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Stoicism Today: An alternative approach to cultivating the virtues

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Stoicism Today: An alternative approach to cultivating the virtues

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This paper is intended both as a contribution to theory on cultivating the virtues and to discussion of practical ways to promote this process today. The underlying claim is that we have good reason to give more attention to Stoicism than we normally do, rather than (or alongside) Aristotle, as a basis for evolving modern forms of virtue ethics and for using these to inform our practice. Stoicism was a Greco-Roman philosophical movement, active from the third century BC to the second century AD and probably the most influential ethical theory in this period. The paper begins by outlining the distinctive features of the Stoic theory of ethical development, including the role of the cultivation of virtues, and by defining salient differences from Aristotle's approach, regarding development and virtue ethics generally. I then show how the Stoic approach is reflected in the main themes of Stoic writings on ethical guidance from the Roman period. The latter topic has a practical as well as theoretical dimension, since these writings are available in accessible modern translations with notes and introductions, and so they can fruitfully be drawn on in contemporary attempts to promote the development of the virtues. I close the paper by reflecting on the implications of a public engagement project, 'Stoicism Today', in which I have been closely involved, for the question of the feasibility of promoting Stoic ideas on ethical development under modern conditions.

I The Stoic Theory of Ethical Development

Stoic thinking on ethical development, conceived as 'appropriation' or 'familiarisation' (*oikeiōsis*), was recognised in antiquity as a distinctive and innovative feature of their ethical theory. What is outlined here is an ideal programme of development, rarely if ever completed entirely, but one that Stoics insist falls within the natural capacities of all human beings. The process is often subdivided into two distinct but interdependent strands, personal or individual and social. In both strands, human beings are seen as developing from certain primary instincts, shared with non-human animals, to more advanced and complex ethical attitudes and understanding, informed by the distinctively human capacity for rationality. In the first strand, human beings move from instinctive self-preservation to rational selection of things that promote their nature such as health, property and a family or social context. This in turn leads to the progressive recognition that what matters, ultimately, is not securing these things ('primary natural things') for their own sake but doing so in a way that expresses the virtues. Put differently, this is the recognition that virtue is the only real good, the only thing worthy of unqualified choice, and that, in comparison with virtue, other things, such as health, are 'matters of indifference', though it is natural for us to 'prefer' them to their opposites.

The second strand in ethical development also takes its starting-point from a primary instinct seen as common to human and non-human animals, namely the desire to care for others of one's kind, of which the most obvious manifestation is parental love for offspring. In human beings, this develops into more complex and advanced forms of care for others of one's kind. It leads, on the one hand, to full-hearted and well-judged engagement in family life, friendship and community relationships. On the other hand, it leads to the recognition that all human beings are, in principle, appropriate objects of our care and are part of a larger brotherhood (or sisterhood) and are co-citizens in a world-community. The basis of the second idea is that all human beings

are akin to us in being naturally capable, as rational and social animals, of the same kind of ethical development as we are. Although we do not have extended theoretical discussions of the relationship between these two strands in ethical development, it seems clear that, while distinct, they are also taken to be mutually supporting and interdependent. The cultivation of virtues is most obviously present in the first strand. Here, it takes the form of increasingly well-judged selection of primary natural things (that is, selection in line with an emerging understanding of virtue), culminating in recognition of the absolute value of virtue, by contrast with the primary natural things. However, it seems clear that this process is seen as going hand in hand with the progressive development of the instinctive care for others of one's kind and the broadening and deepening of this instinct. We develop our understanding of what the virtues involve, in part, through engaging in these different forms of social relationship, and we inform our conduct of these relationships by applying our developing understanding of virtue, and of the contrast with 'preferred indifferents', such as health and property.¹

In reflecting on the Stoic theory of ethical development, and its potential value for modern thinking about the cultivation of virtue, I focus in part on differences from Aristotle, who has often been taken in modern thought as the paradigm of virtue ethics. Modern thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams looked back to ancient philosophers such as Aristotle for inspiration on the subject of ethical development, which they saw as being relatively neglected in modern moral theory.² In fact, Aristotle's comments on ethical development, while suggestive, are rather brief and piecemeal.³ On a number of points, as brought out shortly, Aristotle's approach reflects the elaborate, two-stage programme of ethical development set out in Plato's *Republic* as the educational curriculum for the future guardians of the ideal state.⁴ The Stoics, more explicitly than Aristotle, give ethical development a central place in their theory. Also, I think, there are various ways in which their ethical theory, including that of development, is more promising as a basis of engagement with modern moral thinking than Aristotle's.

