THE GREATEST EMPIRE

A Life of Seneca

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

STOICISM

Stoicism, the intellectual movement with which Seneca most closely associated, was designed to create a possibility of individual happiness in times of vast social unrest. The ideal person in Stoic theory is the Wise Man (the *sapiens*), who is able fully to realize the truth that nothing except virtue really matters. He thus becomes fully aligned with the real nature of the universe.

Stoicism was an intellectual movement that had been in existence for over three hundred years before Seneca's birth and had undergone many important changes and developments in that time. Like most philosophical histories, the tale begins with Socrates—in particular, with the Socrates who wore the same cloak both summer and winter, who was guided by a divine sign, and who taught that it is better to suffer wrong than to do it, and that nobody willingly does wrong. The combination of asceticism (or "voluntary simplicity"), providentialism (being guided by a mysterious but entirely reliable divine force), and some kind of intellectualism (all wrongdoing is due to mistaken thinking), along with an insistence that being good is the primary, or indeed only, component of human happiness—all of these are ideas articulated by Socrates and developed by the Stoics.

The next element in the story is the Cynics, whose name means "dog-like." This movement was initiated by a man called Diogenes in the fourth century CE, who notoriously spent most of his life like a homeless person on the streets of Athens, living in a barrel with no possessions. One story goes that after he saw a poor boy drinking water from his hands, he threw away his single wooden bowl, realizing that it, too, was unnecessary. The Cynics presented themselves as followers of Socrates and were notorious for their eagerness to endure and celebrate poverty, on the grounds that material possessions distract one from life in accordance with virtue. True happiness and peace of mind could be achieved only by self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency itself is possible only through indifference to the material world and to the false norms of human culture. The ideal Cynic philosopher—like the founder of the school, Diogenes—would spend his life in rags or naked, defecating and fornicating in the street without shame, like a dog. There is an ancient story that Alexander the Great once came to visit Diogenes and asked him if there was anything he would like from him. "Get out of my light,"

the sage replied. Alexander was not offended: he recognized a kindred spirit, somebody with as much ability to ignore human convention as he had himself. The world-conqueror remarked, "If I were not Alexander, I would like to be Diogenes."

Cynicism was a philosophical movement that only a fairly limited number of the population were willing to embrace wholeheartedly, for obvious reasons: most people do not want to defecate in the street. But the central impulse of Cynicism—its recognition that material wealth and social status do not always bring happiness—was appealing to a huge number of people, and increasingly so. In the third and second centuries BCE, with the fall of the great Greek city-states and the rise of great empires (first Macedon, then Rome), in a time of enormous, and terrifying, alterations of the cultural, military, and political landscape of the Mediterranean area, more and more educated people were searching for peace of mind. People sought comfort not in large-scale social change but in their own individual spiritual healing. All the great philosophical movements of the period—including Cynicism but also Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism—promised to provide the state of "untroubled-ness," *ataraxia,* to their practitioners. Happiness (in Greek, *eudaimonia,* "blessedness") was associated not with the extremes of joy or exhilaration, nor with external achievements or events, but with an individual's capacity to maintain a calm disposition no matter what.

Stoicism can be seen as a more socially acceptable version of Cynicism, one that had deeper intellectual credentials and was more compatible with the normal behaviors of not only slaves and working people but also elite inhabitants of Hellenistic or Roman cities—those who did not want to live half-naked in a barrel but still hoped for spiritual calm and a sense of self-worth, virility, and autonomy in a vast and bewildering world. It is not surprising that Stoicism proved extremely popular.

Stoicism was founded around 301 BCE by a Greek called Zeno, living in Athens. Zeno acknowledged his debt to Cynicism: he was taught by a Cynic named Crates in his youth. It is difficult to reconstruct exactly what Zeno's version of Stoicism was like, since none of his work, or indeed that of any of the original Greek Stoics, survives. But Zeno is the person who gave Stoicism its name, by teaching in the location of the *Stoa Poikile*—the Painted Porch, an area of the Athenian marketplace.

Stoicism was developed in a systematic way by a slightly later leader of the Stoic school, Chrysippus.[11] Chrysippus' philosophy is recognizably a

development of Cynicism. The Stoics, like the Cynics, believed that nothing is truly valuable except virtue; that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for human happiness; and that such happiness involves living a life in accordance with Nature. But Stoicism was different from Cynicism in two crucial ways. The Stoics, unlike the Cynics, placed enormous value on human reason. They also, again unlike the Cynics, placed a high value on action in the world, including political engagement. Whereas Diogenes the Cynic dismissed Alexander, Chrysippus the Stoic would have engaged with him and tried to advise him on his public policy.

Stoicism, like the other major ancient intellectual movements of antiquity, is dubbed a "school." The word "school" implies a shared tradition of belief and practice, not necessarily a shared physical location, but it does not necessarily imply total agreement on every point of doctrine. Our (fragmentary and inadequate) evidence for Greek Stoicism suggests that there were a number of shifts of focus and belief over the course of the movement's history. Scholars usually distinguish between the early period and the Middle Stoa (although there is less of a gap between the early and middle periods than was once thought), and then the Roman period, characterized by an increased interest in ethics. Moreover, adherents to Stoicism often held different views from one another even in a single period. Seneca was an eclectic thinker; despite identifying primarily with Stoicism, he draws on many other traditions. Adherence to a school did not imply that a person would take all aspects of dogma as already predetermined by that school's traditions: a philosophical movement was not a faith. Seneca was also an original and creative thinker who made significant new contributions to Stoic views of psychology.

