


# The Stoics on Living According to Nature


PHIL 210 — Living a Good Life  
November 14, 2022

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## (Ancient) Stoicism in its Time and Place



### Key Stoic Philosophers





<i>early</i> { <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Zeno (c. 334 – 262 BCE) -----</li> <li>Cleanthes (330 – c. 230 BCE) -----</li> <li>Chrysippus (c. 279 – c. 206 BCE) -----</li> </ul>	Diogenes of Babylon (c. 230 – c. 145 BCE) -----	<i>middle</i> { <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Panaetius (c. 185 – c. 110/109 BCE) -----</li> <li>Posidonius (c. 135 – c. 51 BCE) -----</li> </ul>	<i>late</i> { <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seneca (c. 4 BCE – 65 CE) -----</li> <li>Musonius Rufus (c. 20/30 – ? CE) -----</li> <li>Epictetus (c. 55 – 135 CE) -----</li> <li>Marcus Aurelius (121 – 180 CE) -----</li> </ul>	<h3 style="text-align: center;">Influences and Interlocutors</h3> <p style="font-size: small; text-align: center;">C = Cynics    A = Academics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><del>X</del> 399 BCE: Death of Socrates</li> <li>----- Antisthenes (c. 445 – 365 BCE) C</li> <li>----- Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412 – 323 BCE) C</li> <li>----- Speusippus (c. 408 – 339/8 BCE) A</li> <li>----- Xenocrates (c. 396/5 – 314/3 BCE) A</li> <li>----- Crates of Thebes (c. 365 – c. 285 BCE) C</li> <li>----- Polemon (? – 270/269 BCE) A</li> <li>----- Arcesilaus (316/5 – 241/0 BCE) A</li> <li>----- Carneades (214/3 – 129/8 BCE) A</li> <li><del>X</del> 155 BCE: Embassy to Rome</li> <li>----- Philo of Larissa (154/3 – 84/3 BCE) A</li> <li>----- Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 125 – c. 68 BCE) A</li> <li><del>X</del> 529 CE: Emperor Justinian closes all philosophical schools</li> </ul>
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# Who's the Stoic?

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change ..."  
– Reinhold Niebuhr



 "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept."  
– Angela Davis

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## Who's the Stoic?


- Reinhold Niebuhr
- Angela Davis
- Neither
- Both
- What's a Stoic?


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**Prove they're saying the same thing using the logic of conditional statements**


- "if it's a triangle, it has three sides" (mathematical truth)
- "if not for you, babe I couldn't find the door" (Bob Dylan)
- "if you're gonna be my lover, you've got to get with my friends" (Spice Girls)
- "if it's raining, then there are clouds" (empirical truth)


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antecedent	...	consequent		antecedent	...	consequent
if it's raining		then there are clouds		if you can't change it		then accept it
if $p$		then $q$		if not- $p$		then $q$
if not- $q$		then not- $p$	} contrapositive {	if not- $q$		then $p$
if there are no clouds		then it's not raining		if you can't accept it		then change it


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	antecedent				consequent
what you can't change (what you can't control)	if you can't change it	...	then	accept it	←
	if not- <i>p</i>	...	then	<i>q</i>	
	if not- <i>q</i>	...	then	<i>p</i>	
what you can change (what you can control)	if you can't accept it	...	then	change it	←

contrapositive {


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## OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S CLASS

- The Stoic system: physics, logic, ethics
- The Stoics on the human good
- "Living in accordance with nature"
- The Stoic Sage
- How to be a Stoic activist

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## Seneca on the Happy Life




“[A]s is agreed among all Stoics, Nature is the guide I choose; wisdom lies in not wandering from her path and in moulding oneself in accordance with her law and example” (*On the Happy Life*, § 3).

“It will, then, be the same thing, if I say, ‘The highest good is a mind that despises the operations of chance, rejoicing in virtue,’ or ‘The power of the mind resides in being unconquerable, experienced in life, calm in action, and possessed of much kindness and concern for those with whom it has dealings’” (*On the Happy Life*, § 4).