The outcome of the first (personal) strand of Stoic development is the recognition of virtue, uniquely and on its own, as the proper object of human aspiration. This, in turn, reflects the core, distinctive Stoic ethical claim that virtue is the only good; put differently, that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for happiness.⁵ Aristotle's own position on this point is nuanced or ambivalent; subsequently (at least until the second century AD), his view is understood as being that happiness depends on a combination of virtue and a certain measure of 'external goods', such as bodily health and property.⁶ The Stoic position is closer to the widespread modern assumption, formulated in different terms by different theories, that moral claims are overriding and that moral qualities are superordinate and different in kind from other kinds of claims and values. In so far as this position underpins the Stoic account of the first strand of ethical development, this gives their account a special interest for moderns. A second difference from Aristotle can be taken along with this. The outcome of Stoic ethical development, in both strands, is the achievement of wisdom, seen as the basis both for correct practical action and

¹ On the two strands in ethical development, see (for the first strand) Long and Sedley 1987 (=LS), 57A-C, 59D; for the second 57D-H, also Cicero *On Duties (De Officiis)*, 1.11-14 (both strands), 1.50-3 (second strand). On the theory (first strand), see also Inwood 1985: ch. 6, Gill 2006: 129-66; (both strands) Reydams-Schils 2005: ch. 2.

² MacIntyre 1981: ch. 12, Williams 1985: ch. 2.

³ See esp. *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)*, 1.3-4, 2.1, 10.9; also Burnyeat 1980, Sherman 1989: ch. 5.

⁴ Gill 1996: ch. 4, esp. 272-5.

⁵ LS 58, 63; also Annas 1993: 388-411.

⁶ On Aristotle's discussion in *NE* 1.7-10, see Annas 1993: 18. On the later Aristotelian (Peripatetic) positions, see Annas 1993: 385-8, and ch. 20; Sharples 2010: ch. 18; Inwood 2014: ch. 3.

theoretical understanding. This reflects the Stoic view of wisdom in general, which is seen as operative equally in both spheres and is not subdivided into theoretical and practical wisdom, as it is by Aristotle, and, by implication, by Plato. In the *Republic*, as Plato himself accentuates, complete ethical development leads to a motivational conflict, or at least tension, between the claims of practical and contemplative wisdom to constitute the highest form of human happiness. A similar tension is underlined in Aristotle *NE* 10.7-8, though it is not there linked with the process of development.⁷ The fact that the Stoic conception of wisdom (the ideal human state) is not subdivided in this way, and does not give rise to the same problems that arise in other ancient theories, is a further feature which renders their ethical theory, and their account of ethical motivation, of special interest for moderns.⁸

There are also several suggestive aspects in the second, social, strand of development. Stoic theory presents the motive to benefit others of one's kind as a primary, instinctive one, parallel to self-preservation, which is treated as a primary instinct in the first strand.⁹ This point applies to animal motivation generally, though Stoics see this instinct as giving rise to distinctively human (rational) expressions of this motive. This bears on an important crux in the relationship between ancient and modern versions of ethical theory. 'Moral' motivation and action, in modern thought, tends to be specified as that which benefits others, not oneself, whereas ethical virtue, in ancient thought, is not restricted in the same way, and is seen as benefiting oneself as well as others. When ancient approaches are examined more closely, this difference may appear less marked than it does initially. Julia Annas, especially, has brought out the extent to which most of the main ancient theories 'find room for other-concern' and offer strategies for correlating other-concern with self-concern.¹⁰ Even so, the difference of outlook is not entirely erased. However, the distinctive Stoic move of presenting other-benefiting motivation as a primary human, and animal, motive, and conceiving other forms of social relationship as expressions of this motive, goes furthest, I think, in bridging this conceptual gap.

