

Nietzsche, the philosopher, famously remarked that studying philosophy will help us become better people. Stoicism, more than any other philosophical system, aids us in our pursuit for improvement. This school of philosophy, which dates back over two thousand years and originated in Ancient Greece, underlines the significance of acts over what's being said – of the correct way of living instead of saying the correct words.

Therefore, let us understand Stoicism by uncovering the life and experience of the Stoic school. In this overview, you will travel to ancient Greece and Rome to explore the interesting biographies of the most influential Stoic thinkers.

You'll explore how all these historical characters applied the Stoic traits of knowledge, fairness, and bravery into action. You'll also discover how their readiness to suffer assisted them in overcoming the same anxieties, uncertainties, and wants that plague our modern-day lives.

What you will learn in this overview:

- the reason why Cleanthes chose oyster shells to write his philosophy;
- How Marcus Aurelius handled an outbreak of a pandemic disease; and
- The story of how the world's most famous Stoic ended up with blood on his hands.

## Chapter 1 - Stoicism arose from the crucible of adversity.

Stoicism may have expanded into a colossal world philosophy, but it started modestly. One guy, a catastrophic shipwreck, and a simple porch stoop were the catalysts for this significant school of thinking.

Our story begins in the fourth century BCE in the Mediterranean, with a wealthy trader named Zeno.

Zeno prospered by selling a rare purple dye created from sea-snail blood. His luxurious existence was turned upside down one day when a ship carrying his valuable cargo was destroyed. Zeno and his family had everything taken away from them.

This catastrophic sequence of events would have ruined some people, but just not Zeno. He faced his misfortune with tenacity and bravery, exactly the virtues that Stoicism would come to exemplify. Instead of wallow in his misery, Zeno relocated to Athens, Ancient Greece's pulsating heart, and rebuilt himself as a philosopher.

He'd made the proper decision.

Athens in the fourth century was oriented on both business and, regrettably, the slave trade. Because of the city's commercial success and slave labor force, the intellectual elite of the city had plenty of time to consider life's most philosophical concerns. Zeno soon met a

distinguished teacher named Crates of Thebes who taught him the fundamentals of philosophy.

Crates lost no time in offering Zeno an unusual first lesson, which he taught him to use a pot of lentil soup. Crates requested him to transport the soup across the city. Zeno carried the soup thru the back streets to avoid being spotted, thinking that this duty was under him. Crates caught him sneaking around and poured the soup over him as a lesson in not thinking about what others think.

Zeno quickly established himself as a well-known philosopher. He developed the four governing principles of Stoicism, which are courage, knowledge, temperance, and justice.

Zeno, like the Stoics who followed him, felt that philosophy should not be limited to the classroom but should be used in everyday life. Instead of yelling from a bell tower or a big lecture hall, Zeno and his supporters debated their theories on the Stoa Poikile, a porch in the heart of Athens. Zeno's humility is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that he gave his philosophy the name of this porch instead of himself.

## Chapter 2 - Cleanthes felt that a spartan existence was sufficient reward in and of itself.

Society nowadays doesn't bother to think about how a philosophy professor spends his life. Philosophers, on the other hand, were a source of intrigue for their fellow citizens in Ancient Greece. Everyone had an opinion about their views and personalities, and these views weren't always nice in the case of our next Stoic.

Cleanthes who was born in 330 BCE on the Aegean coast would go on to be one of Zeno's most loyal students. Cleanthes worked and labored his entire life because he was born into a poor household. While most of us would like to avoid hard labor, Cleanthes embraced it.

He studied Stoicism in the daytime and worked as a water carrier for rich Athenians in the nighttime, despite his growing reputation as a philosopher. He could have comfortably quit working because there were many people who prepared to pay for Cleanthes' time and wisdom. However, Cleanthes always rejected these offers. Even when the Macedonian king, Antigonus II Gonatas, urged Cleanthes to be his personal tutor, Cleanthes declined.

