1.

THE DEAD EMPEROR

The year is 180 AD. As another long and difficult winter draws to a close on the northern frontier, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius lies dying in bed at his military camp in Vindobona (modern-day Vienna). Six days ago he was stricken with a fever, and the symptoms have been worsening rapidly. It's clear to his physicians that he is finally about to succumb to the great Antonine Plague (probably a strain of smallpox), which has been ravaging the empire for the past fourteen years. Marcus is nearly sixty and physically frail, and all the signs show he's unlikely to recover. However, to the physicians and courtiers present he seems strangely calm, almost indifferent. He has been preparing for this moment most of his life. The Stoic philosophy he follows has taught him to practice contemplating his own mortality calmly and rationally. To learn how to die, according to the Stoics, is to unlearn how to be a slave.

This philosophical attitude toward death didn't come naturally to Marcus. His father passed away when Marcus was only a few years old, leaving him a solemn child. When he reached seventeen, he was adopted by the Emperor Antoninus Pius as part of a long-term succession plan devised by his predecessor, Hadrian, who had foreseen the potential for wisdom and greatness in Marcus even as a small boy. Nevertheless, he had been most reluctant to leave his mother's home for the imperial palace. Antoninus summoned the finest teachers of rhetoric and philosophy to train Marcus in preparation for succeeding him as emperor. Among his tutors were experts on Platonism and Aristotelianism, but his main philosophical education was in Stoicism. These men became like family to him. When one of his most beloved tutors died, it's said that Marcus wept so violently that the palace servants tried to restrain him. They were worried that people would find his behavior unbecoming of a future ruler. However, Antoninus told them to leave Marcus alone: "Let him be only a man for once; for neither philosophy nor empire takes away natural feeling." Years later, after having lost several young children, Marcus was once again moved to tears in public while presiding over a legal case, when he heard an advocate say in the course of his argument: "Blessed are they who died in the plague."[1]

Marcus was a naturally loving and affectionate man, deeply affected by loss. Over the course of his life, he increasingly turned to the ancient precepts of Stoicism as a way of coping when those closest to him were taken. Now, as he lies dying, he reflects once again on those he has lost. A few years earlier, the Empress Faustina, his wife of thirty-five years, passed away. He'd lived long enough to see eight of their thirteen children die. Four of his eight daughters survived, but only *one* of his five sons, Commodus. Death was everywhere, though. During Marcus's reign, millions of Romans throughout the empire had been killed by war or disease. The two went hand in hand, as the legionary camps were particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of plague, especially during the long winter months. The air around him is still thick with the sweet smell of frankincense, which the Romans vainly hoped might help prevent the spread of the disease. For over a decade now, the scent of smoke and incense had been a reminder to Marcus that he was living under the shadow of death and that survival from one day to the next should never be taken for granted.

Infection with the plague wasn't always fatal. However, Marcus's celebrated court physician, Galen, had observed that victims inevitably die when their feces turn black, a sign of intestinal bleeding. Perhaps that's how Marcus's doctors know he is dying, or maybe they just realize how frail he's become with age. Throughout his adult life he had been prone to chronic chest and stomach pains and bouts of illness. His appetite had always been poor. Now he *voluntarily* rejects food and drink to hasten his own demise. Socrates used to say that death is like some prankster in a scary mask, dressed as a bogeyman to frighten small children. The wise man carefully removes the mask and, looking behind it, he finds nothing worth fearing. Because of this lifelong preparation, now that his death finally draws near, Marcus is no more afraid of it than when it seemed far away. He therefore asks his physicians to describe patiently and in detail what's happening inside his body, so that he may contemplate his own symptoms with the studied indifference of a natural philosopher. His voice is weak and the sores in his mouth and throat make it difficult for him to speak. Before long he grows tired and gestures for them to leave, wishing to continue his meditations in private.

Alone in his room, as he listens to the sound of his own wheezing, he doesn't feel much like an emperor anymore—just a feeble old man, sick and dying. He turns his head to one side and catches a glimpse of his reflection on the polished surface of the goddess Fortuna's golden statuette by his bedside. His Stoic tutors advised him to practice a mental exercise when he noticed his own image. It's a way of building emotional resilience by training yourself to come to terms with your own mortality. Focusing his eyes weakly on his reflection, he tries to imagine one of the long-dead Roman emperors who preceded him gazing back. First he pictures Antoninus, his adoptive father, and then his adoptive grandfather, the emperor Hadrian. He even imagines his reflection slowly assuming the features depicted in paintings and sculptures of Augustus, who founded the empire two centuries earlier. As he does so, Marcus silently asks himself, "Where are they now?" and whispers the answer: "*Nowhere* … or at least nowhere of which we can speak."[2]

He continues to meditate patiently, albeit drowsily, on the mortality of the emperors who preceded him. There's nothing left of any of them now but bones and dust. Their once illustrious lives have gradually become insignificant to subsequent generations, who have already half-forgotten them. Even their names sound old, evoking memories of another era. As a boy, the Emperor Hadrian had befriended Marcus, and the two used to go boar hunting together. Now there are young officers under Marcus's command for whom Hadrian is just a name in the history books, his real, living body long ago replaced by lifeless portraits and statues. Antoninus, Hadrian, Augustus—all equally dead and gone. Everyone from Alexander the Great right down to his lowly mule driver

ends up lying under the same ground. King and pauper alike, the same fate ultimately awaits everyone …

This train of thought is rudely interrupted by a bout of coughing that brings up blood and tissue from the ulceration at the back of his throat. The pain and discomfort of his fever vie for his attention, but Marcus turns this into another part of the meditation: he tells himself that he's just another one of these dead men. Soon he'll be nothing more than a name alongside theirs in the history books, and one day even his name will be forgotten. This is how he contemplates his own mortality: using one of the many centuries-old Stoic exercises learned in his youth. Once we truly accept our own demise as an inescapable fact of life, it makes no more sense for us to wish for immortality than to long for bodies as hard as diamonds or to be able to soar on the wings of a bird. As long as we can grasp the truth firmly enough that certain misfortunes are inevitable, we no longer feel the need to worry about them. Nor do we yearn for things that we accept are impossible, as long as we can see with crystal clarity that it is futile to do so. As death is among the most certain things in life, to a man of wisdom it should be among the least feared.

