

Self-Coherence:

The Fundamental Intuition of Stoicism¹

by Christopher Fisher

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Self-coherence is a disposition of the soul where your *Self*—your guiding principle or rational nature—is united with universal Reason, universal Nature, and humanity as a whole. Self-coherence is the fulfillment of the Stoic maxim “live according to Nature.” Pierre Hadot described it as “the fundamental intuition of Stoicism”; a state of congruity, unity, and coherence between that which “generates reality” and that which “regulates human thought and conduct.”²

Stoicism offers a method to achieve self-coherence. It provides a prescription for a life free of psychological distress—a flourishing and happy life achieved through the pursuit of human excellence. The path of Stoicism is the path of the sage and, while it includes the study of logic, physics, and ethical theory, its process and aim is not primarily academic. The Stoic philosopher is a practitioner. As such, he must learn to live logic, to live physics, and to live ethics.

While Stoicism is a philosophy, it is often referred to as an art of living—a way of life.³ Founded in ancient Athens during a time of social and Geo-political upheaval, Stoicism became a dominate influence in Hellenistic Greece and later in the Roman Empire. The origin of Stoicism was not in the academic world of rhetoric, sophistry, and syllogisms; it was birthed and nurtured under the painted Stoa (porch) of an Athenian marketplace—a “place for the activities of civil magistrates, shopkeepers, and others.”⁴ Stoicism does not offer a retreat from physical reality, society, pain, or death. Instead, it prescribes a way of life, a way of thinking, which allows one to achieve human excellence and happiness in the midst of the human experience.

Stoicism survives today largely because of the teaching of Epictetus, the slave turned philosopher; the personal journal of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius; and the prolific writings of Seneca, a Roman Senator. Within those writings one can find a practical guide for living which resonates with the human psyche as strongly today as it did more than two millennia ago.

The late French philosopher Pierre Hadot is renown for his ability to pull philosophy down from the esoteric clouds of academia and make it accessible and applicable to the lives of the non-specialist. This essay presents Hadot's concept of *self-coherence*⁵ as a path toward human excellence for those who seek happiness through a life lived according to Nature. While the synthesis herein is my own, the influence of Hadot will be obvious to anyone who has read *The Inner Citadel*.

I hope the following pages give you a glimpse of the power of self-coherence and provide some direction to get you started on the path toward that disposition with Nature which culminates in the realization that your rational nature is a fragment of the rational Nature which orders the entire universe. From that disposition of self-coherence, Marcus Aurelius was able to live these eloquent words he wrote:

Everything suits me which suits your designs, o my universe. (*Meditations* 4.23)

¹ Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 130

² Ibid

³ John Sellars, *The Art of living* (London: Duckworth, 2009); and Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*

⁴ *The Stoa*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/stoa/>

⁵ Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 130

The Concept of Self-Coherence

Self-coherence occurs when your *Self*—your guiding principle or rational nature—is united with, or in agreement with universal Reason, universal Nature, and humanity. Thus, self-coherence is another way of conceptualizing the Stoic maxim “live according to Nature.” *Self-coherence* relies on three disciplines to cohere the *Self* with three different aspects of reality and produces three virtues within the *prokopton*.

Coherence with universal Reason, achieved through the discipline of assent, creates an “inner citadel”⁶ within the psyche where the *Self* is circumscribed and protected by the impenetrable walls of Epictetus' distinction between those things which are in our control and those which are not.⁷ The first and critical hurdle is the quieting of the psychological tumult, created by the passions, which ravishes the psyche of the fool. Only then, can the *Self*—your guiding principle—begin the process of cohering with universal Reason. The discipline of assent guides you in the quest for truth. It results from the ongoing and dynamic expansion of human understanding through rational means—a process which continues to seek new knowledge about human nature and universal Nature. The discipline of assent teaches you to rely upon your rational nature to build an organized and structured conception of self and universal Nature. *Coherence with universal Reason*—lived logic—produces the virtue of truth.

Coherence with universal Nature, achieved through the discipline of desire, inspires a sense of reverence for creation and the natural laws that regulate the cosmos. This sense of reverence is a dutiful respect for parents, the laws of society, and Nature. *Coherence with universal Nature* results in acceptance of your destiny. It involves understanding and accepting your place and role within the grand scheme of Nature. *Coherence with universal Nature*—lived physics—produces the virtue of temperance.

Coherence with Humanity, achieved through the discipline of action, drives you to seek justice in all your human interactions. Your actions are within your control and they are also causal events within the web of causes involving others, your local society, and humanity as a whole. Thus, your daily actions contribute to either justice or injustice in a myriad of ways. The link between your actions and those closest to you, like your family and friends, is intuitive. However, as a citizen of the world, you must expand their frame of reference and consider how your actions affect others around the world. *Coherence with Humanity*—lived ethics—produces the virtue of justice.

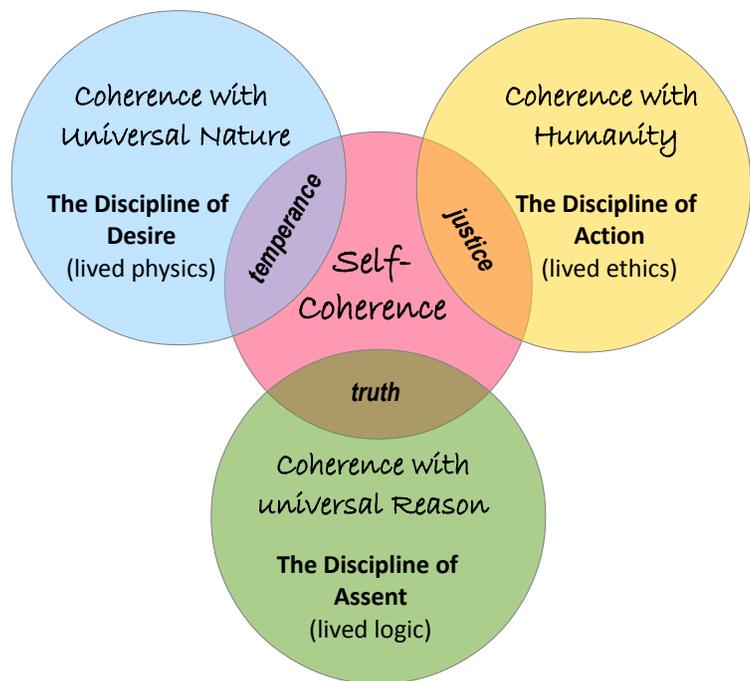


Illustration 1

⁶ Ibid., 107

⁷ Epictetus Encheiridion I

The Three Disciplines

Self-coherence is achieved through the practice of three Stoic disciplines referred to frequently within the *Discourses* of Epictetus and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. These three disciplines are the discipline of *assent*, the discipline of *desire*, and the discipline of *action*; they correlate with the study of logic, physics, and ethics respectively. The three disciplines of Stoicism are designed to transform the foolish, lost wanderer into a *prokopton*,⁸ capable of appropriate action, as he travels the path of the sage toward a life of excellence (virtue) and happiness.

