



Five Stoic Preparations for a Digital World **Professor Jennifer Baker**

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Virtues and the Digital World

Five Stoic Preparations for a Digital World

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30 minutes

I would like to point out five distinct ways in which stoic virtue ethics “prepares” one for the challenge and hazards of online technology. Each of these “preparations” is already a part of stoic virtue ethics (I will use capital “S” “Stoicism” and signal this verbally, too, if referring to the full ancient account instead of contemporary ethics) and differs from what we already have in terms of general guidance: warnings in the form of summary of current (and impressive) data and some good tips.¹

Instead, these stoic preparations are substantial in this sense: they offer counterproposals to common and easily understandable (though mistaken) assumptions about good, and they are philosophical enough, in the sense of requiring a bit of revision of not just our behavior, but our own previous views, ends or beliefs even, self-ascriptions typically, in order to apply. I want to suggest that if these stoic prescriptions were offered to agents they would encourage attention to the dual questions of a) why we need the internet, social media and technology and b) *how* these may be causing us harm despite how enjoyable these seem to us.²

Due to the substantial and philosophical nature of these preparations, which I hope to indicate enough in this talk, I think this approach, a virtue ethics-based approach, can reach agents directly in a way that data on the downsides to online technology use do not. But, I should hurry to say, since stoic ethics is known for being ancient, it is also naturalistic and therefore must work in concert with empirical research on what researchers can be find calling the “negative potential hazards” of digital living, those that range from the clinical to the less clinical

¹ There are many examples of evidence-based recommendations that experts word very carefully for a general readership. As just one:

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf

² Perrin A, Jiang J. About a quarter of US adults say they are ‘almost constantly’ online. *Pew Research Center*, March 14, 2018.

(such as social disconnect, overwork, depersonalization, undue focus on short-term and digitized rewards to the neglect of longer-term pursuits, an anxious focus on personal presentation across multiple and complex mediums, and an exaggerated fear of judgment and a feeling of being addicted).³

Here is my basic assumption, shared, of course, by so many character education researchers: if we treat our own behavior as a moral phenomenon we are filling in the gaps that always remain between data on harms and the trade-offs and decisions agents themselves make. This gap would be filled by the way virtue ethics approaches moral phenomenon, but especially the way stoic virtue ethics does, highlighting the role of sorting through norms with practical rationality: we must develop standards for our behavior even apart from having full picture of how a course of behavior might go for us and others. In other words, “what concerns an agent” or “what an agent experience or imagines” or even “finds appropriate” is fine subject matter for a virtue ethics. This content is taken up by an agent’s practical reasoning, compared to their self-understanding, and then considered along with present norms and personal experience in following those.

Larry Becker, who offers a readily usable version of a contemporary stoic virtue ethics, emphasizes the role of norms in stoic practical rationality in this way. For virtue ethics, practical reasoning is what solves “problems of clarifying and operationalizing the end (of our endeavors), finding effective means for reaching the end within the constraints of the project, and generating norms of reformative assessment.”⁵ We are not done, in other words, until we have generated norms, ones we can articulate and share. We identify and support “normative propositions” in these efforts. Why is this? Well, we may just have a proclivity for it. Becker suggests this much.⁴ But unlike recommended or admired attitudes, specified norms also readily serve as objects for an agent’s own moral deliberation. Recommending a norm continues to engage our moral reasoning: when following any norm, an agent must still ask herself whether she is doing so in a way that is honorable, beneficial, or if there is any conflict between either of these appearances. Furthermore, it is useful that we can describe good behavior through reference to a

³ Stiglic N, Viner RM, “Effects of Screentime on the Health and Well-being of Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review of Reviews” *BMJ Open* 2019.

⁴ Becker describes as our proclivity for thinking and acting “consistently,” in, as he puts it, an “informal,” “unsystematic,” and “serviceable” sort of way. Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

recommended norm without having acted in accordance with it ourselves. The recommendation of a norm moves us from a focus on narrowly defined self-interested explanations to more generalizable concerns. Anyway, new norms are what these five stoic preparations are aiming for.

