

Is Ancient Stoic Philosophy Relevant to 2020s America?

By Steven Yates



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We approach a pivotal election and a very precarious future no matter who wins...

What is Stoicism, and what does it have to do with our present situation?

In order: Stoicism is a philosophy originating with ancient Greeks shortly after the time of Socrates. It was one of several competing schools in what was then the thriving city of Athens. It spread throughout the ancient world and was popular in Rome prior to Rome's Christianizing.

When we see what it offered the people of its time, we'll see its present-day relevance. Indeed, there appears to be a certain amount of interest in Stoicism today. Author [Ryan Holiday](#) is the most visible figure tapping into this interest. He has built a thriving cottage industry around a few bestsellers with titles like *The Obstacle Is the Way* (2014) and *Stillness Is the Key* (2019).

Some will want to know: is Stoicism compatible with Christianity? Devotees of each considered themselves to be competitors during the first few centuries AD. To my mind Keith Humphrey, in his just-published [Stoicism and Christianity](#) (2024), lays out a credible account of the overlap between the two, which is greater than their

differences. It's a shame that Stoics and Christians have never figured out how to work together. They had the same enemies. They still do. But their approaches are very different. Each, in my opinion, could stand to learn from the other.

Stoicism: A Brief Account.

Stoicism's founder was a wealthy merchant and shipping magnate named Zeno, of Citium, a seaport located on what is now Cyprus. It was around the start of the 3rd century B.C. One day, while bringing some rare and very expensive dye towards Athens (we think), he lost everything in a shipwreck off the coast of Greece. We don't know the details.

Obviously, he couldn't call 9-1-1.

He made his way to Athens. We don't know how he fed himself until the day he wandered into the ancient city's equivalent of a bookstore and discovered writings on Socrates. He asked the proprietor where he could find a man like that. The proprietor directed him to Crates, of Thebes. Crates was a Cynic (another school of ancient philosophy not to be confused with how the word *cynic* is used today). Zeno became Crates's pupil. He also studied a range of other philosophies then available, including Plato's whose Academy was then thriving.

Zeno appears to have realized that there were problems with all he'd read and encountered, and that he needed to find his own way.

That's usually how it begins.

Eventually he began lecturing from a location in the Athenian Agora known as the *Stoa Poikile* (Painted Porch). He and those who gathered around him became known as Stoics. They began to attract the attention of prominent citizens and even royalty. The attention wasn't negative. Stoic philosophy, though hardly unified in all respects, attempted to be practical and useful,

addressing problems of life and self-improvement in a manner anyone, rich or poor, could make use of. (Today's *academic* philosophy has virtually *nothing* to do with the problems of living and sees this as a mark of professionalism and intellectual maturity.)

What did Zeno teach? None of his original writings have survived, so what we know of him is through quotations by later writers such as Diogenes Laertius and others. These indicate that he divided his philosophy into three components: *physics*, *logic*, and *ethics*. The first two served the third.

The value of philosophy, Stoics said, is that it offers *perspective*, and *counsel*, in a turbulent world.

How I like to express the Stoic worldview: Stoic *physics* tries to describe how the world works, i.e., its unity, and causality within it. Stoic *logic* tries to describe rules for proper thinking about the world, e.g., deductive reasoning. Stoic *ethics*, finally: given how the world works and our best reasonings about it, if we are to cultivate peace with others, with the world, and with ourselves, *how should we conduct our lives and affairs?* The Stoics outlined four cardinal virtues: justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom. Each could be an essay in itself (Holiday is at work on a series of books developing each).

The way Stoic philosophy is also sometimes expressed: to achieve and maintain lives of tranquility, we should "live in accordance with nature." That's general, and easy to caricature. What does it mean?

To find out, let's turn to Epictetus, who lived shortly after the time of Christ. This time, we can be reasonably sure we have his actual words, inscribed by a diligent pupil (for like Christ, he never wrote anything down himself).

The most important distinction Epictetus drew was between those things which are *within our power* and those things which

are not within our power.

The basic counsel here is that we should attend to what are properly our own affairs, over which we can maximize personal control. We should let the rest go without reacting emotionally to it, as it is outside our control.

In other words, things in the world operate according to rules, laws of nature, however we put it. The counsel here is to acknowledge these rules, using them where possible and desirable. This is the path to a better life, in which one is at peace with oneself and one's surroundings. If you do otherwise, the way the world works will automatically work against you, and you'll be endlessly frustrated and enraged by "the unfairness of it all."

In other words, Stoicism counsels *self-mastery*. The word 'stoic' (lower-case 's') is sometimes used to mean cold and emotionless. The Stoic isn't emotionless. Far from it! He sets about to discipline his emotional responses to what is outside his control, allowing reason to guide what he says and does as much as is humanly possible.