The disciplines of assent, desire, and action are interrelated. None can be practiced entirely isolated from the other two; thus, while you may be focused on one of the disciplines at a given time, the other two disciplines are necessarily involved in every step the *prokopton* takes. The practice of these disciplines is an iterative process where technical understanding and practical application are inseparably intertwined and synergistic.

Nevertheless, Epictetus asserts that controlling our passions, through the discipline of desire, is the “most urgent” of the three exercises for two reasons. First, our unnatural desires and aversions, those which are incongruous with universal Reason and universal Nature, are the source of crippling psychological disturbances. Secondly, until our most ardent desires and aversions are controlled, we are “incapable of listening to reason” (*Discourses* 3.2.3). Universal Reason cannot reach the guiding principle within the mind of a complete fool, driven by passions. Epictetus meets the fool where he stands—in the midst of a whirlwind of passions—where a cacophony of noise prevents him from hearing the quiet voice of universal Reason, where ever present distractions blind him from the truth of universal Nature which surrounds him. Epictetus realizes the fool must step outside the tumult of life's passions before he can take the first step on the path toward human flourishing (happiness).

However, attempting to quell the passions without the discipline of assent is akin to attacking a raging forest fire with a bucket brigade. The flames are far too hot and the fuel too plentiful for such an effort to have an impact. Thus, like modern fire fighters who cut a firebreak around a blaze to deny it more fuel, we must circumscribe the Self through the discipline of assent and thereby begin starving the flames of our passions, which are fueled by false judgments.

Before diving into the three disciplines, it is helpful to understand how they relate to each other and to Stoic philosophy in general. Table 1 is consolidated from two of Hadot's books.⁹ It brings many of the supporting concepts together and illustrates the relationships between the technical and practical aspects of the three disciplines of Stoicism.

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Domain of Reality</i>	<i>Field of Study</i>	<i>Inner Attitude</i>	<i>Corresponding Virtue</i>
of assent	faculty of judgment	Logic	objectivity	Truth (<i>aletheia</i>); absence of hasty judgment (<i>aproptasia</i>)
of desire	universal Nature	Physics	consent to destiny	Temperance (<i>sophrosyne</i>); absence of worries (<i>ataraxia</i>)
of action	our Nature	Ethics	justice and altruism	Justice (<i>dikaiosyne</i>)

Table 1

Below are passages from Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius which directly relate to the three disciplines. The blue text within parenthesis was added to relate the passages to each of the Stoic disciplines.

⁸ *prokoptōn (προκόπτων) [pro-KOP-tone]* - Making progress. Even though one has not obtained the wisdom of a sage when appropriate actions are increasingly chosen fewer and fewer mistakes will be made and one will be prokoptōn, making progress. Greg Wasson, *College of Stoic Philosophers: Stoic Glossary & Pronunciation Guide*, (2012), p. 6

⁹ Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 44; and *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1995), 198

The three disciplines are outlined in Epictetus' *Discourses* 3.2.1-5:

1. There are *three areas of study or exercise*, in which a person who is going to be good must be trained. That concerning desires and the aversions, so that he may neither fail to get what he desires nor fall into what he would avoid ([discipline of desire](#)).
2. That concerning impulse to act and no to act, and, in general, appropriate behavior; so that he may act in an orderly manner and after due consideration, and not carelessly ([discipline of action](#)). The third is concerned with freedom from deception and hasty judgment, and, in general whatever is connected with assent ([discipline of assent](#)).
3. Of these, the most urgent, is that which has to do with the passions ([discipline of desire](#)); for these are produced in no other way than by the disappointment of our desires, and the incurring of our aversions. It is this that introduces disturbances, tumults, misfortunes, and calamities; and causes sorrow, lamentation and envy; and renders us envious and jealous, and thus incapable of listening to reason.
4. The next has to do with appropriate action ([discipline of action](#)). For I should not be unfeeling like a statue, but should preserve my natural and acquired relations as a man who honours the gods, as a son, as a brother, as a father, as a citizen.
5. The third falls to those who are already making progress and is concerned with the achievement of certainty in the matters already covered, so that even in dreams, or drunkenness or melancholy no untested impression may catch us off guard ([discipline of assent](#)).

The three disciplines are repeatedly stressed by Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations*:

- 7.54 Everywhere and all the time it lies within your power to be reverently contented with your present lot ([discipline of desire](#)), to behave justly to such people as are presently at hand ([discipline of action](#)), and to deal skilfully with your present impressions so that nothing may steal into your mind which you have not adequately grasped ([discipline of assent](#)).
- 8.7 Every nature is contented when things go well for it; and things go well for a rational nature when it never gives its assent to a false or doubtful impression ([discipline of assent](#)), and directs its impulses only to actions that further the common good ([discipline of action](#)), and limits its desires and aversions only to things that are within its power ([discipline of desire](#)), and welcomes all that is assigned to it by universal nature.
- 9.6 It is sufficient that your present judgement should grasp its object ([discipline of assent](#)), that your present action should be directed to the common good ([discipline of action](#)), that your present disposition should be well satisfied with all that happens to it from a cause outside itself ([discipline of desire](#)).
- 9.7 Blot out imagination ([discipline of assent](#)); put a curb on impulse ([discipline of action](#)); quench desire ([discipline of desire](#)); ensure that your ruling centre remains under its own control.
- 4.33 What, then, is worthy of our striving? This alone, a mind governed by justice, deeds directed to the common good ([discipline of action](#)), words that never lie ([discipline of assent](#)), and a disposition that welcomes all that happens, as necessary, as familiar, as flowing from the same kind of origin and spring ([discipline of desire](#)).

The Discipline of Assent

The Discipline of Assent involves bringing your guiding principle into a state of coherence with universal Reason. This discipline circumscribes the self and builds an “inner citadel,” within which your guiding principle or Self is protected from the psychological tumult of incorrect judgment. This inner discourse relies on the Stoic practice of assent to adequate impressions. The importance of assent within Stoicism cannot be overstated. Tad Brennan suggests assent is “the linchpin of the Stoic system” and further, “every difference that there can be between one person's psychology and another person's psychology can be accounted for entirely in terms of the patterns of assents that they each make.”¹⁰

This implies the agent you refer to as 'I' when you refer to your *Self* is comprised of a pattern of assents or judgments pertaining to everything from your like or dislike of specific foods, to your desire for certain pleasures and aversion to pain, your political ideas, ethical mores, etc. This pattern of assents forms an internal force that influences your thoughts, creates the impulses that drive you toward action, and ultimately forms your character. Therefore, it is critically important to limit assents to correct impressions. Incorrect assents based on

¹⁰ Brennan, *The Stoic Life*, 52

false impressions, and hasty judgments based upon insufficient evidence lead to psychological agitation which will disturb your serenity. Thus, you must limit your assent to those impressions which are clear, vivid, and distinct. If you are uncertain, withhold your assent until further evidence for the truth or falsity of the proposition presented by the impression is obtained.

