

THE BIG IDEAS

Theory or Practice
Which is more important?

Practicing Philosophy
Is where it's at.

Vice vs. Exile
Freeing yourself.

Food
Is the medicine of life.

Stoic Love Advice
Competing in kindness.

"Just as there is no use in medical study unless it leads to the health of the human body, so there is no use to a philosophical doctrine unless it leads to the virtue of the human soul."

~ Musonius Rufus



Musonius Rufus

Lectures and Sayings

BY MUSONIUS RUFUS TRANSLATED BY CYNTHIA KING · CREATESPACE INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING PLATFORM © 2011 · 102 PAGES

"Gaius Musonius Rufus (c. AD 30-100) was one of the four great Roman Stoic philosophers, the other three being Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Musonius had a considerable following while alive and after his death was admired by philosophers and theologians alike. Today, though, he is the least well known of the Roman Stoics. This is unfortunate, inasmuch as familiarity with the views of Musonius is essential if we are to fully understand Roman Stoicism. In particular, the insights of Musonius are indispensable if our goal is not so much to explore Stoicism as a philosophical theory as to discover what it means to be a practicing Stoic. ...

Musonius' lectures, because they are long on practical advice and short on theory, are quite accessible. They also give us insight into what it meant, in ancient Rome, to be a practicing Stoic. And for those whose interests are cultural rather than philosophical, they provide us with a window into daily life in first-century Rome.

Musonius' reputation outlived him. Thus, more than a century after Musonius' death, philosopher and theologian Origen, in discussing individuals who could be held up as examples of living 'the best life,' mentions two philosophers, Socrates and Musonius. By the end of the twentieth century, though, Musonius had fallen into obscurity. While the works of the other Roman Stoics could be obtained in most libraries and bookstores, the works of Musonius were surprisingly difficult to obtain. There was only one translation into English of his works... and where I live, only one tattered copy of this translation was available through inter-library loan. The translation that follows is an attempt to remedy this situation and help return Musonius to his rightful place in the Stoic pantheon."

~ William B. Irvine from the Editor's Preface to *Musonius Rufus - Lectures and Sayings*

I got this little book after William B. Irvine referenced it in his great book [The Stoic Challenge](#).

I'd heard of Musonius Rufus but didn't realize there was a collection of his wisdom I could read. So, of course, when I heard about this book, I got it. And, when I got it, I immediately dove in.

Unless you're really into Stoicism, you've probably never heard of Musonius but he was one of the four great Roman Stoics. In fact, he was known as the "Roman Socrates."

To put him in historical context with the other three great Roman Stoics: He was born in AD 30, about 34 years after Seneca. He taught Epictetus (who was born in AD 55—making him about 25 years younger than Musonius). Epictetus died in 135 but taught the guys who taught the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (who was born in AD 121) his Stoic philosophy—which is why Aurelius refers to him more than any other teacher in [Meditations](#).

Like Socrates and Epictetus, Musonius never wrote a book. This book is a translation of a collection of his lectures and sayings as captured by one of his students—a guy named Lucius.

"Indeed philosophy is nothing but the practice of noble behavior."

~ Musonius Rufus

(Socrates had a guy named Plato take some good notes. Epictetus had Arrian.)

In addition to the old school wisdom, we get a glimpse into some (fun) details of daily life in Roman culture—which kinda reminded me of some parallel ancient wisdom and (fun) details of daily life in Chinese culture in Confucius' [Analects](#).

If you're into Stoicism, I think you'll really enjoy the book. Musonius has the same no-nonsense energy as his top student, Epictetus. It's a joy to read and to feel his clarity and unequivocal conviction on the power of philosophy/living a life of virtue. (Get a copy [here](#).)

Of course, it's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share a few of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

IS PRACTICE OR THEORY MORE IMPORTANT?

"On another occasion we asked him whether practice or theory is more effective for acquiring virtue, given that theory teaches what we ought to do and practice is demonstrated by those who have been trained to act in accordance with the theory. Musonius thought that practice was more effective, and in support of his own opinion he questioned one of the people present as follows: 'Suppose there are two doctors. One of them can talk about medical matters as if he had the greatest possible acquaintance with them, but has never actually cared for sick people. The other is not able to talk about medical matters but is experienced in healing in accordance with medical theory. Which one would you choose as your doctor if you were ill?' His companion answered, 'The one who is experienced in healing.' ...

