

The Early Stoics

Introduction Part 2 – Basic Facts about the Early Stoics & Stoicism

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This introduction comes from the Cave's
The Best of the Early Stoics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Early Stoics.

Introduction Part 2

Basic Facts about the Early Stoics & Stoicism

WHAT WAS ANCIENT Stoicism? Ancient Stoicism was a philosophical system oriented to practical living, which is to say, how to live well, with the ultimate goal of happiness (*eudaimonia*) always kept in mind. As such, Stoicism was about character, about human excellence or virtue, since virtue was judged sufficient for happiness.

For the Stoics, the three parts of philosophy—logic, physics or natural philosophy, and ethics—were closely related. Logic was aimed at physics, which was, in turn, aimed at ethics. In line with these three parts, the key imperatives of Stoicism, all oriented one to another as goals, were to ...

- Think well (logic), to ...
- Understand nature, or the way things are (physics), to ...
- Live in harmony with nature (ethics), to ...
- Live in conformity with reason (ethics), to ...
- Live in accord with virtue (ethics), to ...
- Have a good flow of life, or to be happy (ethics).

We will delve more extensively into each of these points and the three parts of Stoic philosophy in the next section, "The Big Themes & Ideas of the Early Stoics & Stoicism."

What was it like to practice the Stoic way of life? Although extraordinary both in its ideas and its

demands, Stoicism was in many ways an ordinary affair in that it did not draw practitioners away from ordinary life—from your city, family, friends, or business. Rather, Stoicism counseled full engagement with ordinary life and offered advice about how to be so engaged. Well-known Stoics were manual laborers, businessmen, teachers, scholars, writers (poets, playwrights, satirists, essayists, textbook authors, expositors), librarians, heads of school, counselors, political advisors, statesmen, senators, consuls, and even emperors. To practice the Stoic way of life, then, was to practice a well-lived life precisely when and where you found yourself. For the Stoics, happiness was not *out there* somewhere apart from the present time and circumstances; rather, it was practiced right *here* and *now* in terms of duty or what was fitting. Generally speaking, duty was a matter of virtue—of living wisely, courageously, moderately, and justly. More specifically, it was about a person's present and ongoing circumstances—your family, for example, friends, work, and city-state.

What periods make up Stoic history? Stoic history is divided into three periods. The early Stoic period is called the “Early Stoa.” It lasted from the founding of Stoicism (c. 300 BC) to the first half of the second century BC. The next was the “Middle Stoa,” which lasted through the remainder of the second century to the end of the first century BC. The last was the “Late Stoa.” It more or less coincided with the time of the Roman Empire (late first century BC to the last quarter of the fifth century AD).

Who were the major early, middle, and late Stoics? The three most significant early Stoics were Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism; Cleanthes of Assos, Zeno's loyal follower and successor; and Chrysippus of Soli, the third head of the school, as well as its greatest and most prolific systematic thinker. Panaetius and Posidonius were both central to the Middle Stoa. They made significant adjustments to Stoicism, adapting it to their time and place. Finally, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius were significant late Stoics. We have extensive writings from all three.¹

What does the name “Stoic” mean? And how did the Stoics get their name? Originally called “Zenonians”

after their founder, the followers of Zeno of Citium were eventually named Stoics after the *stoa* (a covered colonnade or portico) nearby the *agora* or marketplace in Athens that Zeno used to pace back and forth in while lecturing. Portrayed by Pausanias in his *Description of Greece*, this particular stoa, the so-called *Stoa Poikilē* (the Painted Colonnade), was a magnificently decorated space, with a bronze statue of Hermes, murals celebrating glorious moments in Athenian history and mythology, and shields taken in battle.²

How was early Stoicism related to Cynicism? And what about earlier Greek philosophy? Zeno of Citium initially read about philosophy and its goals in books, whether when he was young in Cyprus or, as Diogenes Laertius reports, after he first came to Athens. Either way, when he arrived in Athens, he was determined to meet and follow someone “like Socrates,” the Athenian philosopher who had focused on how to live a good and happy life, “investigat[ing] ethical matters both in his workshop and in the marketplace.”³ Since Socrates had died decades earlier, Zeno settled for and gave his allegiance to Crates of Thebes, one of the early Cynic philosophers.

