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# Stoic Consolations

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## Abstract

*In this paper I explore the Stoic view on attachment to external goods, or what the Stoics call “indifferents.” Attachment is problematic, on the Stoic view, because it exposes us to loss and exacerbates the fragility that comes with needing others and things. The Stoics argue that we can build resilience through a robust reeducation of ordinary emotions and routine practice in psychological risk management techniques. Through a focus on selected writings of Seneca as well as Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations and Marcus Aurelius’s Meditations, I nonetheless ask whether Stoicism leaves any room for grief and distress. I argue that it does, and that consolation comes not from a retreat to some inner citadel, but from the support and sustenance of social connections.*

**Keywords:** *resilience; Stoicism; Marcus Aurelius; Seneca; Cicero; Epictetus; PTSD*

## I. A fiery apocalypse and street philosophy of the day

A sober historical event that involved massive destruction of stuff was the Great Fire of 64, the fire that devastated Rome. Whether or not Nero “fiddled while Rome burned,” let us assume arson was the act of some internal enemy. What is critical is the result: a fiery apocalypse that destroyed much of Rome, leaving half of its population homeless, without shops and businesses to sustain the population, and with public and cultural heritage sites turned into rubble.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Miriam Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (London: Routledge, 1984), 141, and Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 178-209, esp. 191, who

The burning of Rome forces a question that must have been on the minds of those who witnessed the conflagration and who practiced and preached the street philosophy of the day: How do you react as a Stoic? Seneca, after all, was the young Nero's rhetoric tutor and then court minister *par excellence*. Does Stoic philosophy force us to rethink our attachment to objects and our valuation of them as central to flourishing? Does it help us to loosen our grip in some way?<sup>2</sup> Can we flourish without attachment to objects and persons we love?

The Greek founders of Stoicism – Zeno of Citium, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus, and later Stoics, both Greek and Roman, such as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, hold a view of flourishing or happiness inspired by Socrates – that virtue alone is sufficient for flourishing. External goods, all those outer goods that are not themselves part of our inner goodness – health, wealth, and material objects and edifices, however much integral to sustenance or subsistence, homeland, history, culture, or security, are renamed by the Stoics and dubbed “indifferents.” They are to be preferred rather than dispreferred, but are never themselves the kinds of things that can make or break our happiness. Rome may burn as Nero watches or wanders to the outer wilds of his empire; houses, shops, public baths and communal ovens, tombs, and monuments may go up in smoke; the glories of ancient Greek cities may be demolished by battle. All these are disasters; however, the task of Stoicism as a practical philosophy is to teach us to endure the loss

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take the view that Nero was responsible for the fire. For the view that the Christians may have been the arsons, see John Pollini, “Burning Rome, Burning Christians,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, eds. Shadi Bartsch, Kirk Freudenburg, and Cedric Littlewood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 212-236. Our ancient sources are Tacitus, *The Annals*, in *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, eds. Alfred Joh Church and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Perseus, 1942), <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi1351.phi005.perseus-eng,1:15.38>, who wrote in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, and later authors Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars: The Life of Nero* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1914), [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Nero\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Nero*.html), 38, and Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, vol. 8 (Cambridge, MA, and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1925), 62.16-18. The latter two point the finger at Nero. Tacitus cautiously says: “A disaster followed, whether accidental or treacherously contrived by the emperor, is uncertain, as authors have given both accounts” (15.38).

<sup>2</sup> This paper draws on earlier considerations of some of these issues in Nancy Sherman, “Stoics on Stuff: Consolations on the Destruction of Cultural Heritage in War,” in *Heritage and War: Ethical Issues*, eds. William Bülow, Helen Frowe, Derek Matravers, and Joshua Lewis Thomas, 195-212 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023) and Nancy Sherman, *Stoic Wisdom: Ancient Lessons for Modern Resilience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). An abbreviated version was also presented as the keynote address at the Eurolsme (European International Society for Military Ethics) conference in Athens, May 2023. My book, *Stoic Wisdom*, aims to construct a credible Stoic account of how we invest in things outside our control in a way that doesn't fully unhinge us.

and manage risk. If Socrates in the *Phaedo* dubs philosophy as the practice of dying, then the Stoics double down on the claim and pronounce philosophy as the practice of prerehearsing loss.

This Stoic perspective may strike some as the harsh austerity of an ancient philosophy gone awry. We may rehearse evils or what the Stoics call “prerehearse the bads” in order to practice loss.<sup>3</sup> But to claim that the exercise is not just protective, but that there are no real losses, is to give too much credence to Stoicism’s strange recalibration of values that dubs all goods that are not excellences of character false goods.

Still, the Stoic view gives us space to wonder if we do not at times fetishize material stuff and underestimate our resilience in the face of loss. The Stoics argue that if we want to go on valuing things that are outside the kind of control we generally have over our characters, then we should downgrade their value somehow and develop new kinds of attitudes toward them. In addition, we should learn techniques that mitigate risk.

Given the practical bent of ancient Greco-Roman Stoicism, especially as elaborated by later Stoics such as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, it’s not surprising that in our own time, “Modern Stoicism” has become a wildly popular street philosophy.<sup>4</sup> It competes with Buddhism as a practiced philosophy. For some it is nothing short of a secular religion – with no building funds or tithings attached! It becomes an alternative, yet familiar “chosen” religion. Given that ancient Greco-Roman Stoicism flourished around the turn of the first millennium, with many Judeo-Christian thinkers (such as Philo of Alexandria – Philo Judaeus – and Augustine) picking up bits and pieces of its view, it’s not surprising that many looking for a new religion find familiar shards in Stoic writing.

