

THE BIG IDEAS

The Goal of Life

According to Stoics.

The Ideal Sage (+ You)

Contemplate It.

Stoic Joy

Is eudaimonic.

Time Projection

Beats catastrophizing.

The Choice of Hercules

Is our choice, too.

How to Think Like a Roman Emperor

The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius

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“The Stoics can teach you how to find a sense of purpose in life, how to face adversity, how to conquer anger within yourself, moderate your desires, experience healthy sources of joy, endure pain and illness patiently and with dignity, exhibit courage in the face of your anxieties, cope with loss, and perhaps even confront your own mortality while remaining as unperturbed as Socrates. Marcus Aurelius faced colossal challenges during his reign as emperor of Rome. *The Meditations* provides a window into his soul, allowing us to see how he guided himself through it all. Indeed, I would invite you, as a reader, to put effort into reading this book in a special way, to try and place yourself in Marcus’s shoes and look at life through his eyes, through the lens of his philosophy. Let’s see if we can accompany him on the journey he made as he transformed himself, day by day, into a fully-fledged Stoic. Fate permitting, more people may be able to apply the wisdom of Stoicism to the real challenges and everyday problems of modern living. However, that change won’t leap off the page. It only comes by making a firm decision, here and now, to begin putting ideas like these into practice. As Marcus wrote to himself,

Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be; just be one.”

~ Donald Robertson from *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*

“At one point, Socrates explains in plain language what it means to him to be a philosopher: ‘For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: ‘Wealth does not bring about virtue, but virtue makes wealth and everything else good for me, both individually and collectively.’”

~ Donald Robertson

Donald Robertson is one of the world’s leading thinkers, writers AND practitioners of Stoic philosophy. He’s also a therapist who integrates Stoicism into his work with individuals.

This is our second Note on one of his great books.

The first Note was on [The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy](#) in which he connects the philosophical underpinnings of CBT (one of the most empirically-validated, effective modern therapies) to ancient Stoicism.

In that book, he also tells us that most modern-day academic “philosophers” act more like “librarians of the mind” (cataloging the *theory*) rather than “warriors of the mind” (actually putting the philosophy into PRACTICE.) <- I just love that distinction.

In this book, we get an amazing look into the life and mind (and soul!) of one of history’s greatest philosophers who also just so happened to be one of its greatest leaders: Marcus Aurelius.

If you want to know how to think like a Roman emperor, start here. I think you’ll enjoy the book as much as I did. (Get a copy [here](#).)

The book is part biography and part philosophy. It’s all awesome.

Of course, it’s packed with Big Ideas and, as always, I’m excited to share a few of my favorites we can apply to our lives TODAY so let’s jump straight in.

STOICS ON THE GOAL OF LIFE

"Zeno told his students that he had come to value wisdom more than wealth or reputation. He used to say, 'My most profitable journey began on the day I was shipwrecked and lost my entire fortune.'"

~ Donald Robertson

"The schools of Hellenistic philosophy that followed the death of Socrates were often distinguished from one another in terms of their definition of the goal of life. For Stoics, that goal is defined as 'living in agreement with Nature,' which we're told was synonymous with living wisely and virtuously. Stoics argued that humans are first and foremost *thinking* creatures, capable of exercising reason. Although we share many instincts with other animals, our ability to think rationally is what makes us human. Reason governs our decisions, in a sense—the Stoics call it our 'ruling faculty.' It allows us to *evaluate* our thoughts, feelings, and urges and to decide if they're good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. We therefore have an innate duty to protect our ability to reason and to use it properly. When we reason *well* about life and live rationally, we exhibit the virtue of *wisdom*. Living in agreement with Nature, in part, means fulfilling our natural potential for wisdom; that's what it means for us to *flourish* as human beings.

The Stoics therefore took the name of philosophy, meaning 'love of wisdom,' quite literally. They loved wisdom, or loved virtue, above everything else. If 'virtue' sounds a bit pompous, the Greek word for it, *arete*, is arguably better translated as 'excellence of character.' Something excels, in this sense, if it performs its function well. Humans excel when they think clearly and reason well about their lives, which amounts to living wisely. The Stoics adopted the Socratic division of cardinal virtues into wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation. The other three virtues can be understood as wisdom applied to the social sphere, our relationships with other people. Displaying courage and moderation involved mastering our fears and desires, respectively, overcoming what Stoics called the unhealthy 'passions' that otherwise interfere with our ability to live in accord with wisdom and justice."