Cleanthes, as a Stoic, recognized that hard work had respect and that even a menial task like water-carrying can be honorable and virtuous when done effectively. Cleanthes saw no conflict between his two jobs as a philosopher and a worker. Indeed, he believed that being a water carrier had aided him in becoming a greater philosopher. It's not difficult to

understand why. While physical activity is taxing, it permits our brains to roam and observe others. It provides us with the mental space to consider our ideas calmly while performing our tasks.

Cleanthes lived a very prudent life just like other true Stoics. It was said that he used to scribble his thoughts on oyster shells and cow bones rather than papyrus paper to save money. Cleanthes embodied the Stoic characteristic of apathy to discomfort throughout his spartan way of life.

However, not everyone admired this hardworking, frugal philosophy student.

The fact that he had spent 20 years learning under his instructor, Zeno, was derided by his fellow Athenians. He was labeled a simpleton, a clumsy lump of stone incapable of being sculpted. Cleanthes, on the other hand, dealt with his detractors with a sense of humor. Instead of being outraged by people making fun of him, he would often respond by making fun of himself. Cleanthes, like many Stoics, utilized comedy to avoid whining or concentrating on distress.

## Chapter 3 - Not all Stoics followed their own advice.

Cicero was born in 106 BCE in Ancient Rome and is well known for his book *Stoic Paradoxes*. Cicero analyzes the surprising nature of Stoicism's core ideas in this fascinating essay. Why do Stoics claim that virtue is all one needs yet money and good health are also necessary for survival? And how could Stoics assume that only the wise were wealthy when so many philosophers were poor?

Many of these Stoic ideas and paradoxes would have been lost to current audiences if Cicero's works had not been preserved. However, despite doing Stoicism a tremendous favor by immortalizing its concepts in ink, Cicero failed to follow its lessons in his own life on numerous occasions.

Cicero, who was born into an unknown family in a little hamlet outside of Rome, spent his early adult life rapidly ascending the job ladder. He rose through the ranks to become consul of Rome and head of the Roman army. Cicero rose to prominence after successfully prosecuting a corrupt magistrate named Verres who had stolen huge sums of money from the people of Sicily throughout his meteoric rise.

But, while his deeds exemplified the Stoic virtues of justice and courage, his motivations were less noble. In truth, Cicero was primarily motivated by vanity, personal ambition, and the desire for fame and wealth, all of which are diametrically opposed to Stoic values.

Cicero's disobedience to Stoic precepts would have disastrous implications not long after.

Cicero faced a dangerous competitor in the form of a Roman senator named Catiline not long after assuming his role as consul. Cicero took decisive but unethical action when Catiline attempted to conduct a coup and deployed an army outside Rome. He elected to put Catiline's supporters to death without a trial for their insurrection. Thousands of men had been slaughtered by the time Cicero was done. Cicero had allowed his rage to lead him in this heinous act. However, as a Stoic, he should have realized that justice, not passion, is the finest master.

Cicero later failed his life's most important test owing to the absence of courage.

Julius Caesar and his formidable army were on the verge of seizing power in Rome in 49 BCE, and Cicero was asked to join the Republic's military counter-offensive. Cicero, on the other hand, opted to do nothing. He stood back and accepted Caesar when he finally became Rome's dictator, rather than having the guts to stand against injustice.

## Chapter 4 - Stoicism won out over practicality for Cato the Younger.

Some individuals are fearless from birth. While the majority of us are more likely to pick the easy route over the tough, more true one, these exceptional individuals never waver from their beliefs, even when they are threatened. Our next historical figure exemplified the Stoic virtue of bravery as an example of someone who has such traits. However, as you'll see, his convictions occasionally drove him to make poor decisions.

Cato the Younger, a contemporary of Cicero, was born in Rome around 95 BCE. These two individuals, on the other hand, could not have been more different in their views on life. Where Cicero was solely concerned with his personal interests, Cato was only concerned with what was proper.

