

## STOICISM FOR THOSE IN DESPAIR

### *Introduction.*

What I hope to do in this article is draw together several truths from my own experience, link them to truths out of Stoic doctrine, and present these as tools for certain people: I would speak to the person who has lost hope, who is suffering, who cannot see a way forward, or who is contemplating self-destruction as a solution. I would ask him or her to tarry a while here with me, and read what I have to say. My viewpoint might be beneficial.

Who am I, addressing this to you? I am not someone of great ability; just someone who once wished to do away with himself but managed to think better of it -- and has managed to live a bit better, too. And I would share what I know with whosoever finds him or her self lost in dismay and embracing out-and-out despair.

### *Basic Expectations.*

Every person in despair can cite a reason for giving up. I would argue that in all cases these reasons rest on the person's defeated expectations, on the disappointments of life. It is in the general nature of people to expect success in living; this expectation is part of our nature, part of the package, as it were. Even when our lives fill up with weaknesses and failures, we retain implicit egocentric expectations, in particular: (1) that I am good, (2) that I deserve well, and (3) that "life should work". This contradiction between how we feel the universe *should* be and how it turns out to be can translate into the opinion that life itself is broken, such that people may wind up grieving for the loss of something they never had to begin with. So my first premiss is that it is the defeat of *Basic Expectations* that vexes many people and even drives them in despair to the point of suicide.

### *Additional (and Unwarranted) Expectations.*

A second premiss is that someone in despair will not overcome this frustration unless he or she learns to distinguish between these innate Basic Expectations and all the *Added*

*Expectations* that each person naturally enough attaches to the Basic ones. One Basic Expectation is that the person, him or her self, is good; this expectation can be defended not as fact but as a natural starting point for a social animal, wishing to be good and hoping that, in fact, he is. But we eventually accumulate a huge constellation of Expectations; a few are Basic, but many turn out to be baseless.

As living creatures we receive sensations of insult, hostility, deprivation, and pain, and we receive these as bad things; these Adversities are shocks to our nerves; they are causes of anger and resentment. It may seem that we should have a better natural defense against these, yet, strangely, many of us do not. Every such reversal we receive, if not handled correctly, can nest and sting like a burr in our mind. Yet every Expectation we have is another setup for just such a disappointment (only one of many paradoxes of being a human being).

*“Seek not that things which happen should happen as you wish, but wish the things which happen to be as they are, and you will have a tranquil flow of life.”*

*Epictétus, Enchiridion, VIII.*

Having linked many Added Expectations to the Basic ones, we are living “beyond our means” in a sense. We've constructed a constellation of unspoken expectations that increases the certainty and the number of shocks we will receive. To make things worse, people often expect things to happen for them immediately, and they are disappointed if they do not. Expecting too much too soon, then, almost qualifies as a kind of self-torture. For these reasons, the trimming away of spurious Expectations is both an important tool and also a necessary habit for someone in despair who wishes to find a happier way of life.

### *The Desire to Live.*

There is another important 'Basic' to speak of; to demonstrate this, I must ask you a question: Setting aside all hopes and dreams, all the scenarios and experiences you have of life, do you not - at base - *wish to live*? Most people must answer, “Yes, I do.” Yet certain of us, habituated to negativity, will maintain, “No, I do not.” But invariably that negative reply is conditioned by a specific complaint, for example:

*No, I do not wish to live any more ...*

*- after finding out that she hates me; or*

- *after having seen how truly cruel people can be; or*
- *after having seen for myself what a coward I am; or*
- *after having failed repeatedly at what I imagined was my work in life;*

and so on.

But these specific complaints, given as justifications for suicide, reveal a most important truth: that, stripped of this or that particular complaint, each of us implicitly accepts his or her own Basic Desire to Live. This is human, implicit, and natural. And so I propose that it is on that little foundation that rebuilding a life begins.