Although Marcus first began training in philosophy when he was just a boy of about twelve, his practice intensified in his mid-twenties, when he dedicated himself wholeheartedly to becoming a Stoic. Since then he has rehearsed his Stoic exercises daily, trained his mind and body to obey reason, and progressively transformed himself, both as a man and a ruler, into something approaching the Stoic ideal. He has tried to develop his own wisdom and resilience systematically, modeling himself after the philosophers who shared their teachings with him and the other great men who won his admiration, foremost among them Antoninus. He studied the way they met different forms of adversity with calm dignity. He carefully observed how they lived in accord with reason and exhibited the cardinal virtues of *wisdom*, *justice*, *fortitude*, and *temperance*. They felt the pain of loss but did not succumb to it. Marcus has been bereaved so many times, has practiced his response to it so often, that he no longer weeps uncontrollably. He no longer cries "Why?" and "How could this happen?" or even entertains such thoughts. He has firmly grasped the truth that death is both a natural and inevitable part of life. Now that his time has come he welcomes it with a philosophical attitude. You might even say that he has learned to befriend death. He still sheds tears and mourns losses, but as a wise man does. He no longer adds to his natural grief by complaining and shaking his fist at the universe.

Since completing his journal of reflections on philosophy several years earlier, Marcus has been passing through the final stage of a lifelong spiritual journey. Now lying in pain and discomfort, nearing the end, he gently reminds himself that he has already died many times along the way. First of all, Marcus the child died as he entered the imperial palace as heir to the throne, assuming the title Caesar after Hadrian passed away. After Antoninus passed away, Marcus the young Caesar had to die when he took his place as emperor of Rome. Leaving Rome behind to take command of the northern legions during the Marcomannic Wars signaled another death: a transition to a life of warfare and a sojourn in a foreign land. Now, as an old man, he faces his death not for the first time but for the last. From the moment we're born we're constantly dying, not only with each stage of life but also one day at a time. Our bodies are no longer the ones to which our mothers gave birth, as Marcus put it. Nobody is the same person he was yesterday. Realizing this makes it easier to let go: we can no more hold on to life than grasp the waters of a rushing stream.

Now Marcus is growing drowsy and on the verge of drifting off, but he rouses himself with some effort and sits up in his bed. He has unfinished business to attend to. He orders the guards to send in the members of his family and his inner circle of courtiers, the "friends of the emperor," who have been summoned to his camp. Though he appears frail and has suffered from illness throughout his life, Marcus is famously resilient. He has seemed on the verge of dying before, but this time the physicians have confirmed to him that he is unlikely to survive. Everyone senses that the end is near. He bids farewell to his beloved friends, his sons-in-law, and his four remaining daughters. He would have kissed each one of them, but the plague forces them to keep their distance.

His son-in-law Pompeianus, his right-hand man and senior general during the Marcomannic Wars, is there as always. His lifelong friend Aufidius Victorinus, another one of his generals, is also present, as are Bruttius Praesens, the father-in-law of Commodus, and another of his sons-in-law, Gnaeus Claudius Severus, a close friend and fellow philosopher. They gather solemn-faced around his bed. Marcus stresses to them that they must take good care of Commodus, his only surviving son, who has ruled by his side as his junior co-emperor for the past three years. He has appointed the best teachers available for him, but their influence is waning. Commodus became emperor when he was only sixteen; Marcus had to wait until he was forty. Young rulers, such as the Emperor Nero, tend to be easily corrupted, and Marcus can see that his son is already falling in with bad company. He asks his friends, especially Pompeianus, to do him the honor of ensuring that Commodus's moral education continues as if he were their own son.

Marcus appointed Commodus his official heir, granting him the title Caesar when he was just five years old. Commodus's younger brother, Marcus Annius Verus, was also named Caesar, but he died shortly thereafter. Marcus had hoped that the two boys would rule jointly one day. Any succession plans Marcus agreed with the Senate were always going to be precarious. However, at the height of the plague, as the First Marcomannic War broke out, it was necessary for Rome's stability to have a designated heir in case a usurper tried to seize the throne. During a previous bout of illness five years earlier, rumors spread that Marcus had *already* passed away. His most powerful general in the eastern provinces, Avidius Cassius, was acclaimed emperor by the Egyptian legion, triggering a short-lived civil war. Marcus immediately had Commodus rushed from Rome to the northern frontier to assume the *toga virilis*, marking his official passage to adulthood. After the rebellion was put down, Marcus continued to accelerate the process of appointing Commodus emperor. If Marcus had died without an heir, another civil war would probably have ensued.

Likewise, replacing Commodus with a substitute ruler at this stage would leave the whole empire vulnerable. The north-

ern tribes might seize the opportunity to renew their attacks, and another invasion could mean the end of Rome. Marcus's best hope now would be that Commodus might follow the guidance of his trusted teachers and advisors. He is being swayed, however, by various hangers-on who constantly plead with him to return to Rome. As long as he remains with the army, under the watchful eye of his brother-in-law Pompeianus, there's still hope that Commodus may learn to rule with wisdom. Unlike his father, though, he shows no interest in philosophy.

In the middle of their conversation, Marcus suddenly slumps forward and loses consciousness. Some of his friends are alarmed and start to weep uncontrollably because they assume he is slipping away. The physicians manage to rouse him. When Marcus sees the faces of his grieving companions, rather than fearing his own death his attention turns to theirs. He watches them weeping for him just as he had wept for his wife and children and so many lost friends and teachers over the years. Now that he is the one dying, though, *their* tears seem unnecessary. It feels pointless to lament over something inevitable and beyond anyone's control. It's more important to him that they calmly and prudently arrange the transition to Commodus's reign. Though Marcus is barely conscious, things somehow seem clearer than ever before. He wants those gathered to remember their own mortality, to accept its implications, grasp its significance, and live wisely, so he whispers, "Why do you weep for me instead of thinking about the plague … and about death as the common lot of us all?"

The room falls silent as his gentle admonition sinks in. The sobbing quiets down. Nobody knows what to say. Marcus smiles and gestures weakly, giving them permission to leave. His parting words are, "If you now grant me leave to go then I will bid you farewell and pass on ahead of you."[3] As the news of his condition spreads through the camp, the soldiers grieve loudly—because they love him much more than they care for his son Commodus.

The following day, Marcus awakens early, feeling extremely frail and weary. His fever is worse. Realizing that these are his last hours, he summons Commodus. The series of wars against hostile Germanic and Sarmatian tribes that Marcus has been fighting for over a decade now is already in its final stages. He urges his son to bring them to a satisfactory conclusion by assuming personal command of the army, pursuing the remaining enemy tribes until they surrender, and overseeing the complex peace negotiations currently underway. Marcus warns Commodus that if he doesn't remain at the front, the Senate may view it as a betrayal after so much has been invested in the long wars and so many lives have been lost in battle.

