

THE BIG IDEAS

Judgment

Principle #1 of practical Stoicism.

Virtue

The good life vs. the good mood.

What Others Think

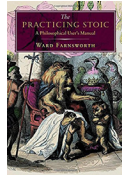
Ignore it.

Preferred Indifferents

Committed but not attached.

Adversity

As fuel for our Optimizing.



The Practicing Stoic

A Philosophical User's Manual

BY WARD FARNSWORTH · DAVID R GODINE © 2018 · 260 PAGES

“The body of ideas known as Stoicism contains some of the finest and most durable wisdom of any age. The Stoics were deep students of fear, status, emotion, and much else that bedeviled the human race thousands of years ago and bedevils it still. They were philosophers of a down-to-earth sort, seeking by force of their insights to free ordinary people from their sufferings and illusions. The Stoics had their limitations, of course; they held some beliefs that very few people do anymore. But in other ways they were far ahead of their times. They said a number of the best things that anyone ever has.

The teachings of the Stoics are as interesting and valuable now as when first written—maybe more so, since the passage of two millennia has confirmed so much of what they said. The idiocies, miseries, and other discouragements of our era tend to seem novel or modern; hearing them described in a classical dialogue reminds us that they are nothing new. That itself was a claim of the Stoics: that the stories and problems of humanity don't change, but just put on new masks. The same can be said for the remedies. The most productive advice anyone offers nowadays, casually or in a bestseller, often amounts to a restatement of something the Stoics said with more economy, intelligence, and wit long ago. The reader does better by going straight to the sages.”

~ Ward Farnsworth from *The Practicing Stoic*

“To put the point differently, the Stoics, when speaking in the manner shown here, will sometimes be found to arrive at the same summit as the followers of other philosophical or spiritual traditions, but they go up the mountain by a different face. Their way will be congenial to many modern readers. It is the path of logic, reflection, and knowledge of humanity.”

~ Ward Farnsworth

I got this book after our team was trading messages with Donald Robertson—author of [The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavior Therapy](#) and [How to Think Like a Roman Emperor](#).

We were setting up an interview and he mentioned an event on Modern Stoicism he was producing. One of the speakers at that event was Massimo Pigliucci. Really enjoyed his great book *How to Be a Stoic*. Another speaker was William B. Irvine. Love him and his books. (See Notes on [A Guide to the Good Life](#) and [The Stoic Challenge](#).) Another prospective speaker was Ryan Holiday. Of course, love Ryan and our collection of Notes on *his* great books: [The Obstacle Is the Way](#), [Ego Is the Enemy](#), [The Daily Stoic](#), and [Stillness Is the Key](#).

And... Another speaker was Ward Farnsworth. The name rang a vague bell. I Amazoned him and found this book. Of course, got it. And, here we are.

As you probably know by this stage, I'm a big fan of (and aspiring practitioner of!) of [Stoicism](#). You'd think I'd get a little tired of reading books on Stoicism after creating quite a few Notes on the subject but the wisdom simply never gets old. It's curiously inspiring and rewarding to study Seneca and Epictetus and Aurelius from slightly different perspectives—providing an opportunity to deepen my understanding of the subject while getting more clarity on how to best integrate their wisdom into my own life and into our evolving Optimize approach.

In fact, my love of ceaselessly immersing myself in Stoic (and all) wisdom makes me think of

Aurelius who told us: “Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts. Soak it then in such trains of thoughts as, for example: Where life is possible at all, a right life is possible.”

Back to Ward Farnsworth. He’s the Dean of the University of Texas School of Law. As you can imagine, he brings a logical precision to his discussion of Stoicism that is distinct and powerful. (Seriously. It’s actually ASTONISHINGLY powerful.) I *really* enjoyed the book and I highly recommend it for the aspiring Practicing Stoic. (Get a copy [here](#).)

Of course, it’s PACKED with Big Ideas and ancient Stoic wisdom we can apply to our modern lives. I’m excited to share some of my favorites, so let’s jump straight in.

JUDGMENT: THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF PRACTICAL STOICISM

“The first principle of practical Stoicism is this: we don’t react to events; we react to our judgments about them, and the judgments are up to us. We will see the Stoics develop that idea in the pages to come, but this expression of it is typical:

If any external thing causes you distress, it is not the thing itself that troubles you, but your own judgment about it. And this you have the power to eliminate right now. - Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

The Stoic claim, in other words, is that our pleasures, griefs, desires and fears all involve three stages rather than two: not just an event and a reaction, but an event, then a judgment or opinion about it, and then a reaction (to the judgment or opinion). Our task is to notice the middle step, to understand its frequent irrationality, and to control it through the patient use of reason. This chapter starts with noticing. Later chapters will talk about the irrationality and offer advice about control. We begin here because the point is foundational. Most of the rest of what the Stoics say depends on it. Soon we will hear from them about ‘externals,’ desires, virtues, and much else. But it all begins with the idea that we construct our experience of the world through our beliefs, opinions, and thinking about it—in a word, through our judgments—and they are up to us.”