Two other aspects of Stoic thinking on the social strand are also suggestive. The Stoics, exceptionally among ancient theories (and unlike Plato and Aristotle), present ethical concern for any given human being as such, and not just those to whom we are closely related, as one of the proper outcomes of ethical development.¹¹ Stoic thinking on the idea of the 'brotherhood of humankind' has often been noted, and has given rise to debate about how far this prefigures modern ideas about 'human rights'. A second aspect of Stoic thought (at least in the Roman period) is also worth considering in this connection. Stoics present *both* involvement in family and communal life *and* recognition of the brotherhood of humankind as appropriate outcomes of this side of development, and also explore the question how these two outcomes are to be squared with each other.¹² This aspect of their theory has a special interest in the modern context, where we too are conscious of the potentially competing claims of local and global or universal bonds. This dimension of Stoic thought merits closer attention than it has yet received, in part with a view to gauging whether their insights can inform analogous current concerns.

I turn now to the psychological assumptions of the Stoic account of development, considered again in comparison with Plato and Aristotle. A distinctive feature of the Stoic theory

⁷ Plato, *Republic* 519c-521a; also Gill 1996: 287-307, 370-83.

⁸ Bénatouïl and Bonazzi 2012: 8-9, also 75-117.

⁹ LS 57 A and F; also Annas 1993: 275-6.

¹⁰ Annas 1993: 223-6, and chs. 11-13.

¹¹ LS 57 F(3-8), G-H; also 67 A, K-L, also Annas 1993: 265-75, 302-11.

¹² LS 57 F, 67 K, Cicero *On Duties* 1.11-12, 50-9; also Gill 2013: xliv-xlvi.

is that all human beings are seen as constitutively capable of undertaking this developmental process. As they put it, ‘all human beings have the starting-points of virtue’ (LS 61 L, LS translation modified); and, in principle, all humans are capable of completing the progress to wisdom, even if this is very rare. This, seemingly extreme or radical, claim is supported by other aspects of Stoic thinking. These include the belief that all humans have the in-built capacity to form certain core concepts, such as that of ‘good’, which are fundamental for ethical development. Stoics also hold a strongly unified or holistic view of human psychology, according to which changes in belief and understanding, of the kind involved in ethical development, affect emotions and desires directly, without the need for separate training of non-rational parts of the soul, since there are no such parts.¹³ There is a marked contrast with certain Platonic and Aristotelian ideas on this subject, which were also influential on later ancient thinkers such as Plutarch and Galen. According to the Platonic-Aristotelian view, complete ethical development depends on the combination of a specific kind of inborn nature, a specific kind of family and communal upbringing (which provides the ‘habituation’ of emotions and desires), and, based on these two factors, a specific kind of intellectual education. One indication of the difference lies in Aristotle’s belief, indicated in *NE* 3.5, that at a certain point in one’s life, ethical development is no longer possible, even if one sees the need for it. This is, presumably, because ethical defects have become habitually ingrained in the non-rational part of one’s personality, and thus prevent change, a phenomenon whose possibility is denied in the Stoic framework.¹⁴

The Stoic theory of development involves a number of strong, and potentially problematic, claims, as regards its psychological assumptions. Why should it be of any special interest to us now? One reason is that the theory represents a distinct and coherent alternative to the Platonic-Aristotelian view. It is worth noting for this reason alone, to correct any impression that there is a single ‘ancient’ view of ethical development. Also, the Stoic assumptions are ones we have good reason to take note of, in the light of recent developments in modern thought. Although sometimes presented as over-intellectualist and implausible, their psychological theory, especially their account of emotions, is now often compared with modern ‘cognitive’ accounts of emotion, according to which emotions are directly dependent on beliefs (not necessarily conscious ones). Martha Nussbaum, who underlines this side of Stoic psychology, and adopts it, with qualifications, also accentuates its compatibility with some recent neuropsychological theories, such as Antonio Damasio’s. Damasio stresses the strongly interrelated and integrated character of brain processes, rather than the idea that there are distinct (cognitive and affective or behavioural) locations or sectors of psychophysical activity.¹⁵ Another point of contact with modern thought is the linkage between Stoic and modern ‘cognitive’ versions of psychotherapy. A shared assumption is that many, if not all, psychological problems, however deep-rooted they may be, are amenable to modification by addressing the belief-sets underlying the affective responses. Hence, the Stoic view that ethical development, in changing beliefs, also changes patterns of emotions and desires, has a striking

¹³ Gill 2006: 132-4, 137-45, 178-82, Graver 2007: ch. 7.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *NE* 3.5, 1114a3-21, esp. 9-10. On this contrast between the two ancient approaches, see Gill 2006: 130-8, 231-2, 415-21; Gill 2010: 159-62, 257-8, 261-2.