Here lies the power of Stoicism: the power to assent or withhold assent is within your control. It lies within the safety of your soul (psyche) as your guiding principle. Nothing outside of you—external to your psyche—including health, wealth, fame, power, pleasure and pain can control your power of assent. There is a vast divide between your soul and every 'thing' external to it. Thus, nothing external to your soul can touch it.

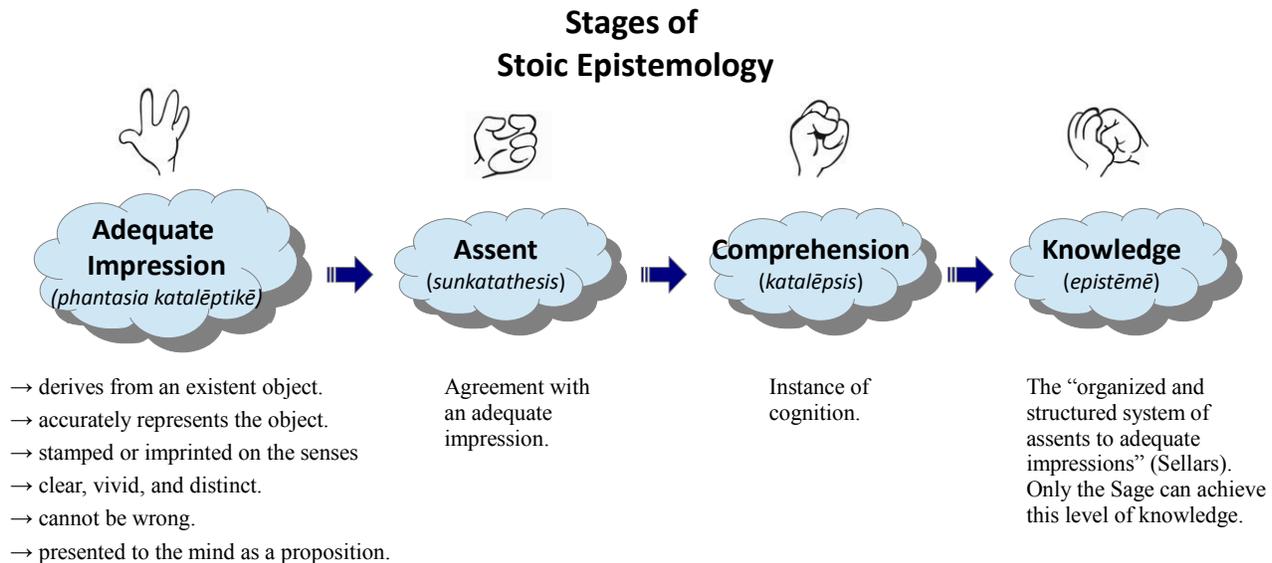


Illustration 2

The illustration above diagrams the stages of Stoic epistemology from the initial impression “stamped” on the senses, through the critical stage of assent, to comprehension, and finally to that “organized and structured system of assents” only achievable by the Sage. Cicero described a series of hand gestures used by Zeno to solidify the process of acquiring knowledge within the minds of his students. The hand gestures in *illustration 2* correspond to Cicero's description.¹¹

Assent is the critical stage; it is there and only there that you have complete control. You control what you assent to—what you agree to believe—the judgments you make. Whereas, the constant bombardment by impressions is outside your control. For example, you may be presented with impressions such as an overdraft notice from the bank; a phone call from your child's teacher regarding misbehavior in class; a call from your doctor telling you the test for cancer came back positive. Each of these impressions are accurate as far as they have been described so far. The problem arises when you add unnecessary, and often invalid, value judgments to those impressions. Such, as, “Oh my God, I overdrew my checking account; that's horrible; they're going to charge me bank fees which I can't afford to pay. My whole budget is screwed up now; I'm such a financial failure.” Or, “I wonder what Johnny did this time; he can be such a little brat. Where did he learn to act like that? His teacher must think I'm a complete failure as a parent.” Or finally, “I'm going to die. That's just not fair. I'm too young to die. How could God let this happen to me?”

In each case, it is not the incident itself which caused psychological angst, it is your thoughts—your assent to value judgments about the incident—which destroy your peace of mind. That is how the discipline of assent can change your life. In each of the above examples the incident has already occurred and nothing can change the fact that you overdrew your account, your child misbehaved, or you have been diagnosed with cancer. Once

¹¹ Cicero *Academica* 2.145

events occur, the hands of time cannot be rewound to make them disappear. Heaping unnecessary judgments on after the fact only serves to disturb your peace of mind. The second you add those unnecessary judgments you step outside your inner citadel where tranquility and peace of mind exist; you step into the world of externals where psychological angst reigns.

The inner citadel is not something you create, it already exists within your soul as your guiding principle. The walls of your inner citadel are impenetrable, and your soul is serene when your guiding principle remains in a state of self-coherence inside those walls. Unfortunately, all too often, our guiding principle is lured away from self-coherence—distracted by the appeal of externals such as wealth, power, fame, pleasure, etc. Once you begin the pursuit of externals as a means of happiness, your soul becomes vulnerable. Your inner citadel no longer provides a place of serenity for your soul. Instead your soul becomes overwhelmed by the psychological angst produced by incorrect judgments. As Epictetus taught, “Whenever externals are more important to you than your own integrity, then be prepared to serve them the remainder of your life” (*Discourses* 2.2.12). This is the state of most of humanity so eloquently described by Thoreau in *Walden*:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation... From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.

Most of humanity remains in this sad state of anxiety seeking happiness in externals. Only a few will choose to follow the path of the Stoic sage back to the serenity of their inner citadel by beginning a life-long process of attaining and protecting self-coherence: coherence with universal Reason, universal Nature, and humanity.

