

THE STOICS: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

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The Stoics: A Guide for the Perplexed

By M. Andrew Holowchak. New York:
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Holowchak's recent addition to Continuum's burgeoning collection of "guides" seems to have wandered from its primary purpose—that is, providing a pellucid introduction to Stoicism by focusing on just what makes the subject matter so difficult to grasp in the first place. The installation reads more like an argumentative pitch than what is supposed to be a comprehensive introduction, as Holowchak pushes for the perennial argument that Stoicism is a pragmatic and applicable ethical philosophy for contemporary people to embrace. In a move that seems to jettison the very telos of the series' governing principle, the author reserves the lion's share of the book for making his case for a privileged third of the egalitarian trio of main Stoic principles: ethics taking the main stage while physics and logic are kept hidden behind the curtain. In opting for almost exclusively Roman Stoic literature he bypasses the rich collection of variegated, and sometimes obfuscated, contributions from the Hellenistic Stoics, thereby taking the simpler, easier route to support the focus of his own brand of ethics-centered Stoicism. The stones left uncovered are the heavier, more cumbersome challenges that students often struggle with, and Holowchak's aloof attitude does little to help the estranged student become more apt and confident with the far more demanding tenets of the ancient philosophy. Regardless of Holowchak's focus, there are certainly some merits in using the book as an introductory piece for beginners—or the stymied. The purpose and structure are clearly mapped out from the start, paving the way for progressively developing a keen understanding of Stoicism as a substantive cure for psychical malady. Along the way the author does touch upon and incorporate pertinent subjects to the philosophical canon, such as: fatalism and determinism, indifferents/preferables, the sufficiency thesis, and nature, among others. In the development of his main argument, Holowchak interweaves otherwise seemingly disparate Stoic teachings by using, interestingly, both contemporary and ancient Greek examples of commonplace moral dilemmas to illuminate his arguments.

What is inexcusable, however, is his refusal to explore the great contributions that Hellenistic Stoicism made to reasoning, dialectic, and especially syllogisms. This terrain of Stoicism would seemingly be the most in need of a guide and is certainly an important masthead of the school. Within the ethical sphere, however, it had, according to Roman Stoics, a far less important part to play—one could even say they looked at such a trifling, purely academic pursuit as a dangerous distraction when compared to the heavy emphasis on daily ethical training. As a result, Holowchak spends very little time on the subject.

In a span of five chapters, Holowchak builds his case for adopting Stoicism as an ethical compass. The first of the five chapters begins as an overview of the roots of the school and a brief chronology of the major figures in its development. A general account of the canonical themes is sketched, although the author laments the traditional emphasis placed upon the elusiveness of the Stoic sage—the idealized human being who always judges correctly and never errs in any act. Holowchak cites that Stoic teachers have acknowledged progress towards virtue, but nevertheless denied the diminution of vice along the pathway. Thus, “progress” by their definition is riddled by the contradiction of evolving closer toward virtue while remaining just as vicious as they were previously.

Chapter 2 is undisputedly the heart of Holowchak’s argument for adopting Stoicism as a means toward a virtuous and, therefore, happy life. What he sees as the major deterrent is the traditional emphasis put on the conception of the sage; he thus sets out to extensively and systematically dismantle it. The established framework is, Holowchak charges, something akin to the old adage, “the perfect is the enemy of the good,” because it casts the highest ethical progressors into the same wretched lot as the most vicious and bellicose heathens. Instead of the “all or nothing”-model that discourages the adoption of Stoicism as a means towards a virtuous life in the first place, Holowchak momentarily offers Tad Brennan’s No-Shoving Model (NSM), which was inspired by a quote from Chrysippus regarding proper conduct for a foot race: that one should strive as hard as possible and also that one must aim for those things which are “useful in life,” or Stoic conveniences.

Although Holowchak agrees that Brennan’s model is heading in the right direction, he posits that it draws too heavily from the competitive-game analogy, which can be misleading. Holowchak instead develops his own “Peak Performance Model,” or PPM, which likens Stoic sagacity to a professional athlete being “in the zone.” Through habitually engrained training does the pro athlete solidify a settled disposition for instinctually reacting in the right manner without needing to deliberate on the available possibilities. PPM would then

convincingly explain how a dedicated progressor makes the sudden transition to being a prudent sage, but also how the transmogrification occurred without her own awareness. Finally, PPM, unlike NSM, addresses the difficulties inherent in the tendency to prop up the sage as an idealized exemplar for demonstrating appropriate acts—that is, progressors cannot act identically to a sage since they do not have the same psychical dispositions as that particular sage. The here presupposed notion of rational equipotency, which dictates that different rational creatures will *always* act the same way and make the same choices—even in congruent circumstances—is false since each person is born with their own unique capacities and different life roles that they need to fulfill. Peak performance entails that a progressor develop her self-understanding in order to appropriate that which is right for her role within the cosmic order. She can enter and become rooted in “the zone” and reap the benefits without hindering any other person’s upward progression towards the mutual goal by sharing in the equipotency of making right choices.

Chapters three and four successively stress the importance of consistently building one’s character in order to live a peaceful life, no matter what fate may bring. Equanimity through hardship, in the third chapter, is equated with being courageous and seeking invincibility against any harm—or “arrows,” as Seneca is so fond of saying. In contrast to the Epicurean understanding of invincibility, which Holowchak deems untenable, the Stoics will feel the initial sorrow of losing a loved one or the forceful blow to the face from a combatant; however, beyond the inchoate impressions they will choose not to let them usurp the sole thing that is up to them: their internal psychical harmony. After all, going back to the Epicurean stance, one could not choose how to react without first registering the initial stimulus from which to respond. Moving onward, in the fourth chapter, the author warns that although equanimity through success may seem to be a far easier responsibility to attend, magnanimity is necessary to remain unsullied and unburdened by proliferation of material wealth, public reputation, or noble birth. Relying on such externals renders one a slave and beholden to a life ruled by fate.

In the fifth and final chapter, entitled “The Heroic Course,” Holowchak provides the reader with two real-life similes to help her advance in her apprenticeship. The first is that of comparing vice to an illness and likening students to patients and teachers to doctors. Curatives are offered in the form of doctrines, exhortations, precepts, and reminders aimed at healing the patient with a view to absolute health. Elsewhere, Holowchak compares indoctrination in Stoicism to athletic training, where ethical progress is paralleled by

augmented strength and, especially, obstinate endurance. The cultivating of the mind with regimented exercises is not that much different from consistent, rigorous training required of a respective sport, the author explains, because for the Stoics everything is composed of matter and therefore our minds are malleable by our own powers of judgment.

Hollowchak's argument is strong and efficacious due to his clear writing style and use of helpful examples. From the first through the last chapter, he employs the popular ancient Greek *khreiai*, a witty or pithy quip used to reinforce a precept, munificently. On the other hand, some efforts by the author serve to confuse the reader, as is the case with his five tables in the first chapter that are disproportionately arranged and forcefully crammed in between text masses. Students looking for a better understanding of Stoic ethics could certainly benefit from studying this book. However, other more general "guides" to Stoicism would be more fruitful. Continuum should have instead named this book: *The Roman Stoics: A Guide for the Perplexed*.