

Philosophy from a Grumpy Bastard

Philosophy is not something we tend to think about in everyday life. It seems to be an abstract discipline, very much the field of academics. I am going to talk about applied philosophy: concepts that can help you get through your life more smoothly by giving you practical means of achieving a better balance of control and stability. Not so much the “Meaning of Life” as the managing of it.

All you need to do is learn and accept seven simple truths! Well, it will probably take a bit more effort than that, but those seven truths are going to be a giant leap down the right path.

I will be drawing on some ideas from Stoicism. “Stoic” in general, modern usage usually means “detached”, “unemotional”, even “apathetic”. “Stoicism” is quite different in its general outlook. A very good place to start learning about Stoicism is Darren Brown’s book “*Happy*”. *Happy* deals in much greater depth with some of the topics I will cover, and also covers a number of fields I do not have space for.

That said, many people will not consider me a proper “Stoic” and some of the ideas I present may be different to mainstream Stoicism. I admit to being something of a cynic, in the modern sense of the term, rather than that of the Greek movement of Cynicism that preceded the Stoics. The Classical Stoics were rather more optimistic about their fellow man and the abundance of wisdom than I am, and as will be seen, I am not strong on piety! What I will present is my own approach to life, which has helped a few people I know. Darren Brown’s book has inspired me to put this in a more structured format, and helped me identify certain facets. Like my life in general, it is a work in progress, and I am working out the bumps.

If you want a name for the following ideas, call it “*Pessistoicism*”.

Part One: Great Universal (or Uncomfortable) Truths

“You are Here!”

This pamphlet should, perhaps, start with a picture of the galaxy. “The Galaxy Song” sung by Eric Idle or Stephen Hawking, plays in the background. Down in one corner would be an arrow pointing at a barely visible speck, labelled “*You are here*”. Perhaps at the edge of the image would be a legend that helpfully reminds us the image is not to scale. The reason we do not have this image is that the scale is still too big! We need this galaxy shown alongside all the other galaxies in the universe, an estimated two million millions. That is a million, multiplied by a million, and then doubled! Each of those galaxies has hundreds to thousands of millions of stars. How many planets, how many self-aware life forms, we do not know. We do know that one of these planets has at least seven and a half thousand million people. A single person is a near infinitesimally minuscule component of the universe. As a more famous book notes: the universe is really big!

The scale of the universe pales to comparison, however, when we realize that millions of people on this planet think the universe revolves around them and exists to meet their desires. Some of them think an external agency will act on their behalf, others think their own will or conviction is enough. The flow of the universe will change to cater for an individual’s desires. All it will take is the right mantra, sacrifice of a virgin or giving money to a certain pastor. This concept ranges from complex, formal systems to simply assuming that the world/ universe “owes” you something. Darren Brown begins his book “*Happy*” with an examination of Law of Attraction, faith-healing and similar systems. Such ideas are widespread in our civilizations and have existed for millennia. Other examples include prayer, “Name it and Claim it”, “If you deserve it, it will serve it”, positive visualization, magical thinking and countless other examples based on the idea that the universe is malleable to your or your chosen deity’s will. Movies frequently bombard us with the message that the hero will win if he/she only has

enough faith/believes in him/herself. This implies that if they fail it is entirely their fault. The bad guys' will/faith/desire is presumably inferior, even though there are usually more of them than the hero. Supposedly, you cannot use the Twelve-Step program to overcome addiction until you accept a higher power.

You may dismiss some of these as simple superstitions. Superstition is all fun and games until someone ends up on the bonfire. Such beliefs may ruin lives, destroy communities and bring down economic systems. We now seem to have an entire generation of individuals that was raised expecting to always get their own way if they scream and complain enough or put their opinion on social media.

Logically, the world and the universe cannot revolve around everyone who believes it does. There are millions of people who think they are the centre of the universe, and it seems improbable that the universe can exist for the personal benefit of all of them, if any of them. It is tempting to suggest it cannot revolve around more than one person, but perhaps there is a cosmic mechanism beyond our current ken. Mathematically, the probability that the universe does not revolve around a particular single individual must be approaching 0.999 . 0.999 is effectively 1, so the hypothesis that the world/ universe does not revolve around anyone appears to be nearly certain to a very high confidence level.

Some groups have the concept of a divine being or force that looks out for everyone, or just members of a select group (usually theirs!). Evidently, this is not the case. You may think your god is looking out for you, cherry-picking the events of the day for proof. Still bad things happen to others, babies get diseases, cheats prosper, terrible things happen to good people and bad people often do very well for themselves. The evidence suggests that if there is a being controlling it all, they are either very negligent, or operating on very different concepts of what is good and bad to our own. Or they have a very alien sense of humour! The universe is very unlikely to re-arrange itself

or be re-arranged for your personal benefit, and will not change its flow or nature for you.

This brings us to the first of the great universal truths.

