

Stoicism & Religion: Virtue & Equanimity

Sermon by Marc Deshaies

Worship Service of July 26, 2015

First Unitarian Church – Worcester, MA

Today when we hear the word "stoic", someone like Mr. Spock from Star Trek might come to mind; someone devoid of emotion. In fact, while ancient Stoics did minimize negative emotions, they welcomed positive emotions, and were much more like Captain Kirk.

The Stoic philosophy is epitomized in the first line of the book called the Enchiridion, or manual, of the Stoic teacher Epictetus, written by one of his students, which says:

"Of all existing things, some are in our power, and others are not in our power."

This mirrors the Serenity Prayer which we spoke earlier. And which we plan to sing.

Some things are only partly in our control. For example, next month I plan to run in a 5 mile race. Why enter a foot race if I can only partly control whether I win? The other runners may be better athletes, so winning is not completely up to me. It is "up to me", however, whether and how often I practice running, eat right, and get plenty of sleep. How my competitors run and prepare is not up to me. A better goal than winning would be to focus on what is under my control and strive to be the best that I can be.

My focus today is to compare Stoicism and Religion, which is like comparing apples and oranges. Stoicism is a life philosophy while a religion is a system of faith and worship. A life philosophy like Stoicism has the goal of a good life. A religion, by contrast, is likely to show us how to lead a good afterlife, or at least how to be a good person in this life. Philosophy's emphasis on a good life and religion's focus on morality are both worth practicing. Having one without the other, though, leaves a person and society lacking. If we just lead a good life without a moral code, we would interfere with other people's pursuit of happiness, and if we just practice being good people without asking ourselves "what is the purpose in life?", we might come to the end of our life wondering whether we have squandered our opportunity.

A young person in ancient Athens could choose a school of philosophy. Zeno of Citium taught in Athens on the Porch, or Stoa of the city's main gathering place, so Zeno's

school became known as the Stoic school of philosophy. There were other schools then too. Just outside Athens was the garden of Epicurus. Epicureans emphasized pleasure as the greatest good, attainable through a simple life. The students of Diogene's Cynic school of philosophy practiced their simple lifestyle sometimes in extreme ways by sleeping on the ground, owning only one set of clothes and living hand-to-mouth. I heard Diogene's story recently on a podcast that is referenced on a list of online and print resources here on the side table that you are welcome to take home. Diogenes the Cynic lived in a barrel in the public square, deliberately experiencing poverty, seeking discomfort such as more heat in summer and more cold in winter, and publicly mocked major figures of the time such as Plato and Alexander the Great. It was said that despite Diogene's brashness, Alexander the Great was quite taken with him, and said something like "If I were not Alexander the Great, I would want to be Diogenes.", and Diogenes retorted "I feel the same way. If I were not Diogenes, I also would also want to be Diogenes."

Competition for students was said to have caused schools of philosophy to steal each other's ideas. This led to similarities between some of the different school's teachings. For example, the Stoics did practice the occasional self-denial, to better appreciate what they had.

Blending of beliefs, of course, also happens in religion. Consider the date of Christmas, for example. While it's controversial, there is speculation that the December 25th date was set in the 4th century was to align Christmas with the Winter Solstice in conjunction with the worshippers of the Sun God.

Blending beliefs also took place in Asia, such as in Neo-Confucianism, which adopted Buddhist ideas, blending Confucian morality with Buddha's ideas on overcoming suffering.

So, in ancient times, a young person could choose to be a Cynic, a Stoic, or an Epicurian, as today one might choose to be a Catholic, a Muslim, a Unitarian Universalist, or a hedonist.

In fact the default life philosophy for most people today seems to be hedonism. With no philosophy to guide our lives, today we tend to maximize pleasure and minimize pain and discomfort. One problem with this approach is what's called Hedonic adaptation or running on the Hedonic treadmill.

Studies have shown that for most people, if they win the lottery or become a paraplegic, after an initial period of great joy or sadness, they are likely to settle back into the level of happiness they had before this major event. What happens after we experience pleasure, such by obtaining an iPhone? That existence becomes the new normal. Then we want something else. By wanting something else, we switch from being content to having an unmet desire. Why not want what we have? If we just want what we already have, we could remain content.

