safely follow Michael Chase's translation of Pierre Hadot's interpretation of pursuits and avoidance as *actions*,²⁷ which is how the third study will be represented henceforth.

Incidentally, according to Hadot, Epictetus was the first to divide Stoic thought into three studies – judgments, desires, and actions – but he was really just following the three parts of philosophy. He did this by pairing judgment with logic, desires with physics, and actions with ethics.²⁸ Marcus Aurelius apparently followed Epictetus in using the same tripartite division, and it was his focus on these three studies that made up the bulk of his writing exercises we now know as the *Meditations*.²⁹

Judgments:

Take away the complaint, "I have been harmed," and the harm is taken away.³⁰ The habits of your thoughts will become the character of your mind; for the soul is dyed by the thoughts. Dye it, then, with thoughts such as these: wherever one lives, one can live well—even if he must live in a palace.³¹

Marcus Aurelius

Judgment, Logic, and the Inner Discourse. Clearly, the inner discourse, what we tell ourselves about our world, is one of the most important themes in all of Stoic literature. Hadot believes it is the very essence of being a Stoic. He says, "Everything in an individual's life depends on how he represents things to himself—in other words, how he tells them to himself in inner dialogue."³² As you can see from the quotations above, much of the actual work of becoming a Stoic begins with *judgments and the inner discourse*.

So, what does this have to do with logic? The ancients believed that the truth of the judgments that form in the mind could be *proved* by formal logic, syllogisms. However, it's more important to remember that logic is made up of both syllogisms *and* rhetoric. The rhetoric part, essentially the clarity and accuracy of our reasoning with words, the stuff of our inner discourse, is what we emphasize here. There is danger in getting bogged down and sidetracked by analysis, and it's been going on for millenia. Both Seneca and Epictetus caution us against it.

One is led to believe that unless one has constructed syllogisms of the craftiest kind, and reduced fallacies to a compact form in which a false conclusion is derived from a true premise, one will not be in a position to distinguish what one should aim at and what one should avoid.

It makes one ashamed that men of our advanced years should turn a thing as serious as this into a game.

*'Mouse is a syllable,
and a mouse nibbles cheese;
therefore, a syllable nibbles cheese.'*

Suppose for the moment I can't detect the fallacy in that. What danger am I placed in by such a lack of insight?... What childish fatuities these are!³³

Seneca

...our present philosophers, leaving the first [desires] and second [actions] topics, employ themselves wholly about the third [judgments]; dealing in the logical subtleties.... Is this really, then, the thing you need? Have you mastered the other points?"³⁴

Epictetus

Our first study is the inner discourse and how it forms our judgments. As we have already seen "... death is nothing terrible ... the terror consists in our notion of death, that it is terrible."³⁵ Shakespeare said the same thing more concisely and poetically in *Hamlet*. "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."³⁶ It is the judgments we form in the mind that inflame or cool the passions, the emotions that have run amuck. If we were not afraid of death or great pain, we would not know fear even in the face of a raging lion.

Of course we do feel fear in such circumstances because of the primary impulse of survival, and that's OK. It's more than OK; it's ordained by Nature. Stoics are not retarded. We know there is a place for adrenalin. We are *supposed* to be energized by such emotion – in this case, be prepared to fight or flee.

In addition to facing danger, there are many other kinds of judgments we form with the thoughts of our inner discourse. In fact, virtually everything. Where else can the feelings of desire and aversion come from? We desire one thing; we don't desire another. Why? Because of what we have been told and/or told ourselves about this thing. And there's another source: the body. It also enters the inner discourse with it's own feelings of hunger, fatigue, dis-ease, and other physical complaints of the body.

However, it is what we do with this information, all information from all sources, that matters. The mind

acquires an impression, makes a judgment, then desires something to be or not to be: a large bowl of yummy food – without a hair in it; a different president – one that's thoughtful, strong, and kind; a new wife that is rich – and good-looking. All of our desires imply aversions, and vice versa.