But on my view the best way to cast the project of ancient Stoicism is as a response to Aristotle and his fudging at the end of the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* about how much weight to give to external goods and how they are to be regulated by virtue in a good life.

## II. The indifferent

Aristotle is commodious in what he will include in the good or flourishing life. And this, itself, is a response to Plato. At the end of Book I of the *Republic*, Plato moves virtue (or justice) to a state of the soul or

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Seneca, *Letters on Ethics to Lucilius*, trans. Margaret Graver and A. A. Long (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 76.34.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://modernstoicism.com/> for a group that helped launch the movement.

psyche. His concern was never how people practice that virtue. Rather, his worry was that the virtues cannot just be a list of conventional behaviors, as his teacher Socrates had imagined them to be when he buttonholed his interlocutors in the *agora* and asked his famous question τί ἐστί (what is it) – what is temperance, what is justice, what is piety? However, any move to virtue or a state of character is itself inadequate, insists Aristotle. A virtuous life spent fully asleep or tortured on the rack is no flourishing life.<sup>5</sup> Still, Aristotle never works out how to structure a composite notion of happiness that mixes external goods and persons and fortune with the internal good of the virtues. To many readers, happiness seems to become a messy ragbag of different kinds of goods. How to achieve happiness, given our dependence on external goods, is never made fully clear. Happiness seems unstable, at best. The Stoics are intent to find a more stable conception of happiness, and to do so by drawing brighter stripes and by indulging in neologisms. They dub external goods “indifferents.” Indifferents are never constitutive of happiness or even real kinds of goods to be chosen as part of our happiness. In the case of indifferents that are preferred, they are supportive conditions that in most instances (in a way, never fully worked out) are selected because they are “in accord with nature.”

Whatever the substantive axiological difference, the practical take home point for the Stoics is that preferring and dispreferring (selecting and disselecting) involves not indifference, but a rational approach and avoidance attitude that steers clear of both sticky acquisitiveness and panicky aversion. They argue that we need to learn behaviorally and not just intellectually new ways of wanting and rejecting that introduce a certain lightness to our touch. As Epictetus puts it, “use [...] impulse and aversion lightly and with reservation and in a relaxed way.”<sup>6</sup> How this attitude packs in enough investment to make life worth living, and not just a constant hedged bet, is a concern that drives many common critiques of Stoicism.

### III. Stoic moral psychology: Three layers of emotions

Consider key foundational elements in Stoic moral psychology. Critically, the Stoics hold that the locus of control is our assent to impres-

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.5, 1095b32-1096a4, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Epictetus, *How to Be Free: An Ancient Guide to Stoic Life. Encheiridion and Selections from Discourses*, trans. A. A. Long (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), using emended translation from Tad Brennan, “Reservation in Stoic Ethics,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 82 (2000): 151.

sions, and in particular, impressions that are affectively charged, or umphy, (*hormetikai*). Seneca explains:

Anger is undoubtedly set in motion by an impression received of a wrong. But does it follow immediately on the impression and break out without any involvement of the mind? Or, is some assent by the mind required for it to be set in motion? Our view is that it undertakes nothing on its own, but only with the mind's approval.<sup>7</sup>

Emotion, is thus, a kind of voluntary action, something we will.<sup>8</sup> Through assent we implicitly frame and grasp the world propositionally and act on the resulting opinions or judgments. The view borrows heavily from Aristotle's cognitivist account in the *Rhetoric* II. But it is both more thoroughly cognitivist than anything Aristotle would sign off on, and more volitional.

The robust volitional moment emerges in the Stoic's novel idea that we can insert pauses before we approve or disapprove of the impressions that trigger emotional reactions. As I write in *Stoic Wisdom*, you can slow down or stem initial responses, think not just fast, but slow, as Daniel Kahneman might put it. What we are approving or disapproving of is a cognition, as in the case of anger, that we were unjustly wronged or offended. The Stoic view is that all mental activity, whether to do with emotions or the most theoretical study, is cognitive. The Stoic psyche just is made of reason in manifold manifestations.

That said, the Stoics hold that there are three distinct layers of emotional experience, with differing levels of cognitive engagement. The first layer is made of sub-threshold emotional arousals – starts and startles. These are impressions we process in a near automatic way, as in autonomic responses that at times are adaptive (such as flight-fight-freeze responses) but at other times, maladaptive or rooted in implicit bias or unhinged fear.<sup>9</sup> Says Seneca, they can “come unbidden and depart unbidden.” But we may also deliberately “bid” them adieu before they derail us.

If anyone thinks that pallor, falling tears, sexual excitement or deep sighing, a sudden glint in the eyes or something

<sup>7</sup> Seneca, “On Anger,” *Moral and Political Essays*, trans. John M. Cooper and J.F. Procope (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Seneca, “On Anger,” 2.4.