Welcome to chapter #1 in which we get a biographical sketch of [Marcus Aurelius](#) at the end of his life along with a quick introduction to the history and underlying philosophy of Stoicism.

The goal of life, according to Stoics? *"To live in agreement with Nature."*

What's that mean? Well, in short, the Stoics believed that what differentiated humans from other animals is our ability to reason.

To what end should we put that reason? To living with virtue.

Why? So we can benefit society.

Massimo Pigliucci reflected on similar wisdom in his great book [How to Be a Stoic](#). Here's how he puts it: *"Since human beings are naturally social animals capable of reason, it follows that we should strive to apply reason to achieve a better society."*

That's one of the reasons why our good emperor wrote to himself: *"Think often of the bond that unites all things in the universe, and their dependence on one another."*

And: *"Let your one delight and refreshment be to pass from one service to the community to another, with God ever in mind."*

Let's go back to Massimo who also reflects on the four cardinal virtues of Stoicism. Here's how he puts it: *"The Stoics adopted Socrates's classification of four aspects of virtue, which they thought of as four tightly interlinked character traits: (practical) wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Practical wisdom allows us to make decisions that improve our eudaimonia, the (ethically) good life. Courage can be physical, but more broadly refers to the moral aspect—for instance, the ability to act well under challenging circumstances, as Priscus and Malala did. Temperance makes it possible for us to control our desires and actions so that we don't yield to excesses. Justice, for Socrates and the Stoics, refers not to an abstract theory of how society should be run, but rather to the practice of treating other human beings with dignity and fairness."*

"Marcus makes it clear that his internal goal is to live with virtue, particularly wisdom and justice, but his external aim, his preferred outcome, is the common welfare of mankind (not just of Roman subjects, incidentally). Although the outcome is ultimately indifferent to Stoics, it's precisely the action of pursuing the common good that constitutes the virtue of justice."

~ Donald Robertson

Here's to loving wisdom and to dedicating our lives to becoming the Optimus-best, most excellent versions of ourselves. In service to the world. TODAY.

CONTEMPLATING THE IDEAL SAGE (+ YOU)

" Marcus actually imagines Nature herself as a physician, like Asclepius, the god of medicine, prescribing hardships to him as if they were painful remedies. To take Nature's medicine properly, we must accept our fate and respond virtuously, with courage and self-discipline, thereby improving our character."

~ Donald Robertson

"Your first step is to *write down* the virtues exhibited by someone you respect. Listing the qualities you most admire in another person, just as Marcus does in the first book of *The Meditations*, is a simple and powerful exercise. ...

In addition to the virtues of real people, the Stoics were also known for contemplating the hypothetical character of an *ideal Sage*, or wise person. There are several passages where Marcus appears to be doing this. These descriptions inevitably seem a bit more abstract and grandiose. For example, he says that the perfect wise man is like a true priest of the gods, at one with the divine element of reason within himself. He is neither corrupted by pleasure nor injured by pain, and he remains untouched by insults. The true Sage is like a fighter in the noblest of fights, dyed deep with justice. With his whole being, he accepts everything that befalls him, as assigned him by Fate. He seldom concerns himself with what others say or do unless it's for the common good. He naturally cares for all rational beings, as though they were his brothers and sisters. He is not swayed by the opinions of just anyone, but he gives special heed to the wise who live in agreement with Nature. Marcus is trying here to describe human perfection to himself and to envisage an ideal Sage who completely embodies the Stoic goals of life.

In addition to asking ourselves what qualities the ideal wise person might have, we can ask what qualities we might hope to possess in the distant future. For instance, what sort of person would you hope to be after having trained in Stoicism for ten or twenty years?"

That's from a chapter called "Contemplate the Sage."

Donald combines his scholarly and practical Stoic wisdom with his equally scholarly and practical experience as a cognitive behavioral therapist to give us an ASTONISHING array of practical tools. (Seriously. The book is packed with practical exercises.)

One of the core practices is to, as per the passage above, think about and WRITE DOWN the virtues you admire in others.

You can also contemplate the virtues of your vision of an ideal Sage.

And... My favorite: You can imagine the virtues YOU, as the ideal version of YOURSELF might have after a decade or two of consistent practice.

This is almost exactly how we start the Mastery phase of our Heroic Coach program. We start with a [Stephen Covey](#)-inspired eulogy exercise in which you attend your own funeral and listen to what your loved ones have to say about you.

Pause for a moment, if you feel so inspired, and imagine the scene. You're gone. It's your funeral. Who says what?

