

Points of Wisdom from the Early Stoics

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Note • The following points of wisdom come from the early Stoics—from the Cave's *The Best of the Early Stoics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Early Stoics*. Each begins in *italics* with a single word or more indicating the point's topic or meaning. For more points of wisdom from the early Stoics organized by topic, buy the Cave's *The Wisdom & Way of the Early Stoics*.

Points of Wisdom from the Early Stoics

Shoot for the goal of life. The goal of life is to live in conformity with nature—that is, with our own nature as well as with the nature of the whole cosmos. Accordingly, one holds back from every action forbidden by the law common to all things—that is to say, the right reason that pervades all things and is the same as Zeus, who leads the administration of every existing thing. This very thing is the virtue of the happy man and the good flow of life, when all actions promote the harmony of the divine power dwelling in each man with the will of the administrator of the whole cosmos. —*Diogenes Laertes (offering the Stoic view) (DL from now on)*

Follow nature and virtue. Living in accord with virtue is equivalent to living in accord with the experience of nature as it actually happens. —*Chrysippus of Soli*

Keep in mind the tie of human being to divine being. We humans are your offspring, Zeus, having received your voice-image, we alone of all mortals who live and move on earth. —*Cleanthes of Assos*

Know what we humans are (soul and body). Human beings are composed of soul and body. —*Sextus Empiricus*

Realize the ubiquity of mind. Mind pervades every part of the cosmos just as the soul pervades every part of us. —*Chrysippus of Soli*

Study philosophy to be virtuous and happy. If, then, it is true that all the good and none but the good are happy,

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what possession is greater than philosophy, or what is more divine than virtue? — *Cato (Cicero)*

Long for philosophy; deliberately choose a noble life. If anyone has longed for philosophy, turning away from well-known pleasure that renders effeminate the souls of some of the young, it is clear that he is inclined to nobility of life not only by nature but by deliberate choice. — *Zeno of Citium*

The divisions of philosophy. There are three divisions of philosophy, namely, logic, natural philosophy or physics, and ethics. And they begin their teaching with logic. . . . The Stoics liken philosophy to a fertile, all-productive field. Logic is the fence that goes around the field, ethics is the crop, and physics is the soil or the fruit tree. — *DL*

Study dialectic so as not to be thrown. Without the study of dialectic, the wise man cannot guard himself in argument so that, as in a wrestling match, he will never be thrown. This is because the study of dialectic enables him to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and to judge well between what is plausible and what is ambiguously expressed. And without the study of dialectic, the wise man cannot methodically ask questions and give answers. — *DL*

How dialectic guards us. Dialectic offers a method that guards us against giving assent to any falsehood or ever being tricked by deceptive probability. And it enables us to maintain and to defend the truths that we have learned about good and bad things. . . . Without the art of dialectic any man may be tricked and led away from what is true or actual toward what is false or deceptive. If, therefore, thoughtlessness and ignorance are in all matters faulty and full of misfortune, then the art that removes them is correctly termed “virtue.” — *Cato (Cicero)*

Act in accord with nature and reason. The goal of life is to act with sound reason in the selection of those things that follow nature. — *DL*

Act in accord with nature and virtue. The end or goal of life is to live in agreement with nature, which is the same as living in accord with virtue since nature leads us toward virtue. — *Zeno of Citium*

The good (for human beings) is a kind of fulfillment. “The fulfillment or perfection of a rational being *as* a rational being following nature” is another particular definition the Stoics give for the good. Virtue is such a perfection since acts done according to virtue and excellent men are participants in virtue, as are its accompanying by-products, joy and merriment and like things. — *DL*

Do your duty. The goal of life is to live while carrying out every duty, that is, whatever is appropriate.

— *Archedemus of Tarsus*

Nature’s gifts to plants and animals (including humans). We observe that nature sustains things that spring up from the earth (plants). For these, nature grants nothing more than the ability to nourish themselves and to grow. To animals she gives sensation and motion, together with a kind of appetite or desire that draws them toward health-giving things and withdraws them from destructive things. — *Balbus (Cicero)*

How nature regulates and sustains plants and animals (and humans). The Stoics declare that nature originally made no difference between plants and animals. Nature regulates the life of plants without the use of impulse and sensation, just as certain plant-like processes go on in us. But for animals, impulse was added to this general rule

of nature later on. Impulse makes animals pursue what is suitable. Nature's rule for animals is to follow the direction of impulse. —DL

Our first impulse (as animals) is to self-preservation. The Stoics say that an animal's first impulse is to self-preservation since nature endears the animal to itself from the beginning. —DL

Know why we (animals) act. We Stoics must assert that nature has made the animal so that it is near and dear to itself. As such, it pushes away all that is harmful and pulls near all that is suitable and fitting. —DL