<sup>9</sup> We can think, too, of neurobiologist Joe LeDoux's low road emotions.

similar are indications of an emotion [...] he is wrong; he fails to see that these are just bodily agitations. Thus, it is that even the bravest man often turns pale as he puts on his armour, that the knees of even the fiercest soldier tremble a little as the signal is given for battle,<sup>10</sup> that a great general's heart is in his mouth before the lines have charged against one another, that the most eloquent orator goes numb in his fingers as he prepares to speak.<sup>11</sup>

In positing this subthreshold layer of emotional experience, the Stoics leave room for quasi-emotional phenomena that may catch even the calm and cool sage off guard. Blanching in a ship wreck, knees knocking at the sound of the clarion call, a passing frisson or erection, (or to take an example from Philo of Alexandria, Sarah's nervous laughter when she is told she will give birth at 100) will not impugn the sage (or near-sage matriarch) because these arousals are not full-blown emotions that grab hold in lingering ways.<sup>12</sup> There is not yet an assent to the impression. The Stoics hold that there is time to nip a full-blown emotion in the bud before there are unwanted consequences of the emotional arousal.

This takes us to the second layer of emotional experience. The Stoics classify all full-blown or ordinary emotions as subspecies of four basic emotions: desire/fear/pleasure/distress.<sup>13</sup> These ordinary emotions represent our customary, Stoic-untrained ways of affectively engaging wholeheartedly in the world, animate and inanimate stuff. Each of the emotions, says Cicero following the Greek Stoic patriarch Chrysippus, is itself a two-tiered evaluative judgment that some good or bad is in the offing and that it requires an appropriate or fit behavioral response. So, desire judges some good as worth pursuing – that house is the one I want – and a judgment about how it is appropriate for me to go for it – I'll bid with all my hard-earned savings on it.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A Ukrainian front line combat doctor, Ivanka Chobanyuk, reported that when she is treating patients, her legs shake, no matter how many times she has performed this kind of work. But the response goes away quickly and she regains control. See <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/05/1090992369/a-ukrainian-woman-a-medic-in-the-military-says-the-war-has-changed-her>.

<sup>11</sup> Seneca, "On Anger," 2.3.

<sup>12</sup> Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, trans. R. Marcus (Cambridge, MA, and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1953), 4.16

<sup>13</sup> Again, the Stoics are keen here to tidy up Aristotle's messier non-taxonomic account of emotions in the *Rhetoric*.

<sup>14</sup> Cicero, *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4*, ed. Margaret Graver (Chica-



The problem with these ordinary emotions, according to Stoics, in a move that influenced much modern moral philosophy (including Kant's famous rants against inclinations), is that emotions can be excessive impulses – you're like a runner, says Chrysippus – once in stride you can't easily stop. Seneca embellishes the metaphor: being angry is like standing on the edge of a precipice. Once the descent begins, there is no going back. You're like a body in free fall.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, emotions can be overly intense and hard to rein in. There is, however, a further problem of mis-valuation. Ordinary emotions are perverted cognitions, false evaluations about what is really good and bad in the world. Love and desire, distress and grief, anger and fear, by and large, attach to objects that are not genuine goods and bads. They attach to indifferents. And the proper attitude toward indifferents, on the Stoic view, should be preference or dispreference, a way of approaching or avoiding an object without unbridled emotional investment or aversion. Preference or dispreference (selection or rejection) is not the same as unbridled emotional investment or aversion. When we prefer or disprefer, we make "wise selections," or as moral aspirants, at least, try to do so. In making those selections, we engage in the business of the ordinary world. We are not hovering above it in some Platonic transcendent sphere of Forms. Rather, we are in the world of mud and dirt, brick and mortar, food and shelter, aesthetically beautiful buildings and objects, friends and lovers. We are in the world of sights and sounds (however disparagingly Plato viewed that world in the *Republic*). But as Stoics moving in that concrete world of persons and stuff, we are always trying to loosen ourselves a bit from too tight a clutch or too desperate a need. We need to keep in mind that the Stoics are doctors of the soul keen in helping us find pockets of resourcefulness, pivots, agility that can take root in our emotional repertoire.

This puts us nearer to a third layer of emotional experience that we can approximate only as progressors and not fully wise. This third layer of emotional experience consists in rational or "good/healthy" analogs of ordinary emotion, focused on actions that are virtuous and that avoid vice. These rational attitudes are the affective dimensions that go with wise selecting – in place of desire, there is rational desire (*boulesis*); in place of fear, there is rational cautiousness or wariness (*eulabeia*); and in place of pleasure, there is rational joy (*chara*).<sup>16</sup>

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go, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3.75-6.

<sup>15</sup> Seneca, "On Anger," 1.7; Seneca, *Letters on Ethics to Lucilius*, trans. Margaret Graver and A. A. Long (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3.1.4; also 3.16.2.

<sup>16</sup> Note, there is no rational analog for distress, for the only real cause of distress would be



But what does all this amount to? Do the Stoics leave any room for robust delight in external goods once we dub those externals “indifferents” and purify the emotional attitudes that we invest in them? Presumably, a sage will find joy not only in acts of beneficence, justice, or mercy (i.e., virtuous deeds), but also in human security and friendship. She will find joy in safe dwellings and homes, stable food supplies and health. She will find joy in pleasing objects that uplift whether because they are part of one’s cultural heritage or just because they are beautiful and they tickle one’s fancy.