[GUT 1]: The universe/ world/ god(s) are indifferent.

The universe/ world/ whatever does not exist to merely fulfil your needs. What you can achieve is down to effort, talent, opportunity and a chunk of luck. You do not “deserve” anything and the universe is not obligated to provide it, no matter what positive thoughts, prayers, spells or magic underpants you employ. Any time someone tells you you “deserve” something or an idea is “common sense”, you are probably being bullshitted!

Your “wants” and “desires” are not “needs” nor “rights”.

The universe is indifferent and you control very little of it.

That last section will have challenged some preconceptions and upset some readers. If you have kept reading, well done! As a reward, I will jump right to the second great universal truth:

[GUT 2]: The world is not fair!

Most of us get told this when we are children, not realizing that our parents have shared with us one of life's fundamental truths. Some people's lives will be happier or easier, and this may be determined simply by which womb you happen to have dropped out of. This is down to luck and has nothing to do with nobility, pedigree or breeding.

Life is a continuous procession of problems. As we solve one problem, new problems appear to take its place.

When we were first told the world is not fair, it is quite probable that we did not like hearing this. If we do not like something we think we can reject it and then consider it irrelevant or untrue. This is very likely

to have been your reaction to some of the statements I made in the earlier section. This is clearly another example of expecting the world to change to accommodate your whims and prejudices. We have established that this (very, very probably) does not happen. Thus, we logically derive GUT 3:

GUT 3: Your opinion of the Great Universal Truths has no effect on their veracity!

GUT 4: Most of life is not under your control.

Your desires or preferences will have very little impact on the universe.

Classical Stoicism divided everything between what was out of control, and the little that was. This dichotomy is simplistic, and as will be discussed soon, most systems are more complex than they appear and seldom binary. Many Modern Stoics acknowledge that there are some things over which we have varying levels of partial control or influence. You cannot control what your friends do or think, but you can have some effect on this.

It would be useful to have a word for all that you have no control over. I use *“akivernitos”*. Say it any time you need to remind yourself you do not have control of something.

Society is to Blame!

As noted in the previous section, very little in life/ universe/ etc is binary. Most of it cannot be appreciated in simple “black” and “white”. Systems are usually more complex than they appear. They are neither “yin” nor “yang” alone, but a varying blend of the two, with myriad possible shadings of grey. The previous statement extends to concepts such as “good” and “bad”. These are human constructs, and, like “left” and “right”, are best understood as relatives rather than absolutes. What is “good” for one creature or individual may be considered “bad” by some other.

People are also complex systems, and thus are in reality a mixture of both bad and good, often depending on one’s point of reference. An interesting and useful analogy is to think of a person as a tangle of coloured threads. It is nearly impossible to pick out a single thread. You can only experience that person as the complete mass that comes with the part you wanted.

The complex nature of people is why it is foolish to idolize an individual. Our perception of someone is often a projection of varying accuracy. One may admire something they said, wrote, sung or their ability to play with a ball, but your “hero” may also have many other characteristics, not all of which may be admirable. People are complex, imperfect and flawed. Anything created by people is most probably likely to be imperfect and flawed too. Contrary to the beliefs of some, this includes man-made constructions such as religion, god(s) and religious institutions. While it is considered a matter of faith to ignore this, evidence of flaws, contradictions and discrepancies are apparent if one chooses to look. Often small children spot these logical inconsistencies. Since such things are composed of or by fallible humans, it is perhaps inevitable that their product can never be perfect. If god is truly perfect, as some faiths insist, perhaps the problem lies in the interface of using fallible humans.

***“L’enfer, c’est les autres”:* Hell is (the) other people.**

Huis Clos (No Exit), Jean-Paul Sartre.

Unhappiness and frustration is often generated from expecting too much. Most of us expect the universe to send us more than it does. We may expect people to behave better than they usually do. From an early age we are sold the myth that *“people are inherently good”*, and most of us doggedly cling to this, despite near constant evidence to the contrary. There are some really good and wonderful people in the world, and if you are lucky you may spend some time with some of them. But, as already observed, people are complex systems and show a mixture of “good” and “bad” traits, the perception of which will depend on many

factors, including the observer. The lowest common denominator is often dominant. Statistically speaking, most people you are likely to encounter are likely to be behaving as dicks! They will chew with their mouths open, stand in doorways or on stairs, talk in theatres, put their dirty feet on seats, abuse animals for entertainment and countless other minor evils that make life just a little bit less pleasant than it might have been. Once you learn to expect less of people, you will find their behaviour bothers you less, and hopefully you will begin to have a greater appreciation of those individuals that are exceptional and who behave better.

GUT 5: People are Scum.

You and me included. There is always room for improvement and we can all do better. The behaviour of most people is something you have no control over [GUT 4], so do not dwell on it. Think “*People are scum*” or “*akivernitos*” and focus on things you do have control of. It would be nice if people were better, but the only ones you really have some control over and can improve are yourself, and perhaps your immediate circle.