So now we have a Basic Desire – to live; and we have certain Basic Expectations – to be good, to be well-treated, to be successful. But what fouls this up? Events? Yes, in a superficial sense; but more fundamentally, what fouls this up is our attachment to our many Added Expectations, all the fanciful conditions that we have attached to our Basic Expectations and Desire. In a word, for an unhappy lot of us, our Expectations are inflated and un-natural.

*Paradox is normal, perfection is a lie.*

A paradox is a statement that *maybe* true but which appears to state two opposite, mutually contradictory things. In life, we see many paradoxes, often the result from viewing a single subject from two distinct points of view. But paradoxes can be quite instructive; their absurdity (in strict logic) makes them (in practical terms) all the more memorable. I have one I keep by me which is absurd, and yet, in a certain sense, quite true, that: “*Our vices are our virtues*”. What do I mean? I mean that often unexpected “good” is to be found in what we feel to “bad”, and vice versa. Not strictly true, but pedagogically useful and actually *quite* important.

For example, during my years of depression, my small intellect only aggravated my dismay and hopelessness; yet in the end it was that intellect that provided a way out, first by allowing me to argue that I was worthwhile (as opposed to all the “worthies” of the world who prompt endless wars and ruin nature) and then later as a faculty for reading and discovering Stoicism, this philosophy of wisdom that can wrestle so well with an absurd world. Moreover, it was only when I had hit emotional bottom and was actively contemplating suicide that I

discovered that it was partly “hope” (hope for inordinate achievement) that kept me resentful and ineffective, and that I still had my actual desire to live. These paradoxical insights (among others) allowed me to live, and to live better.

*“The sea is both pure  
and tainted: healthy  
and good haven to the fish,  
to men impotent and deadly.”*

*Heraclitus, Haxton.52 (corresp. to Burnet.61)*

### *Simplification.*

I believe that we discover a more accurate and dependable basis for living if we reduce our Expectations and objectives to just the essential ones. This may not be necessary for a lot of people, especially people of great ability or determination; but for those who find it difficult simply to face each day, it is fundamental. It is not that we need to abandon dreams or desires entirely, but if we are going to entertain them, then they must have something to do with who and what we really are. Holding on to imperatives that only frustrate and embitter ourselves is useless and destructive. Thus, it is sensible to re-orient ourselves, simplify our burdens, and get a better grip on what will be needed to live. Hopes should have a basis in reality and, for someone overwhelmed, simplification needs to be radical.

*“Rescue the drowning and tie your shoe-strings.”*

*– Henry David Thoreau, Walden*

Here is a valuable simplifying tool: Make a list of the good things in your life (meaning 'good' in its most common sense), but don't discount the positive value of anything. Dig deep; this is a serious list. Leave nothing out, no matter how common or small. Anything that is not utterly dismal and crushing, anything decent that you normally take for granted, anything that is simply “to be expected” must on this list be counted as a good. The very first item will most likely be, “I am alive”. Add to it *every* positive thing you can think of. Starting from zero in this way, you'll find that there is an abundance of things with value, even for someone who can “prove” that he or she is miserable. A short example might be:

- *I live.*
- *I have my limbs (but perhaps not; everyone is in a different position!).*

- *I have my mind.*
- *I am not ill (but, again, perhaps not).*
- *My lungs work (some cannot even count on this).*
- *My pet loves me (or at least comforts me).*
- *No thugs accost me (but perhaps this is not always so).*

And so on. The point is to strip away the blinders that automatically omit elements of life that are, in fact, life-giving and fortunate.

Now someone may object to this as a pathetic exercise, like an ode to shameful mediocrity. But is the exercise “dishonest”? Are we shirking the task of being “excellent”? On the contrary, it is therapeutic; it allows a person to re-discover the simple value of things in life; to see both self and world more clearly. While the Perfectionist may wander about in an over-focused fog of dissatisfaction and resentment, the modest man or woman, accepting reality, will stand on better ground.

### *Stoicism: a Philosophy of Living.*

It is now that I wish to bring more of Stoic philosophy into my discussion, and to clarify certain topics.