That said, there is tension, especially in Seneca’s writing, between a life of asceticism and aestheticism. Seneca berates himself: will he go for a thin straw palette or a mattress plush enough to show the imprint of his body? Will he be content with a simple abode or go for marble halls and a retinue of servants that would make Downton Abbey’s staff look scant? But clearly, part of the appeal of Stoicism today, in circles of power and wealth, not least of which in Silicon Valley, is that the Stoics of old struggled hard with the pushes and pulls of stuff – especially glittering stuff – its corrupting force and the yearning to be free of its yoke.

One way to try to be free of its yoke is to practice loss. And so the Stoics introduce methods of risk management and preparedness. But how do we imagine the unthinkable, such as loss of home or homeland overnight? How do we manage risk in a way that doesn’t pre-traumatize? The Stoics introduce various Stoic meditative techniques which will be the topic of the section which follows.

#### IV. Managing risk through pre-rehearsal of the bads

We have already alluded to one technique: prerehearsing future evils or bads. Anticipate the traps that lay ahead. Don’t be caught off guard. The exercise goes back to the early Greeks. Cicero, not himself a Stoic but a redactor of Stoic texts, approvingly quotes a fragment from Euripides:

I learned this from a wise man: over time  
I pondered in my heart the miseries  
to come: a death untimely, or the sad  
escape of exile, or some other weight  
of ill, rehearsing, so that if by chance  
some one of them should happen, I’d not be  
unready, not torn suddenly with pain.<sup>17</sup>

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vice and of that the sage is incapable. I return to that point later.

<sup>17</sup> Cicero, *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4*, ed. Margaret Graver (Chica-

Euripides, he says, in turn, takes a lesson from the pre-Socratic Anaxagoras who legend has it said when his son died, “I knew my child was mortal.” The Stoics ratify the idea by turning it into a daily exercise: Regularly rehearse potential future evils to mitigate the shock of accident and tragic loss.<sup>18</sup> The Stoics claim that if we do that, we can mute some of the “freshness” of a sudden loss. The Greek term here for “fresh” is telling. *Prosphatos* connotes “rawness,” as in freshly slaughtered meat.<sup>19</sup> We need advance exposure if we are to weaken the visceral, raw assault of close-up losses.

Pre-rehearsal is a form of pre-exposure, a desensitization ahead of time. There are contemporary, clinical parallels to the notion of pre-rehearsal. Some may be more familiar with exposure techniques that work on desensitization after the fact. Clinicians have for some time successfully used evidence-based prolonged exposure (PE) therapy after the fact, to reduce posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PE is a form of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT, itself with roots in Stoicism)<sup>20</sup> during which patients confront (*in vivo* or through imagination) situations or events that are reminders of traumatic situations, though now experienced in safe settings. Through repeated approach, rather than avoidance, the fear response is deconditioned rather than reinforced.

Take the case of military service members exposed to the constant threat of improvised explosive devices. Survival depends on quickly responding to those threats. But the fear response can become overre-active. Hypervigilance is adaptive in a war zone, but not always after war, at home when thunder claps are heard as gunfire, fresh bumps on a pavement read as newly planted bomb sites, a black plastic bag on a lawn a hiding place for an explosive. Re-exposure to stressors

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go, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3.29.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.30.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.52; A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols., vol. 1: Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 65B.

<sup>20</sup> Both Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck, founders of an early version of CBT, acknowledge the debt: Albert Ellis, *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy* (Oxford: Lyle Stuart, 1962); Aaron Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1975). Note, there has been a move within the military community to use the term post-traumatic stress (PTS), dropping the “D” for “disorder” which many find stigmatizing. One argument often made is that servicemembers don’t come home from war with “limb disorders,” but “limb injuries.” Psychological injuries should be viewed with parity. Others argue that in so far as posttraumatic stress is a *normal* response to an *abnormal* situation of overwhelming life threat, the notion of a “disorder” gets the response wrong. I have used “PTSD” in the above discussion for consistency, because the literature I go on to cite on pre-exposure uses the term.

by talking about them, seeing them in virtual settings, revisiting and processing memories in a relationship where there is trust and safety becomes a way of deconditioning both the avoidance response and hyperreaction. The “neutral” garbage bag on a lawn or new bump on the neighborhood road over time loses its associated negative valence.<sup>21</sup>

According to more recent studies, researchers have begun to investigate pre-treatment exposure. “Attention bias” (or to cast the idea in Stoic terms, the patterns in our assent to impressions) is modulated by balancing focus between threat and neutral stimuli. The idea is to learn to shift attention, so that we develop perceptual and cognitive resources for focusing not only on threat, but also on neutral situations. Research suggests that advance training of this sort in shifting focus between threat and unthreatening stimuli reduces anxious hypervigilance characteristic of PTSD.<sup>22</sup> In a related research experiment, Israeli Defense Force combat soldiers in units likely to face potentially traumatic events were exposed to “attention bias modification training” sessions.<sup>23</sup> Through computer programs, they were trained to attend to threats “in an attempt to enhance cognitive processing of potentially traumatic events.” The idea is to make the response to stress cues adaptive and agile: elevate the response in acutely threatening situations in combat, but train it to be transient, so that it recedes in safe circumstances.

Again, we can put a Stoic gloss on this: train in advance to withhold inappropriate assent to impressions of threat by retreading alternative patterns of assent to impressions of calm and safety. Of course, Stoic standards of what is and what is not appropriate will not map onto what most of us commonly hold to be appropriate or adaptive. The devil is in the details of how we interpret the doctrine of indifferents and what will count as wise selection. But the formal Stoic notion – of preventive exposure and training in what we focus on in our environment – is prescient.