GUT 5 may make you feel uncomfortable or you may choose to be offended. *Pessistoicism* is about basing your life on evidence rather than wishful thinking.

Original Stoicism advocated a kinship between humanity while recognizing an inherent depravity. Christianity adopted many concepts from the Stoics, and took the latter as “original sin”. Unfortunately the notion of inherent depravity usually spurred a quest for absolution or “get out of jail free” rather than inspiring self-improvement in this life. In *Pessistoicism* it is OK to think ill of your fellow man. Once you accept people are imperfect, then at least you may incorporate such factors into your plans and then vector and motivate it in a useful direction. Recognize and accept he or she is seldom as noble as they paint themselves.

You may encounter the suggestion that some of the Stoic writers, such as Zeno, Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius are “sages”. The Stoic sage, we are told, would happily endure torture on the rack because he would think to himself, “*It isn't me they are harming, just my body.*” There is a school of thought (which I subscribe to) that maintains there never was such a thing as a real Stoic sage. The Stoic sage, I believe, is a hypothetical; a teaching aid; an impossibly perfect example to guide and inspire those on the Stoic path. This idea might be supported by Seneca’s comment: “*Without a ruler to do it against, you won't make the crooked straight.*” (Letters from a Stoic, Letter XI). People are imperfect, and perfection is not possible. There is always someone better than you at something. What is important is being good enough, and trying to improve. I am sure many of those better qualified in Stoicism than me will disagree, but to my mind no one is realistically expected to reach the end of the Stoic path or be a true Stoic sage. What is important is not the destination, it is to try to move towards and up the path.

You

Having dealt with the universe and humankind, we now arrive at the smallest element of your world. This, however, is likely to be the largest section, and that most relevant to yourself.

Here we arrive at the “Stoic Fork”. On one prong of the fork, we have the things you have voluntary control over:

- ◆ Your thoughts.
- ◆ Your emotions.
- ◆ Your actions.

It is a surprisingly short list! On the other prong is “things you do not control”, which is basically, everything else, in the whole universe and whatever may be outside it.

Including, but no limited to:

- What people think.
- What people think of you.

- How people behave.
- How well people do their jobs.
- How rude people are.
- Other people's habits.
- Other people's success.
- How well other people listen to you.
- How much your partner/ friends/ children behave as you wish them to.
- Cats.
- What our partner/ friends/ children fear or find stressful.
- Everything else.

Humbling, but accepting this division and behaving accordingly is the essence of what I am discussing.

Two examples:

You are sitting in a bar and a stranger walks up and addresses you "Do you want a drink, bitch?" You might be amused by this, offended, or insulted.

Rewind, same bar. Your best friend appears unexpectedly and says "Do you want a drink, bitch?" Do you have the same emotional response as before? Chances are you will be pleased to see her, laugh, and insult her back.

Second example:

You are on an escalator and something bangs into your leg, painfully. You turn around and are confronted by a man who was clearly too busy playing with his phone to pay attention to not colliding with others. OR, you see a little old lady who has clearly accidentally hit you with her walking frame. She is clearly embarrassed, so much so she can hardly voice the apology she is attempting.

In both examples we have the same stimulus, but differing emotional responses. In the second, the pain may have evoked a burst of anger or

aggression towards the source. This is a reflex, as in "knee jerk" reaction. Whether this emotion continued, or was replaced by another emotion is controlled by the emoter. You probably reigned in your anger and aggression when you saw it was an old lady. How you would have reacted to the man with the phone might have been more forceful, unless he was much bigger. These examples demonstrate that we have at least some control of what emotions we experience.

How we handle the vicissitude of life is very much dependent on how we choose to respond emotionally. The stranger and your friend in the first example said exactly the same. The words they used have no inherent power and are not inherently offensive. The reaction to them is determined by the listener. This is worth remembering when dealing with others. When people claim to be offended by a play, song or hairstyle, understand that in many incidences they are choosing to be offended, often in full awareness that their response is not that which was intended to be produced.

GUT 6: You control how you feel about things.

Albert Ellis: "It's not the events that upset us, but our judgements about the events."

Epictetus: "Some things are under our control and others are not."

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms— to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Viktor E. Frankl, concentration camp survivor.

One of the few things you do have control of is your "inner emotional landscape". You can change how you choose to feel about things that happen. Sometimes our feelings about something will change suddenly when something is placed in a different context. You can choose to do this consciously. You have undoubtedly done this before at certain times. Sometimes it will not be easy, but as we have

discussed, we cannot be expected to be perfect. Sometimes it will be a struggle and takes some work. It may require self-control and fortitude. While you cannot change your past, you can change perspective. You may benefit from chatting about some things to a friend, a counsellor or a support group.