However, unlike his father, Commodus is *scared witless* of dying. Gazing upon Marcus's withered body, rather than being inspired to follow his father's virtuous example, he feels repulsed and afraid. He complains that he risks contracting the plague by remaining among the legions in the north and that he yearns more than anything to return to the safety of Rome. Marcus assures him that soon enough, as sole emperor, he may do as he wishes, but he orders Commodus to wait just a few days longer before leaving. Then, sensing the hour of his death looming, Marcus commands the soldiers to take Commodus into their protection so that the youth cannot be accused of having murdered his father. Marcus can only hope now that his generals will talk Commodus out of his reckless desire to abandon the northern frontier.

Marcus wrote that nobody is so fortunate as not to have one or two individuals standing by his deathbed who will welcome his demise.[4] He says that in his own case, as emperor, he can think of hundreds who hold values at odds with his own and would be only too glad to see him gone. They do not share his love of wisdom and virtue, and they sneer at his vision of an empire that makes the freedom of its citizens its highest goal. Nevertheless, philosophy has taught him to be grateful for life and yet unafraid of dying —like a ripened olive falling from its branch, thanking both the tree for giving it life and the earth below for receiving its seed as it falls. For the Stoics, death is just such a natural transformation, returning our body to the same source from which we came. At Marcus's funeral, therefore, the people will not say that he has been lost but that he has been returned to the gods and to Nature. Perhaps his friends voiced this sentiment in their eulogies because it sounds like a reference to the Stoic teachings Marcus held dear. Never say that *anything* has been lost, they tell us. Only that it has returned to Nature.

Commodus, unfortunately, surrounds himself with sycophants who constantly plead with him to return home, where they can enjoy greater luxury. "Why do you continue to drink this frigid mud, Lord Caesar, when we could be back at Rome drinking pure waters running hot and cold?" Only Pompeianus, the oldest among his advisors, confronts him, warning him that to leave the war unfinished would be both disgraceful and dangerous. Like Marcus, Pompeianus believes the enemy will view it as a cowardly retreat and gain confidence for future uprisings; the Senate will view it as incompetence. Commodus is persuaded for a short while, but eventually the lure of Rome is too great. He gives Pompeianus the excuse that he must return there in case a usurper suddenly appears, plotting an uprising in his absence. After Marcus is gone, Commodus will hastily conclude the war by paying huge bribes to the leaders of hostile Germanic and Sarmatian tribes. Fleeing from the army camps will undermine, at one fell swoop, whatever credibility he had with the troops who were so steadfastly loyal to his father. Instead, he must turn to the populace of Rome for support, resorting to expensive crowd-pleasing gestures to win popularity and increasingly behaving like a *celebrity* rather than a wise and benevolent ruler. The Stoics observed that often those who are most desperate to flee death find themselves rushing into its arms, and that seems eminently true of Commodus. Marcus lived to fifty-eight despite his frailty and illness and the harsh conditions he endured in command of the northern legions. By contrast, Commodus is destined to spiral into paranoia and violence following repeated assassination attempts. His enemies in Rome will eventually succeed in murdering him when he is still only *thirty-one* years old. No number of bodyguards, as Marcus once said, is enough to shield a ruler who does not possess the goodwill of his subjects.

The successor chosen by an emperor is an important part of his legacy. However, the Stoics taught that we can't control the actions of others and that even supremely wise teachers, such as Socrates, have way-

ward children and students. When Stilpo, a philosopher of the Megarian school, one of the predecessors of Stoicism, was criticized over the disreputable character of his daughter, he reputedly said that her actions no more brought dishonor to him than his own brought honor to her. As things turned out, Marcus's real legacy would not be Commodus but the inspiration that his own character and philosophy provided for generations to come. Like all Stoics, Marcus firmly believed that virtue must be its own reward. He was also content to accept that events in life, let alone after death, are never entirely up to us.

Nevertheless, the Stoics taught that the wise man is naturally inclined to write books that help other people. Sometime during his first campaign on the northern frontier, Marcus, separated from his beloved Stoic friends and teachers back in Rome, started writing down his personal reflections on philosophy as a series of short notes and maxims. He probably began not long after the death of his main Stoic tutor, Junius Rusticus. Perhaps he wrote as a way to cope with this blow, becoming his own teacher as a substitute for conversations with Rusticus. These collected reflections are known today as *The Meditations*. How the text survived is a mystery: it may have fallen into Commodus's possession, unless Marcus bequeathed it to someone else. Perhaps it changed hands at the final meeting with his courtiers. Disappointed by the feckless character of his son, the dying emperor would at least know that one of his trusted friends was already safeguarding *The Meditations*—his true gift to subsequent generations.

As soon as Commodus has gone, Marcus beckons the young officer of the night watch to lean in close and whispers something hoarsely in his ear. Then he wearily covers his head with a sheet and lapses into sleep, passing away quietly during the seventh night of his illness. In the morning, his physicians pronounce the emperor dead, and the camp is thrown into a state of anguished confusion. As news quickly reaches them, the soldiers and the people fill the streets, weeping. According to Herodian, a Roman historian who witnessed firsthand the reign of Commodus, the whole empire cried out as if in a single chorus when word spread of Marcus's death. They grieved for the loss of him as their "Kind Father," "Noble Emperor," "Brave General," and "Wise, Moderate Ruler," and, in Herodian's opinion, "every man spoke the truth."

As the hubbub outside grows louder, the nervous guards ask their tribune, "What did he say?" The officer looks like he's about to speak but then pauses for a moment. He furrows his brow in puzzlement as he relays the dead emperor's message: *"Go to the rising sun," he said, "for I am already setting."*[5]

THE STORY OF STOICISM

Marcus Aurelius was the last famous Stoic of the ancient world. However, the story of Stoicism began almost five hundred years prior to his death, with a *shipwreck*. A wealthy young Phoenician merchant from the island of Cyprus named Zeno of Citium was transporting his cargo of purple dye across the Mediterranean. Many thousands of fermented shellfish had to be painstakingly dissected by hand to extract just a few grams of this priceless commodity, known as *imperial* or *royal* purple because it was used to dye the robes of emperors and kings. The ship was caught in a violent storm. Zeno narrowly escaped with his life and washed ashore at the Greek port of Piraeus. He watched helplessly from the beach as his precious cargo sank beneath the waves and dissolved back into the ocean from which it came.