Despite all these caveats, some central notions were common to Stoic belief throughout its history and among all its adherents, including Seneca. The Stoics believed that the whole world is governed by universal Reason or Fate or God or Providence, also identified as Jupiter or Zeus, and associated with primordial Fire, which guides all of Nature. "Any name for him is suitable," as Seneca says: "You can't go wrong" (*Natural Questions* 2.45.2). According to Stoic physics, the cosmos has a cyclical pattern: at regular intervals everything is destroyed by fire (*ekpyrosis*) and then remade again (*palingenesis*). Nature was not merely inert or purposeless; rather, the whole universe followed a fixed, predetermined, and always benevolent pattern. It is always in the best interests of humanity to follow nature, because nature is always good. Despite a firm

humanity to follow nature, because nature is always good. Despite a firm belief in Fate, the Stoics emphasized individual decisions, since we always have a choice about whether we conform our will to the will of the universe, or resist. In Seneca's imagery, the wise person, who conforms his desires to those of God, becomes the follower of God; the foolish person, who fails to conform to what must be, is merely His slave (*On Providence* 5.6–7).

Virtue and knowledge are thus closely connected. The Stoics challenged the view common among other philosophical movements in antiquity (such as Platonism) that the human soul includes both rational and irrational elements. For them, human beings are a complete whole, not a collection of diverse parts, and that whole is entirely rational—although people are prone to false reasoning and mistaken beliefs. It is a failure of reason that makes us liable to unhappiness and wrongdoing. For the Stoics, if we always thought properly and managed to perceive the truth, we would never do wrong or be unhappy. This helps to explain the central place of logic in the Stoic system. The Stoics believed that humans are entirely capable of understanding the universe, and also that human happiness depends on our ability to think properly. The ideal is to align our own minds with the rational will of the universe. The Stoics were sophisticated logicians who made many advances in formal logic; in antiquity, those hostile to the school often mocked them for their abstruse reasoning and fondness for paradox.

Ethics was and is the most challenging area of Stoic philosophy—the most inspiring or the most infuriating, depending on one's point of view. The Stoics had, as we have seen, a notion of the "wise man." I use "man" deliberately because for most Stoics and Stoic-sympathizers, including Seneca, there is a strong assumption that the ideal wise person will be male, and that there is a correlation between virtue (in Latin, *virtus*, "manliness"—from *vir*, "man") and masculinity—although a few Stoics, most notably Musonius Rufus, a younger contemporary of Seneca, seem to have questioned this association and argued that women are quite capable of learning to be philosophers.[12]

The wisdom of the Sage consists in the fact that he knows, fully and at every moment, that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness: everything else, including pleasure, pain, health, wealth, and freedom, is "indifferent." This virtuous wisdom is an all-or-nothing proposition: the Sage is always,

at every single moment, acting virtuously and in possession of all the virtues. Even when doing apparently normal things that might not look especially virtuous—eating dinner or taking a bath—the sage is always acting with wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Conversely, those who are not sages can never act virtuously; even when they may seem to be doing something good (like saving a child from a fire) or neutral (like eating dinner), the non-sage is always in a state of vice. Moreover, only the Sage is free and self-sufficient; everybody else, even when they seem to be making their own choices, is actually in a constant state of metaphysical enslavement. The Stoics cited the metaphor of a person drowning: it makes no difference whether his head is ten feet under water or only an inch; any amount of water above your head is enough to stop the breath (Plutarch 61T).

All this is, of course, very paradoxical, and it is not hard to see why Stoic ethics were widely mocked. The Stoics themselves acknowledged that the true Sage is very rare, possibly nonexistent; it is, after all, difficult for a human being to be perfectly virtuous and perfectly wise. One may well wonder, then, what practical purpose is served by the ideal. If a person who is utterly depraved is no worse in relation to true virtue than one who has just a few faults, then why would one ever try to improve? What would improvement even mean, if virtue is something you either have or you don't?

But the Stoics allowed a great deal of room in their system for improvement and education in the path toward virtue. Crucially, they distinguished between performing a "correct function," *kathekon*, and performing a "fully correct action," *katorthoma*. The former includes any kind of action that is in accordance with nature (such as eating or breathing or exercising in appropriate ways); correct functions can be performed by plants and animals as well as non-sage humans. The non-sage can train himself (perhaps with the help of a philosophical tutor or teacher) to perform more and more correct functions and to come closer and closer to full realization of the true nature of the universe. He may still die before attaining the status of a sage, but the attempt to come somewhat closer to the surface of the water is itself a worthwhile goal.