1. My first such topic is “Freedom”. Everyone wants to be free – able, unfettered, on their own. But think a moment: Is anyone simply a free agent in the world? Well, no; not entirely. Even less so if you're handicapped or spiritually depressed. Many are the things that press against a person, weigh him or her down, restrict choices, subvert desires, promise heaven for a penny, tantalize and mislead. I submit that, in fact, no one ever finds freedom in life without acknowledging, to begin with, this natural state of un-freedom. To proceed otherwise demands disappointment and frustration.

And yet, as the Stoics would point out, each person does possess a sphere of freedom that is basic and irreducible, if too often neglected. Nature has provided each of you with this, the necessary tool for dealing with a world that is not yours. But it is not some utterly comprehensive magical power!

To demonstrate what it is, I must ask another question: What things are *up to you* as an Individual? What things are truly within your personal responsibility and control? At first, one may answer that there are many areas where we have influence -- with friends, family, colleagues, tools, possessions, pets, our physical selves. Yet experience must eventually teach us just how limited our influence is. Consider: If, say, your in-laws had certain objectionable habits, is it within your power to change them? Perhaps, somewhat, but fundamentally? No. What about inanimate things, such as a simple screwdriver? Taken in hand by a malefactor, the simple tool, suddenly gone from our control, becomes a threat to our very life! Or, looking inwards, how about our intimate biological selves? For instance, ask a cancer patient: What afflicts you? His or her body's cells *themselves* have gone mad, multiplying furiously into deadly alien masses, threatening not only the Individual but themselves! Or what of fatal external things: a tsunami's arrival; being hit by a locomotive; the latest strain of influenza; and so on. All these things are driven – literally – by forces outside of your life over which you have absolutely no influence. Death and misery hover around us all, secret, unpredictable.

We may have some influence on external things, but only some, and even that only imperfectly. In general, we have little or no positive control over other people or events in the world at large. This is why, for the Stoic, an Individual has only one critical domain: *the few things that are really* “up to me”. But what is “up to me”? Whatever rests solely with me to do, guide, accomplish, maintain: my thought, will, action, judgment. This interior domain is the only valid place where the Individual will have a free hand, *beyond* the control of other people or events.

Yet, even here, beyond the *direct* control of others, this power may still be up for grabs. The Individual's power here is not automatic, but must be developed and exercised; if it is not, then foolish impulses, external events, or other people will influence us and seize the control - control that should be our own. Whenever a person is not actively and rationally using the internal power, it will be used by bad habits or external forces and the person will simply be carried away.

So if the germ of our will is in the Basic Desire, *wishing to live*, and the germ of our freedom is in "*what is up to us*" (the inner domain where one can choose how to try to act), then

combining these gives us the power to simplify the life that until now we have found so overwhelming. We can do this by restricting our concerns just to (a) things that have to do with staying alive, and (b) things that are “up to me”. Let the Individual attend to just these two areas to begin with; by doing so, he or she will refuse the self-told-lie that one “does not want” to live and can also begin to trim away the unnecessary Added Expectations attached to the simple desire to live.

2. This brings us to the topic of “Values in Life”.

“The foot is the measure of the shoe.”

-adapted from Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, XXXIX.

Now, if a person says that certain things – material or emotional or social - are absolutely necessary to him or her, then certainly let that person enumerate those essential things! But he or she should eye them critically, and keep the list short. For even at first glance many of these things we enjoy or hope for can be set aside as unnecessary, and others as not even helpful. Consider: A fancy stereo; streaming video; an automobile; a large home; a mate gifted with excellence or beauty; a surplus of leisure time; travel to exotic locales; and so on. Who has not experienced the sadness of getting “what you wanted” and finding it that it did not satisfy as it ought to have? How are any of these things critical to maintaining the inner domain (“What is up to me?”) where the Individual has his essential being? And how many extra problems may come attached to the objects of desire? To be without such things is no cause for grief! To have endured a period of discomfort, or compensated for things given up, or developed new habits – these are occasions for some satisfaction in your Self. And the new habits, if done fairly, may well be better and stronger than the old ones – and likely easier to maintain. As such, they should be a source of, instead of a substitute for, self-esteem.