We can't control the weather. We can't control traffic. We can't control what the economy does, or what its movers and shakers do. We have no power over life and death. The only way we can affect what the world can do to us is through preparedness.

At this point things start to get really interesting: for most of us, our only *real* power within the political system (unless we're office holders, and there are a lot of limits even then) is to vote every two or four years, usually for one of two candidates who have been carefully vetted by those who have the actual power over such matters. Those of us able can write about politics, supporting one candidate over another and giving our reasons *hoping* to influence others. But we cannot make up their minds for them. Their opinions are outside our

control.

In sum: Stoicism counsels *focusing the bulk of your thoughts and life energies on what you can control*. It never says you can't expand this through study, learning, and then taking action. The Stoic dichotomy of control is really a continuum. What *can* we control? What *must* we control? Can we learn to control *more*, affect *more*, doing so constructively and therefore ethically—and *recognizing limits*.

Our responses, if unleashed, may range from overjoy to fury, depending on how events play out. These often get us nowhere. Reason and reflection, for the Stoic, are paths to a peaceful and tranquil life in a world that was turbulent even then.

Stoicism thus became one of the most popular and prevalent philosophies in the ancient world of declining Greece and rising Rome. How does it apply to us in the 2020s? Before answering that, let's look closer at the environment in which Stoicism thrived.

The social and political environment of the Stoics?

What motivated Stoic ideas?

Zeno of Citium lost *everything* to a random event and found himself stranded in a foreign city. *How does he cope?*

He pivots, and undertakes something new, as this was clearly better than living out his life in bitterness and despair, begging for food.

Epictetus was born and grew up in slavery. In his teens, his leg was broken by a cruel master. The break did not heal properly. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life.

How does he cope? Again, with anger? What does that accomplish?

So like Zeno, he accepts what he cannot change. He embraces a

philosophy allowing him to move ahead. He begins helping others do the same.

Another prominent Stoic, Seneca (author of essays with titles like "On the Shortness of Life"), found himself with the unenviable duty of having to advise the emperor Nero, by any measure a grade-A psychopath. Eventually Nero, paranoid to the point of near-insanity, suspected Seneca of participating in a plot against him. He ordered his advisor to commit suicide, which Seneca did, along with his wife.

At the complete other end of the political-economic spectrum from Epictetus was Marcus Aurelius, of the 2nd century A.D., author of *Meditations*. Marcus became Emperor of Rome: a true *philosopher-king* although not in Plato's sense nor in the pejorative sense I've used that phrase.

Marcus had not *wanted* to be Emperor! Having encountered Stoic teachings, he wanted to be a philosopher! Having been groomed for the position, he became *both*, penning his *Meditations*, written for *his eyes only*, efforts to clarify and contain his own turbulent thoughts.

A Stoic is *always* aware of his limitations and imperfections. He stresses learning opportunities inherent even in painful circumstances. He focuses both on gratitude for what he has, and on how to be a better person.

All the Stoics were *acutely* conscious of how *little* control *anyone* really has. It is *tough* enough to control oneself!

Marcus doubtless experienced the personal costs of power. Somehow, he became one of those extremely rare figures who grasped that with enormous power comes enormous responsibility. He set about disciplining his emotions before making a decision that could cause a war, or otherwise affect the direction of the empire and the lives of millions.

He also had to deal with plagues. He buried several of his own

children.

Marcus may have been Emperor of Rome, but he *suffered*. He knew *loss*.

The question still applies, therefore: *how does he cope?*

The answer: with a philosophy appropriate to the world he had to operate in. Did he get everything right? Of course not. He disliked those *Christians* he saw. He seems to have thought their strange faith subversive and even atheistic (they did not worship the gods of Rome). The [killing of Justin Martyr](#) happened under his watch (giving us that term).

But at least he became conscious of how power allows and encourages corruption. He understood that if he'd somehow thwarted filling the shoes made for him and walking the path others had laid out in front of him, someone worse would have done so.

So he filled those shoes and walked that path.

Marcus was the last of the "good emperors." Emphasis on *last*. He couldn't control what his successor would do, or what would befall Rome after he passed from the scene. As we know, the empire went into long-term decline. Basically, Rome self-destructed, a victim of overextension and its own irrational fiscal and tax policies. These drove its more intelligent and productive citizens to opt out and build new lives elsewhere. This was something they could control.

Our present situation.

So how do we apply all this today?

This is about more than an election just under two months away.

Even if Donald Trump wins back the White House without leftists rioting in the streets, he'll have his hands full.

And whether anyone likes it or not, Trump is *no* Marcus Aurelius. The closest we had to such a person was [Dr. Ron Paul](#), long retired.

He wasn't taken seriously by anyone in Rome on the Potomac. There simply are no such people in politics today, not on either side of the aisle. Any present-day Epictetuses, or Marcus Aureliuses, are unlikely to want to go anywhere near our present-day governmental-corporate-academic-military-surveillance-censorship complex.

