

Daily life of ancient Epicureans / 21st Century Epicureans

Post by “Don” of May 27, 2025 at 10:38 PM

[Quote from Robert](#)

Just curious--could you elaborate further on your view of modern-day Stoics?

I will be honest to say I haven't delved too deeply into Stoicism. I flirted briefly with it, read Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (where I discovered this guy named Epicurus), read some articles on Stoicism, learned about Epictetus and his *Enchiridion*, discovered some more of their doctrines, then read *The Consolations of Philosophy* by Alain De Botton which led me to decide to dig into this Epicurean stuff. And I haven't looked back. I've read more about the Stoics after leaning more into Epicureanism.

When this topic comes up, I usually first point to Dr. Emily Austin's article [Are the Modern Stoics Really Epicureans?](#) In it, she makes the point that modern "Stoics" are closer to Epicureans than they are really to ancient students of the school. For example...

Quote from Emily Austin

Marcus [Aurelius] objected to Epicurus' natural science and his advocacy of hedonism, the view that humans achieve tranquility through strategic pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. That sounds like two objections—natural science and hedonism—but it's really one. The Epicureans were intellectually-refined hedonists because of their science. ... Marcus rejected these Epicurean views whole-heartedly because he considered the divine creation of a providential universe essential to the Stoic project, as did other Roman Stoics like Epictetus and their Greek predecessors. For the Stoics, human rationality is a manifestation of God's generosity to humans, not a sophisticated animal capacity. Marcus insists that "the whole divine economy is pervaded by Providence." When he writes, "If not a wise Providence, then a jumble of atoms," he means to offer two options: "If not Stoicism, then Epicureanism." In fact, Marcus admits that if Epicurean natural science were right, he would fall into despair. Without providence, he asks, "Why care about anything?"

The ancient Stoics believed in Providence, that every person's fate was already cast. Whatever happens to you is fated to happen. As Dr. Austin points out, the ancient Stoics believed that the universe was imbued with a divine providence. We face our suffering because it's part of a bigger plan, we were meant to suffer this pain we are undergoing. It's the classic "Everything happens for a reason." Which, I fervently believe, it does not.

Modern "Stoics," from what I have read, tend to downplay this idea of Providence, of divine will, directing their lives. But you can't have your muscular Stoic fortitude without the Providence. That's not Stoicism, at least not in the classical, ancient sense. There are some classical Stoics nowadays that keep their Providential underpinnings, but they appear to be a minority.

Another thing that turned me off Stoicism was the idea that even if your child dies, you should treat that loss no different than you would the loss of a drinking cup. There are nuances, but, that's basically what they're saying. Epictetus writes:

[Quote from Epictetus Discourses](#)

Do not attach yourself to them and they will not be necessary: do not say to yourself that they are necessary, and then they are not necessary.

This study you ought to practice from morning to evening, beginning with the smallest things and those most liable to damage, with an earthen pot, with a cup. Then proceed in this way to a tunic, to a little dog, to a horse, to a small estate in land: then to yourself, to your body, to the parts of your body, to your children, to your wife, to your brothers. Look all round and throw these things from you (which are not yours). Purge your opinions, so that nothing cleave to you of the things which are not your own, that nothing grow to you, that nothing give you pain when it is torn from you

Basically, be unattached to everything external to yourself, from a cup to your children, wife, brothers. Be completely unattached to all of them so that "nothing can give you pain when it is torn from you." That is, if your cup is broken or your wife dies. That doesn't even sound human to me.

Epicurus and other Epicurean writers write that we will feel grief when someone dies. They also write that we shouldn't let grief overcome us, but grief will sting and be painful. We should focus on the memories of our dead friends and family and take pleasure in the time you had together. That seems a much more human response to loss.

That's a taste of why I'm not a Stoic and where I think most modern Stoics paper over the actual tenets of their philosophy to make it more palatable to a modern audience. There's also the issues brought up in [Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age](#) by Donna Zuckerberg but that's for another post.

I'll address your other question in the next post.