3. “Good and Bad” is the third topic. In common parlance, we say many things are good or bad, speaking relatively and with an eye to pleasure or pain. But the Stoics were resolutely critical of this common definition of good and bad; they argued that common things which were uncertain, perishable, or controlled by others, or rare things which were costly to maintain, were all inferior to that which was certain, reliable, and more freely available. The Stoics urged their adherents to look beyond appearances, to investigate mentally the nature of

things, to understand that things can be both Indifferent, without true value, and yet also retain their simple, daily, common-sense value. (Again, a critical paradox.) Men and women do need certain things – food, shelter, and so on – to live; but with some effort, these will usually prove to be obtainable. Why, then, must someone pursue things that are exquisite, hard-to-get, fragile? “Because they are rare!” one replies. Rare, yes, but what is their *real* value? If our basic needs are met by other things nearer to hand, can we not cast off our worry about getting or having these luxuries?

The Stoics held that neither inconveniences, nor misfortunes, nor suffering, nor death of a loved one, nor a fatal disease are acceptable as truly “Bad” things. My death, for instance, will not be up to me; I will not choose it; but I know that it *will* come. Yet this will be in the nature of life, the simple, natural consequence of my having lived in the first place. The condition of life is part nurture, part suffering, and ultimately death. Accept this, they urged, and get started on your fate instead of fretting about it.

*“Never say about anything, 'I have lost it', but say, 'I have restored it'.*

*Epictêtus, Enchiridion, XI.*

4. Another topic to address is “Pleasure”. What is pleasure? It is a state, a feeling, a disposition of the body and mind. Pleasure is a positive feeling that identifies things as valuable. But this is primarily a function of the Animal faculty – a reaction. You might say that it is an automatic self-training mechanism, one that identifies “good things” but then disappears and creates the habit of acquiring that thing. It is part of the package of animal life, frustratingly transient and dependent.

5. “Reason.” All well and good, said the Stoics; enjoy your pleasures. But they also knew that there are better, more useful things than pleasure: Above all, Reason, the domain of decision-making and understanding, the special faculty of mankind, shared (as they said) by the Gods themselves. Reason is more than calculation: it is memory, curiosity, logic, experience, sympathy, and appreciation. It is Reason that reminds us that that, for example, if we drink too heavily, we will become sick; or that we must save some money for the future if we are to avoid living in filth on the street. Reason is very much the faculty of judgment.

But Reason involves not only the capacity for judgment but also for *reflection and changing our opinion*. This is an additional part of judgment, whether to assent to an opinion, to withhold assent, or to revoke assent. It is a power that belongs to me; it is, once again, “what is up to me”. In the task of trying to be better, we owe it to ourselves to judge the value of things wisely but also to judge for ourselves rather than rely on others. A person's Basic Wish for Freedom, then, justifies both a habit of critical evaluation of “what I need” and also a habit of independent decision-making, so that one's decisions reflect one's own will and not the unreliable desires or ulterior motives of others.

And it is Reason ultimately that tells us that what really matters for the Individual is “what is up to” him or her. Fashions and the desire for social acceptance, for “positive face”, are native to us all; so also, moments of pleasure may be so delicious that we decide without thinking to pursue them. But the pursuit of face or fun or pleasure alone turns to be generally contrary to the other needs of life, often wasteful of health, and – in the case of addictions – a madness that carries all before it. To want what someone else controls is to put yourself into their power, for they will deny or grant the thing to suit themselves, not you. Reason allows us to, in moments of sanity at least, to recognize all this.

5. This brings me to the topic of “Things Indifferent”. The Stoic accepts that things outside the Individual's proper domain of decision, of “what is up to him”, are alien (quite literally, “alienum”, belonging to another); that they are essentially of no account because they do not belong to me in this way. And the Stoic calls these “Things Indifferent”, things that do not truly make a difference. As a Stoic, I let them lie. But in contrast to Indifferents, my Life and my Freedom of Decision belong to me in a fundamental way: My Life creates the topic, “the Fact That I Live”, and my Freedom of Decision determines “the Way I Choose to Live”; and these two together, within the context of the physical world, constitute “What I Am” in this life.