<sup>21</sup> Lotte Hendriks et al., “Intensive Prolonged Exposure Therapy for Chronic PTSD Patients Following Multiple Trauma and Multiple Treatment Attempts,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 9, no. 1 (2018): 1425574.

<sup>22</sup> Amit Lazarov et al., “Bias-contingent Attention, Bias Modification and Attention Control Training in Treatment of PTSD: A Randomized Control Trial,” *Psychological Medicine* 49, no. 14 (2019): 2432-2440; Ilan Wald et al., “Attention to Threats and Combat-related Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms: Prospective Associations and Moderation by the Serotonin Transporter Gene,” *JAMA Psychiatry* 70, no. 4 (2013): 401-408; Amy S. Badura-Brack et al., “Effect of Attention Training on Attention Bias Variability and PTSD Symptoms: Randomized Controlled Trials in Israeli and U.S. Combat Veterans,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 172, no. 12 (2015): 1233-1241.

<sup>23</sup> Ilan Wald et al., “Selective Prevention of Combat-related Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Using Attention Bias Modification Training: A Randomized Controlled Trial,” *Psychological Medicine* 46, no. 12 (2016): 2633.

Epictetus develops the idea of pre-rehearsal, suggesting that we can be trained for personal loss, of things or persons, by gradually increasing the stakes: we move incrementally from rehearsing small potential disturbances to great ones: “In the case of everything that attracts you or has its uses or that you are fond of, keep in mind to tell yourself what it is like, starting with the most trivial things.” He suggests we start with a jug: “If you are fond of a jug, say: ‘I am fond of a jug.’ Then, if it is broken, you will not be troubled.” Epictetus then widens the sphere of practice. “If you go out to bathe, picture what happens at the bathhouse – the people there who splash you or jostle you or talk rudely or steal your things.”<sup>24</sup> (The stakes are small, but this is just a heuristic for how to learn the technique and apply it when the stakes are higher).

Consider a pandemic, ours, or perhaps the Antonine Plague that spread through the Roman Empire (165-180 CE). Imagine what seems unimaginable. And then prepare for the personal and emotional toll. Know the attitudes that travel with disaster – anxiety, dread, massive sorrow and grief, loneliness, dislocation, a sense of an empty future. And know the sources of comfort and support. There is no way we can be immune from psychological distress. Nor would we want to be. Moreover, any armor that claims to fully protect is a scam, a fool’s errand. Still, there are Stoic lessons we can learn about possible ways of minimizing and managing distress both on a personal and institutional level. Make hardships that are distant and almost unthinkable real and proximate. And then collectively and responsibly design best resources and responses to meet those cases.

## V. Managing risk through mental reservation

An additional technique the Stoics deploy is “mental reservation.” The idea is this: Tag on to your intentions, or as they say, your impulses toward preferred indifferents, a tacit mental reservation: “if nothing happens to prevent it.”<sup>25</sup> The thought is: Things may not work out. Think of what you want as tentative. Append an “unless.” I’ll go sailing, says Seneca, “unless something interferes.” Hedge your bets.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Epictetus, *How to be Free*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> The Greek term is *ὑπεραίρεσις*. Often *exceptio* in Latin. See Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 119-126. For a contrary view that reservation does not involve conditional impulses and that there may not be evidence for the synergy of Stoic logic and psychology, see Tad Brennan, “Reservation in Stoic Ethics,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 82 (2000): 149-177.

<sup>26</sup> I often think of this technique as something Virginia Woolf conjures up in the opening pages of *To the Lighthouse*. Recall little James is dying to go to the lighthouse. “Will we go?” he

Epictetus invokes a similar idea: “Use only impulse and aversion, but lightly and with reservation and in a relaxed way.”<sup>27</sup> Again, in going “light” on our impulses, we try to avoid the kind of yearning that leaves you with nothing but chronic emptiness if things don’t work out. A late first century BCE Stoic, Arius Didymus, invokes a similar idea from the Old Stoa:

They also say nothing [...] contrary to his desire or impulse occurs in the case of the worthwhile man, because he does all such things with reservation and nothing adverse befalls him unforeseen.<sup>28</sup>

But is the idea to make your impulses, or selections, fail-proof? If so, then, impulses come, as it were, with built-in cushions, a bit like car airbags that inflate upon impact in an accident. Formulated in the right way, impulses ensure psychological immunity that protects when you need it most. The idea is too good to be true, psychologically, if not logically.<sup>29</sup>

Maybe a better way of thinking about reservation is on the financial trading model: “past performance is no guarantee of future results.”<sup>30</sup>

This is actually a useful way of thinking about key Stoic texts on mental reservation. The point of the financial analogy is, rather, that information about the world and our best analyses of it are constantly changing. Impulses should change and be responsive to those updated ways of seeing the world. So, to return to Seneca’s example: I’ll go on a boat ride. But I’ll revise my intention if I notice that a storm is setting in. I plan to campaign for election as a Roman magistrate. But I’ll change my plans if my bid for election seems highly unlikely. And so on. In the sage’s case, there is always a quick responsiveness to new

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clamors. Mrs. Ramsey, his mother (and likely based on Virginia Woolf’s own mother, Julia Duckworth Stephens), says repeatedly: “we will go, if the weather is fine.”