Marcus Aurelius prescribes retreat into one's own soul for serenity:

People seek retreats for themselves in the countryside, by the seashore, in the hills; and you too have made it your habit to long for that above all else. But this is altogether unphilosophical, when it is possible for you to retreat into yourself whenever you please; for nowhere can one retreat into greater peace or freedom from care than within one's own soul... So constantly grant yourself this retreat and so renew yourself; but keep within you concise and basic precepts that will be enough, at first encounter, to cleanse you from all distress and to send you back without discontent to the life to which you will return... things of themselves have no hold on the mind, but stand motionless outside it, all disturbances arise solely from the opinions within us... (*Meditations* 4.3)

He further asserts that you have the power to stop the turmoil caused by judgments at any moment:

If you suffer distress because of some external cause, it is not the thing itself that troubles you but your judgement about it, and it is within your power to cancel that judgement at any moment. (*Meditations* 8.47)

Lived Logic

The discipline of assent requires you to understand that things outside your own soul cannot affect your *Self*—your guiding principle—the agent you refer to as 'I' during conversation with others and during reflection. It is only your thoughts that affect your serenity and they are completely within your control. The 'things' external to you do not hold power over you. Your guiding principle is the only thing with the power to control you and it has the power to alter (heal) itself:

Things as such have not the slightest hold on our soul, nor do they have access to the soul, nor can they alter it or move it; but the soul alone alters and moves itself, and ensures that whatever is submitted to it conforms to the judgements of which it considers itself worthy. (*Meditations* 5.19)

Once you understand you control your assents, you are ready to begin practicing the discipline of assent in your daily life. Practicing the discipline of assent is both a passive discipline and an active discipline. The passive discipline involves protecting your inner citadel from incorrect and hasty judgments, which means withholding judgment when the facts are incomplete or unclear. Then, when a judgment is made, it means not inferring more

meaning—judgment—than is necessary to the impression. The active portion of the discipline of assent invokes the Delphic command to “Know Thyself.” As an adult, you are the “pattern of assents” that comprise your psychology—your character. Therefore, you must actively excavate cognitions, resulting from incorrect assents of the past, which are causing emotional turmoil in your life today.

Protect your inner citadel from incorrect judgments

Your first and ever-present responsibility is to accurately judge the impressions forced upon you in daily life. The vast majority of these impressions result from events and causes outside of your control. Thus, you must use your guiding principle to accurately judge their veracity and meaning by reducing them to their essential proposition and then assenting or withholding assent. As Hadot wrote:

...the discipline of assent appears as a constant effort to eliminate all the value-judgments which we bring to bear upon those things which do not depend upon us, and which therefore have no moral value, The phenomena of nature and the events of the world, once they are stripped of all the adjectives—“terrifying,” “frightening,” “dangerous,” “hideous,” “repulsive”—which humankind, in its blind anthropomorphism applies to them, appear in their nudity and all their savage beauty.¹²

Every assent must be limited to the objective meaning of the impression; it must be stripped of all subjective inferences.

Perform some inner citadel housecleaning

Everyone but the sage will discover their guiding principle entertaining irrational thoughts. We sense something is wrong when we ask self-reflecting questions like: “Why did I say that?” “Why did that make me so angry?” “What is it about him that irritates me so much?” etc. Those questions are important for inner citadel housecleaning. To nurture the habit of housecleaning, pay attention to your emotional reactions to people, things and events. Then you can attempt to ascertain the false premises (prior assents) that lie beneath the emotional reactions.

Circumscribing your Self¹³

In *Meditations* 12.3, Marcus Aurelius details the process of circumscribing the Self. He begins by delineating our true nature into three elements: *body*, *breath*, and *mind*. He asserts the *body* and *breath* are under your care, yet outside of your control. Only the *mind* is within your control. The process of circumscribing the Self involves realizing the things outside your control, such as *others*, the *past* and *future*, *involuntary emotions*, and *destiny* are incapable of touching your *Self*. That realization creates an impenetrable “inner citadel” within your soul where your *Self* can reside in serenity. Your *Self*, once protected from influences outside your control, is capable of “doing what is just,” “desiring what comes to pass,” and “saying what is true.” *Illustration 3* represent the concept of the inner citadel—that which is “up to us”—protected from those things outside the *Self* which are “not up to us.”

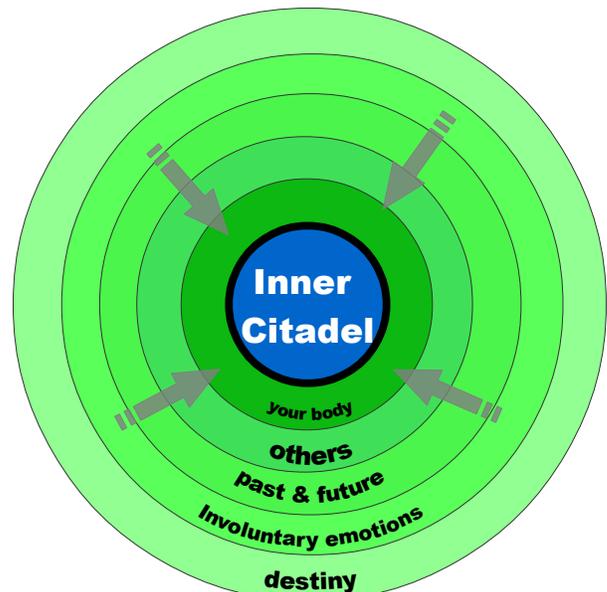


Illustration 3

The concept of a circumscribed Self, unaffected by anything outside one's *Self*, can easily feed a common misunderstanding about Stoicism. Stoics have often been

¹² Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 111-112

¹³ Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 112-118

wrongfully maligned by critics as emotionless creatures without concern for anyone or anything external to themselves. As Lawrence Becker wrote:

The image of the austere, dispassionate, detached, tranquil, and virtually affectless sage - an image destined to be self-refuting - has become a staple of anti-Stoic philosophy, literature, and popular culture.¹⁴

It's easy to understand how a cursory reading and superficial understanding of Stoic theory can lead to such misunderstanding. However, it is far from the truth. In fact, unlike their Epicurean counterparts in Hellenistic Greece and Rome, the Stoics thought it one's duty to live within and be a productive member of society rather than retreat from it. The Stoic doctrine of *oikeiôsis*, properly understood, effectively dismantles this caricature of Stoicism. The doctrine of *oikeiôsis* will be covered in more depth under the discipline of action.

Final thoughts on practicing the discipline of assent

Circumscribing your *Self*, and thereby protecting your guiding principle within the inner citadel requires the practice of all three disciplines: the discipline of assent, the discipline of desire, and the discipline of action. I will address the other two disciplines next. For now, it's important you understand that the discipline of assent involves taking control of your judgments and thoughts about external events.

Practice being the dispassionate observer of the events around you. Slowly, you will begin to realize the Stoic truth that it is not the event itself which causes you mental anguish, but your thoughts about the event. Your thoughts are the only thing within your control and they are completely within your control. You are not your destiny, you are not your involuntary emotions, you are not your past and future, you are not the “others” around you. Your *Self* is comprised of the pattern of assents you have agreed to in the past. You have complete control over those assents—none of those external entities or events can infringe on that power. Take control of that power—take control of your *Self*—protect your guiding principle within the inner citadel of your soul.

Everything is what you think it is. (*Meditations* 4.23)

The Discipline of Desire

Once you have begun practicing the discipline of assent, you are ready to reevaluate your understanding of your own human nature and the nature of the cosmos in which you live. This is the discipline of desire. The goal of this discipline is coherence with universal Nature, which includes your human nature. It involves bringing your will into congruity with what is appropriate for your human nature as Nature has created you. Your will, desires, and impulses are the subject of this discipline. Thus, the discipline of desire requires some understanding of your human nature and the physical laws of our universe. Ultimately, it results in acceptance of events and circumstances which are external to you and, therefore, not within your control.