In this way, the Individual's *Animal* self (his will to live, and his essential needs for living) combines with his *Rational* self (his ability to judge and analyze) to allow him to make best use of the incidental stuff of life, the external things. Some things are life-essentials, some merely desirable, some neutral, some hard or difficult; to make wise use of all these

Indifferents is to be an agent, a free Individual, in a largely contrary world.

6. “Morality”. There is yet a third dimension essential to the Individual, the Moral domain, that of personal conduct. It is at once both Social (a community's sense of what's right, in social, interactive terms) and also Personal (one's innate sense of what is right, attested to in one's conscience). This is a domain of justice and reciprocity. For well or ill, we are by our nature *social* primates; we grow with others and live with them in a clumsy kind of cooperation. It is not always easy, yet it remains our calling to seek others and make our lives in association with them.

It may be tempting for some, given the frictions and disappointments of social life, to see our fellow humans simply as Indifferent things, things “not up to us”. And in a sense, indeed, people *are* Indifferent things: we do not control them, however much we may influence them. But to leave it at that is an abuse of the definition of “Things Indifferent”. Certainly, the lives of others are not a matter of indifference for *them!*

By logic and experience a Stoic knows that others possess the same Basic Desire to Live, the same Basic Expectations, and human faculties akin to ours: in these three ways, then, even without personal contact, we understand there to be a basic relationship between self and others. Others are, in this logical sense, already related to us, related not personally, but morally and reasonably. If that other is not out to harm me, he or she is even a kind of comrade, at least Morally so. It is just and reasonable to also recall that these are fellow people, each vested with as much natural value as one's own self is.

Because of this, the Stoic – along with Confucians, Buddhists, Christians, and so many others – subscribes to the Golden Rule: “*Do unto others as you would wish to be done unto*”. This does not erase danger or misfortune; but it give us a simple, practical rule of conduct, and a virtue to aspire to. Other people belong in this special state, as both “Things Indifferent” but at the same time not “things” at all, but rather a kind of extended family; and they should be seen this way at the very least until they cross over into active Evil, into what is truly Bad. The Moral faculty acts to prevent a Stoic from becoming un-natural in the Moral domain.

7. “Evil and 'The Bad'.” Was there, then, anything that the Stoics held to be truly “Bad”? What, indeed, constitutes Evil? The best definition I have found for significant evil is this: “Doing harm with intent to do harm”.

But note that suffering in itself is not a “Bad” thing. External misfortune, unintentional errors, sickness or the onset of death, though miserable, remain Indifferents and can only be called “evils in lowercase”, as it were. Substantial Evil occurs only when a human being chooses to act to someone's detriment, yet what is Bad in such a choice falls upon the malefactor himself, not the victim. While the victim may suffer, *even piteously!* it is still the malefactor who has dirtied his hands by plotting and foul action, has wasted his freedom, has declared himself an enemy of mankind. The malefactor then, intending harm and acting against innocence, spurns the Golden Rule, betrays the fundamental human principle of cooperation, and fails as a human being.

A wise man calls nothing truly Good or Bad simply because it is pleasurable or miserable. The Stoic reserves “Good” as a term for wisdom, and “Bad” as a censure for people who ignore good conduct (beneficence) and act against their own better nature. Our true value as agents in the world is in our decision-making and our progress toward being Good (in the best sense). To harm self or others wrongs the faculty of thought that understands this, betrays our Basic Expectations (either in our self or as they are present in other Individuals), and inverts our value as members of the human race. Accidents and mistakes, even the most tragic ones, are not in themselves Evil or truly Bad, since we did not wilfully create them; they are simply part of the general run of chaos in the world, Nature's urgent (and to us mysterious) need to keep all its parts in perpetual change and motion. It is only when we humans neglect our own basically social, cooperative nature that we create Moral Evil.