Desires:

Of these [three studies] the principal and most urgent is that which reaches the passions; for passion is only produced by a disappointment of one's desires and an incurring of one's aversions. It is this which introduces perturbations, tumults, misfortunes, and calamities; this is the spring of sorrow, lamentation, and envy; this renders us envious and emulous, and incapable of hearing reason.³⁷

Epictetus

Observe the courses of the stars as if you were to run those courses with them; have constantly in mind the changes of the elements into one another, for such thoughts sweep away the squalor of life on earth. And when you talk about men you should look upon things on earth as one who looks from above on things below....³⁸

Marcus Aurelius

The Physics of Desires and Aversions. The Stoic's desires and aversions are studied so that we can bring them into alignment with the will of Nature. This is an expansion of our motto, *living in agreement with Nature*. In the first place, we use our chief attribute designed for us by Nature, our reason. When we use reason, we see that there is only one good, virtue. Evil, then, is the lack of virtue. Both good and evil are in the will, and only the will is in our power. Thus, living according to Nature means desiring the good, virtue, and desiring to avoid evil, the lack of virtue. This is the one power that Nature has given us, the choices of the will. The right use of reason and will power are the desires of a Stoic.

There is a subtle but significant difference between the use of 'desire' by Epictetus compared to that of Marcus Aurelius. Epictetus teaches that we should desire only that which depends on us, the will, while Marcus Aurelius speaks of aligning our desire with the fate of universal Reason. That is, we should desire that *our* will is the same as the *divine* Will.³⁹ However, this is the stuff of scholarship, and not being a scholar I can only appreciate both points of view without insisting on one being more correct or more orthodox. I can't even imagine ignoring one in preference for the other. I believe we should consciously study to align our desire with both the individual will and with the greater Will of Nature.

Actions:

The next topic regards the duties of life. For I am not to be undisturbed by passions, as a statue is; but as one who preserves the natural and acquired relations—as a pious person, a son, a brother, a father, a citizen.⁴⁰

Duties are universally measured by relations. Is a certain man your father? In this are implied taking care of him; submitting to him in all things; patiently receiving his reproaches, his correction.

“But he is a bad father.”

Is your natural tie, then to a good father? No, but to a father. Is a brother unjust? Well, preserve your own just relation towards him. Consider not what he does, but what you are to do, to keep your own will in a state of harmony with nature.⁴¹

Epictetus

Actions, Duties, Ethics, and Oikeiosis. Our desires and aversions depend upon judgments we have made and become motivation for ensuing action. If we want a new car we have to find the money to pay for it.

Epictetus doesn't dwell on the mere mundane of our actions but on how they become our duties – the duties of life. The evolution from the Primary Impulse of self-love to other-love, *oikeiosis*, is the work of a Stoic philosopher. They are his duties. Mature adult, socialized behavior is exemplified by the noble character, the lofty spirit, the Stoic philosopher, the sage. This process is one of the great principals of ethics.

If our desires and aversions are aligned with Nature, we are burdened with only one responsibility, the good and evil in the will. The proper exercise of that responsibility shows in our actions as a pious person, a good son, a good brother, a good father, a good citizen. A Stoic is the cornerstone of civilized society in that we *preserve* the natural and acquired relations. All of our actions are oriented to that preservation. To a Stoic, these are the noble duties of life. They are *noble* duties because they clearly show the true nature of our character.

What about being a pious person? What *is* a pious person? The first definition of 'pious' in my dictionary says that a pious person is one having or showing a dutiful spirit of reverence for god or an earnest wish to fulfill religious obligations."⁴² How do we do that? Are we supposed to be religious? No. It's true, the classical Stoics believed it was appropriate for a person to attend the religious devotions of the society in which you live. If you were a Roman you honored the Roman gods: Jupiter, Venus, Mars, et cetera. If you were Greek, you honored the Greek gods: Zeus, Athena, Aphrodite, et cetera. Did they believe in these gods as actual living, immortal deities? No, Stoics believed they were merely names for different aspects of the One, the Logos, Nature. ⁴³ Being pious meant honoring the divinity in Nature in a manner harmonious with the time and place in which you live.

Then how can we be pious? I think it's more difficult to answer this question today for a couple of reasons. For one, many Stoics today are atheists, many more are skeptics or agnostics. Does that mean a Stoic should be a Buddhist in Japan, a Hindu in India, a Muslim in Iraq, a Jew in Israel, and a Christian in Canada? Perhaps, but in no way could such a one take on the absolutist mindset of the fundamentalist. That would require forsaking reason for faith in old myths and prophets who claim to speak for God.