Many complained (as did, jokingly, the satirist Lucian) that Stoics were entirely out of touch with the practicalities of daily life.[13] One may accept in theory that it is more important to be a good person than to have a lot of money, but, given the choice of wealth or abject poverty,

most of us would rather be rich. The Stoics took account of this in their theory and allowed for a category in between the things that are absolutely good and bad: the "indifferent things." The Stoics were able to acknowledge that, all things being equal, it is preferable not to be tortured, imprisoned, enslaved, impoverished, dishonored, die, have one's loved ones die, or suffer a painful or debilitating illness. Epictetus tells us, "Of things that exist, some are good, some are bad, others are indifferent. Good things are virtues and everything that shares in virtues; bad things are the opposite; and indifferent things are wealth, health, reputation" (*Discourses* 2.15). The indifferent things are incommensurable with the value of virtue, such that any amount of torture would be better than any amount of vice. The Stoics insist that, even under torture, even while having his limbs cut off, even while being enslaved, even under the greatest humiliation, the Stoic Sage will be happy and free, living the ideal life, as long as his virtue remains intact. The promise of Stoicism, in which lies much of its attractiveness, is that one can be guaranteed a life of pure joy, if only one can attain the correct attitude toward the universe. The Stoic—unlike the "stoic," in contemporary, nonphilosophical usage—will not repress feelings of anxiety, rage, or pain: he will not feel troubled by any of them, and indeed, he will be objectively unhurt by any of them. He is, in Seneca's terminology, not merely above bad feelings but immune from all actual injuries (see, e.g., *On Constancy*, 3.1–4).

There were some significant differences within Stoicism on how exactly we should view the "preferred indifferents."[14] The issue became increasingly important in the school's thinking, as more Stoics took an active part in public and political life: it is an essential issue in Seneca's life story. Panaetius of Rhodes, writing in the second century BCE, had made certain essential adjustments to traditional Greek Stoicism, making it more flexible, more eclectic, and more focused on the practicalities of ethical behavior, with less focus on logical and metaphysical abstractions. He spent time teaching in Rome and became a major influence on Roman Stoicism (including the work of Cicero and Seneca). Roman Stoicism is often considered to be different from earlier forms of the movement in its (Panaetian) interest in pragmatic choices, psychology, and natural human impulses.

Seneca clearly saw Stoicism not as an abstract intellectual interest but as a practical guide to the big decisions and small daily habits of his life. He made a series of choices between preferred and nonpreferred indifferent

things: he chose Rome over exile, vast wealth over modest means, and enormously high social status at court over a humble life in the provinces. His work is haunted by the question of whether indulging in the "preferred indifferents," like money and honor, may get in the way of the journey toward the true value of virtue. Stoicism allowed him to justify choosing, or preferring, things like health, wealth, and luxury—and not preferring exile or torture or death. But he remained strikingly anxious about the fact that indifferent things may muddle one's thinking, since they are all too easy to confuse with real goods.

When considering why Seneca identified primarily as a Stoic, we should be aware that Stoicism was not the only philosophical option for an elite man in Rome at Seneca's time period, and not even necessarily the most obvious choice. There were the Peripatetics (followers of Aristotle); the Academy (founded by Plato); the Cynics (whom Seneca quotes with admiration); the Pythagoreans; and the home-grown Roman school of the Sextians, with whom Seneca felt a particular affinity. An especially influential movement was Epicureanism (named for its founder, Epicurus). The Epicureans believed that not virtue, but pleasure, was the most important value for human beings. But unlike the Hedonists (also called Cyrenaics, from Aristippus of Cyrene)—with whom they were often unfairly conflated—the Epicureans did not advocate a life of sensual physical indulgence. Rather, Epicurus taught that physical pleasure is best attained by a life of moderation (since, for example, eating and drinking too much will ultimately cause more pain than pleasure). He also argued that the most important pleasures and pains are mental, rather than physical. One can achieve maximal mental pleasure and freedom from mental pain only by ridding oneself of the fear of death, by acting with kindness and justice toward others, and by avoiding the turbulence of public, political life. Instead, the Epicurean ideal is to live quietly with one's close friends and contemplate the random movements of the atomic universe.

Seneca's choice of Stoicism as his major intellectual framework has important political implications, since the Stoics, unlike the Epicureans, had a strong tradition of political engagement. Epicurus, in contrast, had advocated a life of withdrawal: "Hide away while you live your life." Seneca chose, rather, a life of political involvement. But he read Epicurus and other Epicureans and took their views seriously, often quoting Epicurus favorably in the *Letters to Lucilius* (at a time when he was particularly concerned with the attempt to withdraw from politics).

Seneca's presentation of Stoicism is distinctive in a number of ways. He writes constantly about suicide, death, and the briefness of life—apparently much more than the Greek Stoics had done. He is also focused on practical, as opposed to theoretical, advantages of the Stoic way of life. Seneca made a number of original contributions to the Stoic analysis of psychology, for instance in his careful distinction between involuntary impulses and actual emotions. Seneca's philosophical writings are important for being composed in Latin—as opposed to Greek, which was traditionally the language of philosophy—and for the virtuosic literary and rhetorical skill with which he explores philosophical and quasi-philosophical ideas. Seneca was at least as much a writer as a philosopher.