'Given that this is so,' said Musonius, 'isn't being self-controlled and prudent about all one's actions much better than being able to say what is involved in prudence or self-mastery?' The young man agreed with this point—that speaking ably about self-control is less important than and indeed is insignificant in comparison with actually being self-controlled. Then Musonius summarized his comments as follows: 'How then would knowing the theory of a thing be better than practicing that theory and doing things in accordance with its guidelines? Although understanding the theory behind the action enables one to speak, it is practice that enables one to act. Theory which teaches how one must act assists action and logically precedes the practice, for it is not possible for something good to be accomplished unless it is accomplished in accordance with theory. But as a matter of fact, practice is more important than theory because it more effectively leads humans to actions than theory does.'"

So... Which is more important: Theory or practice?

Musonius is clear.

Theory is an important guide to help us accomplish something good but... Ultimately, PRACTICE is more important.

Which is why we're always talking about going from Theory to Practice to Mastery.

When I read the first part of that passage, I immediately thought of the obscure twentieth-century teacher Vernon Howard who, in [The Power of Your Supermind](#), tells us: "You see, knowing the words is not the same thing as living the meaning. Suppose I memorize the printed instructions on a first-aid kit. Does that mean I can give first aid? No. The full meaning comes when I admit I know nothing and then try, practice, succeed."

When I read the second part of the passage, I thought of Ernest Holmes and his wisdom from [Creative Mind and Success](#) where he tells us: "I would rather see a student of this Science prove its Principle than to have him repeat all the words of wisdom that have ever been uttered."

One more time: Let's move from Theory to Practice to Mastery a little more TODAY.

Pop quiz: How will YOU?

"How and in what way could one be a better king or live well without studying philosophy? I myself think that a good king is from the start a philosopher out of necessity, and that a philosopher is from the start also a kingly person."

~ Musonius Rufus

PRACTICING PHILOSOPHY

"And yet, wouldn't everyone agree that it is much better ... to train himself to want little instead of struggling to become wealthy? And instead of exerting effort to gain fame, shouldn't a person strive to overcome his thirst for it? ... Won't we, therefore, be willing to endure pain in order to gain complete happiness? For there is no reason for becoming good than to be happy and live a blessed life thereafter."

~ Musonius Rufus

"He gave lectures like this to his companions as he vigorously trained them in their practice of philosophy: virtue, he said, is not just theoretical knowledge, it is also practical, like both medical and musical knowledge. The doctor and the musician must each not only learn the principles of his own skill but be trained to act according to those principles. Likewise, the man who wants to be good must not only learn the lessons which pertain to virtue but train himself to follow them eagerly and rigorously."

Could someone acquire instant self-control by merely knowing that he must not be conquered by pleasures but without training to resist them? Could someone become just by learning that he must love moderation but without practicing the avoidance of excess? Could we acquire courage by realizing that things which seem terrible to most people are not to be feared but without practicing being fearless towards them? Could we become wise by recognizing what things are truly good and what things are bad but without having been trained to look down on those things which seem to be good?

Therefore practicing each virtue must always follow learning the lessons appropriate to it, or it is pointless to learn about it. The person who claims to be studying philosophy must practice it even more diligently than the person who aspires to the art of medicine or some similar skill, inasmuch as philosophy is more important and harder to grasp than any other pursuit."

I don't know about you, but when I read that passage, I just LOVED the fact that Musonius "VIGOROUSLY trained them in their PRACTICE of philosophy."

(Musonius and Epictetus both have an *intensity* that's a) palpable and b) awesome and c) something I find inspiring and worthy of emulation.)

I think this is worth a reread: *"Therefore practicing each virtue must always follow learning the lessons appropriate to it, or it is pointless to learn about it."*

And so is this: *"The person who claims to be studying philosophy must practice it even more diligently than the person who aspires to the art of medicine or some similar skill, inasmuch as philosophy is more important and harder to grasp than any other pursuit."*

One of the other things worth highlighting here are the four cardinal virtues of Stoicism.

Do you know what they are and did you catch them in the passage above?

Musonius comes back to them again and again and again.

Wisdom + Self-control + Courage + Justice.

As I read the book and reflected on those four virtues I mapped them over our Big 3. It all STARTS with Wisdom. We need to know the game we're playing. Hint: High five your inner daimon by living with virtue! With that Wisdom, we Optimize the other three virtues.

Self-control, although applicable to ALL facets of our lives, I think that it is (as we'll discuss in a moment) best correlated with Energy. We need the self-mastery to get our fundamentals (eat! move! sleep!) Optimized so we can show up fully for our Work and our Love.

It takes Courage to give ourselves most fully to the world Work-wise (and Love-wise, of course...)