Crates was himself the follower of Diogenes of Sinope, who was inspired by Antisthenes of Athens, who was, along with Diogenes, credited with being the founder of Cynicism. We are told that Antisthenes learned “the art of endurance” from Socrates, his mentor and friend. As for Diogenes, Plato called him “a Socrates gone mad.” According to later Stoics, “the Cynic philosophy and way of life [was] a shortcut to virtue.” Whereas Stoicism was the steady-as-you-go climb up the mountain of virtue, Cynicism was the off-the-road, straight way up. The Cynic ideal was to follow nature so that they would be as simple and as shameless and, yes, as happy as dogs (from *kyōn*, or “dog,” the source of the name “Cynic”). For Zeno of Citium, this shamelessness was a bit much, and so, after studying with others, he began to teach and eventually founded his own school.⁴

What are the major ancient sources for early Stoicism? Aside from fragments cited in both Stoic and non-Stoic literature, much of early Stoic writing has been lost. The most extensive collections come from the

Late Stoa, including the essays, letters, and plays of Seneca, the *Handbook* and discourses of Epictetus (recorded by his student Arrian), and the *Meditations* or private journal *To Himself* of Marcus Aurelius. Other works from this period include the lectures or essays and sayings of Musonius Rufus (mostly found in Johannes Stobaeus' *Anthology*) and the *Elements of Ethics* and *On Appropriate Acts* of Hierocles the Stoic.

As for the Early Stoa, we have to rely on the third century AD biographer Diogenes Laertius and his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, a work that provides the foundation for the volume you have in hand (Parts 1 and 2). Therein, Diogenes Laertius cites various Stoic works and views, as well as many other ancient writers.⁵ We may note in passing that his work has been judged by scholars to be both reliable and not. The bottom line is that we must judiciously read the *Lives* in the light of other sources.

Otherwise, we know much about ancient (early) Stoicism from the writings of, among others, the Roman statesman, orator, and philosopher Cicero; the physician and Platonic philosopher Galen; the writer and biographer Plutarch; the physician and skeptic philosopher Sextus Empiricus; the Neoplatonist

philosopher Plotinus; and a handful of early Christian writers (Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Lactantius, Eusebius, and Augustine of Hippo). This volume includes writings from Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, Plutarch, a number of early Christians, and many others.

What books did the early Stoics write? The early Stoics wrote many books on a variety of topics and sub-topics related to the three divisions of Stoic philosophy. Unfortunately, most of these are no longer extant except for a few quotations in other works. Nevertheless, to offer some idea of his some-27 books, Zeno of Citium wrote *On Life According to Nature*; *On Impulse*, or *Human Nature*; and *On the Whole Cosmos*. Apparently more prolific than Zeno, Cleanthes of Assos wrote *On Sensation*; *On Reason*; *On Good Counsel*; *On the Goal of Human Life*; *On Duty*; and *On Virtues*. Finally, Chrysippus, the most prolific of all the early Stoics at some-705 books, wrote with a focus on logic. To give a small fraction of his titles, there is *The Art of Logic and of Modes*; *On Inferences*; *On the Rules for Syllogisms*; *Definitions of the Good*; *Definitions of Things Neither Good Nor Bad*; *On Proverbs*; *On Habits*; *On the Kinds of Virtues*; and *Proofs that Pleasure Is Not the Good*.

So ends this item. See you in **another reading or item** from the Cave.

NOTES

¹ For further detailed information about the Stoics, consult "The Cast of Significant Stoics" in "Other Matters of Interest Related to the Early Stoics." Though this book is called *The Best of the Early Stoics*, it would perhaps be more accurate to say "the Early and Middle Stoics." Here we take "Early" to include both.

² Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.15.

³ For Zeno, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.2-3. For Socrates, see *ibid.*, 2.21.

⁴ For more on ancient Cynicism and their teachings and practices, see the Cave's *The Best of the Cynics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Ancient Cynics*. If you'd like to incorporate the teachings of the Cynics into your own life, carry the Cave's *The Wisdom & Way of the Cynics: Pocket Edition* with you. Finally, if you'd like to practice Cynic philosophy with the Cynics, see the Cave's *The Cynics Workbook & Journal: Ancient Cynic Wisdom & Ways for Living Well & Aiming for Genuine Happiness*.

⁵ The *Lives* presents anecdotes about and the teachings of various Greek wise men—philosophers—and the major schools of Greek philosophy, beginning with Thales of Miletus and ending with Epicurus. Therein, Diogenes Laertius refers to the works and views of the Stoics Zeno of Citium, Cleanthes of Assos, Chrysippus of Soli, Persaeus of Citium, Ariston of Chios, Apollonphanes of Antioch, Herillus of Carthage, Dionysius of Heraclea, Sphaerus of Bosporus, Zeno of Tarsus, Diogenes of Babylon, Antipater of Tarsus, Boethus of Sidon, Archedemus, Heraclides of Tarsus, Apollodorus of Athens, Apollodorus of Seleucia, Panaetius of Rhodes, Posidonius Apamea, Hecaton of Rhodes, Eudromus, and Crinis. "Other ancient writers" include Antigonius of Carystus, Diocles of Magnesia, Hippobotus, Demetrius of Magnesia, among others.

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