

## Aretê, Character and the Good by Nigel Glassborow April 2019

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When it comes to the study of Stoicism, discussions often swings back and fore between the use of modern English, Latin and ancient Greek and in the process the original intent of the Athenian Stoics can be overlooked.

Key to Stoicism is the Greek word aretê [ἀρετή] which, within Stoicism, refers to 'excellence and goodness of character' (later aligned with the Latin word 'virtue').

Of course the word 'character' is derived from a Greek word that carries the same meaning that our modern equivalent does today. 'Charaktíras' (χαρακτήρας) refers to the nature of something.

When it comes to what we moderns see as 'goodness', the ancient Greeks in fact referred to as 'the good' within the make-up of something in that they saw this as referring to physical characteristics that were to be known through observation. It is to be remembered that Stoicism is based on a strict materialistic view (albeit a specific Stoic view of materialism).

So key to much of the Stoic teachings is that the would-be-Stoic has decided that they want to physically manifest 'excellence and goodness of character' and they do this by emulating what is seen as the 'common perception' of how a person of good character would be recognised through their outer physical actions.

There is a Stoic expression, popular amongst modern would-be-Stoics that '*aretê is necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia*'. In today's speak we would say that a person of excellent good character will live in such a manner that they will be justifiably contented with how their lives impinge on all around them and how all around them impinges into their life. Through such contentment comes a feeling that everything is right in the world – which is the real intent of the word 'eudaimonia' for the Stoic.

The Greek word 'eudaimonia' translates quite literally as 'good spirits' which, as Zeno defined it, is the feeling that one is living 'in the smooth flow of life'. If translated as 'happiness', as many translate 'eudaimonia' today, then there can be misunderstandings and the aim of being a person of excellent and good character can be lost from sight.

But to return to 'aretê' as 'excellence and goodness of character', when looking at a knife the Athenians saw 'the good' as the characteristic of a that knife that includes such matters as its design being fit for its particular purpose, the comfort with which it sits in the user's hand, how it benefits the skill of its user, it being in good condition as well as being well honed and presenting a pleasing appearance, etcetera. As A A Long explains in his book 'Stoic Studies', we are looking at 'the good' in an item as being an observable set of harmonious characters, and such is seen as 'excellent' (aretê) when all the appropriate characters are present and exist in harmony with each other – the Greek expression being that 'all the numbers are present'.

So the Stoic trains to develop 'the good characters' in order to be able to be 'excellent' (skilled) in the living of their lives for the purpose for which they are put on this earth – just as a knife is excellent when it serves its purpose on many levels. However, the knife is not 'excellent' for its own sake. It is only 'excellent' when it is serving its purpose for being.

And here Marcus Aurelius tells us:

VIII.59. 'Mankind have been created for the sake of one another.

V.1. 'Consider each tiny plant. Each little bird, the ant, the spider, the bee, how they go about their own work and do each his part for the building of an orderly Universe.'

III.13. 'Thou shalt never carry out well any human duty unless thou correlate it to the divine.'

We are not told that the Stoic's efforts at manifesting the 'good characters' is for our own self-satisfaction or for us to achieve 'eudaimonia'. The self-improvements are always aimed at being of service to our society, our world and to God. The feeling of 'eudaimonia' is just a side-product. 'Eudaimonia' is never the end target for the Stoic.

The living as a person of good character whereby we aim for our will to be one with the will of God is the target. And if a person does not believe in this target, but is more interested in their selfish wants, they will not advance as a Stoic.