According to one story, Zeno lost *everything* in this shipwreck. Devastated, he found himself living as a beggar after making his way to nearby Athens: a penniless immigrant in a foreign city. Searching for guidance about the best way to live, he trudged for miles to the Oracle of Delphi, where the god Apollo, speaking through his priestess, announced that Zeno should *take on the color not of dead shellfish but of dead men*. He must have been fairly bemused by this cryptic advice. Feeling completely at a loss, Zeno made his way back to Athens and collapsed in a heap at a bookseller's stall. There he started reading what, by chance, turned out to be a series of anecdotes about Socrates, written by Xenophon, one of his most distinguished students. The words Zeno read struck him like a thunderbolt and completely transformed his life.

Greek aristocrats traditionally believed that virtue was associated with noble birth. Socrates, however, argued that classical virtues like justice, courage, and temperance were all just forms of moral wisdom, which could potentially be learned by anyone. He taught Xenophon that people should train themselves to acquire wisdom and virtue through self-discipline. After Socrates was executed, Xenophon faithfully wrote down many recollections of Socrates's conversations about philosophy. Perhaps it was at this moment that Zeno suddenly realized what the Oracle meant: he was to "take on the color of dead men" by thoroughly absorbing the *teachings* of *wise* men from previous generations, teachings such as the very philosophical doctrines he was now reading in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* of Socrates.

Zeno dropped the book, jumped to his feet, and excitedly asked the bookseller, "Where can I find a man like this today?" It so happened that a famous Cynic philosopher called Crates of Thebes was passing by at that very moment, and the bookseller pointed him out, saying, "Follow yonder man." Sure enough, Zeno became Crates's follower, training in the Cynic philosophy founded by Diogenes of Sinope. Stoicism therefore evolved out of Cynicism, and the two traditions remained very closely associated right down to the time of Marcus Aurelius.

When we speak of "cynicism" (lowercase c) today, we mean something like an attitude of negativity and distrust, but that's only very tenuously related to the meaning of capital-C "Cynicism." The ancient philosophy of Cynicism focused on cultivating virtue and strength of character through rigorous training that consisted of enduring various forms of "voluntary hardship." It was an austere and self-disciplined way of life. Zeno's followers would later call it a *shortcut* to virtue. Nevertheless, he wasn't completely satisfied with the Cynic philosophy and apparently found its doctrines lacking in intellectual rigor. He therefore went on to study in the Academic and Megarian schools of philosophy, founded by Plato and Euclid of Megara, respectively, two of Socrates's most famous students. All of these schools focused on different aspects of philosophy: the Cynics on virtue and self-discipline, the Megarians on logic, and the Academics on

metaphysical theories about the underlying nature of reality.

Zeno appears to have been trying to synthesize the best aspects of different Athenian philosophical traditions. However, the Cynic and Academic schools were often seen as representing fundamentally different assumptions about what it means to *be* a philosopher. The Cynics sneered at the pretentious and bookish nature of Plato's Academy. The Academics, in turn, thought the doctrines of the Cynics were crude and too extreme—Plato reputedly called Diogenes "Socrates gone mad." Zeno must have seen his own position as a compromise. His followers believed that studying philosophical theory, or subjects like logic and cosmology, can be good insofar as it makes us more virtuous and improves our character. However, it can also be a *bad* thing if it becomes so pedantic or overly "academic" that it *diverts* us from the pursuit of virtue. Marcus learned the same attitude from his Stoic teachers. He repeatedly warned himself not to become distracted by reading too many books—thus wasting time on trifling issues in logic and metaphysics—but instead to remain focused on the practical goal of living wisely.

After studying philosophy in Athens for about two decades, Zeno founded his own school in a public building overlooking the *agora* known as the *Stoa Poikile*, or "Painted Porch," where he used to vigorously pace up and down as he discoursed on philosophy. The students who gathered there were originally known as Zenonians but later called themselves Stoics, after the *stoa*, or porch. It's possible the name "Stoic" also hints at the practical, down-to-earth nature of the philosophy. It arose on the streets of Athens, out in public, near the marketplace where Socrates once spent his time discussing wisdom and virtue. The name change from Zenonians to Stoics is significant because unlike other philosophical sects, the founders of Stoicism didn't claim to be perfectly wise. Zeno's attitude to his students perhaps resembled the one later described by Seneca, who did not claim to be an expert like a physician but saw his role more like that of a *patient* describing the progress of his treatment to fellow patients in the hospital beds beside him. This stood in marked contrast to the rival school of Epicureanism, for example, which *was* named after its founder. Epicurus *did* claim to be perfectly wise, and his students were required to memorize his sayings, celebrate his birthday, and revere his image.

Zeno told his students that he had come to value wisdom more than wealth or reputation. He used to say, "My most profitable journey began on the day I was *shipwrecked* and lost my entire fortune."[6] Even today it's not unusual for a client in therapy to arrive at the paradoxical revelation that losing their job may turn out to be the *best thing* that ever happened to them. Zeno learned to embrace the Cynic teaching that wealth and other external things are completely indifferent and that *virtue* is the true goal of life. In plain English, what the Cynics meant was that our character is the only thing that ultimately matters and that wisdom consists in learning to view everything else in life as utterly worthless by comparison. They believed that mastering this attitude required lifelong moral and psychological training in the voluntary endurance of hardship and renunciation of certain desires.

However, in contrast to the Cynics, other philosophers argued that "external goods"—such as health, wealth, and reputation—were also required for a good life, in *addition* to virtue. The problem is that these external things are partly in the hands of Fate, which seems to make a good life unattainable for many individuals. Socrates, for instance, was notoriously ugly by Athenian standards, lived in relative poverty, and died persecuted by powerful enemies. Would his life have been better, though, if he'd been handsome, wealthy, and praised by everyone? Didn't his greatness consist precisely in the wisdom and strength of character with which he handled these obstacles in life? As we'll see, Zeno's innovation was to argue that external advantages do have some value but of a completely different sort than virtue. They're not always *completely* indifferent. For Stoics, virtue is still the only true good—the Cynics were right about that—but it's also natural to prefer health to sickness, wealth to poverty, friends to enemies, and so on, within reasonable bounds. External advantages such as wealth may create more opportunities but in themselves they simply don't have the kind of value that can ever define a good life.

Zeno was profoundly inspired by his early training in Cynicism. Nevertheless, he sought to moderate and broaden its teachings by combining them with elements from the other schools of Athenian philosophy. His wide-ranging studies had convinced him that intellectual disciplines such as logic and metaphysics could potentially contribute to the development of our moral character. Zeno therefore established a curriculum for Stoicism divided into three broad topics: Ethics, Logic, and Physics (which included metaphysics and theology). The Stoic school he founded had a series of leaders, or "scholarchs," and a set of characteristic *core* doctrines, but students were also encouraged to think for themselves. After Zeno died, Cleanthes, one of his students, who had formerly been a boxer and watered gardens at night to earn a living, became head of the Stoic school; he was followed by Chrysippus, one of the most acclaimed intellectuals of the ancient world. Between them, these three developed the original doctrines of the Stoic school.