*“It is not possible then for [another person] to follow that which seems right to you, but [only] that which seems right to himself.”*

*Epictêtus, Enchiridion, XLII.*

8. “The Passions.” Universal Nature, the physical world, is untroubled by Evil acts. It pursues its own agenda, beyond our ken. On the other hand, a conscious malefactor chooses to contradict his or her own innate “Wish to Be Good”. This highlights the self-awareness

that the Stoics championed, *prosoché*, the act of the Individual constantly surveying and reviewing his or her own behavior in order to avoid excess, generally, and the Passions, in particular. Passions – violent emotions like hatred, fear, jealousy, panic, rage – cancel out good judgment and reflection in the Individual; they prevent a person from achieving proper human nature, as the Stoics defined it.

There is a common idea that the Stoics hated and repressed emotions. It is better to say that they *understood* them, for they distinguished between simple feelings on one hand and the passions – senseless fury, destructive obsession, blind prejudice – on the other. Knowing them both, they promoted Reason instead. Reason was cooperative and healthy; feelings were not always reasonable, but natural and allowable; yet passions were destructive madness which they deplored.

*“To God all things are fair and good and right; but men hold some things wrong and some right.”*        - *Heraclitus, Burnet.102/Haxton.61*

1.     Nor can we ignore “Death”. Mortality is a visible, inescapable, universal part of the world of living things. Bodies fail, individuals die, in every earthly case, from bacterium to man.

We are temporary. Is this a bad thing? Not at all. It is part of the package; it is motion and change and growth – *physis*, in Greek; it is life. Dying may entail suffering, but it also removes that suffering. It is our nature to grow old and to fail and to be re-absorbed into the universe at large. Nor are we alone in this. All materials shift, change, crumble. Death is natural, inevitable; it is not Evil, but simply sad. It may be hard, it may be grievous, but it is intended, it is built in. One can truthfully argue that the effectual goal of a living creature's life, the finish line of its earthly run, is its death. To fear the arrival of death, of dissolution as individuals, would be to be afraid of our own shadow, as it were.

*“[S]till remember that no man loses any other life than this which he now lives, nor lives any other than this which he now loses.”*

*M. Aurelius, Meditations, Book II, 14*

### *The Nature of the Individual.*

This somewhat dismal topic of human mortality is important for three reasons:

*First*, the singularity of Individuals' lives: As an Individual, you have ONLY THIS life, limited in time, not eternal, its particular time-limit unknowable and unpredictable. This temporal quality of mortality confers upon you an urgency of seeing the world more clearly, and of becoming better sooner rather than later; for the clock is ticking and there will be no second chance.

*Second*, mortality means that there are no grounds for complaining about one's fate. If you are born crippled, then that is who you are; if born poor, then that is who you are, at least to begin with. Your uniqueness might not be pretty, but it is done and real; the past is beyond appeal. The Stoics held God to be identical with Nature itself, an intelligence that animated the Universe generally but set aside in each person enough intelligence to both witness Nature's greatness and to draw conclusions therefrom. I myself see this aspect of God, Universal Nature, as a kind of living intent in the universe, bent on kicking up motion and vitality near and far, an intent utterly alien in its magnitude and strangeness. In any case God, as the underlying fact of the Universe, remains unconcerned with the little details of our lives. We are given our faculties and the world runs on. When we encounter Moral problems, these exist only at our level, that of thinking creatures, they are not on God's agenda. People must see to themselves and govern themselves as best they may; that is our office, our duty, here in what is for us the chaos realm, in Allen Ginsberg's "*total animal soup of time*". In terms of fate, the thinking Individual may indeed change his or her future, but the starting-point will always have been a given fact, not open to appeal. Life is not a dream, but growth.

*Third*, mortality means that even though general social and moral conventions are valid as such, they are not the whole story; that every man and woman differ as Individuals, physically and neurologically, even to the point of contradicting the basic biological division of gender. In this world, your particular combination of matter and divinity is justified simply by the fact of its own creation. For well or ill, an Individual is not a defective version of some Perfect Model, but a unique event, an act of Fate, just as necessary for the world as any other part of it. Prince and pauper are equals to this extent; all people "are created equal", to this extent.