Pleasure is not the goal of impulse. The Stoics declare false the assertion—made by some—that the first urge or impulse of animals is directed toward pleasure. By contrast they say that pleasure, if it is anything at all, is a byproduct that never comes until nature by itself has sought and taken those things suitable to the animal's constitution—a byproduct that is comparable to animals that have a cheerful expression and plants that are luxuriant or in full bloom. —DL

If pleasure is the goal, many shameful things will follow. Pleasure is not to be placed among the primary objects of natural impulse. Many shameful things will occur if we think that nature has placed pleasure among the first objects of desire. —Cato (Cicero)

We humans should shape our (animal) impulses by means of reason. Impulse makes animals pursue what is suitable. Nature's rule for animals is to follow the direction of impulse. . . . For those beings we call rational, the rational life correctly became the natural life when reason was given to them by means of a more perfect rule. Reason was added to shape impulse as a skilled craftsman. —DL

We humans should control our (animal) impulses by means of reason. To animals nature gives sensation and motion, together with a kind of appetite or desire that draws them toward health-giving things and withdraws them from destructive things. She gives even more than this to human beings. For them, she added reason, by which the appetites or desires of the soul are controlled—sometimes giving them free rein and sometimes holding them back. —Balbus (Cicero)

Follow those impulses that spur you on to fitting, rational, virtuous acts. Of actions done in relation to impulse, some are fitting, some are not fitting, and some are neither fitting nor are they not fitting. Those acts that are fitting are the ones that reason within us seizes upon and chooses to do, such as honoring one's parents, brothers, sisters, and homeland, and adapting oneself to and spending time with one's friends. . . . It is always fitting to live in accord with virtue. —DL

Virtue is fulfillment. Virtue is in one sense the perfection of anything in general, say of a statue. Virtue may be non-intellectual, such as health, or intellectual, such as practical wisdom. —DL

Virtue and reason. Zeno assigned all the virtues to reason. —Varro (Cicero)

Virtue is the only good, noble, beautiful thing. Virtue of the soul is the only good. . . . The only beautiful or noble thing is a good thing— this is virtue and whatever participates in virtue. . . . Virtue itself, and whatever participates in virtue, is spoken of as good in three ways: one, as the source from which the benefit results; two, as that according

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to which the benefit results—for example, the action done according to virtue; and three, as that by the agency of which the benefit results—for example, the excellent man who participates in virtue.

—*Athenaeus the epigrammatist and DL (Hecaton, Chrysippus)*

Things indifferent. Things that are neither good nor bad are those things that neither benefit nor harm—things such as life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, good reputation, and noble birth, as well as their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, bad reputation, low birth, and the like.—*DL*

Of indifferent things, prefer things with value. Regarding indifferent things, they say that some are preferred and some are not preferred—that is, they are rejected. Those things that have value are preferred, while those that do not have value are rejected.—*DL*

What it means to benefit or harm. To benefit is to move or to restrain oneself or something in accord with virtue. To harm is to move or to restrain oneself or something in accord with vice.—*DL*

Choose virtue and be happy. Virtue is a harmonious disposition, choiceworthy for its own sake—not from fear or hope or any external motive. Happiness consists in virtue, which is the state of the soul that tends to make the whole of life harmonious.—*DL*

Seek completion in virtue. There is nothing between virtue and vice, for all human beings have inducements from nature toward virtue. And, according to Cleanthes, humans are like half lines of iambic verse, so that if they are incomplete or unfinished, they are base, but if they are brought to perfection, they are excellent.

—*Johannes Stobaeus*

We truly can become better. That virtue can be taught is clear from the case of base men becoming good. . . . The proof that virtue really exists is the fact that Socrates, Diogenes, and Antisthenes, as well as their followers, made moral progress.—*DL and Posidonius of Apamea*

There are primary and secondary virtues. Among the virtues, some are primary, and some are subordinate to these. The following are the primary virtues: practical wisdom, courage, justice, and moderation. Specific virtues are magnanimity, self-control, patient endurance, ready-mindedness, and good counsel.—*DL*

There are primary and secondary vices. Vice exists as the opposite of virtue. . . . Among the vices, some are primary, and some are subordinate. Folly, cowardice, injustice, and immoderation are primary, and lack of self-control, slow-mindedness, and bad counsel are subordinate.—*DL*

Passions good and bad. The Stoics say that there are three good passions: joy, caution, and willing. . . . There are four major kinds of (*bad*) passions: grief, fear, desire, and pleasure.—*DL*

Violent passions are irrational and thus unnatural. The terms “irrational” and “unnatural” do not mean what they commonly mean. Rather, “irrational” is the same as “disobedient to reason.” For every passion is forceful—as those who are in a state of passion often see that it is beneficial not to act in such a way, but they are carried off by the violence of the passion as though by some disobedient horse. And so they are led to do it.

—*Johannes Stobaeus*

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Be wise, seek improvement. Wise men are genuinely earnest for and attentive to their own improvement, employing a manner of life that hides the base away while making what good there is in things appear. — *DL*

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