Some people deal with irritations by reminding themselves "*It's fine*". I might use "*People are Scum*", "*Akivernitos*" or "*Amor Fati!*". The latter can be translated as "love fate" or "embrace fate" and was used by Nietzsche, who advocated accepting the world as it was. "A key to living more happily is to simply decide that you are very happy with reality *per se*" (Darren Brown). I am not sure I believe in fate, so work on a personal definition of "*Akivernitos*" as being everything in the universe that is not under my control. While it is not the literal translation, the word reminds me of all I cannot control and what I can.

As I write this, I am the victim of a particularly nasty piece of internal politics. I realized that I would have no control over when I would get to tell my side of the story and the process was likely to be deliberately drawn out. It was probable that the institution's decision would be based on its own self-interest rather than the actual facts and truth (and it was!). I told my partner and friends that I knew I had no control over when the hearing would be, but that I could choose how I felt during the wait. I have used the time very productively and my health has even improved with the rest. I have discovered much during this time, including reading about philosophy and discovering I had been using a Stoic approach. It was also a good exercise in dealing with problems near their appropriate time, rather than brooding on them for weeks or months before.

Others may trigger feelings, but how they are dealt with is up to you. Keep in mind that many things that happen are neither our fault, nor that of others. Sometimes "shit just happens!"

The Stoics tell us to rein in our aims and lower our expectations of both ourselves and others. We feel bad because other people or the world in general do not treat us how we think we "deserve", or do not act how we wish. GUT 1 to 6 explain why.

Useful techniques include:

- Try to consider an issue both objectively and subjectively.
- Try to think about an issue logically, rationally and calmly. Identify what aspects are under your control and outside of it.
- Postpone responding to an issue until your initial feelings have abated.
- Be conscious of your own perception and reaction.
- When you make plans, remember the universe may decide differently.
- Remembering that all things are transient.

Stoic practices include "*premeditation*" and "*nightly review*".

Premeditation is to spend five minutes in the morning thinking about the anticipated upcoming events and encounters of the day. How might we handle them, and what is and is not under our control? Nightly review is an alternative or supplement to the morning premeditation. It is a retrospective of the day and thought about how events and encounters may have been better handled. These contribute to what is termed "a considered life".

Some people will find relaxation techniques such as meditation, mindfulness, Yoga and Tai Chi useful in taming their inner emotional landscape.

***"For every ailment under the sun
There is a remedy, or there is none;
If there be one, try to find it;
If there be none, never mind it."***

WW Bartley

Dog on a Lead

If *Pessistoicism*, my personal, mutated form of Stoic philosophy, was to have a symbol, I think I would choose a dog on a lead. We would be wise to learn from dogs. A dog considers it a point of honour to greet someone it loves. If a dog does not like you, it will let you know. It won't see your friends behind your back and tell lies about you. Cats can teach you a lot too, but not anything that is relevant to this current analogy. Zeno and Chrysippus gave us the analogy of a dog tied behind a cart. Interestingly, the name of Cynicism movement in philosophy was derived from "dog".

The dog does not know where the cart is going. It may be a fun trip to the beach or a visit to the vet. The dog will deal with those likelihoods if and when they happen. In the meantime, the dog is happy to trot behind the cart, revelling in the chance to enjoy a long walk and encounter so many sights and smells.

Now imagine a different dog. This dog yaps and barks and snaps. It fights the cart and pulls in every direction. The dog is baffled that the cart will not move in the directions the dog chooses. Why does the cart not understand it is supposed to obey the dog?

"There isn't a way things should be. There's just what happens, and what we do."

A Hat Full of Sky, Terry Pratchett.

This Too, Shall Pass

There is a story that has passed down through many cultures. The original version may be Persian. A king or rich man demands something that will help him through troubled times. He is presented with a ring upon which are characters that represent the phrase *"This too, shall pass"*.

And when times were bad, the man would look at this inscription and take solace in being reminded that the bad times were only temporary, and eventually things would change.

But when the man was happy, he might sometimes notice this ring and be reminded, *"This too, shall pass"*. The happy times, too, were destined not to last.

The story is incomplete, however. When times were good and he noticed the inscription, how did the man actually feel? Did he become sad and melancholy because he had been reminded that the happiness he was now feeling would leave him? Or did the message inspire him to enjoy and cherish these happy moments all the more because of their transience?

GUT 7: All things are temporary, including you.

Friendships, love affairs, lives and even the universe itself will change and end some day. Accept this, since you have no control over it. Enjoy the times you do have with a thing or person all the more. Whatever it is, remember *"This too, shall pass"*.

Part Two: Living in an Uncaring, Unfair World

Be polite, tolerant, use deodorant.

Many institutions promise constant or eternal happiness, if you are worthy or believe the right things. The junkie and the alcoholic chase constant happiness, unsuccessfully. Stoicism and *Pessistoicism* more realistically aim for contentment, and tools to better manage the inevitable bad times. The Stoics believed that life should not be a constant, unrealistic quest for unending happiness. Such is likely to be a selfish and futile endeavour.