<sup>27</sup> Epictetus, *How to be Free*, emended trans. following Brennan, “Reservation in Stoic Ethics,” 151.

<sup>28</sup> A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols., vol. 1: Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 65E; Arius Didymus Stobaeus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics (Eclogae)*, ed. and trans. Arthur Pomeroy (Atlanta, GE: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 2.115.5-9; Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1: Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary, 65W.

<sup>29</sup> For an eloquent and careful elaboration of the critique, see Brennan, “Reservation in Stoic Ethics.”

<sup>30</sup> As in <https://corporate.vanguard.com/content/corporatesite/us/en/corp/how-we-invest/principles-for-investing-success.html#:~:text=Past%20performance%20is%20no%20guarantee,invest%20directly%20in%20an%20index>.

information. That said, the sage's case is highly idealized: The sage can almost instantly update impulses in light of new, veridical perception. The sage doesn't get stuck on what's wished for or what was. The sage's motives always track cognitive changes. And cognitive agility guarantees keeping up with a changing epistemic landscape.

Seneca goes on to unpack the idea behind mental reservation by capturing the above idealized line of reasoning, but with a few critical additions: "This is why we say that nothing happens to a wise man contrary to his expectations – we release him not from the accidents but from the blunders of humankind [...]. We ought also to make ourselves adaptable, lest we become too fond of the plans we have formed [...]." He accents the last point: "Both the inability to change and the inability to endure" are "foes to tranquility."<sup>31</sup>

The first point to note is that the sage is protected not from "accidents" or misfortune, but from human error. And this is because a sage's knowledge, as we suggested, keeps up with the facts. It is in this sense that things are not "contrary to his expectations." It's not that the sage cushions all impulses against disappointment or failure. Rather, she changes impulses to keep up with what is now the case. We fallible beings are not so lucky: our knowledge is not always one step ahead of accidents. But then Seneca brings the sage down a notch or two to our human level. A sage may suffer by having to abandon plans and desires. So here we have the concession that the sage makes emotional investments that can actually lead to pain. But the suffering (*dolorem*) will be "much lighter," if success is not guaranteed (because of mental reservation), and if there is an overall capacity to be adaptive. That is a tip for all of us, even we who are fallible and who invest with more passion than is often wise.

Overall, this is a powerful set of lessons. If the fundamental point behind mental reservation is cognitive agility, facing facts squarely, trying to keep up with fluid informational landscapes, then the Stoic idea here is less about how to beat frustration than about how to change motivations in ways that align with new and reliably curated information. Beating frustration may be an indirect windfall, but the work in getting there is cognitive. Of course, as we said, the Stoics idealize the model. The sage is an exalted knower, indeed, an infallible one, who doesn't have to worry about assenting to misleading and attractive impressions or clinging to health or clean feet when the inevitability of disease or muddy feet is how nature is unfolding here

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<sup>31</sup> Seneca, "On Tranquility of Mind," in *Moral Essays*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1932), 13.3-14.1.

and now and guiding what we should assent to. And he does not seem to have to worry either about all the unconscious ways we take in impressions without surveillance or with misinformation that distorts our views. But even so, the general idea of being responsive to a changing world aided by exercises in pre-rehearsal, are cautionary lessons for trying to find calm in unnerving times.

## VI. Return to Seneca and attachment and loss

We can now circle back to the beginning of this paper – to attachment to stuff, and to its loss, through fires and massive devastation, whether through arson, war, or nature. And we return with Seneca.

Seneca is a complex and colorful writer who uses his oratorical flourishes to dazzle and at times confuse his readers. He indulges in the excesses of palatial luxury, but then excoriates himself for it. He aspires to ascetic simplicity, but not so secretly revels in an aesthete's taste for patterned marble and statuary. You can see him beating his chest in this passage, but with a wink wink and a nod nod:

I am not telling you to give yourself airs if you look down on golden couches and bejeweled cups. What's the virtue in scorning superfluities? [Rather] [a]dmire yourself when you look down on necessities.<sup>32</sup>

Don't be fooled by "the glitter and gleam of wealth" or the "false glare of high repute and great power."<sup>33</sup> Learn to see virtue as what's really beautiful, even when coated in dirt and grime<sup>34</sup>:

Only then will we be in a position to understand what worthless items we admire. We are just like children, who set great store by their playthings and care more about any cheap trinket than they do about a sibling or even a parent. As Aristo says, how are we different from them, except that we with our statues and paintings have a more expensive form of silliness. They delight in smooth pebbles found on the beach with specks of different colors; we delight in patterned marbles imported from the deserts of Egypt or the wilds of Africa, broad columns sup-

<sup>32</sup> Seneca, *Letters on Ethics to Lucilius*, 110.11.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.6.



porting some hall or dining pavilion large enough for an entire town.<sup>35</sup>

Seneca points here not to our attachment to homes as shelters but to cities and their cultural heritage. At his most breast-beating earnest moments, his point is that all that patterned marble – in imperial columns and arches that fill a forum – caters to a false glory. We need to recast glory so that virtue and its exempla, in a Cato or a Socrates, come to inspire in the way that triumphal pageantry and monuments do.<sup>36</sup> This is a standard Stoic move: to give words new referents. Real glory is what is typically not glorified. But it ought to be.