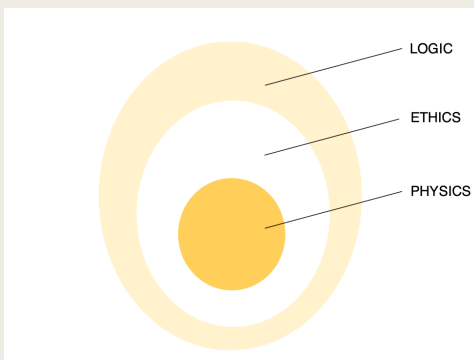
What’s the connection between:

**NATURE ... WISDOM ... MIND ... VIRTUE ... OTHER PEOPLE ... ?**

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## The Stoic System



“physics” = study of nature

“logic” = study of reason

“ethics” = study of the good life

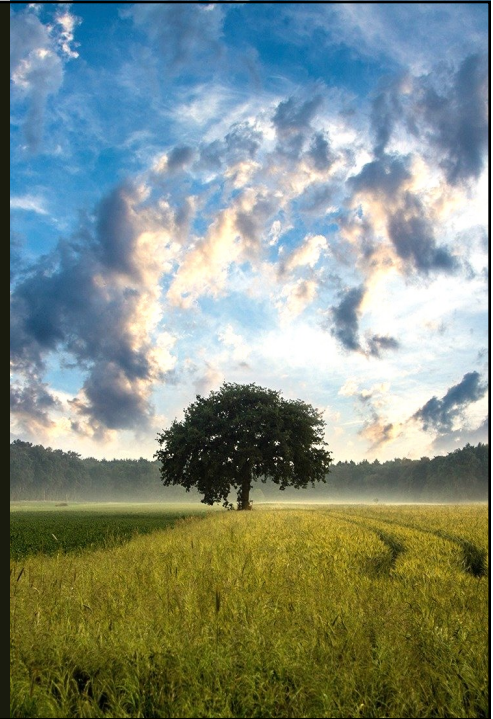
incl. metaphysics  
(what underlies nature?)

incl. epistemology  
(what is knowledge?)

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## The Stoics on the Human Good

- What is the good life (= happiness, *eudaimonia*)?
  - Zeno: “living in agreement with nature”
- From the standpoint of physics: the study of nature
  - nature tells us conventional goods can be bad
  - the only thing unconditionally good for us is virtue
  - so good life = living virtuously



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## The Stoics on the Human Good

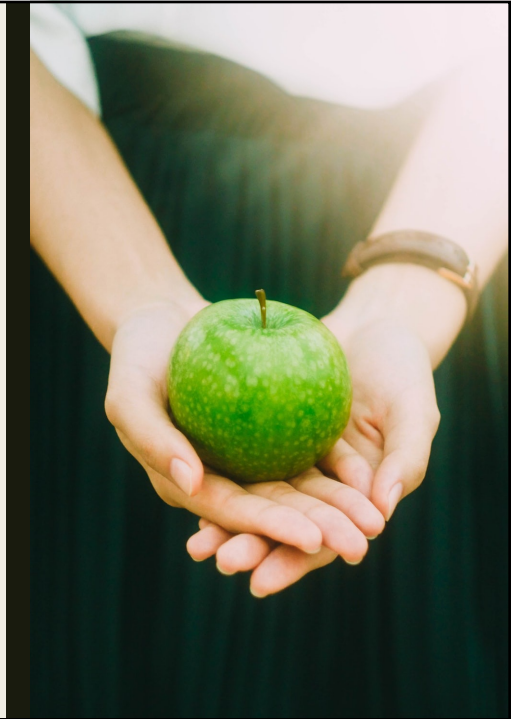
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- From the standpoint of logic: the study of reason
  - to follow nature, we must attend to our impressions
  - the human power to deal with impressions is the mind/reason
  - this is the only thing under our direct control
  - so good life = attending to what's under our control



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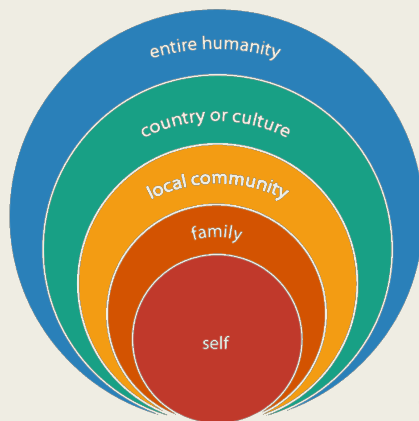
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- Connect physics with logic: the Stoic Sage
  - the Sage lives in full agreement with nature
  - acts with knowledge (responds well to impressions)
  - so virtue = wisdom = responding well to impressions



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## Stoic Cosmopolitanism



- From: *cosmos* (world) + *politēs* (citizen)
  - “citizen of the world”
- Circles of affinity (*oikeiōsis*)
  - first circle: self
  - second circle: family
  - wider circles: tribe, state, nation
  - widest circle: all humankind

“Wherever there is a human being, there exists an opportunity for an act of kindness” (Seneca, “On the Happy Life,” §24).