And... The virtue of "Justice" could (and perhaps *should*) be referred to as Love as the Stoics valued not just "justice" per se but kindness and generosity and, well, LOVE.

So...

Wisdom → Self-control (Energy!) + Courage (Work!) + Justice (Love!).

Let's know the game we're playing and play it well by Optimizing our Big 3.

"But isn't it more praiseworthy to help a lot of people than to live expensively? Isn't spending money on people much more noble than spending it on wood and stones? Isn't it much more worthwhile to have a lot of friends (as a result of doing good deeds cheerfully) than to have a big house? What benefits from having a big and beautiful house could match those that could be derived from using one's possessions to help one's city and its citizens?"

~ Musonius Rufus

"If you accomplish something good with hard work, the labor passes quickly, but the goodness endures; if you do something shameful in pursuit of pleasure, the pleasure passes quickly, but the shame endures."

~ Musonius Rufus

P.S. As we wrap up the Theory to Practice goodness, I can't help but drop this [Librarian vs. Warrior](#) gem from Donald Robertson's *The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*: "The ancients conceived of the ideal philosopher as a veritable warrior of the mind, a spiritual hero akin to Hercules himself, but since the demise of the Hellenistic schools, the philosopher has become something more bookish, not a warrior, but a mere librarian of the mind."

FREEING YOURSELF FROM VICE

"The courageous man is as courageous in exile as he was at home; therefore he also says as boldly what he thinks when exiled as when he was not an exile. ...

But why must I resort to historical examples? Don't you know that I myself am an exile? Have I been robbed of free speech? Have I had the power of saying what I think taken from me? Have you or anyone else seen me crouching before anyone because I am an exile, or have you seen me thinking that my condition is worse than before? By Zeus, you must admit that you have never seen me groaning or moaning because of my exile. Even if someone has deprived us of our country, he has not taken away our ability to endure exile.

Let me tell you how I convince myself not to be bothered by exile. As I showed you above, I do not think that exile completely deprives a person of the things which many people consider good. And even if it would deprive a person of some or all of these things, it does not deprive him of things that are truly good. The person in exile is not prevented from having courage, justice, self-control, wisdom, or any other virtue, just because he is in exile. When these qualities are present, they tend to honor and benefit a person and show him to be deserving of praise and fame. The absence of these qualities works to harm and shame him by showing him to be bad and without fame. Consequently, if you are a good and virtuous person, exile would not harm or diminish you, because you still have the things that can best assist and elevate you. And if you happen to be a bad person, it is vice, not exile, that harms you—vice, not exile, that brings you grief. You must work on freeing yourself from vice rather than from exile."

Which is worse? Vice or exile?

I don't know about you, but Musonius' logical precision has me sold. It's VICE that we must work on freeing ourselves from—whether we're exiled or not. (And, to be clear on the historical record, Musonius was an expert on such matters. He was exiled not once but twice.)

Why should we care more about vice than our exile? Well, Musonius' student Epictetus does the job articulating Rule #1 of Stoicism: "The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control. Where then do I look for good and evil? Not to uncontrollable externals, but within myself to the choices that are my own."

Ryan Holiday riffs on that gem brilliantly in *The Daily Stoic* where he tells us: "The single most important practice in Stoic philosophy is differentiating between what we can change and what we can't. What we have influence over and what we do not. A flight is delayed because of weather—no amount of yelling at an airline representative will end a storm. No amount of wishing will make you taller or shorter or born in a different country. No matter how hard you try, you can't make someone like you. And on top of that, time spent hurling yourself at these immovable objects is time not spent on the things we can change.

The recovery community practices something called the Serenity Prayer: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.' Addicts cannot change the abuse suffered in childhood. They cannot undo the choices they have made or the hurt they have caused. But they can change the future—through the power they have in the present moment. As Epictetus said, they can control the choices they make right now.

"And, if possible, it is better to go shoeless than to wear shoes: wearing shoes is rather like being shackled; shoelessness allows the feet, once they get used to it, to move freely and with agility. This is why couriers do not wear sandals on the roads. Also, competitive runners would not run fast enough if they had to run in sandals."

~ Musonius Rufus

"It is a mistake for people to dress so that they never experience cold and heat. To the contrary, they should be somewhat cold in winter, get out in the sun in summer, and stay in the shade very little."

~ Musonius Rufus

The same is true for us today. If we can focus on making clear what parts of our day are within our control and what parts are not, we will not only be happier, we will have a distinct advantage over other people who fail to realize they are fighting an unwinnable battle."

There ya go. Exile? Can't control it. Vice? Must free ourselves from it.