Again: While your life may be hard, you are nonetheless *justified in being here*, as much as any king or rock-star or any mountain range. And for those of us who fail in performance or beauty or any such measure, it is fundamental to remember this justification. We need not fear or hate the paradoxes in our lives simply because they are contradictory and messy. We see the world through a near-sighted lens; we struggle to reconcile spirit, appearances, and reversals; but we can resolve what we can, each thing in its proper sphere.

While these three conclusions, above, may sound simply dismal, they do confer on life a strange specialness – not the specialness of the super-talented, but a uniqueness of fact – of mind, body, spirit, and situation. And our situation then confers on us, not barren futility, but a task, although rather often an upside-down one: mystery, training and sabotage all at once. But it remains the task given us by our situation. And the three factors above also collectively confer on the Individual a complementary duty to oneself, arising from mortality's terminal nature, of finding ways to cope and to do one's best. For many of us, “doing better” will involve not only putting unimportant concerns and preoccupations in their place, as outlined at length above, but also trying to brighten whatever flame of life already burns within us. By accepting Fate, the future, its specifics still unknown, we set aside any reasons for fearing life.

While the Stoic takes on commitments that may seem burdensome, he or she also avoids a good deal of worry and trouble by religiously keeping certain habits:

- Accepting external things as they are;
- Focusing his or her spiritual resources on “what is up to us”;
- Not blaming anyone, either others or one's Self, for events beyond personal control.

In this way the Rational and the Moral act together to complete the nature of *the Individual*:

- Animal Faculty: life, movement, biological behaviors;
- Rational Faculty: memory, judgment, extrapolation, assent;
- Moral Faculty: cooperation, beneficial acts.

It is in successfully integrating these faculties and their various impulses that we become, in a fundamental sense, better people. To be Individual and forlorn is our initial state, but to be a Decent Individual is our task. And those of you who have felt yourself to be bad and

undeserving, if you will cease from detesting your Self and your situation and those strange, inconvenient fellow people all around you, you too can adopt this clearer vision of life.

In other words, and as practical injunctions:

- Acknowledge the truth of your Basic Desire to Live (the Animal faculty);
- Acknowledge having been fooled by expectations of *automatic* success and gratification (naturally but fallaciously added to human nature's Basic Expectation of Success);
- Acknowledge your own power of judgment, of assenting to correct opinions and of dismissing false ones (the Rational Faculty, the ability to learn);
- Acknowledge that others, also, share in these basics, are generally deserving, and are in a fundamental way in a kinship with you (the Moral Faculty); and
- Acknowledge that you must get going; that you can and must do whatever you may; and that living activity is why you were put here (the Urgency of Mortality).

You may object to accepting these ideas and changing your ways, saying that it is not an easy thing. I agree that it is not easy. But the ideas presented here give you a decent code to follow, something spiritual to work on, a clearer way to see the world, and a positive path in the crowded confusion of life: certainly a better fate than mere suicide.

Stoicism, like the mortals who developed it, is not perfect or complete. It will never be so, because it is a philosophical project, an attitude that champions a search for understanding and for wisdom. Despite its history and all its teachings, it only exists as the active thought and action of Individuals. It is engagement with your situation, in order to resolve rancor and strife and to preserve your better Self. Stoicism, as a re-orientation toward and a beneficial engagement with life - life within, without, and at large – is suited to many, and is of particular value to the lost soul feeling overwhelmed.

*“Remember how long thou hast been putting off these things, and how often thou hast received an opportunity from the Gods, and yet dost not use it. Thou must now at last perceive of what universe thou art a part, and of what administrator of the universe thy existence is an efflux, and that a limit of time is fixed for thee, which if thou dost not use for clearing away the clouds from thy mind, it will and thou wilt go, and it will never return.”*

*M. Aurelius, Meditations, Book II, 04*

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