If not constant happiness, then what? There is nothing wrong with being happy or enjoying the good times when they come. It is just unrealistic to think the sole pursuit of your life should be after happiness. As some would-be hedonists have been surprised to discover, such a life is likely to be unsatisfying.

Preferable, the Stoics believed, was to pursue a life of “virtue” (*aretee*). In modern use “virtue” has moral/ religious connotations that may not have been part of the original concept as used by the Stoics. In “For Us, the Living”, Robert A. Heinlein notes many of society’s laws come from religious dogma rather than the more logical motive of intent to prevent an individual damaging or harming others. “Developing a Universal Religion” by David Hockey proposes a standardized ethical code based towards the advancement of life. All life, not just that of humanity.

The Wikipedia page on *aretee* tries to associate it with athletic prowess. Personally I believe a better translation is one of “potential”. While fitness and health are important contributors to living a life of full potential, it can be argued that the life of many athletes is somewhat unbalanced. Potential should be judged by positive effects on other lives, rather than success in sporting events. Pursue victories of life rather a life of victories!

The Stoics wanted people to live as productive components of society, presumably attempting to live good moral and ethical lives. A reasonable question might be “why should you bother?”. The universe is indifferent, the world isn’t fair and good is relative. The bad and the selfish often appear to thrive. Scum rises. Why not act only in the interests of your personal subjective “good”? This echoes the atheism/ morality argument popular in some circles: Without a Heaven, Hell and the Devil as potential reward/ punishment, there is no incentive for atheists to be good, it is argued. And yet, millions of atheists, agnostics and followers of other creeds manage to live productive lives and get involved in charitable causes without murdering, torturing or raping.

“There is neither happiness nor misery in the world; there is only the comparison of one state with another, nothing more. He who has felt the deepest grief is best able to experience supreme happiness.”

The Count of Monte Christo, Alexandre Dumas.

A large number of social systems are based on a false premise. Only a small proportion of any population will be altruists. A much greater proportion will be egoist, or more accurately, egoists with varying degrees of altruism. Various systems of religion, philosophy, ethics, politics and education have had no success in shifting the proportion of altruists into the majority. Clearly we need a world-view that allows a human to perceive acting in the common good to be in their own best interest.

My quick answer to “why be good?” is simply “I don’t want to be THAT guy!”. The selfish, demanding, self-entitled individual so common today may indeed get better treatment as others fall over themselves to accommodate them, but I find them repugnant. The world may not be fair, but I still hope to see justice cast some light across it. The longer answer is that I think “Not living like a dick” will genuinely be the better life, not only for those around you, but for yourself. An act of cruelty or other self-indigence may give you a momentary pleasure. An act of thoughtfulness or generosity will have greater effect on yourself as well as others. Later I will discuss the interesting finding by psychologists that has confirmed that helping others has considerable psychological and social benefits for the donor. It really is “better to give than receive”.

In “Happy”, Darren Brown notes that the very wealthy are seldom happier than those who are financially “comfortable” (i.e., have enough money to be free from money worries). Logically, the very wealthy and super-rich might experience better lives if they gave more of their money away or put it towards beneficial projects.

We cannot all donate vast sums of money or work as volunteers, but we can all try to be a little kinder to those around us. Although I am a pessimist, misanthropist, grumpy old bastard and a cynic, I believe the world would benefit from more random acts of kindness.

I am, by no stretch of the imagination, a particularly good person. Admittedly, most of my help and generosity goes to my immediate loved ones, who I am very lucky to have, or to other people that I like. By helping them, they are able to interact positively with their larger social circles, and that is a good start. The path is followed with little steps. I am no saint, and like anyone else I am imperfect. I have no reservations about not helping those I considerer to behave badly. If someone is trying to hurt me, I do not empathize with the pain and history that has lead them to such acts. While understanding another's motivations is useful, empathy has a time and a place. If being attacked, it is the time to hurt them enough to make them think twice about trying to do the same again. Even when I know I cannot win a fight, I make sure the other side will know they have been in a fight.

Survival Course: Keep your pecker up! Always fight like hell!

Rightly or wrongly, Stoicism is often perceived as a philosophy of frugal, simple or even austere life. Personally, I like a beer, books, ice cream and snuggling with my girlfriend. Some Modern Stoics propose practising “voluntary discomfort” or “rehearsing non-attachment”: temporary avoidance of something to harden oneself against misfortunes that might befall one in the future. Worth trying if you are the sort of person that considers it a nightmare if the wi-fi is patchy or there are only eighteen flavours of ice cream available. Spend a day not playing with your phone. Keep off *facebook* for a weekend. The experience my surprise you!

Some Eastern philosophies and religions consider attachments to be a source of unhappiness and suffering. Ownership of possessions and material goods needs to be recognized as being, like all things, temporary. If you break a plate you can find many reasons to be annoyed, or simply note that you may have to buy more plates soon.