Specifically, what VIRTUES do you hope people use to describe you and your presence in their lives? WRITE THOSE DOWN.

In our Mastery Series, we proceed to help you get more clarity on who you are at your Optimus-best so that you can more consistently express those virtues TODAY.

We need to move out of the abstract, "Oh, yah. That's how I'd like to be remembered" to a VERY concrete, "Well, if I *really* think those qualities are important, then TODAY is the day to live in integrity with them." (Right?)

Which leads us right into the next piece of wisdom Donald shares which also happens to map over nearly perfectly with what we encourage our Optimizers to do.

" They taught the young Marcus that inner calm and happiness are natural consequences of a life lived well, in accord with genuine wisdom and self-discipline."

~ Donald Robertson

"There are no gurus in Stoicism. Even the founders of the school-Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus-don't claim that they were perfectly wise. They believe we're all foolish, vicious, and to some extent enslaved by our passions. The ideal Sage is perfect by definition, but he's a hypothetical ideal, like the notion of Utopian society."

~ Donald Robertson

He tells us to reflect on your ideal self and those virtues you intend to embody every morning. Write them down. Imagine your ideal self interacting with people Today. Who are you? How do you show up? That's essentially what Marcus did.

We call our Optimize process "Carpe Diem Journaling." We start by getting clarity on our Optimus-best selves in our Big 3 of Energy + Work + Love. Then we briefly reflect on that best-self Identity and write down the virtues *that* version of you embodies. Then we identify the #1 behavior we'll engage in that day as we re-commit to being that version of ourselves TODAY.

Donald adds a PM reflection and encourages us to go through daily "learning cycles." At the end of each day, he tells us to ask ourselves three simple questions:

1. What did you do badly?
2. What did you do well?
3. What could you do differently?

Those three questions happen to be *exactly* the questions [Lanny Bassham](#) tells us to reflect on after a performance. Only, he switches #1 and #2—starting with the positive.

Shall we start that reflection process Today? Actually... How about RIGHT NOW?

If you feel so inspired, reflect on those three questions for your day so far today:

1. What did you do well? _____
2. What did you do badly? _____
3. What could you do differently? _____

Fantastic. Imagine your life in ten to twenty years if the ONLY thing you changed was adding that simple reflection practice into your life.

Here's to aggregating and compounding those incremental gains over an extended period of time so that BEST version of us is the one looking back at us in the mirror in ten or twenty years.

P.S. Donald tells us: "*This famous passage from [Pythagoras's] 'The Golden Verses,' which Epictetus quoted to his students, describes the evening meditation:*

*Allow not sleep to close your wearied eyes,
Until you have reckoned up each daytime deed:
'Where did I go wrong? What did I do? And what duty's left undone?'
From first to last review your acts and then
Reprove yourself for wretched acts, but rejoice in those done well."*

STOIC JOY

"The Stoics want us to go through a radical upheaval in our underlying values so that our supreme goal is to live with wisdom and its accompanying virtues."

~ Donald Robertson

"Modern English isn't well equipped to capture some of the distinctions made in ancient Greek philosophy, especially when it comes to describing emotions and sensations. We use the word 'pleasure' very broadly to encompass almost any positive feeling. However, the Stoics distinguished between the sort of pleasure (*hedone*) we get from 'external' things like food or sex or flattery and the deeper sense of inner joy (*chara*) that Marcus is talking about. Stoic joy is profound. It comes from achieving your fundamental goal in life and experiencing genuine fulfillment, which make ordinary pleasures seem trivial by comparison. Ordinary pleasures often ruffle our minds, especially when indulged in too much. Stoic joy never does this—it's synonymous with inner peace and knows no excess. The Stoics refer to it as the pure form of 'joy' that someone experiences who is living a truly great life and has attained genuine personal fulfillment (*eudaimonia*). Of course, none of us are there yet, but all of us may, potentially, glimpse the goal as long as we're heading in the right direction."

"For instance, when people disagreed with Marcus, he first tried to persuade them to see things from his perspective. However, if they persisted in obstructing what he believed to be a just course of action, he remained calm and transformed the obstacle into an opportunity to practice some other virtue, such as patience, restraint, or understanding. His equanimity remained intact as long as he never desired what was beyond his grasp, which constitutes one of the foundations of the Stoic remedy for worry and anxiety."

~ Donald Robertson

Stoic joy. It's profound.

And, as you can expect, it's not the kind that's found in chasing external things like food or sex or flattery. It's the natural by-product of a life well lived.