Cato declined to speak on behalf of an immoral soldier when he was a youngster. In retaliation, the soldier dragged him by his ankles over a high balcony in an attempt to compel him to relent. Cato stayed astonishingly fearless, not begging for his life or even caring about the possibility of death. The soldier eventually yanked him up and said that this four-year-old child had a greater will than he had.

Cato's Stoic convictions would also influence him in adulthood.

Cato spent his career as a major politician combating Rome's chronic corruption and advocating for the rights of the plebs - Rome's poorer classes. The other elites despised his principled position, but Cato only cared about his acts being moral. That, he claimed, was what it meant to be a real Stoic and a true philosopher.

Cato's unshakable dedication to virtue, on the other hand, would have terrible implications in the end.

Pompey, a member of the political elite, requested to marry Cato's daughter, which caused him issues. Pompey simply intended to unite their two families in this way because he wanted to form a political alliance with him, Cato understood. The marriage would have been the most practical option, but Cato thought the arrangement was unfair and deceptive. So he declined.

Cato would have recognized the dangers of saying no if he had set aside his views for a moment and considered the matter pragmatically.

Following Cato's denial, Pompey married Julia, Julius Caesar's daughter. Caesar received a huge political boost as a result of the marriage, and the two men built a new and autocratic destiny for Rome together. Caesar would attack Rome and crush the Republic before long.

All of this might have been averted if Cato had opted to compromise a bit on his moral high ground and forge an alliance with Pompey.

## Chapter 5 - Only one female Stoic has been documented for her bravery.

You might be asking where all the ladies are as we go across antiquity's philosophical world. Women have been largely expunged from the story of Stoicism, as they have been from the rest of human history.

Yet, no one exemplifies Stoic fortitude more than the unheralded women who faced the same oppression, battles, and tragedies as their male peers. They gave birth to the Catos, Ciceros, and Zenos of Ancient Rome and Greece without pain medication, yet their pains and sacrifices remained unnoticed and unrecognized by history books.

Porcia Cato was this woman's name, and she was Cato the Younger's daughter.

Porcia remarried a guy called Brutus after losing her first husband during Rome's civil war. Brutus and his fellow collaborators conspired to assassinate Julius Caesar, who was the ruler and dictator of Rome, during their marriage. Porcia resolved to take drastic measures to prove to Brutus that she was a worthy companion, knowing that her husband was preparing something but not knowing what.

Porcia stabbed herself in the thigh with a knife, whereas most of us would just inquire what the plot was.

When Brutus arrived home, he discovered her heavily bleeding. "Look at the agony I can take," Porcia remarked. By injuring herself in this way, she hoped to demonstrate that she had a strong and Stoic personality and, as a result, would be able to tolerate great agony if

necessary. She wanted to prove that if she was ever tormented for information, she would not open her mouth. When Brutus saw this confirmation of his wife's strong determination, he quickly told her about the scheme. Porcia was waiting at home when he and the other guys viciously murdered Caesar, hoping that everything had gone as planned.

Porcia's Stoic bravery and indifference to suffering would, unfortunately, not be demonstrated for the rest of her life.

Brutus was slain in a civil war launched by Mark Antony, one of Caesar's most ardent allies, just two years after Caesar's assassination. Even though versions differ, one author contends that when Porcia heard of her husband's death, she dashed to the fireplace and swallowed burning coals.

## Chapter 6 - The Stoic legacy of Seneca is stained by blood.

What if one Stoic virtue requires you to reject another? Seneca the Younger, the most well-known Stoic philosopher of all time, was confronted with this issue.

Seneca, just like Cicero, is most known for his literary achievements, particularly his work *On Morality*, a collection of letters and essays. However, despite his fame for his writings on the subject, Seneca exhibited weak moral judgment during his lifetime.