¹⁵ Nussbaum 2001: chs. 1-2, esp. 114-19 on Damasio; also Gill 2010: 335-46; on the Stoic theory of emotions, see LS 65 and Graver 2007: chs. 1-2.

contemporary parallel.¹⁶ For all these reasons, I think the Stoic theory of ethical development merits special consideration by modern thinkers, on psychological as well as ethical grounds.

II Cultivating the Virtues: Five Stoic Themes

I now turn more specifically to Stoic thinking on cultivating the virtues, outlining five themes which recur in their writings. My concern here is both theoretical and practical: I indicate how their treatment of these themes reflects their distinctive ideas on ethical development, while also bringing into view resources that we can use today for promoting ethical development now, including writings used by the ‘Stoicism Today’ project discussed later.

The first theme is *learning about the virtues*; more precisely, learning how to develop the virtues and to shape our lives and actions accordingly. This is a central topic in Cicero’s *On Duties* (*De Officiis*), on ‘appropriate actions’,¹⁷ especially in Books 1 and 3. The underlying assumption is that we will learn better how to perform specific ‘appropriate actions’, if we learn how to shape our lives in the light of our developing understanding of what the virtues are, how they are interrelated, and in what kind of actions they are typically expressed. The exposition, in all three books, assumes certain distinctive Stoic ideas on the virtues. The virtues are seen as a matched set, typically as four generic or cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage or fortitude, moderation or self-control, justice), though with scope for some variations and subdivisions. This four-fold mapping of the virtues seems designed to cover in a systematic way the main sectors of ethical expertise: that is, understanding, management of emotions and desires, management of our relationships with other people and society. Cicero’s treatment reflects a standard Stoic view that, while the different virtues have different topics or objects of concern, they also embody a unified or comprehensive understanding, and are inter-entailing, so that we cannot have one virtue without the others.¹⁸

In Book 1, Cicero proceeds, first, by offering a general definition of each virtue, then by specifying the kind of actions characteristic of this virtue. I think that this specification is designed to provide a medium-level exposition, intermediate between formal definitions and detailed guidance.¹⁹ However, Cicero also amplifies his exposition by offering detailed and specific illustrative advice. In this respect, the exposition spans what Stoic writers describe as doctrines or theories (*decreta*), on the one hand, and specific advice or guidance (*praecepta*), on the other.²⁰ In Book 3, Cicero offers advice which is designed to help someone deal properly with situations in which there is – or seems to be – a clash between trying to act virtuously and acting in a way designed to secure ‘primary natural things’ (or ‘preferred indifferents’) such as health, wealth, social position or power.²¹ He draws on a series of types of indicators: specifications of the relevant virtue (as offered in Book 1), casuistic discussion of ethically

¹⁶ Robertson 2010: Herbert and Forman 2011: 268-9, and ch. 2 on ‘cognitive’ therapy.

¹⁷ ‘Appropriate actions’ in Stoicism is a very broad concept (broader than ‘duties’), LS 59; Cicero’s concern is with actions that form part of a life well lived, from an ethical standpoint.

¹⁸ Cicero, *On Duties*, 1.15-18; on interconnection of virtues, see 1.15, 1.63, 1.157, 2.35; also LS 61, Annas 1993: ch. 2.

¹⁹ See e.g. *On Duties* 1.20-3 (justice), 1.66-9 (courage understood as ‘greatness of spirit’).

²⁰ See e.g. *On Duties* 1.31-41 (justice), 1.81-91 (greatness of spirit). On Stoic advice, see LS 66, esp. I-J, and Inwood 1999.