Still, at times, when pushed to an extreme, it is a harsh asceticism, even if rhetorical. But Seneca lightens his tone when he documents an actual conflagration that wipes out a city's cultural and domestic edifices, and much of its population. The fire he writes about in a letter to his junior Lucilius is not of Rome, but of the Roman colony of Lugdunum (modern Lyon). The conflagration may have taken place shortly after the Great Fire.<sup>37</sup> Seneca's remarks give us a concrete sense of how he thinks about the technique of prerehearsing loss, the place of distress and grief in the Stoic emotional profile, and the importance of friendship:

Our friend Liberalis is quite upset at news of the fire that has completely consumed the municipality of Lyon. The catastrophe could have shaken anyone, let alone a person deeply devoted to his native land. It has left him searching for the mental toughness with which he had undoubtedly armed himself against what he thought were possible objects of fear. I'm not surprised, though, that he had no advance fears of this disaster, so unforeseen and virtually unimaginable, because it was unprecedented. Fire has troubled many cities, but not to the point of completely annihilating them. Even when buildings have been set alight by enemy action, many places escape destruction [...]. Such a range of splendid structures, any one of them capable of embellishing a city all by itself – and a single night has leveled them all!<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 115.8.

<sup>36</sup> Robert J. Newman, "In Umbra Virtutis: Gloria in the Thought of Seneca the Philosopher," in *Seneca: Oxford Readings in Classical Studies*, ed. John Fitch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 323.

<sup>37</sup> Seneca, *Letters on Ethics to Lucilius*, n. 91.1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 91.1-2.

Seneca is clearly shocked by what happened. And he admits that it is hard to know how one can concretely prepare for what seems unimaginable. And so there always has to be room for grief, distress, sorrow, and pain. Even amongst the noblest. And in the company of friends with whom one can grieve, mourn, rebuild, and repair.

## VII. Is there room for distress?

So, is there room for healthy distress in a philosophy built on eliminating stress and finding calm? In the catalogue of good emotions, I noted earlier that there are three emotions – a good form of desire, a good form of fear, and a good form of joy. But significantly, there is no good form of distress, a good correlate of the fourth ordinary emotion. And that is because, as I mentioned earlier, on the orthodox view, there is no good form of distress. For the only cause of “good” distress is the corruption of virtue, and for the sage, the exemplar of good emotions, vice and shameful conduct is by definition impossible.

However, none of us are sages. And as moral aspirants, we seek and need guidance. The complaint is registered most forcefully by Cicero. He writes from a profoundly personal place. He is grieving deeply for his beloved daughter Tullia, who has died in childbirth in late winter 45 BCE. In his retreat in the Tusculan hills outside Rome, he turns to Stoic tonics for consolation. But he can’t find the right comfort in the texts. And that’s telling, he thinks, against Stoicism.

I pass over the method of Cleanthes [the second head of the Greek school of Stoicism], since that is directed at the wise person, who does not need consoling. For if you manage to persuade the bereaved person that nothing is bad but shameful conduct, then you have taken away not his grief, but his unwisdom [...]. [But] this is not the right moment for such a lesson.<sup>39</sup>

In short, a sage’s wisdom loosens him from the hold of attachment that clings and the devastation of loss that knows only mourning and grief. But if you are a mortal, in the throes of loss, a Cicero mourning his child, then being taught a sage’s wisdom at the moment of bereavement is, at the very least, as therapists would say, bad timing.

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<sup>39</sup> Cicero, *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4*, 3.77.

What if there is room for a Stoic intervention that is gentler? Recall, ordinary emotions are double-tiered, each emotion nesting two evaluative judgments – in the case of mental distress, that a bad has taken place and that a certain behavior is apt. Cicero says he finds Chrysippus's method helpful. For it does not require denying the first judgment, in his case, that a profound loss has occurred, but rather works on changing the second judgment, how we respond to it. But even this behavioral change, he says, is a hard pill to swallow in the throes of loss: "It's a big task to persuade a person that he is grieving by his own judgment and because he thinks he ought to do so."<sup>40</sup> In other words, even behavior modification, comporting yourself in a way that you think is fitting in your role as both father and Roman statesman, who is supposed to be at the forum at that moment (while Caesar is watching and waiting), is a challenge. Robust volition has its limits.

Still, Seneca thinks you can push those limits a bit. If tears flow, watch that they're not just theatrics, and willed and nursed. The natural ones can and should flow, but again, under monitored attention. Your task is to place a pause when the *lacrimae* are still pre-emotions, and on the verge of becoming full-throated and excessive to the point of now being hard to control.

These [preliminary] tears are shed [...] involuntarily. There are others, though, to which we give egress when we revisit the memory of those we have lost and find an element of sweetness in our sorrow – when we think of their pleasant conversation, their cheerful company, their devoted service. At that time, the eyes release their tears, just as in joy. These we indulge; the others conquer us. So you need not hold back your tears because another person is standing near, or sitting at your side; nor should you make yourself cry because of them: neither tears nor the lack of tears is ever as shameful as when tears are feigned. Let them come of their own accord.<sup>41</sup>

So, the foe is forced tears, not public tears, as Cicero, ever concerned with Roman duties and decorum, might have thought, or tears brought on by memory or reflection. What's objectionable is nursing the tears, encouraging them to flow.<sup>42</sup> The problem is excess and theatrics.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 3.79.