The Stoics speak of externals such as a nice house or wealth as “*preferred indifferents*”, which are something to be enjoyed or secured

where convenient, but are ultimately an indifferent because they do not occupy that realm of actions and thoughts that is uniquely our concern. Enjoy these things if you have them, but mourning them when they are gone achieves very little.

It is understandable that we want to be happy, but happiness itself is temporary. We may desire something or a person, and look forward to being able to afford or spend time with them. Achieving that goal may please us, but that feeling may fade or mellow. Sometimes it becomes something better, or it may end. By its very nature, happiness cannot be a constant like a comfortable room temperature.

Typically, humanity pays too much attention to what they and others believe and not enough to their acts and deeds.

Psychologists have confirmed that it is actually better to give than receive. Giving gifts creates more pleasure and good feeling than receiving them. This suggests that with material goods, at least, the most pleasure can be had from acquiring an item, enjoying it for a while and then giving or selling it to an appreciative new home. I know of someone who would periodically sell treasured items of furniture. Her attitude was that owning the item had made her happy, but now it was time for that item to please someone else. I also now better understand friends who would make things and cheerfully give them away to anyone who showed any interest.

“Acts of kindness” should by no means be limited to charities. This can sometimes be a too obvious and easy a route. Oscar Wilde criticized charity for being a quick fix that perpetuated the real problems. Making sleeping mats for homeless veterans is nice, but perhaps we should work towards a system where many of our former servicemen do not need to end up sleeping on the streets? It would be wise to do some research before submitting your money and time to any organization that sounds like it shares your concerns. PETA (People for Ethical Treatment of Animals) sounds like a very worthy

cause and a number of celebrities are public supporters. Do the same celebrities really support PETA's policy of euthanising 97% of animals it "rescues"?

A colleague of mine once announced to the entire room: "I don't give money to the homeless. They just spend it on alcohol!"

Now, I made no comment, since I knew this was a self-centred and selfish individual who was just making this as a justification for using all his money for vintage cars, and beer for himself. If I had chosen to comment, I would have pointed out that once he gave money to a homeless person, it was no longer his money and he had no right to dictate what it was spent on. The homeless person was (hopefully) an adult and got to decide what his or her money was best spent on.

Interestingly, one definition of charity I encountered included that it was "...helping other people for no personal benefit". When you perform an act of kindness, do not expect any gratitude, accolade or reward. If someone thanks you, that is great, but do not expect them to. They may have good reasons that they did not, or the omission may have been unintended. Feel good about doing good, but do not expect others to provide this for you. There is an adage that "No good deed goes unpunished". Not a Great Universal Truth, but something that seems to prove to be the case with a surprising frequency. Do your good deeds anonymously, but keep records for tax purposes.

"Eat when you are hungry, stop when you are full. Sleep if you are tired. Pee whenever you can. The fool laughs but the wise understand."

Moderation in Everything: Enough Is as Good as a Feast

Belief systems often feature a special diet or foods to avoid. This may serve as a mechanism to exercise control and may possibly be beneficial if your self-discipline needs building up. Self-discipline is something that you can build up with practice, rather like exercising a muscle group.

It could be argued that a Stoic strives for a happy medium. As an aside it is worth noting that too much of a good thing can often be as bad as not enough. A few drinks become less fun if we drink to excess. The meals we enjoy the most are actually neither too big nor too small. Try cooking smaller and preferably more varied portions and you may be surprised to find you enjoy your food more, as well as saving some money. If you must use tobacco, switch to a half-decent cigar. You will find the second cigar of the night is never as good as the first. You may end up smoking less and enjoying it more.

If you want a taboo so you can practice self-control? Stop eating at Macdonalds, it makes you smell horrible!

Justice

"YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE LITTLE LIES."

"So we can believe the big ones?"

"YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING."

"They're not the same at all!"

"YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET"—Death waved a hand. "AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME...SOME RIGHTNESS IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED."

"Yes, but people have got to believe that, or what's the point—"

"MY POINT EXACTLY."

***Hogfather by Terry Pratchett.
(revealing the quantity of mercy cannot be strained)***

Further discussion of humanity requires more consideration of some human constructs.

The universe is indifferent and the world not fair. Justice is a human construct. Sadly we have no guarantee that life/ universe will treat us justly or fairly, but we can endeavour to accord it to others, and should fight to be treated similarly. If good and bad are relative as has been observed, is there such a thing as evil? I believe there is and that it needs to be considered within human interactions. When we have stripped away the religious and fictional personifications, evil might be understood to be the deliberate intent to or willingness to ignore inflicting or creating harm.