²¹ *On Duties* 3.7-18.

problematic situations, specific actions illustrating virtuous or non-virtuous motives and character, references to key Stoic ethical themes including the brotherhood of humankind and the idea that acting virtuously is a ‘natural’ way to act. The work closes with an extended, casuistic treatment of a striking decision taken in war by a famous early Roman general Regulus, illustrating the point that we good reason to act virtuously even if this runs directly counter to obtaining ‘preferred indifferents’, including our own continued life.²²

Cicero presents *On Duties* as advice directed towards his son, then a young man studying philosophy at Athens. Cicero is not a committed Stoic, but this work is based, in Books 1-2, on a treatise by the Stoic thinker Panaetius, and in Book 3 on a number of Stoic writings on practical ethics.²³ Although Cicero’s treatment is personal, it reflects salient features of Stoic thinking on ethical development. In particular, it reflects the idea that we develop ethically by learning how to ‘select’ appropriately among primary natural things (or ‘indifferents’) by forming an increasingly better understanding of the virtues and what kind of actions are characteristic of them.²⁴ The different forms of guidance Cicero offers in Books 1 and 3 seem designed to enable people such as his son (and Cicero himself, probably) to bridge the gap between general analysis of the virtues and specific actions intended to express them, or to make progress towards doing so. The key Stoic claim, that virtue is the only good, by contrast with which ‘primary natural things’ come to be recognised as ‘matters of indifference’, underpins the exposition in a number of ways. In particular, it lies behind Cicero’s concern to offer guidance to enable someone to deal with situations in which the claims of acting virtuously clash with acting to secure ‘indifferents’ - or seem to do so. The thesis assumed is that virtue is the only thing that is really good and worthy of choice; hence, there can be no *fundamental* clash of value between virtue and indifferents. What Cicero is doing is providing guidance to clarify situations so that we can move towards recognising this fact.²⁵

Cicero’s work can also help to illustrate the second and third themes, which are discussed more briefly. Both of these, in different ways, involve the second strand in ethical development and the relationship between the two strands. The second theme centres on *correlating cultivation of the virtues with the management of one’s life*. In *On Duties* 1, Cicero presents the idea, apparently based on Panaetius, that we should conceive our lives as acting out four roles (*personae*). The first of these is our shared human nature as rational and social animals who are capable of developing the virtues as a matched set. The second role is our specific nature, our individual talents and inclinations. The third role is the social context in which we find ourselves, and the fourth is the role or career we choose for ourselves, if we are in a position to make this choice. The overall message is that we should work towards consistency in the way we act out these various roles, since otherwise this will lead to internal incoherence and tension in our lives. However, it is also stressed that of these roles, the first, our common human nature as rational and social animals and potentially virtuous people, must be given priority over the other roles.²⁶ Similar ideas appear in other Stoic ethical writings, for instance, those based on Epictetus’ teachings, notably, the idea that we should correlate the objective of seeking to develop the

²² See e.g. *On Duties* 3.3.20-32, 46-62, 99-111 (on Regulus, whose decision to keep an oath sworn to enemies also benefited his state at the expense of his life); also Gill 2005: 35-40.

²³ For translation with notes, see Griffin and Atkins 1991; for full commentary, see Dyck 2004.

²⁴ Cicero, *On Ends* 3.20-1 (= LS 59 D(3-5)); Gill 2006: 129-31.

²⁵ *On Duties* 3.12-18, 34-7, 81.

²⁶ *On Duties* 1.107-121, esp. 110-11, 119-20; also 93-6 on the ideal (*decorum* or acting in a way that is ‘just right’) underlying the first role. See also Gill 1988; and, for the consistency of this Panaetian theory with orthodox Stoic thought, Tieleman 2007.

virtues with that of commitment to a specific social or familial role. Here too, it is stressed that aiming to act virtuously (acting in line with ‘the good’, as Epictetus puts it) should have priority and that this should affect the way we play a specific social role – indeed, whether we can go on playing it at all, in certain cases.²⁷ This second theme reflects the Stoic view that ethical development consists, in its second strand, in appropriate engagement in family and social roles. More precisely, it expresses the idea that social engagement should inform the development of the virtues, for instance, helping us understand what justice involves, and that it should be informed, in turn, by a developing understanding of the virtues.