<sup>41</sup> Seneca, *Letters on Ethics to Lucilius*, 99.18-19.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 99.21. For insightful clinical research on persistent distress in prolonged grief reactions, see

Even so, Seneca is aware that tears can overtake one. He is at once the doctor and the patient giving counsel that is always also self-counsel:

I am writing these things to you – I, who wept for my beloved Annaeus Serenus so unrestrainedly [...]. I understand, now, that the main reason I felt such grief was that I had never thought it possible that his death should precede my own. I kept in mind only that he was younger than I, much younger. As if birth order determined our fate!<sup>43</sup>

Again, pre-rehearsal has its limits, especially if you defend against thinking about what you don't want to think about! Freud had a term for that form of defense: denial. And it dampens the putative effectiveness of preparation taken in the calm before the storm.

### VIII. Are you in the storm alone?

Popular modern Stoicism, and indeed the Victorian version epitomized by the British stiff upper lip, often conjures up a picture of go-it-alone grit. To be Stoic is to be self-reliant. You may not retreat to the inner citadel, but you find your strength in your inner resources. Social systems and their support, friendships and alliances, seem to fade into the background in the modern Stoic snapshot. They are often not even in the frame.

But this is not the full legacy of ancient Stoicism. For example, Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* is writing to himself, at nightfall, on the battlefield during the Germanic campaigns (172-180 CE). As a military leader, reflecting on the day, he knows intimately that an army's strength depends on the coordinated movements of a cadre and the grit sustained not just by individual will, but by common purpose and mutual support. This view is rooted in his Stoicism: We are parts of a larger whole, a shared humanity in an ordered cosmos that unites humans and the gods. Our fulfilment, as individual selves, depends on that collaboration. We have to work together, he says, in colorful language, "like feet or hands or eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth."<sup>44</sup> We have to strive to be in sync.

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Paul A. Boelen and Lonneke I. M. Lenferink, "Symptoms of Prolonged Grief, Posttraumatic Stress, and Depression in Recently Bereaved People: Symptom Profiles, Predictive Value, and Cognitive Behavioural Correlates," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 55 (2019): 765-777. He points to the importance of the first six months for early identification and early treatment of those at risk. He notes the prevalence among those at risk to continue to yearn to see the lost one. The yearning and clinging are attitudes that the Stoics pinpoint as unravelling control.

<sup>43</sup> Seneca, *Letters on Ethics to Lucilius*, 63.14.

<sup>44</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations: The Annotated Edition*, ed. Robin Waterfield (New York: Basic

With the detritus of the battlefield still fresh in his mind, the image of social grit becomes more visceral. Picture a dismembered hand and head lying apart from the rest of the human body. That's what "man makes of himself [...] when he cuts himself off from society."<sup>45</sup> Body parts cannot function cut off from the organic whole to which they belong. So, too, we can't thrive cut off from the political and social whole of which we are a part.

To be "at home" in the world, a stock Stoic phrase, is to be a citizen of the cosmos, not bound by the borders of a *polis*, as Aristotle had argued. We are global citizens, on the Stoic view, *cosmopolitans*, a term coined by a colorful Stoic predecessor, Diogenes the Cynic. When asked where he was from, Diogenes replied in essence, from everywhere and nowhere, or literally, "a world citizen."

The founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium, develops the idea in his *Republic*, of which only fragments remain. But Marcus, no doubt, was telegraphing the notion when he writes we are woven together, "intertwined" by a common bond, "in a loving relationship," with one thing scarcely foreign to another.<sup>46</sup> That bond, on the Stoic view, is our shared reason. The view becomes foundational for later philosophers. Kant is the inheritor of that notion of universal reason as the foundation of the moral imperative.

Social grit and the supports that come from common bonds become the way we endure loss. For preparation, "dwelling in the future," may give us some protection, but it would be nonsense to think it made us bulletproof. And the Stoics have no illusions of such immunity. When Rome burns, when Lyons is devastated, when Kyiv and Khartov are firebombed in indiscriminate acts of war, when the treasures of cultures in Palmyra are destroyed by the Islamic State as a way of blotting out history, do the Stoics really say we acquiesce, retreat, find peace in discourse and meditation that take us out of the world, away from its stuff, its attachments, its loved ones, and all the meaning that that invests? Do they shrug their shoulders and say it's naive to invest energy and care in preserving and protecting the Cathedral of St. Sophia, the 11<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine structure, with its cupolas and frescoes, a UNESCO World Heritage site in the heart of Kyiv against the massive shelling rained down by Russian bombs?<sup>47</sup>

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Books, 2021), 2.1.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 6.38.

<sup>47</sup> See New York Time Magazine, March 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/18/magazine/ukraine-war-kyiv.html>, "Citizens of Kyiv" by photographer Al-

I have argued “No.” For the Stoics do not practice indifference. At least a credible Stoicism, and the best of Stoicism, does not. Rather, as Stoics, we try to learn ways of managing fears and distress. As a Stoic, we have emotional skin in the game. We remain attached but we try to cultivate the kind of love that knows a measure of prudence and finds ways to be nimble and adaptive when that is what is required. We remain alert and cautious, we know fear, but fear that also knows courage and resistance. We mourn deeply, we wail and cry, but in ways that know being “at home” in the world always requires the support and sustenance, and material assistance, that comes from being connected to others and to things. That is a Stoic consolation.

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