When I suggested this to my friend Dan, he said "What if everyone acted that way? The economy would collapse!", so, while I try to practice it myself, I hesitate to recommend this approach to others, as I would not want the collapse of the economy on my conscience.

Taking this approach further, Stoics suggest we imagine losing what we have. This is called "Negative Visualization". I sometimes imagine not having a smart phone or a car. When I imagine how it would feel to walk to the store and carry my groceries home by foot, or not being able to call my brother in Seattle, it makes the simple act of driving to the store or talking with someone 3000 miles away more pleasurable.

Taking Negative Visualization to an extreme, if we imagine the death of a loved one, or even our own death, we can better cherish life.

Even more effective than imagining hardship is to occasionally practice hardship. For example I could actually walk to the store instead of just imagining it, or, as crazy as it sounds, write a letter to my brother. For those of you born after about 1990, a letter is a physical piece of paper that for 49 cents someone will carry to Seattle for you.

The Serenity prayer epitomizes the dichotomy of control. For example, there are members of my extended family that I used to say drive me crazy. The Stoic point of view is that it is not my relative that annoys me, it is what I am thinking when I am with them that annoys me. So, instead of just focusing on trying to change my relative, first I need to change myself. It reminds me of riding in a car with a driver who yells and screams at the other drivers, with the windows rolled up, so the other driver cannot hear, of course. A Buddhist perspective on this would be that it's like drinking poison and expecting someone else to get sick.

Stoicism emphasizes Fatalism, or an acceptance of what has already happened, and even what is happening now, while emphasizing what is within our control for our focus

on the future. So in our Serenity Prayer, the serenity to accept the things I cannot change focuses on Past and Present, while the courage to change the things I can refers to the future.

Focus on what's in our power versus what is in God's power is a major difference between Stocism and Theism. One way to balance the two would be to attribute to God the things I cannot change.

The early Christian teachings were influenced by Stoic self-denial and the Christian disciples' Stoic audiences described in Acts 17 would have accepted self-denial more readily than in today's more selfish "What's in it for me?" society.

Just as religions can change in their beliefs, there was a shift in emphasis as Stoicism spread over the centuries from 300 BC Athens to 180 AD Rome. In Athens, the Stoic's main goal was to live in Virtue. By Virtue, they meant being the best human which a person could be, and maximize use of the human ability to Reason. The Roman Stoics, by contrast, emphasized tranquility. This shift from a general good such as virtue to a more selfish goal like tranquility and equanimity (a levelling of the peaks and valleys of emotions) reminds me of the shift in emphasis over the past decades in modern times from focus on others to focus on ourselves.

To summarize, the answer may be for us to pursue both Virtue and Tranquility, because Virtue and Tranquility are intertwined. When we strive to be the best people we can be, we attain tranquility, and when we are in a state of tranquility, we are better able to attain Virtue.

I have been trying to practice Stoicism since November when I tried living like a Stoic for a week along with an online community from England. My call to action is to encourage others to consider having a life philosophy, whether it be Stoicism, or something better to suited to their personality.

Whatever you choose for yourself: whether it be no life philosophy, Stoicism, or some other approach, I wish you the best on your journey toward Virtue and tranquility.

Acts 17:18-33 New International Version (NIV)

18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. **19** Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? **20** You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." **21** (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! ...

24 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. **25** And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ...

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." **33** At that, Paul left the Council.

Further print and online resources on Stoicism

July 26, 2015

Print

A guide to the good life, 2008 book by William Braxton Irvine ISBN-10: 0195374614

Stoicism and the Art of Happiness 2013 book by Donald Robertson ISBN-10: 1444187104

Enchiridion circa 126 A.D. by Epictetus

Meditations circa 180 A.D. by Marcus Aurelius

Online

modernstoicism.com

paintedporch.org

immoderatestoic.com

<http://www.missedinhistory.com/podcasts/diogenes-of-sinope>

<http://www.newstoa.com/>

The resources above, in the order shown, would be a good start, and lead to other sources of information.

Postlude

The Stoics believed in Fate. If a Raven crosses your path, that was said to be an omen of misfortune. One of the most famous stoics was the roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. He wrote in his diary, called "Meditations", that "Misfortune, borne nobly, is good fortune." So, even if a Raven crosses your path today, I wish you good fortune.