The teachings of Zeno and Cleanthes were simple, practical, and concise. True to his Cynic roots, Zeno focused on improving the character of his young students while avoiding long-winded academic debates. When someone complained that his philosophical arguments were very abrupt, Zeno agreed and replied that if he could he'd abbreviate the syllables as well. However, Chrysippus was a prolific writer and developed many arguments—we're told he wrote over seven hundred books. By his time, it had become necessary to defend Stoicism against philosophical criticisms leveled by other schools, especially the emerging Academic Skeptics, and that required formulating increasingly sophisticated arguments. On the other hand, Cleanthes, the teacher of Chrysippus, was not a great intellectual. According to legend, Chrysippus often said that it would be better if Cleanthes just cut to the chase and taught him the conclusions of the Stoic school so he could figure out better supporting *arguments* himself. Today many students of Stoicism adopt a similar attitude: they're attracted to the Stoic worldview but prefer to "update" it by drawing upon a wider range of arguments from modern science and

philosophy. Stoicism was never intended to be doctrinaire. Chrysippus disagreed with Zeno and Cleanthes in many regards, which allowed Stoicism to keep evolving.

The original Stoic school survived for a couple of centuries before apparently fragmenting—into *three* different branches, according to one author. We're not sure why. Fortunately, by that time the Romans of the Republic had started to embrace Greek philosophy and felt a particular affinity for Stoicism. The celebrated Roman general who destroyed Carthage, Scipio Africanus the Younger, became a student of the last scholarch of the Stoic school at Athens, Panaetius of Rhodes. In the second century BC, Scipio gathered around himself a group of intellectuals at Rome known as the Scipionic Circle, which included his close friend Laelius the Wise, another influential Roman Stoic.

The famous Roman statesman and orator Cicero, who lived a couple of generations later, is one of our most important sources for understanding Stoicism. Although he was a follower of the Platonic Academy, Cicero nevertheless knew a great deal about Stoic philosophy and wrote extensively on the subject. On the other hand, his friend and political rival Cato of Utica was a "complete Stoic," as Cicero puts it, a living example of Stoicism, but didn't leave any writings about philosophy. After his death, making a stand against the tyrant Julius Caesar during the great Roman civil war, Cato became a hero and an inspiration to later generations of Stoics.

Following Caesar's assassination, his great-nephew Octavian became Augustus, the founder of the Roman Empire. Augustus had a famous Stoic tutor called Arius Didymus, which perhaps set a precedent for the Roman emperors who followed, most notably Marcus, to associate themselves with the philosophy. A few generations after Augustus, the Stoic philosopher Seneca was appointed rhetoric tutor to the young Emperor Nero, later becoming his speechwriter and political advisor—a position that clearly placed a strain on Seneca's Stoic moral values as Nero degenerated into a cruel despot. At the same time, a political faction called the Stoic Opposition, led by a senator called Thrasea, was attempting to take a principled stand against Nero and those subsequent emperors whom they considered tyrants. Marcus would later mention his admiration for Cato, Thrasea, and others associated with them, which is intriguing because these Stoics had been famous opponents, or at least critics, of imperial rule.

Emperor Nero, by contrast, was less tolerant of political dissent from philosophers, and he executed both Thrasea and Seneca. However, Nero's *secretary* owned a slave called Epictetus, who became perhaps the most famous philosophy teacher in Roman history after gaining his freedom. Epictetus himself wrote nothing down, but his discussions with students were recorded by one of them, Arrian, in several books of *Discourses* and a short *Handbook* summarizing the practical aspect of his teachings. The Stoics that Marcus knew personally were probably influenced by Epictetus, and some had likely attended his lectures. Indeed, we're told that Marcus was given copies of notes from these lectures by his main Stoic tutor, Junius Rusticus, so it's no surprise to find that Epictetus is the most quoted author in *The Meditations*. Marcus probably saw himself mainly as an adherent of Epictetus's version of Stoicism, although the two never met in person.

Nearly five centuries after Zeno the dye merchant founded the Stoic school, Marcus Aurelius was *still talking about dyeing things purple*. He warns himself to avoid dyeing his character with the royal purple and turning into a Caesar, instead aspiring to remain true to his philosophical principles. He (twice) reminds himself that his purple imperial robes are mere sheep's wool dyed in fermented shellfish mucus. He tells himself to dye his mind with the wisdom of philosophical precepts handed down from his Stoic teachers. Marcus Aurelius, indeed, viewed himself as a Stoic first and an emperor second.

WHAT DID THE STOICS BELIEVE?

The Stoics were prolific writers, but probably less than 1 percent of their writings survive today. The most influential texts we have today come from the three famous Roman Stoics of the Imperial era: Seneca's various letters and essays, Epictetus's *Discourses* and *Handbook*, and Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. We also have some earlier Roman writings on Stoicism by Cicero and about a book's worth of fragments from the early Greek Stoics, as well as various other minor texts. That's woefully incomplete, but it does provide a *consistent* picture of the philosophy's core doctrines.

The schools of Hellenistic philosophy that followed the death of Socrates were often distinguished from one another in terms of their definition of the goal of life. For Stoics, that goal is defined as "living in agreement with Nature," which we're told was synonymous with living wisely and virtuously. Stoics argued that humans are first and foremost *thinking* creatures, capable of exercising reason. Although we share many instincts with other animals, our ability to think rationally is what makes us human. Reason governs our decisions, in a sense—the Stoics call it our "ruling faculty." It allows us to *evaluate* our thoughts, feelings, and urges and to decide if they're good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. We therefore have an innate duty to protect our ability to reason and to use it properly. When we reason *well* about life and live rationally, we exhibit the virtue of *wisdom*. Living in agreement with Nature, in part, means fulfilling our natural potential for wisdom; that's what it means for us to *flourish* as human beings.

The Stoics therefore took the name of *philosophy*, meaning "love of wisdom," quite literally. They loved wisdom, or loved virtue, above everything else. If "virtue" sounds a bit pompous, the Greek word for it, *arete*, is arguably better translated as "excellence of character." Something excels, in this sense, if it performs its function well. Humans excel when they think clearly and reason well about their lives, which amounts to living *wisely*. The Stoics adopted the Socratic division of *cardinal* virtues into wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation. The other three virtues can be understood as wisdom applied to our actions in different areas of life. Justice is largely wisdom applied to the social sphere, our relationships with other people. Displaying courage and moderation involves mastering our fears and desires, respectively, overcoming what the Stoics called the unhealthy "passions" that otherwise interfere with our ability to live in accord with wisdom and justice.