Buddhism attributes all suffering to the “three poisons” of hatred, greed and ignorance. My own observation is that the four cornerstones of human nature seem to be Prejudice, Injustice, Selfishness and Superstition. (yes, this does come out as PISS!) This statement may be disturbing to some readers, so deeply ingrained in us is the false dogma that *“people are inherently good”*. This is a case where the truth can set you free! Once you adopt a more realistic, be it more pessimistic, view of mankind, your understanding of human behaviour, and how it might interact with you will be better. One can examine one’s own choices for prejudice, selfishness, unfairness or superstition and change accordingly.

It is mistakenly claimed that Stoics are indifferent to issues such as politics or injustice. Attempting to manage emotional reactions seems to be confused with extreme “turning the other cheek” or passiveness.

Darren Brown: “We may also prefer to push for change in the world where we see injustice. But a Stoic will be prepared for such projects to fail or be terminated by fate, through mentally rehearsing worst-case scenarios and, above all, taking care not to believe he is in control of such things in the first place. Fortune will always continue on her own

path, providing one day and denying the next; the Stoic does not fight fate but quietly separates his business from hers...Engage; inspire. Where there is injustice, and where it is under your control to make a difference, use your abilities to create change. But don’t ultimately emotionally commit yourself to the outcome. That’s out of your hands.”

Marcus Aurelius: “Do your best to convince them. But act on your own, if justice requires it. If met with force, then fall back on acceptance and peaceability. Use the setback to practise other virtues. Remember that our efforts are subject to circumstances; you weren’t aiming at the impossible. Aiming to do what, then? To try. And you succeeded. What you set out to do is accomplished.”

Anger

There are entire Stoic works devoted to dealing with anger. Darren Brown devotes a whole chapter to it, and reading his book is recommended.

Aristotle: “Anybody can become angry – that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not within everybody’s power and is not easy.”

Anger can be through of as having both acute and chronic manifestations. Acute anger is probably impossible to avoid. Someone hits your car while you are at the lights. A “phone-zombie” walks into you and spills your hot coffee down your front. Chronic anger is the anger that persists. You have a choice whether to remain pissed-off or to let something go. The main effect of chronic anger is on yourself, not the object of your anger. When this is not the case, the results are often bad for all parties.

As a section in Darren Brown’s book notes, good decisions are never made in anger. This is an important observation to remember. It puts a whole new light on the proverb “Revenge is a dish best served cold”!

Most of us have been told “Take a breath, count to ten”, but few of us seem to practice it. I know I usually forget. “Let the matter await your leisure.” Epictetus recommends. Try programming yourself with a trigger word such as *“Breathe!”*

Martha Nussbaum credits Gandhi and Martin Luther King with successfully redirecting anger about past events into future-orientated, constructive actions. This contrasts with the rabble-rousing of some orators that claim to admire Gandhi or MLK. That said, the inherent idea is useful and worth adopting: Do not feed anger, turn anger into positive future action.

The time between an anger trigger and action should be used positively, not for sulking or seething. Use the time to learn more. “Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted.”

Christianity has the often repeated, but seldom followed: “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.” Like many Christian concepts, this was adopted from the Stoics.

Seneca: “If we are willing in all matters to play the just judge, let us convince ourselves first of this – that no one of us is free from fault”.

Marcus Aurelius: “When you run against someone’s wrong behaviour, go on at once to reflect what similar wrong act of your own there is.”

Viktor E. Frankl (on his time in a concentration camp): “It is not for me to pass judgement on those prisoners who put their own above everyone else. Who can throw a stone at a man who favours his friends under circumstances when, sooner or later, it is a question of life or death? No man should judge unless he asks himself in absolute honesty whether in a similar situation he might not have done the same.”

Accept the Past. Move On

Whenever you were, it is now!

Don’t let your past kill your future!

We are living in the now, heading into the future, but the past is dead and done. It is just where we came from.

Dealing with our emotional landscape involves understanding we all have a self-narrative, an autobiography that is being read by our “remembering self”. This narrative is not like a video tape. It has errors, gaps and is often being re-edited. Something that may have been scary at the time may now be considered as amusing when we recall it. Our past is a story that we tell ourselves in the present. We create it every day when we accept the narratives we have developed about who we are and why we are who we are. “I’m like this because this happened to me” (and I chose to remember and feel about it thus).

The past is where we came from, but we should be cautious on how we let it define us. We might use it as an excuse and a justification for not changing what we know needs changing. A friend of mine often substitutes explanation or justification for solution. He reacts in a particular manner “because XXX”, and having stated any explanation, he feels no impetus to change, no matter how detrimentally his usual reaction affects him.

Whole societies define themselves by an event or events that have (or may have) taken place in the past. Assumed victimhood and assumed guilt are rife in our current world. “You should feel guilty because your ancestors did this to mine!” or, more accurately. “You should feel bad because someone who may or may not have been your ancestor may have done this to people that may have been my ancestors, or if they were not they were at least part of a social group I choose to identify with. Admittedly, it may not have been any of your ancestors, but they probably were the same race, nation, creed or colour as you may be.”