Human Nature

Innate desires (appetites and instincts) are hardwired evolutionary adaptations handed down to us from a long lineage of ancestors who survived to pass their genes on to us.¹⁵ These basic survival instincts exist in us because they enhanced the survival of our ancestors. They are easily observable in a newborn's innate desire for food and aversion to discomfort. An infant does not acquire a desire for food or learn an aversion to discomfort; he feels the pangs of hunger or senses discomfort and cries out to have his innate desires met. We share many basic survival instincts with animals and they have served humans well. Unfortunately, natural desires, when coupled with human creativity and imagination, often seek fulfillment in ways that are detrimental to our physical and psychological well-being—they become obsessions or compulsions. Our natural desire for sweet

¹⁴ Lawrence Becker, *Stoic Emotion*, in *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 250-251

¹⁵ This assertion is based on neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory and insights offered by evolutionary psychology.

fruit, sexual intercourse, and pair-bonding were handed down to us by our primate ancestors and these instincts enhanced our survival as a species. However, it doesn't take much imagination to see how each of these instincts, pursued in excess, can become dysfunctional in ways that threaten our well-being and even our survival.

Modern advertising specialists manipulate innate human desires when they bombard us with images (impressions) designed to arouse our natural desires to levels far in excess of what is necessary for well-being. These advertisements redefine human prosperity solely in terms of material acquisition, social status and power. The Stoics sought to understand human nature and constrain human desires within reasonable boundaries so they do not become self-destructive. This resulted in the Stoic motto, "Live according to Nature." The Stoics were not ascetics; they were not suggesting we wear animal skins, live in caves, and return to our hunter-gatherer heritage. Humans, they suggested, should desire only what is natural for humankind—that which Nature designed us to have. Pursuit of your desires, beyond what is natural for you as a human being, can lead to physical and psychological pain, and human conflict.

Even a cursory review of human history reveals that most interpersonal conflict and war are the result of desires for things (wealth, fame, honor, power) which are not necessary for our happiness. A great deal of human despair and tragedy is created when we allow the innate desires of our human nature to run amok—unconstrained by any rational system of values which promotes universal well-being and justice. Your will is the mechanism by which you can control your desires.

The Human Will

The early Stoics delineated two functions within our guiding principle—assent and active impulse. Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius broke the human will down further into two distinct functions and thus created a third function of the guiding principle—desire.¹⁶ The three disciplines correspond to these three functions of the will. We can now begin to see the interrelated nature of assent, desire, and the impulse to act. I will address actions in the next discipline; however, it's important now to recognize why our good intentions often fall short of their aim. We usually attempt to intervene at the last stage—action. By then, the train has already left the station (assent), and has a full head of steam (desire), and it is rolling down the tracks regardless of our wishes. There is little hope of stopping it at that point. That is why Epictetus taught controlling our passions, through the discipline of desire, as the "most urgent" of the three exercises. The train must be stopped before it gets started. That can only be accomplished through the discipline of desire and the discipline of assent.

Unlike Platonists, the Stoics do not divide the psyche of humans into a rational part and an irrational part locked in perpetual battle for control. Platonists envision a battle between a wild beast (the passions) and the rational trainer (reason) who attempts to control the beast from the outside. Stoics, on the other hand, do not fancy a beast at all. They see a rational creature out of touch with its own true nature—a human acting like an animal. Stoics believe the solution is to bring the guiding principle of the human into congruence with universal Reason so they can perceive truth, and into congruence with universal Nature so they can know who they truly are—their true nature. Only then, can humans answer the critical question: how should we then live?

Universal Nature

Nature impresses herself upon the soul of the Stoic with every sunrise and sunset, with every clear mountain stream and panoramic landscape, through the birth of a child, the flight of a bird, the perpetual regeneration of biological life, the trembling of an earthquake beneath his feet, and the beating of his heart within his own chest. These adequate impressions of Nature lead the Stoic to assent to the existence of a creative force beyond the reach of his senses and measuring instruments—a force greater than his power of comprehension. Faced with the often incomprehensible and inarticulable wonders of Nature, a Stoic does not give in to crippling skepticism, fatalism, or nihilism. Instead, he accepts the events of Nature—which are outside his control—as part of his destiny, while simultaneously using his rational mind to understand Nature's laws and discern how best to live in congruence with them.

¹⁶ Hadot, *Inner Citadel*, 128-129

Providence or atoms? That is the question Marcus Aurelius asks himself repeatedly in his *Meditations*. Is our universe ordered by teleological providence or the randomness and chance of reductionist materialism? When it comes to the nature of our cosmos, most Western philosophers fall into one of two camps: theism or reductionist materialism. They argue the universe is either the creation of an omnipotent God or the result of materialism devoid of teleology—chance reactions, guided solely by a process of natural selection, toward increasingly complex forms of organic life. Stoic physics, their theory of universal Nature, does not fit neatly into either camp. As a result, throughout history, Stoicism has been attacked from both sides. Theists have often accused Stoics of being atheists, while reductionist materialists often assert that Stoicism is a religion. I think the evidence suggests the ancient Stoics accepted a third alternative, which resulted in attacks from both extremes. They believed in God—a philosophical God—who is immanent rather than transcendent. They did not rely on revealed truth or priestly/shamanic mediators for knowledge; they relied on their rational faculty to accurately discern truth from the systematic analysis of observations about human nature and universal Nature. They were not religious, yet they were reverent, even spiritual. They saw sacredness and order within universal Nature.

Likewise, Stoics view universal Nature as benevolent—conducive to life. Death, disease, and natural disasters are not punishments from an angry God; they are simply the natural unfolding of events within a web of causes, often outside of our control. Stoics accept that the cosmos is as it should be. Is this resignation? No; it means we strive to do all we can to save lives, cure disease, and understand and mitigate natural and man-made disasters. Then, when death, disease, and disaster come—as they naturally and inevitably will—we accept them not as evil adversaries to our plans and desires, but as natural events outside our control.

The Stoic world-view does imply some form of teleology; however, it does not entail an anthropomorphic, transcendent God, actively controlling Nature and the lives of individual beings for his purposes. The philosophical God of Stoicism is no “friend behind the scene” and there is no sense of providence as a worthy and “higher purpose unknown to men.”¹⁷ Instead, the Stoic God, if you wish to use that word, is the immanent creative force within all of existence—the intelligence (logos) within Nature.

Stoics seek to understand Nature and to live in congruity with her laws, rather than seeking to escape her domain physically, psychologically, or spiritually. Living according to nature is the principle theme of Stoicism and it can only be accomplished when your nature, as a human, is congruent with universal Nature—when your will is one with the will of Nature. Only then, will you be in a state of coherence with universal Nature.