Wisdom, in all these forms, mainly requires understanding the difference between good, bad, and indifferent

things. Virtue is good and vice is bad, but everything else is indifferent. Indeed, as we've seen, the Stoics followed the Cynics in maintaining the hard line that virtue is the *only* true good. However, Zeno went on to distinguish between indifferent things that are "preferred," "dispreferred," or completely indifferent. Put crudely, external things do have *some* value, but they're not worth getting *upset* over—it's a different *kind* of value. One way Stoics explained this was by saying that if we could put virtue on one side of a set of scales, it wouldn't matter how many gold coins or other indifferent things piled up on the opposing side—it should *never* tip the balance. Nevertheless, some external things are *preferable* to others, and wisdom consists precisely in our ability to make these sorts of value judgments. Life is preferable to death, wealth is preferable to poverty, health is preferable to sickness, friends are preferable to enemies, and so on.

As Socrates had put it earlier, such external advantages in life are good only if we use them wisely. However, if something can be used for *either* good or evil, it cannot truly be good in itself, so it should be classed as "indifferent" or neutral. The Stoics would say that things like health, wealth, and reputation are, at most, advantages or opportunities rather than being good in themselves. Social, material, and physical advantages actually give foolish individuals more opportunity to do harm to themselves and others. Look at lottery winners. Those who squander their sudden wealth often end up more miserable than they could have imagined. When handled badly, external advantages like wealth do more harm than good. The Stoics would go further: the wise and good man may flourish even when faced with sickness, poverty, and enemies. The true goal of life for Stoics isn't to acquire as many external advantages as possible but to use whatever befalls us wisely, whether it be sickness or health, wealth or poverty, friends or enemies. The Stoic Sage, or wise man, needs nothing but uses everything well; the fool believes himself to "need" countless things, but he uses them all badly.

Most important of all, the pursuit of these preferred indifferent things must never be done at the *expense* of virtue. For instance, wisdom may tell us that wealth is generally preferable to debt, but valuing money more highly than justice is a vice. In order to explain the supreme value placed on wisdom and virtue, the Stoics compared reason, our "ruling faculty," to a king in relation to his court. Everyone in court is situated somewhere or other on the hierarchy of importance. However, the king is *uniquely* important because he's the one who assigns everyone else at court a role in the hierarchy. As mentioned earlier, the Stoics call reason, the king in this metaphor, our "ruling faculty" (*hegemonikon*). It's human nature to desire certain things in life, such as sex and food. Reason allows us to step back and question whether what we desire is actually going to be good for us or not. Wisdom itself is uniquely valuable because it allows us to judge the value of external things—it's the source of everything else's value. How therefore does it profit a man, the Stoics might say, if he gains the whole world but loses his wisdom and virtue?

In addition to believing that humans are essentially thinking creatures *capable of reason*, the Stoics also believed that human nature is inherently *social*. They started from the premise that under normal conditions we typically have a bond of "natural affection" toward our children. (If we didn't, as we now know, our offspring would be less likely to survive and pass on our genes.) This bond of natural affection also tends to extend to other loved ones, such as spouses, parents, siblings, and close friends. The Stoics believed that as we mature in wisdom we increasingly identify with our own capacity for reason, but we also begin to identify with others insofar as *they're* capable of reason. In other words, the wise man extends moral consideration to all rational creatures and views them, in a sense, as his brothers and sisters. That's why the Stoics described their ideal as *cosmopolitanism*, or being "citizens of the universe"—a phrase attributed both to Socrates and Diogenes the Cynic. Stoic ethics involves cultivating this natural affection toward other people in accord with virtues like justice, fairness, and kindness. Although this social dimension of Stoicism is often overlooked today, it's one of the main themes of *The Meditations*. Marcus touches on topics such as the virtues of justice and kindness, natural affection, the brotherhood of man, and ethical cosmopolitanism on virtually every page.

Another popular misconception today is that Stoics are *unemotional*. The ancient Stoics themselves consistently denied this, saying that their ideal was *not* to be like a man of iron or to have a heart of stone. In fact, they distinguished between *three* types of emotion: good, bad, and indifferent. They had names for many different types of *good* passion (*eupatheiai*), a term encompassing both desires and emotions, which they grouped under three broad headings:

1. A profound sense of *joy* or gladness and peace of mind, which comes from living with wisdom and virtue
2. A healthy feeling of *aversion* to vice, like a sense of conscience, honor, dignity, or integrity
3. The *desire to help* both ourselves and others, through friendship, kindness, and goodwill

They also believed that we have many irrational desires and emotions, like fear, anger, craving, and certain forms of pleasure that are *bad* for us. Stoics did not believe that unhealthy emotions should be suppressed; rather, they should be replaced by healthy ones. However, these healthy emotions aren't entirely under our control, and we're not always guaranteed to experience them, so we shouldn't confuse them with virtue, the goal of life. For Stoics, they're like an added bonus.

They also taught that our initial *automatic* feelings are to be viewed as natural and *indifferent*. These include things like being startled or irritated, blushing, turning pale, tensing up, shaking, sweating, or stammering. They are natural *reflex* reactions, our first reactions before we escalate them into full-blown passions. We share these primitive precursors to emotion with some non-human animals, and so the Stoics view them with indifference, as neither good nor bad. Indeed, Seneca, as we'll see, noted the paradox that before we can exhibit the virtues of courage and moderation, we need to have at least some trace of fear and desire to overcome.

Even the Stoic wise man, therefore, may tremble in the face of danger. What matters is what he does next. He exhibits courage and self-control precisely by accepting these feelings, rising above them, and asserting his capacity for reason. He's not entranced by the siren song of pleasure or afraid of the sting of pain.

Some pains have the potential to make us stronger, and some pleasures to harm us. What matters is the use we make of these experiences, and for that we need wisdom. The wise man will *endure* pain and discomfort, such as undergoing surgery or engaging in strenuous physical exercise, if it's healthy for his body and, more important, if it's healthy for his character. He'll likewise forgo pleasures like eating junk food, indulging in drugs or alcohol, or oversleeping if they are unhealthy for his body or bad for his character. Everything comes back to the exercise of reason and the goal of living wisely.