The third theme is *learning about virtues by observation of, and interaction with, other people*. This theme figures prominently in Cicero’s *On Duties*, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. The idea that studying exemplars of virtue and vice, among people one knows, or knows about, in one’s society or in history or legend, is a prime method of ethical education is a widespread feature of ancient Greek and Roman culture. It is also widely recognised that what is involved is not just imitation but critical examination and evaluation of exemplars to gauge what features of their actions and attitudes are worthy of emulation or rejection.²⁸ The treatment of this theme in Stoic writings reflects characteristic features of Stoic thinking on ethical development. Studying other people as examples is located in the context of ethical education, as conceived in Stoic terms. For instance, Seneca treats it as part of forming a conception of goodness, and Cicero as part of learning what the virtues involve and of differentiating virtuous acts from those directed at ‘indifferents’.²⁹ Marcus Aurelius, in Book 1 of his *Meditations*, lists the ethical qualities he has learnt to value from specific individuals with whom he shared his life, beginning with his parents. This fits in with an idea illustrated shortly, namely, conceiving one’s life as a whole as a process of ethical development.³⁰ A further Stoic idea linked with use of exemplars, especially excellent or exceptional ones, is the idea of the unity or inter-entailment of the virtues. In *Meditations* Book 1, for instance, Marcus’ comments bring out how the behaviour of certain people expresses different, but interconnected, types or levels of virtue, namely understanding, emotional register and mode of treating other people (these levels correspond broadly with the four generic virtues).³¹

The fourth and fifth themes are versions of the same motif. The underlying idea is that *ethical development, including cultivation of the virtues, should be the core project of our lives*, underpinning other kinds of project. Epictetus’ *Discourses* present this idea in two versions, each directed at the two main groups to whom his ethical teachings were addressed, namely the young adult students of his philosophical school and older visitors to the school, who were not necessarily philosophically inclined or educated. To the first group he emphasises that the overall aim of the philosophical education he provides is to enable them to take forward their ethical development and to make this central to the way they conduct their lives.³² The more technical disciplines they are learning, such as formal logic and exposition of the treatises of the major Stoic theorist Chrysippus, should not be treated as ends in themselves but as vehicles for this larger goal. To the second group, he stresses that they should be shaping their lives around the

²⁷ See Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.2, 2.10, 3.3.5-10; also Long 2002: 232-44.

²⁸ Gill 2013: lxxx-lxxxii.

²⁹ Seneca, *Epistle* 120 (also Inwood 2005: ch. 10, 2007: 322-32); on Cicero, text to n. 22 above.

³⁰ Gill 2013: lxxv-lxxiv.

³¹ *Meditations* 1.8-9, 1.15-16, also Gill 2013: 61-3, 70-4. See also Cicero, *On Duties* 3.99-100, 104, 110; Seneca, *Epistle* 120.10-14.

³² The *Discourses* are records of informal talks by Epictetus, supplementing his formal lectures on Stoicism (which we do not have); see Long 2002: 43-4.

objective of (life-long) ethical development, rather than around goals such as gaining political distinction or wealth, and managing their families and households, which they tend to treat as ends in themselves, rather than as vehicles of ethical development.³³

Marcus' *Meditations*, a self-directed philosophical diary or notebook of reflections, focuses on the second theme. Marcus reminds himself that his core project in life (his 'work', 'craft' or 'expertise' as a human being) is to take forward his own ethical development.³⁴ His reflections refer to all the aspects of Stoic ethical development discussed here. These include the advice to see every situation in life as an opportunity to try to exercise the virtues and to subordinate all other objectives in his life to this overarching goal.³⁵ As regards the second (social) strand in ethical development and the relationship to the first strand, he stresses the subordination of his social and familial roles to the core ethical project. While accentuating the importance of full engagement in these social roles (above all, of course, that of Roman emperor), he also places them in the broader framework of treating other human beings as brothers and co-citizens and of using this idea to qualify and enhance his interpersonal relationships and communal role.³⁶ He also underlines the way that undertaking this project of sustained ethical development has a transforming effect on his emotional register, helping to lead him from misguided 'passions' towards 'good emotions' such as wishing and joy, even in extreme situations, such as facing the prospect of his own looming death.³⁷ Thus, Marcus' *Meditations* offer an illuminating insight, from the inside, as it were, into what it means to try, in a sincere and sustained way to carry out the Stoic programme of life-long ethical development, which has the cultivation of the virtues at its heart.³⁸

III: Stoicism Today?