Welcome to the first words of Chapter #1.

The #1 most important, foundational distinction of Stoicism?

It’s that THIRD step.

We need to know (!) that our reactions to life are not *determined* by events. Influenced, yes. Determined? No.

There aren’t just *two* steps: EVENT → REACTION.

There are THREE steps: EVENT ← JUDGMENT → REACTION.

This is why Marcus Aurelius says: “If any external thing causes you distress, it is not the thing itself that troubles you, but your own judgment about it. And this you have the power to eliminate right now.”

And why Viktor Frankl (who, as we discussed in [How to Be a Stoic](#), was deeply influenced by Stoicism) told us that our freedom exists in the GAP right between a stimulus and our response.

As he would say, it’s not: STIMULUS → RESPONSE.

It’s STIMULUS (— GAP —) RESPONSE.

Really getting this idea (via thinking about it AND practicing it!) is essential to getting Stoicism and applying its wisdom to our lives. In fact, this is why Ryan Holiday kicks off his year’s worth of meditations in *The Daily Stoic* with EXACTLY the same distinction.

“If Stoics are distinguished by one policy as an everyday matter, it is a refusal to worry about things beyond their control or to otherwise get worked up about them.”

~ Ward Farnsworth

“The trouble with fear, first, is that it multiplies our problems. If something will be bad when it arrives later, we increase its effects when we pull them into the present by fearing them. Why suffer twice?”

~ Ward Farnsworth

"There is only one road to happiness—let this rule be at hand morning, noon, and night: stay detached from things that are not up to you."

~ Epictetus

We've shared this passage a few times but it so perfectly captures the point we'll soak our minds in it again: *"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.

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."

Here's to stepping in between stimulus and response. And choosing our Optimal response. Moment to moment to moment. TODAY.

VIRTUE: THE GOOD LIFE VS. THE GOOD MOOD

*"Stoics regard virtue as sufficient to produce happiness on all occasions, and also as necessary for it. The happiness centrally valued by the Stoic is *eudaimonia*, or well-being—the good life rather than the good mood. But the Stoic believes that virtue gives rise to joy and to peace of mind as well. Virtue produces these good consequences as side effects. The primary mission of the Stoics, in other words, is to be helpful to others and serve the greater good, and they don't do this to make themselves happy. They do it because it is the right and natural way to live. But doing it in that spirit, as it turns out, makes them happy."*

That passage is from page 208 in chapter #11 on "Virtue."

(Note: I might have *started* here after scanning the table of contents. :)

We've discussed this basic theme MANY (many many!) times.

(Note: I promise to continue the deliberate repetition.)

We've talked about Aristotle's summum bonum and the distinction between hedonic happiness vs. eudaimonic happiness (see Notes on his [Nicomachean Ethics](#)). And... Martin Seligman's ideas around (and books on) [Authentic Happiness](#) vs. [Flourish](#). And... Ed Deci's distinctions around intrinsic motivation vs. extrinsic motivation (see Notes on [Why We Do What We Do](#)).

And... I just LOVE (!) this distinction: "The good life" vs. "the good mood."

<- YES!! That's what we're talking about.

For the Stoics, that good life is achieved via a commitment to VIRTUE. The joy that follows? It's just a by-product of doing our best to be helpful to others as we serve the greater good.

As Ward says: *"The Stoics emphasize, though, that in their view virtue is not pursued for the sake of the good consequences it brings. Those consequences are welcomed and prized, but nevertheless are incidental."*

Here's to the good life. And the eudaimonic joy that tends to follow in the wake of our commitment to Optimizing in service to something bigger than ourselves.

"It suggests that the Stoic tries to respond to events in a manner similar to what would be expected of anyone after long experience with them—the kind of response you might have after encountering the occasion for it a thousand times. The result is not an uncaring or unfeeling attitude, though it will probably not involve much emotion. It is the posture of a veteran."

~ Ward Farnsworth

WHAT OTHERS THINK (& DO)

“Who are these people whose admiration you seek? Aren't they the ones you are used to describing as mad? Well, then, is that what you want to be admired by lunatics?”