With lust for power in high gear and responsibility minimal, we're on a precipice. Small wonder we're seeing dozens of books and articles on whether the U.S. is destined to follow Rome.

Volumes have been written on how we got here.

How "public education" was hijacked over a century ago; how it became an institution that has nothing to do with real education and everything to do with producing a controlled mass that will obey, consume, vote, and believe it is living in a democracy. *Democracy* is part of our national and international mythology.

How the Federal Reserve was created by banking power elites of its day. How it gave them control over one of the essentials of economic activity, the money supply.

How the IRS was created, so that your personal income could be taxed for the first time in U.S. history even though this had previously been deemed unconstitutional.

How power elites came to control nearly all corporate media.

They had long controlled energy and its distribution ... they suppressed Nikola Tesla's research results, which suggested that "free energy" technology could be brought to people and used to power a truly free, peaceful, and prosperous

civilization, not one based on monetary encirclements, forms of distribution requiring centralization, and endless wars.

Our official national debt (which does not include all federal legal obligations) just reached \$35 trillion, a sum that would have been unimaginable when Nixon killed the gold standard in 1971. Nixon opened the door to financialization, to what I often call welfare statism in reverse (redistribution of wealth upwards), and to the replacement of the brand of capitalism that gave us the strongest economy in history, that of the 1950s and 1960s, a rising tide that really was lifting more and more boats, to the neoliberalism that created the well-documented wealth gap. Globalized systems managed by globalist elites formulated policies that partly destroyed the middle class earlier capitalism built.

All of this is ultimately outside our control!

We can write about it, but we can't force people to read it, take it seriously, process it, and act on it by ceasing to vote against their own interests.

But we're not helpless! The Internet, if it has done anything, has placed in the hands of us peasants the most powerful information aggregation tool in human history.

How we use it is something we *can* control, even amidst its centralization in the hands of a few leviathan corporations, and the censorship of truthful content labeled "misinformation" (or "malinformation," i.e., sometimes-obvious truths inconvenient for the ruling elites).

As I've also said, though, the Internet is both a blessing and a curse. Its controllers are *not* our "friends."

Because of the Internet, we inhabit an *attention economy*; corporations compete ruthlessly for one thing: *your eyeballs*, to keep them glued to their platforms for as long as possible.

Hence all the clickbait, the emphasis on negativity and violence. On sensationalism. These attract attention. They encourage and enflame divisions.

In the 2020s, you either learn to control your attention, or you are lost!

Fortunately, your attention is something you *can* control! I believe Stoicism can help!

Final introductory lessons of the Stoics.

If asked who I think is going to win this election, my answer is the same as Tucker Carlson's: "I have no idea."

Unless one candidate or the other louses up spectacularly, e.g., blows the upcoming Sept. 10 debate completely in ways *no* damage control can't fix – which is possible – I don't think I'll be able to say anything more useful even on Election Eve.

At the moment things are very close. Kamala has made gains, but with Robert F. Kennedy Jr. throwing his weight behind Trump, I don't think anyone would challenge that.

What I know is that my "[Open Letter](#)" appears to have fallen on deaf ears. It met with no response, not even an acknowledgement. I know of at least three people who sent the link [here](#) via the contact page. Supposedly that site is monitored, so it's possible that Trump might have seen it. There never were any guarantees.

Again, outside my control. We can write articles and letters. We can't force people to read them.

So the first Stoic lesson is that despite all our efforts at showing how a Kamala Harris presidency would only take the globalist/war/Bidenista catastrophe into a new phase, none of us can control the outcome. We can only control our emotional responses to it, and whatever actions we subsequently choose to take.

The second Stoic lesson – it's more of an exercise – is to ask: what *can* you control.

Start with your attention.

I think it will be time to tune out corporate media completely. It won't be possible to get completely out from under the heels of the governmental-corporate-academic-military-surveillance-censorship complex, but you can minimize your contact with large parts of it.

Do you really want to waste your time on CNN and MSNBC, *or* on controlled opposition (Fox News)? Do you really care what Dana Bash thinks? Or Joe Scarborough?

Do you think anyone in corporate media, or anywhere in the above complex, cares about *you*?

Tune it out! Beyond, perhaps, bare-bones reportage like [this](#) that is can be read and processed in around 15 minutes.

Following up is a third point with which I'd like to think the Stoics would agree: we should focus our attention on what is *good* in our immediate surroundings, especially our relationships. Without relationships (spousal, or familial in a broader sense, or even professional), where are we?

Isolated, that's where.

A growing number of people, men and women alike, live isolated lives sometimes because they've never found a partner and sometimes because they've made choices, especially work-related, that make nurturing relationships hard if not impossible to sustain. Think of those who work 80 hours a week. This isn't normal and will eventually burn you out.