The teleology of Stoicism entails direction and probabilities in the unfolding of events. Thus, when a Stoic accepts the divine will of universal Nature and disciplines himself to be in coherence with it, he is not surrendering to a will greater than his to avoid eternal damnation. He is simply accepting the unfolding of events which are outside his control. Ultimately, he grows to love the unfolding events of Nature because he realizes he is a part of it—he is one with it. Walt Whitman answers to the big question about life's meaning with the following profound words:

***That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.***¹⁸

Live your life in congruence with universal nature. Realize the powerful play goes on with or without your participation. Therefore, standing in the peanut gallery, complaining about the play and shouting epithets at the players will only cause you further frustration. Grab a script, read it, understand it the best you can and then jump into the action—contribute your own verse while you still can.

Marcus Aurelius describes congruence with universal Nature as the goal of philosophy:

Philosophy wishes nothing other than what your nature wishes, whereas you were wishing for something else which is not in accordance with nature. Now what could be more delightful than to follow nature? And is it not on account of such delight that vulgar pleasures seduce us? Well, see whether elevation of mind,

¹⁷ Ludwig Edelstein, *The Meaning of Stoicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 8

¹⁸ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Random House, 1891-92), 222

freedom, simplicity, goodness of heart, and piety afford you greater delight. For what is more delightful than wisdom itself... (Meditations 5.9)

Many people cringe when the topics of teleology or design arises. To them, the concepts of design, rationality, and direction do not apply to the universe. They are unscientific and a vestige of religious thought.¹⁹ I suggest this is a symptom of postmodern thinking and a overreaction to the hegemony religion once held over the minds of people in the Western world. Now, after a half-century of postmodernism, at the dawn of a new millennium, many thinkers from various fields are beginning to believe that we have taken a wrong turn somewhere. They do not suggest we return to the monotheistic religions that caused, and continue to cause, so much human conflict. They don't agree where we made the critical mistake and don't agree on a solution. However, many are pointing in the same direction for a possible answer—reverence toward that which is greater than man.

Reverence

Maybe it is time to open the tomb where postmodernism buried the concept of God, and question whether we inadvertently interred some fundamental truths there—truths we mistakenly thought were superfluous artifacts of revealed religion. It is time to acknowledge we left something essential behind, within the baggage of organized religion. Simultaneously, it might be time to bury the threadbare idea offered by Protagoras that “man is the measure of all things.” Man is not—Nature is. Denial of that fact places us in physical and psychological peril. We need to rekindle a sense of reverence for that which is greater than us. Reverence is an ancient concept with modern relevance. The words of three contemporary scholars echo this sentiment:

Paul Woodruff (professor of humanities):

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings... Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods... An irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless, unable to feel awe in the face of things higher than itself. As a result, an irreverent soul is unable to feel respect for people it sees as lower than itself—ordinary people, prisoners, children... It is a natural mistake to think that reverence belongs to religion. It belongs, rather, to community. Wherever people try to act together, they hedge themselves around with some form of ceremony or good manners, and the observance of this can be an act of reverence. Reverence lies behind civility and all of the graces that make life in society bearable and pleasant.²⁰

Stuart Kauffman (biologist):

Look out your window at the life teeming about you. All that has been going on is that the sun has been shining on the earth for some 5 billion years. Life is about 3.8 billion years old. The vast tangled bank of life, as Darwin phrased it, arose all on its own. This web of life, the most complex system we know of in the universe, breaks no law of physics, yet is partially lawless, ceaselessly creative. So, too, are human history and human lives. This creativity is stunning, awesome, and worthy of reverence. One view of God is that God is our chosen name for the ceaseless creativity in the natural universe, biosphere, and human cultures.²¹

Sam Keen (philosopher):

Reverence—the feeling of being in the presence of someone, something, or some place we experience as sacred—may be elicited by a meadow carpeted with a profusion of royal-blue lupines, a herd of thousands of wildebeests migrating in the Serengeti, an ancient image of Avalokitesvara, the compassionate god of a thousand hands and eyes, an icon of Christ in a cathedral, or a two-year-old child laughing on a jungle gym. Reverence induces a desire to speak in a hushed voice, to walk softly on the earth, to kneel and give thanks

¹⁹ See Wright (2000); and Haisch (2010) for examples of a modern philosopher (Wright) and astrophysicist (Haisch) who posit a version of teleology Stoics might find interesting.

²⁰ Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: renewing a forgotten virtue* (Oxford, 2001), 3-4

²¹ Stuart Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred*, (Basic, 2008), xi

for the privilege of being... The feeling of reverence need not be connected to a belief in God... It is possible to imagine that in some distant future the great world religions might disappear. And it is difficult to predict whether such an event would be disastrous or benevolent. What is certain is that should our elemental instinct for reverence be lost we would be left with no defense against narcissism, nihilism, and anarchy. Reverence is what puts the “civil” in “civilization.” It lies at the heart of all ethics.²²

None of these scholars professes to be religious—they are not positing religious dogma; yet, their words echo a familiar sense of reverence toward the cosmos—the kind of reverence we find repeatedly within Stoic writings. Reverence is not an anachronistic concept from ancient times or the Victorian era. Instead, as Paul Woodruff points out, reverence is an abandoned topic much in need of resurrection in our modern times.²³ In our postmodern world, the traditional God of the monotheistic religions is dead. Unfortunately, Western society threw the baby out with the bath water. Now, many nonbelievers within the ranks of philosophy, the humanities, and even the sciences, are beginning to question whether the humanist values of the Enlightenment and the radical skepticism of postmodernism provide the necessary foundation for human happiness. They are not calling for a return to monotheistic religion, revealed truth, and church dogma. Instead, they suggest we have jettisoned some concepts like reverence and sacredness which may be necessary for civil society and human flourishing.²⁴ Sam Keen writes:

We live by the grace of an unacknowledged inheritance from a rich godfather. The “civil” in our civilization was created by generations whose religious institutions taught them that the golden rule and the inalienable rights of citizens were ordained by God. Civic religion inculcated the virtues of care for our neighbor and sacrifice for the common good. But our inheritance is running out. It is doubtful that the imperatives springing from modern secularism can create a civil community. How can a consumer economy justify sacrifice, generosity, and the commitment of time and energy to nurture the young? In a culture that worships efficiency, speed, profit, and consumption, where do we get the mandate to love one another, to feel compassion toward those who are sick, unemployed, homeless, or old (i.e., “useless”)? I can’t help wondering if the idea of a secular civilization is an oxymoron, a failed dream of the Enlightenment. Without some vision of the sacred, what will be the source of compassion, sacrifice, and mutual care, without which there can be no commonwealth? How will we discover values that transcend the selfish interests of the ego, the family, the tribe, the corporation, and the nation? How will we learn compassion for a stranger? Where will we get that sense of reverence for life that is the cornerstone of the desire to preserve our environment? Where shall we look for hope?²⁵