~ Epictetus

“The first rule of this branch of Stoic teaching is contempt for conformity, for the opinion of the majority, for the habit of looking to others when thinking about what to prefer and how to act. The problem runs deep. A large share of what most people say, think, and do is a product of convention. Its force is hard to resist because getting in line with what others expect causes them to think well of us. Deviating from it tends to be punished swiftly by others who are more comfortable saying, doing, and enforcing what is expected. Much of Stoicism is the effort to see the truth and act on it, and to learn a noble contempt for the consequences that follow.”

Welcome to the first words of chapter #7 on “What Others Think.”

Each of the first twelve chapters deals with a different facet of Stoicism.

These include: Judgment, Externals, Perspective, Death, Desire, Wealth and Pleasure, Valuation, Emotion, Adversity, Virtue and Learning.

Ward provides his insightful introduction to the theme then brings his I'm-the-Dean-of-a-Law-School logically precise (and concise!) commentary on a collection of excerpts on the chapter's themes from various ancient Stoics (along with some thoughts from “Stoic descendants” like Montaigne and Schopenhauer).

It's INCREDIBLY DENSELY PACKED with wisdom. As in, insert emoji of your brain exploding in the best possible way. This chapter is particularly good. A couple of the ways Ward tells us Stoics dealt with criticism is via humility and humor. Here are a couple fun examples:

Epictetus: *“If you hear that someone has spoken ill of you, do not make excuses about what was said, but answer: ‘Evidently he didn't know about my other faults, or he wouldn't have spoken only of the ones he did.’”*

Seneca: *“And this thing we call an insult—what is it? They make jokes about my bald head, my weak eyes, my thin legs, my height. How is it an insult to be told what is obvious?”* (Hah.)

On a higher level, we are encouraged to disregard both the applause and the criticism of the masses. AND... To be mindful of when we're mindlessly following the herd and conforming.

My dear friend Pilar Gerasimo wrote a whole book on this theme. Check out our Notes on [Healthy Deviant: A Rule Breaker's Guide to Being Healthy in an Unhealthy World](#). Pilar tells us that a mere 1% of us are truly healthy and defines a “Healthy Deviant” as “any person who willingly defies unhealthy norms and conventions in order to achieve a high level of vitality, resilience, and autonomy.”

She also tells us: *“In Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, James Agee wrote: ‘Adjustment' to a sick and insane environment is of itself not 'health' but sickness and insanity.’ That is so true, and it sounds a lot like that Jiddu Krishnamurti quote I shared at this book's outset: It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society.”*

150 years ago, my dear philosophical great-great+++ grandfather Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay on this theme called [Self-Reliance](#). Check out those Notes and remember: *“What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what your duty is better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”*

Then there's Mark Twain's playful wisdom. Recall: *“Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect.”*

“It is the mark of a great mind to rise above insults; the most humiliating kind of revenge is to treat your adversary as not worth taking revenge upon. Many have taken slight injuries too deeply to heart in the course of punishing them. The great and noble are those who, like a lordly beast, listen unmoved to the barking of little dogs.”

~ Seneca

" All provocations given by unthinking people—and it is only from the unthinking that they can come—should be ignored, and the insults and honors of the crowd should both be valued the same. We must not be pained by the one or rejoice over the other; otherwise—whether from fear of insults or disgust with them—we will neglect many things."

~ Marcus Aurelius

" Whatever is implanted and inborn can be reduced with practice but not overcome. Some of those who appear in public most often will break into a sweat, just as if they were tired and overheated; some tremble in the knees when they are about to give a speech; in some cases teeth chatter, tongues falter, lips quiver. Neither training nor experience will ever get rid of these things. Rather, Nature is exerting its strength to admonish even the strongest among us—each through his particular flaws."

~ Seneca

PREFERRED INDIFFERENTS

"What is the difference between a preferred indifferent and the desires that Stoics regard as hazardous? Detachment. ... An attachment to an external causes one's happiness, and equilibrium, to depend on it. The Stoic tries to avoid that position under all circumstances. But money, if held without attachment, is unobjectionable—for the money isn't the problem. The point is the health of the mind.

The word 'detachment' risks creating the wrong impression, since it can connote a lack of real interest in whatever is the subject of it. That isn't the idea. Detachment refers more to the way in which something is held and to whether the mind has been given over to it in an excessive way. The detachment of the Stoic thus can be viewed as a kind of moderation—that is, moderation in one's relationship to externals. A good way to test such a relationship, and to know whether you have an attachment to a thing or just a preference about it, is to consider how well you would handle its loss."

Welcome to the chapter on "Wealth and Pleasure." As we just discussed, the only thing the Stoic who is aspiring to be an "Ideal Sage" or "Wise Person" ULTIMATELY cares about is VIRTUE. They are "indifferent" to anything outside that.