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## Stoic Activism

### “Wishing With Reservation”



- Is the Stoic excessively passive?
  - no: do what you can
  - but with a “reserve clause”
- “I’ll achieve this, if nothing prevents it”
  - if you’re prevented, adjust efforts
  - adapt to new situation
  - convert obstacles into opportunities
- Focus on efforts rather than outcomes

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## Stoic Activism

### “Wishing With Reservation”



“Accordingly, the happy life is the one that is in harmony with its own nature, and the only way it can be achieved is if, first, the mind is sound and constantly in possession of its sanity, and secondly, if it is brave and vigorous, and, in addition, capable of the noblest endurance, adapting to every new situation, attentive to the body and to all that affects it, but not in an anxious way, and, finally, if it concerns itself with all the things that enhance life, without showing undue respect for any one of them, taking advantage of Fortune’s gifts, but not becoming their slave.”

(Seneca, *On the Happy Life*, § 3)

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# Stoic Activism

## “Wishing With Reservation”



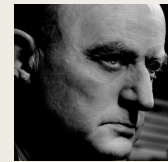
“The ruling power within us, when it is in line with nature, takes up a stance towards events that enables it always to adapt easily to what is presented to it. It is not attached to any specific material, but aims at achieving its objectives with reservation. When it comes up against an obstacle, it converts this into material for itself, like fire, when this masters the things that fall into it. A small lamp would have been extinguished by them but a blazing fire quickly appropriates the things thrown into it and consumes them and uses those very things to grow still higher.”

(Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.1)

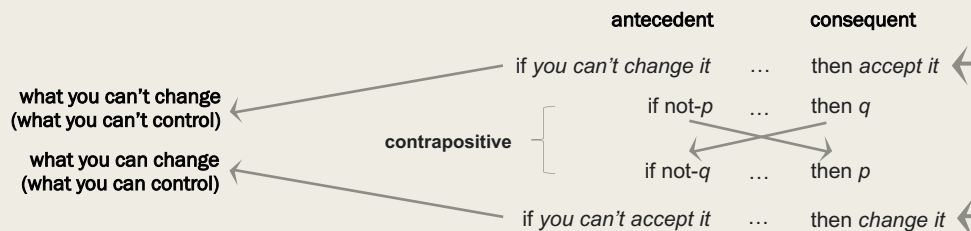
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## Epictetus on What's Under Our Control

- “Some things in the world are up to us, while others are not. Up to us are our faculties of judgment, motivation, desire, and aversion—in short, everything that is our own doing. Not up to us are our body and property, our reputations, and our official positions—in short, everything that is not our own doing. Moreover, the things up to us are naturally free, unimpeded, and unconstrained, while the things not up to us are powerless, servile, impeded, and not our own. Keep this in mind then: if you think things naturally servile are free and that things not our own are ours, you will be frustrated, pained, and troubled, and you will find fault with gods and men. But if you think you own only what is yours, and that you do not own what is not yours, as you really don't, no one will ever put pressure on you, no one will impede you, you will not reproach anyone, you will not blame anyone, you will not do a single thing reluctantly, no one will harm you, you will have no enemy, because nothing harmful will happen to you.
- “... Right now, then, make it your habit to tell every jarring thought or impression: ‘You are just an appearance and in no way the real thing.’ Next, examine it and test it by these rules that you have. First and foremost: does it involve the things up to us, or the things not up to us? And if it involves one of the things not up to us, have the following response to hand: ‘Not my business.’” (Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 1)
1. what's “up to us” or under our control?
  2. what's “not up to us” or not under our control”?
  3. what's “freedom”?
  4. how won't we be harmed?
  5. why beware of impressions?
  6. why say “not my business”?

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- This Wednesday
  - Read: Epictetus' *Encheiridion* 1 and 7
  - Read: Seneca's Letter 9
  - How are Epictetus and Seneca both Stoics?
  - “Boat” metaphor in *Encheiridion* 7
  - What does Epictetus mean by “freedom”?
  - The Stoics on our relations with others

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