Are Stoic ideas on ethical development and cultivating virtues ones that can, plausibly, be used as the basis for modern attempts to promote virtue-development? In addressing this large question, I focus on the implications of a public engagement project, in which I have been involved since 2012. This project represents a collaboration between academics and psychotherapists, and the overall aim has been to present Stoic ideas and practices as a basis for life-guidance or guided self-therapy.³⁹ Collectively, we have set up a widely used blog, 'Stoicism Today', for information and articles, organised four times an on-line course, 'Live like a Stoic for a Week', and organised three public events in London with talks and workshops on putting Stoic ethical principles into practice. Also, we have run a second on-line course, a four-week 'Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training' (SMRT) course, and produced a volume of short articles based on material placed on the blog. In terms of the numbers of people involved, the project has proved highly successful.⁴⁰ Also, the on-line courses have been accompanied by self-

³³ See e.g. *Discourses* 1.4.14-17, 1.17.13-18; 3.21.7-8; 1.10-11, 2.14; also Long 2002: 77-80; 112-21.

³⁴ *Meditations* 4.17, 4.31, 5.1.

³⁵ See e.g. *Meditations* 3.11 and 3.6.

³⁶ See e.g. *Meditations* 2.1, 3.11.2, 2.5, 6.44.6.

³⁷ See e.g. *Meditations* 4.31, 6.48, 10.1, 12.36.

³⁸ Gill 2013: xxiv-lii.

³⁹ Those most closely involved: academics, Gabriele Galluzzo, Christopher Gill, and Patrick Ussher (PhD student) (University of Exeter), John Sellars (Kings College, London); philosophical writer Jules Evans; psychotherapists Gill Garratt, Tim LeBon, Donald Robertson.

⁴⁰ The on-line 'Live like a Stoic' course had over 2000 users in 2013, over 2500 in 2014 and over 3000 in 2015. The SMRT course had over 500 users in 2014 and over 1000 in 2015. The London events in London have had

reporting questionnaires, enabling respondents to gauge their experience during the period in terms of three standard measures of wellbeing. Further, we have evolved a ‘Stoic Attitudes and Behaviours Scale’ to assess the correlation between adopting Stoic attitudes and practices and increasing wellbeing. The results have been very positive, particularly in the case of the four-week SMRT course; and reports have been published on the blog of two Stoic Week courses (2013, 2014) and the SMRT course (2014). This project received AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) funding in 2012 and 2013 (in the latter case a ‘follow-on’ award), but has since been largely self-funded. With further funding we could take this project much further, especially in the assessment of the efficacy of Stoic guidance. However, these activities provide strong indications that, if presented in an accessible form, Stoic ethical guidance can have considerable resonance and benefit for a broad modern audience.

How far have these courses presented, or drawn on, the kinds of ideas outlined here, about Stoic ethical development, including the cultivation of the virtues? The courses have been based on summaries of key Stoic ethical ideas, quotations from Stoic writers, especially Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, as well as offering exercises designed to promote reflection Stoic lines. The courses have outlined the key features of Stoic thinking about ethical development, as well as using them as the basis for the exercises, and illustrating them with material reflecting the five themes in virtue-cultivation discussed here. Virtue forms one of the seven topics in the 2015 Stoic Week course and one of four topics in the SMRT course. Also, we have, especially the four-week SMRT course, underlined the point that Stoic advice on the management of emotions and on developing resilience depends on the strong Stoic claim that virtue is the only real good, and that it is the constitutive basis of happiness. In this respect, I think it is fair to say we have brought out the key features of Stoic thinking on ethical development and on virtue-cultivation, as far as is possible in courses of this kind directed at a wide audience. Further, in-depth, funded research would enable the group to gauge more fully the distinctive impact of Stoic ethical guidance under modern conditions. But, as far as we have gone to date, the impact has been found to be highly positive.⁴¹

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