I have tried to give ancient Stoic examples of this being done in some of my other work, but other virtue ethics can share some of this same understanding of practical rationality.⁵ David Wiggins, in a close read of Aristotle's description of practical rationality, makes clear an aspect of Aristotle's account that is crucial to practical recommendation. It helps me to highlight the similarities between a stoic and other eudaimonistic virtue ethics and also the differences between a virtue ethics approach and orthodox Kantianism or consequentialism.

“No theory, if it is to recapitulate or reconstruct practical reasoning even as well as mathematical logic recapitulates or reconstructs the actual experience of conducting or exploring deductive argument, can treat the concerns which an agent brings to a situation as forming a closed, complete, consistent system. For it is to be the essence of these concerns to make competing and inconsistent claims. (This is a mark not of irrationality, but of rationality in the face of the plurality of ends and the plurality of human goods.) The weight of the claims represented by these concerns is not necessarily fixed in advance. Nor need the concerns be hierarchically ordered. Indeed, a man's reflection on a new situation that confronts him may disrupt such order and fixity as had previously existed and bring a change in his evolving conception of the point, or at several or many points, of living and acting.”⁶¹¹

Perhaps this is enough to motivate these Stoic preparations, which I feel like I am keeping us waiting on, as an alternative to “competing and inconsistent claims” with which we all work. But

⁵It would be nice to eliminate the impression that practical rationality is a “mysterious” component in virtue ethics (that “the virtuous, simply in virtue of their virtues” know what they are to do) about which we should be skeptical. Instead, thinking in terms of virtue is so “unmysterious that it is easily seen to be open to anyone who embarks on learning to be virtuous to begin with.” Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 56. Irene McMullin also demonstrates the non-mysterious nature of practical rationality in her recent book.

⁶ David Wiggins, “Deliberation and Practical Wisdom,” Amelie O. Rorty, ed. *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (University of California Press, 1980), 233.

to a consequentialist who may be doubting why we should generalize about behavior at all since it risks calculating the cost benefit ratio incorrectly? Virtue ethics responds that to understand ourselves is to identify and endorse general norms we consider moral. To a Kantian, who might be annoyed already that I have not “gotten to it” and prescribed digital behavior for us all, as is, of course, surprising common in guidance on online behavior (with no reference to Kantian premises in sight). To this I point out that a further, particular benefit that eudaimonist virtue ethics promises is that following norms we can develop, recognize, and endorse is a way to strengthen our agency, making us more efficacious, more integrated, and happier.⁷ So there is a self-test, a psychological check on all of this. (Psychological feedback is never a simple matter. And we are often very slow to recognize that a course of behavior has made us feel in appropriately negatively about ourselves, or has swept us away, or kept us from feeling efficacious and grounded.)

And it is true that we can already, without any suggestions from a stoic, run our own checks on the various pieces of guidance and many bits of caution we get about our use of online technology. But I will want to contrast the type of guidance we get, even the sort we derive from experiments and ongoing data collection (such as online sites no longer allowing commenting to be anonymous in the hopes of increasing civility). These, I will argue, are both presented and generated in a more *ad hoc* fashion than are stoic preparations. Even if we attempt to follow some advice and it works, if it is not connected to an account of what we ought to value and why, my concern is that we can detect some psychological benefit (better sleep, for example, if we leave the internet a bit earlier than we had)—but not improved self-understanding in terms of our morality. And finally, there is one more potential benefit to agents designing their own rules for themselves: this is to build in some motivation. The behavioral scientist George Ainslie describes a subcategory of these norms, and he depicts them as being self-authored if they are effective. He gives examples and they seem to be catered to the agent herself, designed for herself, even if the

⁷ By modern-day stoic ethics I have in mind an account like that of Larry Becker’s *A New Stoicism*. As I mentioned, stoic virtue ethics foregrounds the role practical reasoning plays in assessing our digital habits. Though I do, of course, hope that this puts a stoic type of virtue ethics in better light than it typically gets granted, any virtue ethics that centers practical rationality would be able to borrow these “preparations.” I think a stoic approach works more readily for the revision and generation of self-ascribed rules for digital life, but, of course, ethical theories of all stripes can borrow reasoning when it seems good.