By now you'll appreciate how much confusion is caused by people mixing up "Stoicism" (capital S) with "stoicism" (lowercase s). Lowercase stoicism is just a personality trait: it's mental *toughness* or the ability to endure pain and adversity without complaining. Uppercase Stoicism is a whole school of Greek philosophy. Being emotionally tough or resilient is just one *small* part of that philosophy, and lowercase stoicism neglects the entire social dimension of Stoic virtue, which has to do with justice, fairness, and kindness to others. Also, when people talk about being stoic or having a stiff upper lip, they often mean just suppressing their feelings, which is actually known to be quite *unhealthy*. So it's important to be very clear that's *not* what Marcus Aurelius and other Stoics recommended. Stoic philosophy teaches us instead to transform unhealthy emotions into healthy ones. We do so by using reason to challenge the value judgments and other beliefs on which they're based, much as we do in modern rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).

In the following chapters you'll learn about the different ways in which Stoicism can be applied to life in order to overcome specific types of psychological problems, including pain, worry, anger, and loss. Stories about the life of Marcus Aurelius provide a human face for the philosophy and will furnish us with practical examples of Stoic strategies and techniques. We'll start by looking at Marcus's early life and education because that gets right to the heart of the matter by introducing *the Stoic use of language*.

Appendix

THE HELLENISTIC SCHOOLS OF PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

Wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.

—Plato, *Theaetetus,* 155

Throughout this book we have talked about ethics, specifically from the point of view of the Stoics. Ethics, of course, is one of the classical branches of philosophy, the other ones being aesthetics (concerned with beauty and art), epistemology (the study of how we know things), logic (dedicated to understanding reason), and metaphysics (to comprehend the nature of the world).

But as we saw at the beginning of the book, "ethics" has a different meaning today than it did for the ancient Greco-Romans, and of course the Stoics' wasn't the only approach to its study. While modern ethics is essentially concerned with which actions are right or wrong, premodern philosophers conceived of ethics as the much broader inquiry into how to live a happy life, the pursuit of which they deemed to be a human being's most important endeavor. But a happy life can be pursued in different ways, depending on which concept of *eudaimonia* —the flourishing life—one adopts. The major Hellenistic schools of philosophy differed primarily on just this point, and it is useful to get a sense of what the alternatives to Stoicism were—and still are. After all, together with *A Guide to the Good Life*'s author Bill Irvine, I believe that adopting and adapting a philosophy of life to guide you is more important than whichever specific philosophy you end up choosing.

True, there are some pretty awful "philosophies" out there that are not conducive to human flourishing. But there are also several alternatives that may make more sense to you personally —I don't want to leave you with the incorrect impression that it's Stoicism or bust! I will not discuss the variety of life philosophies that arose within the Eastern tradition—Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and the like—because I simply don't know enough about them, and because there are already plenty of excellent resources out there that the interested reader can make use of. Here it will be instructive to take a quick look at those that came out of the Western tradition in the Hellenistic period, before the rise of Christianity. What follows is a simplified genealogical tree of the major Hellenistic schools that either focused on or had a lot to say about the good life.

As you can see, it all began with Socrates. Stemming from different interpretations of his teachings, a trio of schools arose: Plato's Academy, Aristippus's Cyrenaics, and Antisthenes's Cynicism. Aristotelianism originated from within the Academy (which Aristotle frequented), Cyrenaism led to Epicureanism, and Cynicism birthed Stoicism—although the actual relationships among all these schools are best thought of as many-to-many rather than in terms of linear descent, given the reciprocal influences that took place over centuries. Let's take a brief look at each—who knows, it may turn out that after having learned this much about Stoicism you are really a Cynic or, Zeus forbid, an Epicurean!

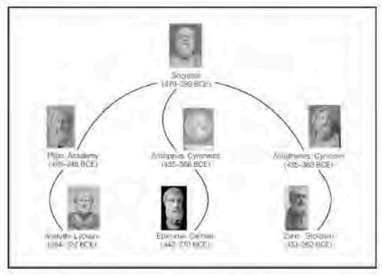


Figure A.1. The historical and conceptual relationships among the main Hellenistic schools of philosophy and how they diverged from the thinking of Socrates. *Source*: After Figure 1 in Gordon, "Modern Morality and Ancient Ethics," *Internet Encycopedia of Philosophy.*

Socraticism: We know what Socrates taught mostly (though not exclusively) from the early Platonic dialogues (for example, *Laches, Charmides,* and *Protagoras*). His was the prototype of the ethical approaches to virtue in which wisdom is the Chief Good, the only thing that is always good because it is necessary to make proper use of everything else. For Socrates, our moral imperative is to examine our life, and reason is our best guide in doing so. The eudaimonic life, according to him, consists in acting in the right way, and evil is the result of ignorance, or *amathia* (in other words, nobody purposefully wants to do bad things).

Platonism (the Academy): Plato, in the later dialogues, maintained crucial aspects of Socrates's view (critically, that the eudaimonic life is one of practicing virtue), while at the same time adding a number of metaphysical notions and recasting things in terms of his famous theory of Forms, where the abstract and idealized Form of the Good is the transcendent principle of all goodness. He eventually subordinated individual flourishing to societal needs, as in the Republic, where the ideal state reflects the tripartite division of the human soul, and philosophers, naturally, are in charge of it—just as reason is in charge of the "spirited" and "appetitive" parts of the individual soul.

Aristotelianism (the Peripatetic school, the Lyceum): For Aristotle too, the point of life was to achieve eudaimonia through the practice of the virtues (of which he identified a whopping twelve). In Aristotle's view, there is a proper function for everything in the world, including humans: our proper function is to use reason, so using reason well is the way to live a eudaimonic life. However, we also need some external goods, such as a supportive family and societal environment, some degree of education, health, and wealth, and even some good looks. Crucially, then, being able to live a eudaimonic life is not entirely within the grasp of the agent: some luck, in the form of favorable circumstances, is also needed.