And... We can have what they describe as "preferred indifferents." Of course, we'd prefer to have wealth and health rather than poverty and sickness. BUT... We'd be wise to make sure we don't get too attached to those things as we remember our ULTIMATE aim and game—which (echo!) is to live with virtue. RIGHT NOW.

Ward quotes Seneca to make the point: *"As a favorable wind, sweeping him on, gladdens the sailor, as a bright day and a sunny spot in the midst of winter and cold give cheer, just so riches have their influence on the wise man and bring him joy. And besides, who among wise men—I mean those of our school—deny that even those things we call 'indifferent' do have some inherent value, and that some are more desirable than others? To some of them we accord a little honor, to others much. So make no mistake—riches are among the ones more desirable."*

(Important note: Ward also tells us: *"Stoics view wealth not as an absolute state, but as a favorable relationship between what one has and what one wants. Most people devote themselves to enlarging the first when they would do better to reduce the second."*)

We also talk about this in our Notes on *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*. Here's how Donald Robertson puts it: *"Marcus makes it clear that his internal goal is to live with virtue, particularly wisdom and justice, but his external aim, his preferred outcome, is the common welfare of mankind (not just of Roman subjects, incidentally). Although the outcome is ultimately indifferent to Stoics, it's precisely the action of pursuing the common good that constitutes the virtue of justice."*

P.S. My Yoda Phil Stutz and I have discussed this basic idea of being engaged yet not attached many times. I think he provides a nice frame to the challenge.

In short, he tells us that we want to be ALL IN committed as we go after whatever we've wisely decided is a noble goal. Yet, at the same time, we want to remain completely NOT attached to the outcome of actually getting it. Obviously, easier said than done.

He says we need to be "Committed to BEING committed." We're committed to being in the game and doing our best RIGHT. THIS. SECOND.

Stepping back to our *ultimate* game, that means we're committed to flipping the switch and showing up as the Optimize = Optimus = Best = Eudaimon = Hero version of ourselves while remembering the #1 rule for creating heroic emotional stamina: The *worse* we feel, the *more* committed we are to our protocol.

ADVERSITY

"Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way."

~ John Stuart Mill

"Stoics avoid adversity in the ways that anyone of sense would. But sometimes it comes regardless, and then the Stoic goal is to see the adversity rightly and not let one's peace of mind be destroyed by its arrival. Indeed, the aim of the Stoic is something more: to accept reversal without shock and to make it grist for the creation of greater things. Nobody wants hardship in any particular case, but it is a necessary element in the formation of worthy people and worthy achievements that, in the long run, we do want. Stoics seek the value in whatever happens."

Welcome to chapter #10 on "Adversity" in which we're introduced to an armamentarium of Stoic wisdom-tools we can use as we face the inevitable obstacles in our lives.

One of my favorites is the idea of "Hermes' magic wand." Ward quotes Epictetus who tells us: "This is Hermes' magic wand: touch it to anything you like, they say, and the wand will turn it to gold. Not so; bring anything you like, rather, and I'll make it something good. Bring disease, bring death, bring poverty, bring insults, bring punishment for high crimes—all these things will be made beneficial by Hermes' magic wand."

Immediately after that passage, Ward shares the Marcus Aurelius wisdom that Ryan Holiday used as the inspiration for his book *The Obstacle Is the Way*: "The mind turns around every hindrance to its activity and converts it to further its purpose. The impediment to action becomes part of the action; the obstacle in our way becomes the way forward."

As I read that passage and reflected on the fact that some adversity is NECESSARY for our growth, I thought of this wisdom from Robert Emmons and his great book *Thanks!*: "Not only does the experience of tragedy give us an exceptional opportunity for growth, but some sort of suffering is also necessary for a person to achieve maximal psychological growth. In his study of self-actualizers, the paragons of mental wellness, the famed humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow noted that 'the most important learning lessons... were tragedies, deaths, and trauma... which forced change in the life-outlook of the person and consequently in everything that he did.'"

So... Facing any adversity, my beloved Hero? Let's wave Hermes' wand, alchemize it into another opportunity to practice our philosophy as we give ourselves most fully to the world. TODAY.

B

Brian Johnson,
Philosopher in Residence

About the Author of "The Practicing Stoic"

WARD FARNSWORTH



Ward Farnsworth is Dean of the University of Texas School of Law. His prior books include the highly regarded *Farnsworth's Classical English Metaphor* and *Farnsworth's Classical English Rhetoric*, both published by Godine.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



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.

If you liked this Note, you'll probably like...

[How to Be a Stoic](#)

[How to Think Like a Roman Emperor](#)

[The Daily Stoic](#)

[The Stoic Challenge](#)