In an increasingly secular world where most people are adrift without any ethical mores, ancient philosophy in general and Stoicism in particular offers practical guidance and a vision of life with real meaning. When the Western world abandoned religion, we left too much behind. We turned our backs on the sacredness of Nature and our necessary connection to her. We justifiably walked away from faith-based religions supported only by the authority of revealed truth. Unfortunately, the 'truth' offered by postmodernist thought did not bring us any closer to human flourishing and happiness than those old-time religions did. The tree of postmodernism is now bearing fruit. Unfortunately, its taste is bitter and it does not satisfy the cravings of the human soul. It's time to “reunite our full humanity” by reinventing our concept of sacredness so we can move forward.²⁶

Lived Physics

The discipline of desire requires that you possess some understanding of human nature and universal Nature—the physical laws that regulate biological life and the cosmos. The virtue of temperance, which results from coherence with universal Nature, will fill you with reverence for the sacredness of Nature and the creative

²² Sam Keen, *In the Absence of God*, (New York: Random House, 2010), 97

²³ Woodruff, *Reverence*, 10

²⁴ See Woodruff, Kauffman, and Keen as examples

²⁵ Keen, *In the Absence of God*, 11-12

²⁶ Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred*, xi

unfolding of life in all of its forms. It leads you toward “a kind of rational spirituality that can nudge the world in a more tolerant and uplifting direction.”²⁷

Living in the Present

In the early 1990's, I was in a small group workshop attended by people interested in personal growth. During a time for sharing, while the group was seated in a large circle, a young woman stood up from her chair, lifted one foot into the air and placed it firmly on the ground, slightly wider than shoulder-width. Simultaneously, she said, “I feel like I'm living my life with one foot in the past.” Then, she lifted her other foot, placed it firmly on the ground creating an even wider stance and said, “And one foot in the future.” Finally, she squatted a little, placed her hands on her knees, and stated emphatically, “And I'm pissing all over the present!” I'll never forget that moment. However, it was years later when I began to study Stoicism that I fully appreciated it. Stoics believe that time does not exist, it only 'belongs.' They view time as a continually moving frame of reference which can never be pin-pointed because as soon as you try, that moment is in the past. Thus, the past and the future do not exist; yet, we mistakenly attempt to live our mental lives there just like that young woman was doing. We sacrifice the present—the only place where our lives can actually be lived—by entertaining the distractions of past regrets and future fears. A necessary part of living in accordance with Nature is learning to live in the present because the present moment is all we have.

Coherence with universal Nature and her laws, achieved through the discipline of desire, will inspire you to want only that which is natural for you as a human; that which universal Nature wills for humankind in general and you in particular...at this present moment. Then, like Marcus Aurelius, you will be able to say:

I presently have what universal nature wills that I should have, and I am doing what my own nature wills that I should do. (Meditations 4.23)

The Discipline of Action

Within this single passage, Marcus Aurelius summarizes the Stoic discipline of action and the concept of *coherence with humanity*:

Say to yourself at the start of the day, I shall meet with meddling, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, and unsociable people. They are subject to all these defects because they have no knowledge of good and bad. But I, who have observed the nature of the good, and seen that it is the right; and of the bad, and seen that it is the wrong; and of the wrongdoer himself, and seen that his nature is akin to my own—not because he is of the same blood and seed, but because he shares as I do in mind and thus in a portion of the divine—I, then, can neither be harmed by these people, nor become angry with one who is akin to me, nor can I hate him, for we have come into being to work together, like feet, hands, eyelids, or the two rows of teeth in our upper and lower jaws. To work against one another is therefore contrary to nature; and to be angry with another person and turn away from him is surely to work against him. (Meditations 2.1)

When I first read that passage I thought, “Oh my, he just described the people I work with—meddling, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, and unsociable.” My self-righteousness was quickly deflated as I continued to read. Marcus was not critiquing them; his words were aimed directly at me. The world doesn't need any more self-righteous purveyors of virtue; it needs people who act virtuously and justly toward others.

Stoic ethical theory is built on a solid foundation of physics (an understanding of human nature and how the universe works) and epistemology (logic, reason, and the theory of human knowledge). Stoicism does not indulge in emotionally uplifting sermons about loving your neighbor as yourself. Instead, it points out that your neighbor is a portion of the same divine mind as you; thus, loving your neighbor is loving yourself. The Stoic does not condemn mankind as evil; he understands the 'wrongdoer' is lost in his own ignorance—out of coherence with universal Reason, universal Nature, and humanity. Stoics do not retreat from society to find

²⁷ Bernard Haisch, *The God Theory*, (San Francisco: Red Wheel, 2006), 2

peace of mind; they stand in the midst of the chaos and work toward the common goals of human flourishing and justice.

***Oikeiōsis*—expanding your circle of concern**

The doctrine of *oikeiōsis* (illustration 4), which is fundamental to Stoic ethical theory, describes the process by which one's natural self-interest for survival expands to include the interests of others. A child's naturally selfish instincts—crying when hungry or uncomfortable without regard for others—make him well-disposed (*oikeion*) for self-preservation as a child. However, as the child matures, he must become well-disposed to survive in relationships, which include his family, society, nation, and ultimately the entire cosmos.²⁸ Thus, Stoics derive their ethical theory and their values from Nature herself—from observations of natural physics, animal behavior, and human psychology.²⁹

At first glance the Stoic process of *oikeiōsis* appears to contradict the practice of circumscribing the Self. On the contrary, the process of *oikeiōsis* relies upon the psychological strength and tranquility derived from the circumscribed self to act justly toward others while maintaining a serene state of mind. It is only from a place of inner peace and strength that we can serve humankind. Neurotic souls, tossed about by the chaos of external events, cannot aid their fellow man. Only calm and tranquil souls are able to enter the arena of duty.

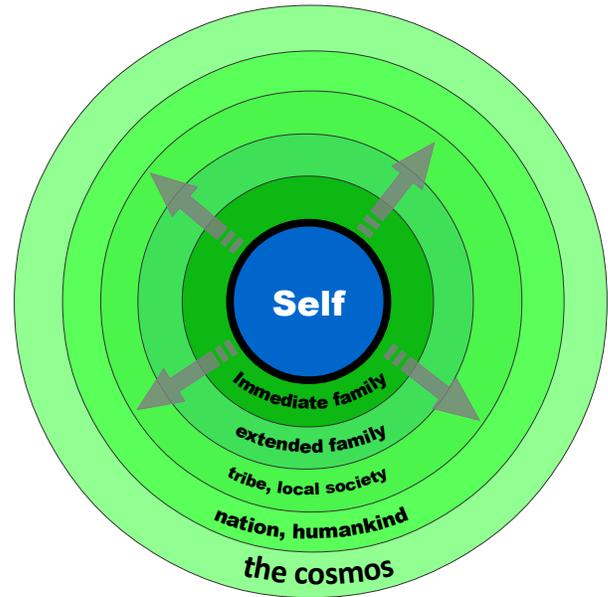


Illustration 4

Appropriate Actions

John Sellars defines an appropriate action as “one that it would be natural for an animal to undertake, such as one that would contribute to its survival and be in accordance with its own nature.” The Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis*, which is based on an understanding of the physical laws of the universe and human nature suggest “the most fundamental action appropriate (*oikeion*) for all animals and human beings is to try to preserve their own existence.” “For a rational creature, to act according to nature and to act according to reason is one and the same” (Meditations 7.11). While this may be conceived as “natural egoism,”³⁰ it is not selfish egoism. Because your nature as a human is instinctively social, the doctrine of *oikeiōsis* necessarily involves the expansion of your circles of concern to include others, even the meddling, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, and unsociable. Nature designed humans as social animals with innate moral instincts which allow us to live in groups. To act otherwise—to live like an animal—is against human nature. We intuitively understand these basic moral precepts and expect others to live by them. We express this understanding when we respond to the barbaric acts of others with the simple judgment, “Animals!”