In fact, Donald tells us that *"The Stoics tended to view joy not as the goal of life, which is wisdom, but as a by-product of it, so they believed that trying to pursue it directly might lead us down the wrong path if it's sought at the expense of wisdom."*

He also tells us that Stoic joy is ACTIVE—it's the result of things we DO, not things that happen to us. What kinds of things? Simple: *"The wise man's sense of delight comes from one thing alone: acting consistently in accord with virtue."*

P.S. Donald also tells us: *"The Greek word for joy (chara) is closely related to that for gratitude (charis)." <- Which is probably why modern scientists tell us that gratitude is such a key part of joyful flourishing.*

TIME PROJECTION

"Another simple and powerful technique is to ask yourself how you would feel about the situation that worries you in ten or twenty years' time, looking back on it from the future. It's an example of a more general strategy known as 'time projection.' In other words, you can help yourself develop a philosophical attitude toward adversity by asking, 'If this will seem trivial to me twenty years from now, then why shouldn't I view it as trivial today instead of worrying about it as if it's a catastrophe?' You'll often find that shifting your perspective in terms of time can change how you feel about a setback by making it seem less catastrophic."

That's another Stoic-psychological tool from a chapter called "The Inner Citadel and War of Many Nations." Sub-section: "Decatastrophizing and the Contemplation of Impermanence."

One of the core practices of cognitive behavioral therapy (inspired by Stoicism) is called "decatastrophizing."

As you may have noticed, when something "negative" happens, we tend to focus on (and exaggerate) all the negative aspects and, as a result, make it MUCH worse than it needed to be. Aka, we "catastrophize" it.

One way to decatastrophize? Time projection. Shall we do it now?

Anything currently stressing you out? (Of course there is! Hah. You're human.)

So... Let's pick one thing.

Got it?

Now, fast forward ten or twenty years. Look at your current problem from THAT vantage point.

And... Ask yourself, *"If this will seem trivial to me twenty years from now, then why shouldn't I view it as trivial today instead of worrying about it as if it's a catastrophe?"*

THE CHOICE OF HERCULES

"What do you think Hercules would have amounted to," Epictetus asks his students, "if there had not been monsters such as the Nemean lion, the Hydra, the stag of Artemis, the Erymanthian boar, and all those unjust and bestial men for him to contend with? Why, if he had sat at home, wrapped up asleep in bedsheets, living in luxury and ease, he would have been no Hercules at all!" Epictetus tells his students that just as Hercules cleansed the earth of monsters—without complaining—they should set about conquering themselves by purging the base desires and emotions from their hearts.

"Epictetus liked to tell his students that in the face of everything that befalls them, they should get into the habit of asking themselves what capacity, or virtue, they possess for making good use of the event."

~ Donald Robertson

For Stoics, in other words, the tale of Hercules symbolizes the epic challenge of deciding who we really want to be in life, the promise of philosophy, and the temptation of giving in to pleasure and vice. The moral is that it often requires a Herculean effort to keep to the right path. But wasn't Hercules's life *unpleasant*? As we'll see, from the Stoic perspective, Hercules remained *cheerful*, despite the terrible things he endured. He enjoyed a profound sense of inner satisfaction knowing that he was fulfilling his destiny and expressing his true nature. His life had something far more satisfying than pleasure: it had *purpose*."

That's from a chapter called "The Choice of Hercules."

(Note: This is the very first Big Idea in our Notes on Epictetus's [Discourses](#).)

So... Apparently, before he became our mythic hero, Hercules was walking on a path and came to a fork in the road. At which point two goddesses appeared.

One barged in front of the other and falsely claimed that her friends called her Eudaimonia. (Her real name was Vice.) She promised Hercules a life of ease and luxury without any hardships.

The second goddess, Arete, was "a less boastful and more modest woman, who nonetheless shone with natural beauty. To his surprise, she wore a grave expression. She warned him that her path led in a very different direction: it would be long and difficult, and would require a great deal of hard work. Speaking plainly, she told Hercules that he would suffer. ... 'Nothing that is really good and admirable,' cautioned Arete, 'is granted by the gods to men without some effort and application.' Hercules would be called upon to exercise wisdom and justice and to face mounting adversity with bravery and self-discipline. Overcoming great obstacles through courageous and honorable deeds, the goddess said, was the only true path to fulfillment in life."

Our hero, of course, chose the path of virtue and became the mythic hero most admired by the Stoic philosophers.

We're faced with the Choice of Hercules in big ways and small ways every day.

Let's choose wisely TODAY, shall we?

B

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

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