Cyrenaism: Aristippus of Cyrene was, tellingly enough, the first of Socrates's disciples to actually take money for his services. For him, the primary purpose of life was not long-term happiness but rather the moment-to-moment experience of bodily pleasures. To achieve this, one needs practical virtue, but only

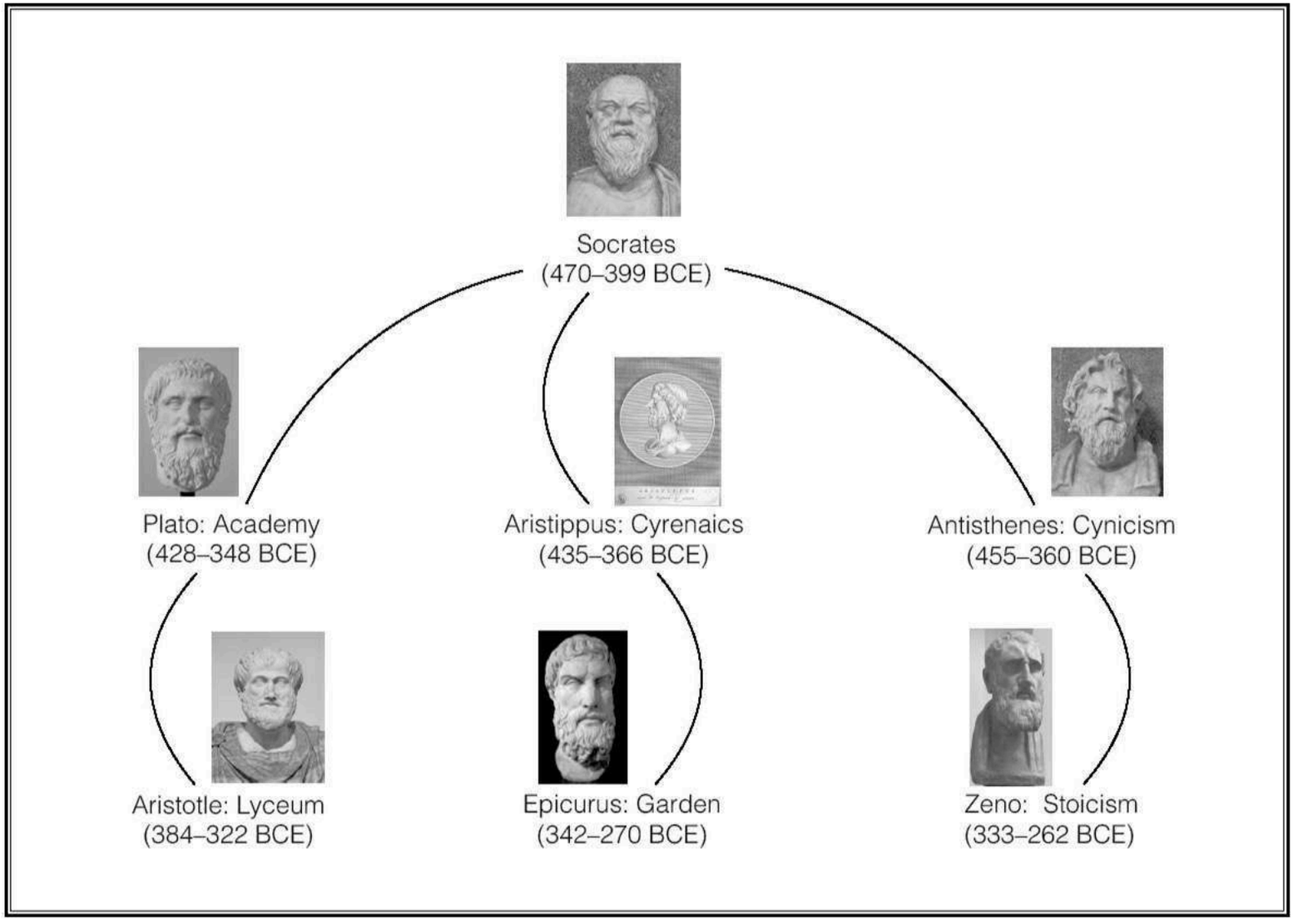
instrumentally, in order to seek pleasure. Still, we shouldn't think of the Cyrenaics as simply being into sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, but rather as seeking what might be called enlightened hedonism. As Aristippus put it: "I possess, but I am not possessed." Self-control was important in order to maintain cheerfulness while making the best of every situation.

Epicureanism (the Garden): Epicurus too taught that life is about increasing one's pleasure and (especially) reducing one's pain. But Epicurean hedonism was much more sophisticated than its Cyrenaic counterpart (despite later Christian smearing, deployed in a successful attempt to fight a threatening rival sect). For one thing, it included mental pleasures, which were considered superior to bodily ones, and happiness was not just a moment-by-moment thing but a lifelong process. The Epicurean way included freeing oneself from prejudice (especially of a religious nature), mastering one's desires, living a modest life, and cultivating friendship. Crucially, however, Epicureans counseled withdrawal from social and political life (because it was much more likely to bring about pain than pleasure).

Cynicism: According to Antisthenes of Athens, the founder of the Cynic school, virtue understood as practical wisdom is not only necessary for a eudaimonic life but also sufficient. That is why the Cynics took the already rather frugal Socratic lifestyle to an extreme. Think of Diogenes of Sinope, Antisthenes's student, who famously lived in a tub, begged for a living, and flaunted just about any social convention. Many Stoics admired the Cynics, and our friend Epictetus devoted the long chapter 22 of the third book of his *Discourses* to an encomium of Cynicism. As he put it, if you really can't be a Cynic, at least be a Stoic.

Stoicism: Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, learned his philosophy initially from Crates, who was a Cynic and disciple of Diogenes of Sinope. As the reader by now knows well, Stoicism struck a middle ground between Aristotelianism and Cynicism, while at the same time strongly rejecting Epicureanism. The Stoics granted to the Cynics that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for happiness, but also nodded toward the Peripatetics in recovering (some) interest in external goods, which they classified into preferred and dispreferred indifferents, to be pursued, or avoided, so long as they do not compromise one's integrity of character.

All in all, there was a nice conceptual progression and ramification from the Socratic starting point: the Platonic/Aristotelian branch stuck close to Socratic eudaimonism, but the Platonists went mystical (the theory of Forms, the ideal Republic), while the Aristotelians turned pragmatic (some external goods are necessary to achieve eudaimonia). The Cyrenaic/Epicurean branch abandoned the centrality of virtue and turned toward the pleasure-pain dichotomy instead, with the crucial difference that the Cyrenaics considered only bodily moment-to-moment pleasures, while the Epicureans most valued intellectual and lifelong pleasures. (Echoes of their philosophy can be heard in John Stuart Mill and modern utilitarian ethics.) Finally, the Cynic/Stoic branch stuck with the Socratic primacy of virtue, with the Cynics turning to an ascetic lifestyle and the Stoics elaborating a way to recover (and yet put into perspective) what most people would consider desirable externals. Both of these schools were highly influential throughout the history of Christianity.


Socrates
(470–399 BCE)
Plato: Academy
(428–348 BCE)
Aristippus: Cyrenaics
(435–366 BCE)
Antisthenes: Cynicism
(455–360 BCE)
Aristotle: Lyceum
(384–322 BCE)
Epicurus: Garden
(342–270 BCE)
Zeno: Stoicism
(333–262 BCE)