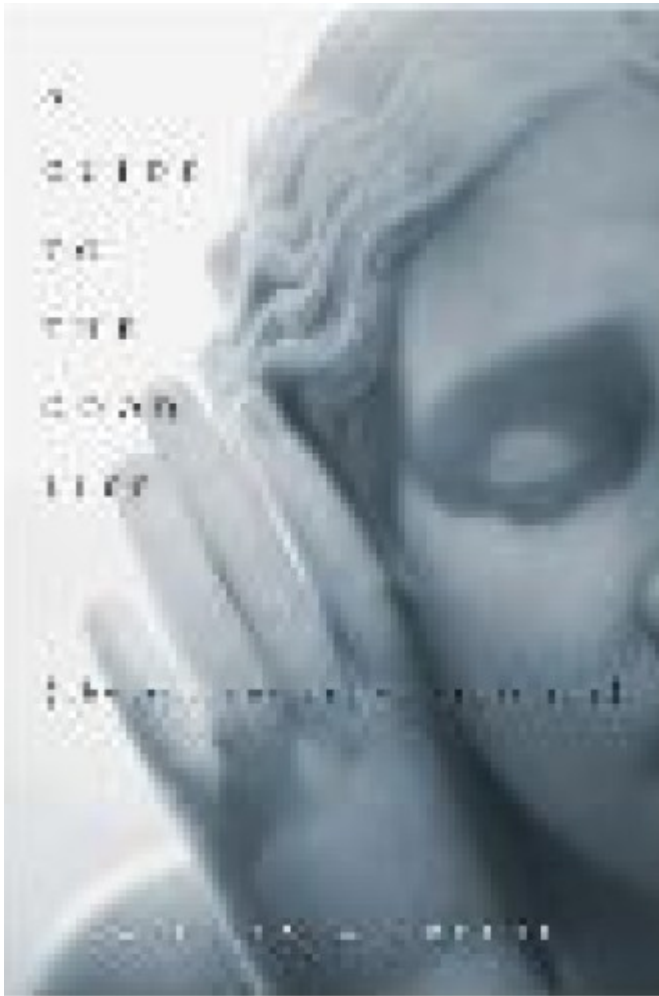


A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy

reviewed by [Gordon D. Marino](#) in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

In Review



A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy

William B. Irvine
Oxford University Press

Aristotle famously asserted, "Philosophy begins in wonder." Sometimes I wonder about that. My experience has been that many of us who join the Socrates guild initially do so because we want to be healed of deep vexations. As Irvine quotes Epicurus, "Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is not profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind."

But while Socrates may inspire the lifelong search for healing wisdom, the academic field of philosophy is another beast. One career hoop leads to another and, alas, to exhaustion; the thirst for transformative knowledge is no longer so urgent. William Irvine, however, has managed to stay forever young, to keep searching in his studies for life-changing ideas. In this clear and engaging volume his quest takes him into the philosophical precincts of Stoicism.

For Irvine, the pivot to Stoicism started when he was conducting research for his book *On Desire: Why We Want What We Want*. At the time, he explored a host of religious takes on the subject and then turned to Zen Buddhism. He writes, "I had long been intrigued by Zen Buddhism and imagined that on taking a closer look at it in connection with my research, I would become a full-fledged convert." But instead he discovered a substantial overlap between Zen and Stoicism: both take tranquillity as their ultimate goal and both teach that tranquillity is impossible unless one comes to terms with the transitory nature of existence.

Irvine resolved not only to make a careful study of the ancient Stoics but to practice what Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and other Stoics preached. His life was enriched by his new practice, and the result is an unusual text that is both an offering in the history of philosophy and a self-help book.

Intellectual historians credit Zeno of Citium (334–262 BC) as the founder of the Stoic school, which derives its name from the fact that Zeno and his interlocutors met on a *stoa*, or porch. As significant as the impact of Stoicism was on Christianity and civilization, the Stoics are a relatively neglected cadre of philosophers. *A Guide to the Good Life* commences with a helpful summation of the lives and views of the most influential Roman Stoics: Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius.

With the groundwork laid, Irvine packages some of the most useful techniques of these thinkers. One of the canonical truths of Stoicism is that everything is passing. We must learn to accept the transitory nature of existence—our own included. Irvine writes, “While enjoying the companionship of loved ones . . . we should periodically stop to reflect on the possibility that this enjoyment will come to an end. If nothing else, our own death will end it.” He paraphrases Epictetus, who counsels that when we kiss one of our children, we should “remember that she is mortal and not something we own—that she has been given to us ‘for the present, not inseparably nor forever.’”

On the issue of how to cope with the flux, there is significant tension between Stoicism and Buddhism on the one hand, and Christianity on the other. Once again, both Stoics and Buddhists insist that we will have no peace until we come to accept that nothing endures. Christianity, however, promises every Nicodemus something unchanging, an eternal life. From a Stoic and Buddhist vantage point, such hopes and convictions invite attachments and are a stumbling block to the good life.

In order to help us appreciate and desire what has been given to us, Irvine advises us to practice the art of “negative visualization.” When we sit by the fireplace with our wife or husband, we should picture what it would be like if we were homeless, or if our loved one were not there, and this will help us to want what we already have. And that is the Stoic key: align your desires with the universe.

As this logic goes, when some event disturbs your inner peace, you should picture something worse. You lost your job? Well then, imagine losing your health as well as your job.

By way of an example, permit me to trot out a personal misfortune that continues to nip at my heels. A few years ago my wife and I were recruited to teach at a major university in Florida. We moved there from Minnesota and built the home of our dreams out in the lush forest. Having grown up in close proximity with nature, I was in seventh heaven, so much so that I literally told my helpmate, “This is too good to be true.”

It was just that. Our jobs went sour and we decided to move back up north to our former, enviable positions. At the same time, the housing market crashed, and after two years we still have not sold our home. When the brutal winters come to Minnesota, I get very depressed and think of the Shangri-la that we built. A natural

stoic or repressor, my wife couldn't brook my moaning and inevitably snapped, "Just let it go! You have a job that you love here." And she had a point, but when it is 20 below I still slip into a nasty funk about the Florida house.

According to our stoic therapist, I should have treated the whole Florida experience as though it were temporary to begin with—maybe along the lines of a vacation. After the floor fell out, I should have continually reminded myself that it could be much worse. I have tried to follow the prescription but to little avail.

Like philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, I am inclined to think that we would be better off to acknowledge the abattoir that we are living in than to pretend to be grateful for breaking one leg instead of two. I think the "it could be worse" cliché impedes a sense of true human solidarity.

Epictetus begins his *Enchiridion* with these famous words: "Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions." The supreme tenet of Stoicism is that attainment of the good life requires first that we distinguish between what is and is not in our control and then that we concern ourselves only with what is within our purview.

Tweaking the words of his ancient teacher, Irvine argues that much of life falls between the two poles of complete control and no control. He counsels readers to transform these aspects of life into internalized goals: I should aim to be the best tennis player I can be instead of to win a particular tournament; my goal should be to work as hard as possible, rather than to gain my boss's approval.

Today philosophy often comes off as set of cute puzzles and abstruse theories about issues that do not much matter. To the serious seeker, philosophy can seem not only far from wisdom but headed in the wrong direction. *A Guide to the Good Life* is not of this ilk. Irvine's calm yet impassioned presentation of a Western philosophy of life that one can actually abide by and practice will be good medicine for many readers. Though I could not entirely swallow it, I heartily recommend it.