Does that mean a Stoic can be a bit of a jellyfish and a hypocrite, one who goes along to get along and makes a show of belief that isn't genuine? Isn't that basically dishonest? Yes, I think it is. There may be only one form of piety that can satisfy the honesty of all kinds of earnest Stoics—atheists, skeptics, and deists alike. That is, a piety and devotion to Nature, our environment. Nature is, after all, our god. Reverence for Nature is a piety we can honestly respect.

HEAR THE SAGE

Hear the sage inside us:

practice, practice, practice, practice.

*...philosophers advise us not to be contented with mere learning, but to add meditation likewise, and then practice.... If, therefore, we do not likewise put into practice right opinions, we shall be nothing more than expositors of the abstract doctrines of others.*⁴⁴

Epictetus

Practice. That's what we are doing.

* * * *

- 1 *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, Second Edition, Unabridged (Random House, 1987), p. 1234
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 1234
- 3 Weatherford, J., *Genghis Khan* (Three Rivers Press, 2004), pp. 88-9
- 4 Arrian, *Discourses of Epictetus* (Walter J. Black, 1944), Book I: 4, 6, 15, II: 2, 6, III: 3, 9, *Ench.* #13
- 5 *Ibid.*, Book I: 20, 29, 30, II: 10, 16, 19, III: 8, 11B, 24, IV: 10
- 6 *Ibid.*, Book I: 1, 4, 6, 12, 22, 25, II: 2, 4, 6, 13, 19, IV: 1, 4, 5, 10, 12, *Ench.* #1
- 7 *Ibid.*, Book I: 17, 18, Book III: 2, IV: 1, 11, *Ench.* #5. I have modified the order that Arrian lists the three studies to more accurately reflect the chronology of events rather than what Epictetus identifies in one reference as the most important study (Book III: 2). I should also be mentioned that according to Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel* (Harvard, 1998, p. 83), Epictetus is the only Stoic to also identify these three studies as three activities of the soul. It should also be pointed out that although this author uses 'actions' to identify the 3rd study, the Epictetus translators most often uses 'pursuits and avoidances' and 'duties,' which is thought to be a bit of a muddle that can easily be avoided with the use of the single idea of actions.
- 8 *Ibid.*, I: 26, II: 10, 18, III: 10, 24, IV: 8, 6, *Ench.* #51
- 9 *Ibid.*, II: 24
- 10 *Ibid.*, I: 29
- 11 *Ibid.*, II: 19
- 12 *32 Principal Doctrines XXI*
- 13 *Ibid.*, XXII
- 14 *Ibid.*, XXIII
- 15 Hadot, P., *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Blackwell, 1995), p. 83
- 16 Hadot, p., *The Inner Citadel* (Harvard, 1998), p.71
- 17 *Discourses*, III: 25
- 18 *Ibid.*, I:1
- 19 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p. 2042
- 20 *Discourses*, I: 1
- 21 *Ibid.*, I: 1
- 22 *Ibid.*, III: 2
- 23 *Ibid.*, *Enchiridion* #5
- 24 *Discourses*, I:18
- 25 *Meditations*, Book 9.5
- 26 Hadot, p., *The Inner Citadel* (Harvard, 1998), pp. 44-5
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 44, 70
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 82-4
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 83
- 30 *Meditations*, Book 4.7
- 31 *Ibid.*, 5.16
- 32 Hadot, p., *The Inner Citadel* (Harvard, 1998), p.50
- 33 Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic* (Penguin, 1977) #48
- 34 *Discourses*, Book 3:2
- 35 *Ibid.*, *Enchiridion* #5
- 36 Wm. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii, 259
- 37 *Discourses*, III: 2
- 38 *Meditations*, Book 7, 47-8
- 39 Hadot, P., *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Blackwell, 1995), pp. 196-7
- 40 *Discourses*, III: 2
- 41 *Ibid.*, *Enchiridion*, #30
- 42 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p. 1474
- 43 D.L., vol. II, book VII, 135-8
- 44 *Discourses*, Book II: 9