“rule” might sound more general (“no internet on the Sabbath”).⁸

Of course, it is typical to think some advice sounds good and not follow it. But the stoic preparations I will now list do not seem to me to be the sort of advice that makes any sense without philosophical explanation.

The five preparations I would like to discuss are these:

1. Our time is best spent pursuing virtue.
2. Our own behavior has lasting impact on us whether it gets detected (is anonymous) or not.
3. Comparative assessments of how well a person is doing are misleading and often even false.
4. Our ability to choose well does not depend on accessing all available news.
5. And finally, that, being part of common humanity, we may as well “live as if upon a mountain” and share our experiences with all others, online.

If I can start with the last, going in reverse order, this stoic instruction reflects some of the particular content of stoicism, and perhaps makes a weak case when it comes to my promise that stoic preparation engages agents philosophically. This might seem more like a set of claims to merely be taken up, rather than requiring the rigor described by Wiggins. It might seem more like an “outlook” than much of an argument, a mere reminder that we are not unique among people and we are here, in a society, sharing all that we have. This directly pertains to social media use, however.⁹ And I think it is important to emphasize what is rightfully attractive about the technology. Stoic virtue ethics, as even just an outlook, as a time-tested view with content, is not at odds with sharing even the small details of our lives with strangers. We will, of course, have different reasons for sharing on social media, and even different motivations each time we consider doing so. Those are to be examined even though I think the increased connectivity is

⁸ George Ainslie, “Procrastination: The Basic Impulse”, Chrisoula Andreou and Mark White, eds. *The Thief of Time: Philosophical Essays on Procrastination* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 11-27.

⁹ Though it would be a very complex argument to suggest that our interests in online data privacy are premised on assumptions at odds with this Stoic one, I have tried something like that, but will certainly leave it to the side for now.

something a Stoic would celebrate. Stoic virtue ethics would recommend that we pause and ask ourselves earnestly: Why am I sharing this? Is it to be seen? (What then am I missing to need this?) It is to make some point indirectly? (Why am I not making it directly?) Am I attempting to make myself seem better than others? (How did I come to think this is effective in any way?) Am I seeking approval? (What has led me to think “likes” are meaningful feedback for me?) Is this honest? Though we may not be good at recognizing false communication, and this causes so many problems socially, we do seem to recognize, ourselves, that there are additional checks to our veracity if we publish.¹⁰ This type of thing (even the challenge of being honest online) is a stoic good. And let it count as one further point in favor of this preparation being philosophical when I remind us that stoic virtue ethics does not suggest that poor reactions to our well-motivated behavior be factored into the goodness of the behavior. This is a component of both a consequentialist and a Kantian-style approach, interestingly. But let me suggest stoic virtue ethics resists it. Let me move on to the related preparation four.

4. Our ability to choose well does not depend on accessing all available news.

Famously, Epictetus emphasized the heuristic of recognizing what is “up to us” and what is “not to up to us.” It was a technique used to keep us from associating ourselves with events with which we have no promise of overcoming or controlling. It is also, I would argue, not meant to suggest quietism or passivity, which would be at odds with the actions Stoics would take in the face of injustice. In any case, whether taking up the emphasis in the way Epictetus does or not, a stoic will emphasize that we are not transformed by keeping up with everything that is happen on this planet. We certainly have some agency, but we need to understand its limits and how it gets