Social media is also more isolating than aggregating. What can you say when most of your Facebook "friends" are people you've never even met and may have nothing in common with beyond political alignment?

Being *busy*, moreover, may *look* like controlling your attention, but it's *not* the same as being productive. Being *busy* may be nothing more than avoidance and rationalization of not doing anything of lasting importance.

I think we were put here to solve problems, where a *problem* is anything that gives someone a sense that things could be otherwise, perchance better. A problem therefore motivates us to learn what is going on and take action.

Learning how things work, their causal properties: that's Stoic physics. Determining what actions to take is then Stoic logic. Acting courageously, honestly, honorably, appropriately, conscious of others as persons like oneself, with goals and aspirations of their own, *and* the same desire as you for personal validation: that's the core of Stoic ethics.

Determining what your innate talents and skills are and who they'll help you serve, is also something you can control. Have you tried to enumerate them? Or worked out, with guidance if necessary, the ways you can use them to help others?

The Alignment with Christianity.

However things play out, we *weren't* put here to sit on our duffs. Jesus's parable of the fig tree applies:

"[Jesus] also spoke this parable: A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it.' 'And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'
Luke 13:6-9.

Do nothing, and we'll be clobbered by events. We'll be

uprooted and blown away!

Both Stoicism and Christianity are philosophies of action as well as putting forth sets of beliefs – a worldview directs a culture, but is worthless if it doesn't also guide your life.

Neither one counsels withdrawal (as I've occasionally done in times past).

If this election really is stolen, and evidence for this can be amassed, hard copies made, etc., the honest and courageous must take a stand. They must stand up "peacefully and patriotically," and reveal what they know. A Stoic outlook calls for this.

Again, we can expect such information to be systemically repressed, those putting it forth demonized as "election deniers" and "conspiracy theorists," and their livelihoods and lives destroyed if they persist. I think the extreme *harshness* with which most of the Jan-6ers were dealt was intended to send a message, that the global governmental-corporate-academic-military-surveillance-censorship complex will no longer tolerate meaningful dissent and determined opposition.

Not to mention jailing people such as Steve Bannon, and weaponizing the Justice Department in an effort to destroy Donald Trump. Even Tulsi Gabbard, surely one of the most peace-promoting people alive, who was demonized by Democrats for her criticisms of the war machine, is now on a terror watch list.

It is *very* Stoic to take a stand against these things.

If Kamala Harris wins, we will see more people imprisoned and more livelihoods destroyed.

But remember Zeno's shipwreck. Remember Epictetus's broken leg. Remember how Seneca was ordered, along with his wife, to take his own life.

Large numbers of early Christians went to horrific deaths – empowered by their faith in what lay beyond. The Apostle Paul was imprisoned several times. It didn't faze him. He was finally beheaded.

All suffered, because suffering is built into the structure of a fallen world, and even more if we face and promote the truth about it.

This is Stoic counsel, for those willing to listen.

Kamala could win outright, without the Democrat Party cheating, if enough Americans are insouciant enough, caught up in the outright airheaded giddiness, of the campaign that has ensued since Joe Biden stepped aside.

In which case there won't be anything worth protesting and much to do to protect oneself and one's own.

Trump (and others) say she's a closet communist. There's a lot of that sort of thing in her family history and overall background. But warmongering Dick Cheney and his loathsome daughter have endorsed her. This speaks volumes. She serves the governmental-corporate-academic-military-surveillance-censorship complex just as Sleepy Joe did, and just as Obama, the Bushes and the Clintons did.

Cultural Marxism has become a distraction from the real fight, which is about more wars and more globalism. It's about truth versus lies. It is about those of us who understand our limits, and those who want to be God, as Lucifer did.

This "blob," some call it (GloboCorp, the New World Order, etc., etc.), is the most hostile visible force in the world if your aim is to live your own life, pursue your own goals, take care of your own, and otherwise be left alone.

Recognize this force for what it is, and also accept the counsel of Paul in Ephesians – the entire letter! – which

ranges from personal salvation and calling, to family, and finally to what threatens us all!

Act accordingly. We all must protect our loved ones to the extent we can, further truth to the extent we can, and remember that *what God wants is what counts*.

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In 2012 he moved to Chile. He is married to a Chilean national. Among his discoveries in South America: the problems of the U.S. are problems everywhere, because human nature is the same everywhere. The problems are problems of Western civilization as a whole.

He has a Patreon.com page. Donate [here](#) and become a Patron if you benefit from his work and believe it merits being sustained financially.

Steven Yates's book *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic* (2011) can be ordered [here](#).

His philosophical work *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory* (2021) can be obtained [here](#) or [here](#).

His paranormal horror novel *The Shadow Over Sarnath* (2023) can be gotten [here](#).

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