For Stoic philosophy, people have a moral obligation to participate in politics to help the common good. Possibly it was because of this Stoic philosophy that Seneca received an invitation to educate a 12-year-old boy predestined to be Rome's next ruler in 50 CE. This boy's name was Nero, and he was Emperor Claudius' adoptive son.

Nero, on the other hand, was harsh and spoiled, careless and egotistical. Seneca tried unsuccessfully to instill in him the Stoic principles of knowledge, justice, and charity. Nero showed obvious indicators of the man and ruler he would become even as a youngster.

Nero's mother Agrippina assassinated his father Claudius four years later, paving the path for the 16-year-old Nero to become the next emperor. And it didn't take long for this new boy-emperor to demonstrate his own nefarious inclinations. Nero assassinated his mother first, then executed any male relative who may be a potential competitor for the crown.

Where was Seneca amid all of this carnage? Regrettably, he stood at Nero's side as his devoted instructor. Seneca stayed faithful to Nero for the next 15 years, while the young emperor turned into a despotic maniac.

While Seneca encouraged Nero to show charity to his adversaries, he lacked the guts and self-discipline to move away when all of this failed.

Seneca, on the other hand, used the chance to accumulate more money than any other philosopher in history and lead a hedonistic life. By living so near to power, he may have convinced himself that he was doing his Stoic political duty, yet his riches were founded on Nero's terrible actions.

Seneca, in the end, lacked the moral fortitude of other Stoics such as Cleanthes and Cato. He wrote about his ideas rather than practicing them. That's for you to decide whether or not it was sufficient.

## Chapter 7 - Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic general who governed the Roman empire with modesty and kindness.

It's been stated that total power corrupts utterly. And history has repeatedly demonstrated that this is the case. The very last Stoic number, however, appears to be an outlier. He demonstrated what mankind is actually capable of via the brilliant example of his own life and guidance. And it's possible that his Stoicism helped him reach such brilliance.

Marcus Aurelius, the world's first philosopher-king, is the subject of our discussion.

Marcus was only 17 when the childless Emperor Hadrian picked him as his successor and requested him to join the imperial household in 121 CE. He was born into a distinguished Roman family. Though many boys would be tempted to let their good wealth get the best of them, Marcus stayed the nice and humble young man he'd been so. Though after moving inside the palace, he continued to pay visits to his tutors' homes rather than asking them to come to him.

One of his first moves, astonishingly, was to share authority with his adopted brother Lucius, declaring him co-emperor. Take into account how radical this was in the context of previous dictators, such as Nero, assassinating their opponents. Marcus' generosity, however, did not end there. Marcus readily forgave the plotters for their treachery after learning that one of his closest political friends, Cassius, was organizing a revolt against him, and cried when Cassius was murdered in retaliation.

Marcus, like a genuine Stoic, made sure that his judgments were always based on the needs of ordinary Romans, rather than his personal enjoyment. Take into account his efforts during the Antonine Plague, which decimated the Roman empire. Marcus could simply have imposed taxes on his citizens to replenish Rome's depleting budget. Instead, he auctioned off all of the decorations from his royal residences to the highest bidder.

Marcus' writings show that he put forth a lot of effort to live according to his Stoic beliefs.

He speaks about his sentiments of jealousy, rage, and desire in his book *Meditations*. Marcus, on the other hand, strove to master these feelings, but many of us succumb to them. He writes about discovering insight into the Stoics and how he used it to build a moral foundation for his governance.

Marcus Aurelius' life and works are arguably the most powerful proof of Stoicism's potency. Because the philosophy is all about refining our flawed human nature so, no matter what life brings for us, we may remain loyal to our ideals.

## Lives of the Stoics by Ryan Holiday Book Review

Stoicism instills in us the characteristics of bravery and justice, as well as the responsibility to perform our civic duty for the greater good. Although the Stoic founders did not always stay loyal to their own philosophy, we may learn the importance of selfless honesty and the perils of vanity and indulgence from their lives and errors.

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