¹⁰ The complexity of the analyses of the temptations of online communication have been so carefully analyzed by researchers, who find a vast array of effects. Scott, G.G., & Fullwood. C. (2020). Does recent research evidence support the hyperpersonal model of online impression management? *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 36, 106- 111.

informed. There is a division of roles, we would sap our own and each other's times if each of us were only being fed new information about new events, and we have misunderstood the point of agency if we feel we must be informed but passive receptacles of the news. Given the urgency with which we attend to news, I think it would be fair to call it a compulsive kind of feeling we have regarding news, a stoic would think we have made some judgments about our worthiness mixed along with the value of understanding current events. And if the desire for news, or its near constant input, is strong enough, the Stoics do suggest there is a large error involved.

Again, practical advice need not be stoic. One response to our being over-attached to staying current is to suggest we schedule some technology-free days, or at least a day. This is clever because it works as an excuse as much as a time-out from the news-seeking. But let me suggest that even practical advice that brings good results might be enhanced with consideration of virtue ethics. What a stoic virtue ethics could offer, to back up the effort to keep yourself from feeling obligated to know as much as possible about ongoing, endlessly new events, is the idea that good behavior is not dependent on this information. Pointing out times when we base moral decisions on information that changes, events that go differently than expected, is one way to caution us to not take on a role as "keeper of the news," but stoic virtue ethics can also point to the role that the view promises will be most satisfactory, and one that is in conflict with constant news-attending: that of being a practically rational agent, working on norms to develop and then test in living.

3. Comparative assessments of how well a person is doing are misleading and often even false.

Many of us experience first-hand one negative impact of social media: an anxious focus on personal presentation across multiple and complex mediums along with an exaggerated fear of judgment. Some people, of course, simply avoid what they can, self-aware to the extent that they know they are susceptible to these unpleasant and distracting reactions. I think there is quite a bit of stoicism in that stance. Others of us face the challenges of recognizing what ought to change. Do we wish, for example, for others to change? Or do we wish to develop a type of resilience to the challenges of comparing ourselves or being judged (based on information we ourselves have offered up!) as lesser in any number of ways?

Here I think stoic virtue ethics has some arguments that are not very wide-spread and even a critique of a practice. Attempts to lessen the basis of comparison with warnings that someone is only presenting their best or curated moments on social media are harmful distractions from the understanding the stoics would encourage: your goodness is not a matter of comparison and others doing well is of benefit. Of course, a stoic would not say to someone feeling left out and behind by social media that her feelings do not matter. This is false and cruel and would be nothing like the offer of an alternative to the assumption that our worth is a matter of some comparative advantage.

Stoic virtue ethics can offer, instead of the confusion of wanting to compete with strangers online, a testable account of our good or flourishing. It promises improvements in our self-understanding if we take these up, and beneficence as something we experience as a result of this understanding. Let me give a simple example. A mother reported to the news media that due to presentations on the internet, her daughter was feeling very bad about herself for being heavy. What to do? The stoic suggestion is to reject the desire to be approved of in this manner. This is not a reflection of folk wisdom of course; this is instead the result of ethical arguments that reach counter-intuitive conclusions. But the stoic ethicists are there for us when our desires become ridiculous and unsatisfiable. What is it exactly that we think we would gain from even objectively high levels of public approval, they ask. There are not good reasons for much of what we desire, they argue. Parents inspired by stoic ethics would signal to children (as sensitively as possible, of course, this would never work if not) why and how wanting approval, even for qualities we generally laud and appreciate, is the wrong sort of aim. Any real distress over not satisfying this desire would be addressed, by a stoic, with an attempt to point out the problems with the end itself. Some of the problems with pursuit of comparative advantage or large amounts of online approval are these:

*It is a way of competing with others that, on reflection, is at odds with our shared purposes and love of each other. This is a losing game.