Stoic ethics begins with an understanding of natural impulses—animal instincts. Then, “with the appearance of reason in human beings, natural instinct becomes reflective choice.”³¹ Thus, what is an appropriate action for animals (e.g. killing or maiming their own kind to defend their territory) is subject to reflective choice for humankind. To this end, Hadot offers a useful test to determine the appropriateness of an action. First, the action must be within the realm of those things which are up to us as humans. This includes thoughts, desires,

²⁸ Seneca's Epistle 121 (On Instinct in Animals); and Diogenes Laertius 7.85

²⁹ Peter Singer's conception of an expanding circle of concern is similar to the Stoic theory of *oikeiōsis*. See Singer (1981)

³⁰ John Sellars, *Stoicism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 120

³¹ Hadot, *Inner Citadel*, 189

and active impulses (will). Second, appropriate action must conform to the law of Reason.³² Our rational and social nature requires us to act in a manner which preserves the existence of the human community.

Imperturbability in the face of what comes to pass from a source outside yourself, and justice in actions that proceed from a cause within yourself; that is to say, impulses and actions which find their end in the very exercise of social duty because, for you, that is in accordance with nature. (Meditations 9.31)

Impulse Toward Justice

Regardless of political ideology or party affiliation, one truth is apparent at the dawn of the twenty-first century—technology has connected humans across the globe in a way that is creating a global community and a new consciousness. We are rapidly becoming a global village. The political concept of cosmopolitanism—being a citizen of the cosmos—may precede Stoicism; however, it is “perhaps most clearly expressed in the surviving works of the late Stoics.”³³ Here is an expression of cosmopolitanism from the writing of Seneca:

Let us grasp the fact that there are two republics, one vast and truly "public," which contains alike gods and men, in which we do not take account of this or that nook of land, but make the boundaries of our state reach as far as the rays of the sun: and another to which we have been assigned by the accident of birth... Some men serve both of these states, the greater and the lesser, at the same time... (On Leisure 4.1)

Seneca was not naïve and he was no pollyanna. As a Roman Senator and tutor to the young Nero, he was familiar with the rough and tumble world of politics. Thus, we see in the above passage a pragmatic view of cosmopolitanism, where “Some men serve both” the nation they are “assigned by the accident of birth” and the ideal community created by the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis*—a polity of the cosmos.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we face pressures from economic globalization, competition for limited resources, potentially catastrophic environmental impact, and a push toward international law and a new world order. It seems the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis* could be quite useful at times like these. With it, we may be able to take concepts like social justice and global justice out of the hands of political activists and special interest groups, and apply them globally for the betterment of all mankind.

Lived Ethics

Stoicism is a philosophy of action—a lived philosophy. You must examine your thoughts to foster a rational mind capable of action; study your human nature and universal Nature to prepare your will for action; then, you must pursue excellence through virtuous action. The three disciplines are necessarily interdependent; none can be practiced effectively in isolation. The discipline of assent and discipline of desire are necessary to create within you a character capable of acting virtuously (the discipline of action). How should we then live? Virtuously. For Stoics, moral good (virtue) is the only good, and the only thing necessary to achieve happiness; everything else is an *indifferent*. This differs from Aristotelian ethics which suggests some wealth, health, and luck are necessary to achieve happiness. It also differs from the Cynics, who did not see any value at all in wealth, health, etc. The Stoics classified wealth, health, good luck, etc., as *preferred indifferents* because they do have some value. However, they are not to be pursued for their own sake—they are not necessary for happiness—they are not moral goods. In fact, pursuit of these indifferents is the genesis of most psychological angst, interpersonal conflict, and war.

³² *ibid*

³³ Sellars, *Stoicism*, 129

Stoicism: an Ancient Philosophy for Modern Man

Postmodern man is engaged in a perpetual search for the latest pop-psychology craze that might relieve his existential angst. We failed to heed Nietzsche's warning; we starred into the abyss of postmodern thought too long and the emptiness therein has darkened our collective soul. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, many great minds, from a variety of disciplines, appear to be wondering if we have taken the noble ideals of the Enlightenment too far. Did we throw the baby out with the bathwater? The concept of a transcendent, anthropomorphic God may be dead, but reverence for the sacredness of Nature need not be buried with him. Many Judeo-Christian values may be anachronistic, but living a virtuous life is not.

The soul of postmodern man is dying of spiritual thirst. He does not need to return to the bitter water of organized religion because Stoicism provides an alternative for his parched soul. Stoicism provides a path forward to human flourishing by pointing back to an ancient but pure spring of wisdom. The path of the three Stoic disciplines can lead you to that spring of self-coherence. There, within the inner citadel of your soul, you will discover an immanent, philosophical God—the creative force behind all of Nature. You will find therapy for your psychological angst. The path of the Stoic sage will lead you to an understanding of your own nature, the nature of the cosmos, and the Nature that created you. It is a quest for self-coherence that will unite you with your own rational nature, humanity as a whole, and Nature herself. Its only commandment is:

“Live according to Nature”

I close with a *mneme* (memory exercise) written by my mentor Erik Wiegardt, founder of [The New Stoa](#) and scholar of [The College of Stoic Philosophers](#). I am continually inspired by his ability to write succinctly and powerfully. The depth of meaning within *The DOE* continues to amaze me. It encapsulates the essence of Stoicism in a manner I have not found elsewhere. It is all too easy to get bogged down in the academic study of Stoicism and lose sight of our philosophy's original intent—practice, practice, practice, practice. I need *The DOE* to remind me of that occasionally. I hope you grow to appreciate and use it as much as I do.

“The DOE”

One rule to unite us:

live in agreement with Nature.

Two maxims to guide us:

*Good is virtue that evil lacks;
all the rest is indifferent.*

*Good and evil are in the will;
only will is in our power.*

Three studies abide us:

*Judgments and the inner discourse,
Desires and the rising passions,
Actions and the noble duties.*

Hear the sage inside us:

*practice, practice, practice, practice.*³⁴

³⁴ Erik Wiegardt, *The Mneme Manual*, (San Diego: Wordsmith, 2011), 4 – [available at http://stoicscollege.com/college_library.php](http://stoicscollege.com/college_library.php)

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