P.S. You know how I often reference the most-used phrases in a book. Well... In addition to coming back to the cardinal virtues (remember them?), Musonius drops a great deal of "By Zeus"es! Which I found pretty epically awesome. :)

P.P.S. Back to Epictetus. When I opened the Note on [Discourses](#) to grab that gem above, my soul jumped with joy at this nugget of pure awesome: *"The true man is revealed in difficult times. So when trouble comes, think of yourself as a wrestler whom God, like a trainer, has paired with a tough young buck. For what purpose? To turn you into Olympic-class material. But this is going to take some sweat to accomplish. From my perspective, no one's difficulties ever gave him a better test than yours, if you are prepared to make use of them the way a wrestler makes use of an opponent in peak condition."*

FOOD IS THE MEDICINE OF LIFE

"He often talked in a very forceful manner about food, on the grounds that food was not an insignificant topic and that what one eats has significant consequences. In particular, he thought that mastering one's appetite for food and drink was the beginning of and basis for self-control. On one occasion, he dispensed with his other customary topics and had the following to say about food:

Just as one should choose inexpensive food over expensive food, and food that is easy to obtain over food that is hard to obtain, one should choose food suitable for a human being over food that isn't."

Wait, wait, WAIT a second.

A philosopher 2,000 years ago was talking in *"a very forceful manner about food, on the grounds that food was not an insignificant topic and that what one eats has significant consequences"?! <- I like this guy! lol*

And... Guess what? You know how much MORE forcefully Musonius would be talking about the ultraprocessed, sugar-laden "food" we consume today? (Seriously, he'd go nuts. lol) And, what do you think he would say about our tech addictions?

I think it's pretty obvious he'd talk in a VERY forceful manner. Why? Because these things are not insignificant. In fact, they're FUNDAMENTAL to our practice of philosophy.

So... How will YOU move from Theory to Practice TODAY?

What's one tiny (or big!) thing you can finally Optimize?

btw: Musonius *"argued that a meat-based diet was too crude for humans and more suitable for wild beasts. He said that it was too heavy and it impeded mental activity."*

P.S. He also tells us to practice *"choosing food not for pleasure but for nourishment, not to please his palate but to strengthen his body. The throat was created as a passageway for food, not as an organ for pleasure."*

And: *"Plants take nourishment for the sake of their survival rather than for pleasure, and for humans as well, food is the medicine of life. Therefore, the goal of our eating should be staying alive rather than having pleasure—at least if we wish to follow the sound advice of Socrates, who said that many men live to eat, but that he ate to live. No right-thinking person will want to follow the masses and live to eat, as they do, in constant pursuit of gastronomic pleasures."*

"To summarize the discussion of food, I say that the goal of eating is to bring about both health and strength. Consequently, one should eat only inexpensive foods and should be concerned with decency and appropriate moderation and, most of all, with restrained and studious behavior."

~ Musonius Rufus

"Someone once tired to encourage me by quoting a saying of Musonius, 'Musonius,' he said, 'when he wanted to encourage someone who was tired and who had given up, upbraided him and said: 'Why do you stand there? What are you looking for? Do you expect the god himself to come and speak to you? Cut out the dead part of your soul, and you will recognize the god.'"

~ Aelius Aristedes

STOIC LOVE ADVICE

"In marriage, there must be, above all, companionship and care of husband and wife for each other, both in sickness and in health and on every occasion. Each party entering into a marriage desires this, after all, just as they desire children. When this mutual care is complete and those who live together provide it to each other completely, each competes to surpass the other in giving such care. Such a marriage is admirable and deserves emulation; such a partnership is beautiful."

That's from a lecture featuring Musonius' thoughts on: "What is the chief end of marriage?" It's part of a section in which he also discusses the importance of families and kids and commitments to more than just ourselves.

He also says: "Tell me, then, shouldn't everyone do things for his neighbor as well as for himself and thus make sure that his city has thriving families and that it is not a wasteland? Isn't this how commonwealths thrive?"

Plus: "... a virtuous person displays love for his fellow human beings, as well as goodness, justice, kindness, and concern for his neighbor—given all this, shouldn't each person, out of concern for his city, create a family with the well-being of the city in mind?"

I'm reminded of Aurelius's parallel wisdom: "Let your one delight and refreshment be to pass from one service to the community to another, with God ever in mind."

Here's to "competing" in surpassing one another in giving such care to our families, communities and world.

With love (+ wisdom + self-mastery + courage),

B

Brian Johnson,
Philosopher in Residence

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.

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