*Even though the focus may be on what one wants for one's self, it is actively disrespectful of others. Would it be so terrible to be the unliked and unadmired? Of course not, stoicism argues. Is the burden of comparison a result of wanting to distinguish yourself from the "losers" as much

as to catch up to the “winners?” Stoic virtue ethics suggests “yes” and, of course, argues that virtue is what we ought to be pursuing instead (I get to that with the last preparation!).

2. Our own behavior has lasting impact on us whether it gets detected (is anonymous) or not.

Stoic virtue ethics recommends that we directly evaluate things we do as a matter of routine or through social influence. We often engage in behavior that we have trouble justifying, and the Stoic task is to stop to look for what justifies behavior that has been called to our attention (for any number of a great range of reason). The idea that, when we earnestly do this, it is difficult to fool ourselves is one tenet of Stoicism. Contemporary Cognitive Behavioral Therapy nicely illustrates some of the same (and yet also the ways we do fail to self-reflect until prompted).

But a stoic virtue ethics insists, far beyond CBT’s methodology, that a lack of self-understanding results from pursuing non-moralized ends and a non-moralized self-identify. Outside of the theory, this must seem harmless. Why not think we are a “well-liked, respected person”? Such therapeutic advice is seen itself as a hazard to a stoic virtue ethicist, as it will come with stress over this identity needing support and being at stake.

A second tenet of eudaimonist virtue ethics is that idea that your behavior is not a one-off but is has an impact on your future self. In fact, all eudaimonistic virtue ethics maintains that we can recognize when we are acting unimpressively by our own lights. Eudaimonist virtue ethics anticipates a psychological “kick” when we do this. As Aristotle made clear in the *Rhetoric*, agents are themselves the best test of our norms, standards, and claims, because we experience tensions in these as a form of felt distress. In order to make something ancient more plausibly modern, we can turn to the evidence gathered by behavior scientists on how we experience negative feedback as a form of willpower failure, lowering our expectations for doing what do find impressive each time we register doing something unimpressive. These scientists call “distortions of planning” the self-deluding tactics we engage in to excuse some bit of behavior we cannot justify, and it reduces what they call “self-efficacy,” or your own trust in yourself.¹¹ We all experience this as we do something as common as procrastinate. But I want to suggest that these basic tenets are enough to provide caution to people engaging in any disinhibited or

¹¹ Ainslie, George, *Ibid.*

toxic anonymous commentary to, instead, imagine your name is associated with everything you write (even if you stay anonymous for the various reasons given for why that can be encouraging of open discussion and debate).¹² In other words, your anonymity is not relevant to the consequences that a stoic virtue ethics predicts for any behavior about which you are ashamed. The simple rule would be: do not write anything anonymously that you would not be proud to own under your name.

What challenges might this self-ascribed rule face? Well, we do often assume things that may be in tension with it. We might feel great or distracted or powerful when zinging another in a disinhibited manner. There are justifications ready: we may be stoking appetites or letting off steam. How would stoic virtue ethics counter these? I think it would be with the reminder that thoughtless behavior, once it approaches immorality, comes at great cost to our agency. Let me give an apt illustration.

In the reporting of writer Lindy West, writing about her frustration with an anonymous “troll,” one harassing her incessantly, even creating a twitter profile in the name of her deceased father, prompted the “troll” to write and apologize.¹³ He explained in his email to her (they later met) that he did not know why or when he started trolling her. He guessed that he was jealous of her happiness “with her own being,” and—well, let me have him speak for himself:

“I can’t say sorry enough. It was the lowest thing I had ever done. When you included it in your latest Jezebel article it finally hit me. There is a living, breathing human being who is reading this shit. I am attacking someone who never harmed me in any way. And for no reason whatsoever. I’m done being a troll.’

¹² It has been challenging for researchers to compare how our anonymous communications differ from our non-anonymous communications online, simply because it is difficult to isolate the impact of anonymity. “Toxic” or “disinhibited” anonymous comments may be from only people with those inclinations more generally, and lab experiments seem to differ a bit from real-world temptations. It also does not seem that researchers have found only negative impacts from anonymity online, and we can easily think of benefits to this type of communication. Knustad, M.; Johansson, C. Anonymity and Inhibition in Newspaper Comments. *Information* 2021, 12, 106. <https://doi.org/10.3390/info12030106>

¹³ Lindy West, “What Happened When I Confronted My Cruellest Troll” *The Guardian*, 2 Feb 2015

This is a good representation of how exactly stoic virtue ethics believes we come to do the wrong things, through misunderstanding ourselves and failing to reason.

1. Our time is best spent pursuing virtue.

Since a stoic virtue ethics does not maintain the idea that there are parts, or discrete aspects, of a soul or human personality they do not invoke explanations about how we might have merely been depleted in terms of agential energy, or focus on the idea that right intentions can be overpowered or reoccur in time.¹⁴ Let me do some summing up: stoic virtue ethics will instead set you to look for the false belief you are maintaining about either a lack of choice in regard to online time (or, let's say you have become addicted, your power over that time). Again, a bit like a cognitive behavioral therapist, they will look to undercover beliefs about why you think it is important to be online (to win arguments, to know more, to assert yourself somehow). They will deny the good of any of these or deny that they are good without encouraging your virtue, putting the "ends" you are pursuing into conscious relief and integrating them with the rest of what you think is good (peace of mind, a full night's sleep, getting outside). Sometimes the ends we mistakenly take to be justified and final are difficult to access, and difficult to change. This lack of consciousness of what we are aiming at is what causes emotional discord and explains losing track of one's self online (in terms of time spent and understanding).

But this may explain why we should not "troll," but what explains why we should not pursue "likes," and perhaps in a meaningful way, as a way to discern something about others. So we should not just insist your "likes" are unimportant. To one degree, you can recognize that you are not socially compatible with others if your posts are not welcome. To another, once you understand this, you can continue to post for good reason. Posting without getting approval is another way to strengthen your appreciation of your aims. Thinking of likes as indifferents is key here.¹⁵ They are good signs if your post is itself well-intentioned and well-designed, but they are

¹⁴ See Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993)

¹⁵ The notion of moral indifferents has more than a few detractors even in work in ancient ethical theory. A paper by Katja Vogt lists and responds to some of the accumulated concerns in Katja Maria Vogt, *Taking the Same Things Seriously and Not Seriously: A Stoic Proposal on Value and the Good*, ed. David Suits, *Epictetus and Stoicism: Continuing Influences and Contemporary Relevance* (RIT Cary Graphic Arts Press, 2014). Her conclusion is that the role of indifferents in

signs of social approval which virtue may very much lose, at times. This two-pronged set of considerations is just what a stoic balances: interest in the social reactions to one's efforts, when one is aiming for harmony with others (there are many bad behaviors that can be indicated in this way) but, at the same time, the ability to, if needed, disconnect from social approval in order to move forward with something that you are confident is the right thing to do. As Annas explains, on a stoic account of ethics, there is the offer of "a sharp separation between the external way of looking at the action, in terms of actual success of the result, and the internal way of looking at the action, in terms of the agent aiming at the kalon (the fine, good for its own sake)."¹⁶

Thank you for your time. I hope there is much to disagree with, as I began: this stoic account is surely philosophical and so truly benefits from consideration.

stoic ethics is focusses on "a pervasive task in ordinary life: taking the same thing seriously and not seriously." This is not the same as moral luck, but a way to address even more regular challenges in "ordinary life" and attitudes that many of us, especially those of us who are familiar, already maintain (she describes the role of ritual a way of taking a "step back" and "distancing herself form the concerns of daily life." Contemporary ethicists in philosophy tend to neglect these issues, she explains, and yet there is nothing strange about accounts that take them up.

¹⁶ Julia Annas, "Aristotle and Kant on Morality and Practical Reasoning," Whiting, J. and Engstrom, S., eds. *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 246.