Never is much thought given to how one party can actually be guilty of actions made decades or centuries before their personal conception. This is collective punishment, and is rightly regarded as immoral and a human rights violation.

Some terrible episodes have happened in humanity's past and these events should not be forgotten. We need to learn and remember the past, both the good and the bad, and remember them accurately. Airbrushing photos, book-burning, pulling down statues, and politically correct re-editing does not serve the best interests of current or future generations. It is, of course, folly to judge the past by criteria that may not have then existed.

Whether it is for an individual or for a whole culture, one cannot move on and progress if one remains defining yourself by your history and constantly reopening old wounds. People love to play the "what if" and "shouldn't have" game, but this is one of the most insidious tortures we inflict on ourselves. The hard truth is "it didn't happen that way; stop fantasizing and deal with what is!"

A friend of mine has had some truly horrifying things happen to her. She refuses to let these define her and is one of the most caring and generous people that I know.

Social Media and Other Hassles

One day the great philosopher Socrates came upon an acquaintance who said excitedly: "Socrates, do you know what I just heard about one of your students?"

"Wait a moment," Socrates replied. "Before telling me anything I'd like you to pass a little test. It's called the Triple Filter Test."

"Triple filter?"

"That's right," Socrates continued "Before you talk to me about my student, it might be a good idea to take a moment and filter what you're going to say. The first filter is Truth. Have you made absolutely sure that what you are about to tell me is true?"

"No," the man said, "actually I just heard about it and..."

"All right," said Socrates. "So you don't really know if it's true or not.

Now let's try the second filter, the filter of Goodness. Is what you are about to tell me about my student something good?"

"No, on the contrary..."

"So," Socrates continued, "you want to tell me something bad about him, but you're not certain it's true. You may still pass the test though, because there's one filter left: the filter of Usefulness. Is what you want to tell me about my student going to be useful to me?"

"No, not really."

"Well," concluded Socrates, "if what you want to tell me is neither true nor good nor even useful, why tell it to me at all?"

This is why Socrates was a great philosopher and held in such high esteem. It also explains why he never found out that Plato was banging his wife.

The last part is a joke, as far as I know. Versions of the above story are often circulated around social media. The historical accuracy of this story is irrelevant. Socrates was not a Stoic, yet the Triple Filters provide some good advice for conduct. Even though they were written thousands of years ago, the writings of some Stoics and their contemporaries also provide good advice for modern communications, both on-line and face-to-face.

Seneca writes:

"Do you want to avoid losing your temper? Resist the impulse to be curious. The man who tries to find out what has been said against him, who seeks to unearth spiteful gossip, even when engaged in privately, is destroying his own peace of mind."

and

"Very many men manufacture complaints, either by suspecting what is untrue or by exaggerating the unimportant. Anger often comes to us,

but more often we come to it. Never should we summon it; even when it falls on us, it should be cast off.”

Plutarch (a contemporary of the Stoics) offers:

“I also try to cut back a bit on my nosiness. I mean, knowing every single detail about everything, investigating and eliciting a slave’s every occupation, a friend’s every action, a son’s every pastime, a wife’s every whisper – this leads to many outbursts of anger, one after another every day, and these in turn add up to habitual discontent and surliness.”

To this we may repeat the general advice already given: “Postpone responding to an issue until your initial feelings have abated.”

Like infants we scream out the first thought that enters our heads. Wait before you hit that reply button! Use the time to better frame your arguments and do some background research. Often someone did not actually mean what you thought you read. The above quotes touch on other issues. One of these is the useful acquired skill of recognizing that many things are none of our damn business! In “For Us, the Living”, Heinlein has a society with the concept of a “privacy sphere”. The acceptance that certain aspects of an individual’s private life were not automatically for general public consumption. Nothing like this seems likely to appear any time soon. We can only police ourselves and hope the concept spreads.

“It never ceases to amaze me: we all love ourselves more than other people, but care more about their opinion than our own.”

Marcus Aurelius

One of the evils of social media and the modern world is based around the myth “*Your opinion matters!*” At best, your opinion, likes or dislikes, will have an infinitesimally small effect. Most of your world is not under your control. What others say about you, what opinions they have of you, will often be independent of your desires or what is true.

Here it is helpful to ask yourself how much you value someone else’s opinions?

If someone on the street yells an insult at me, I will probably reflect on how little I value the opinion of someone who seems to spend his entire day sitting on a wall and clearly failed in understanding how to wear a baseball cap.

“Opinions are like assholes: Everyone has got one” and every asshole has an opinion.

I pay attention to the opinions of my real friends since I have the benefit of context. I know J- will probably dislike a thing because of her religious upbringing, for example. Vast amounts of mental energy and time are wasted arguing on-line with the opinions of people whose opinions we would not care about normally.

Personally, I no longer participate in forums, it having become clear that, like a swimming pool, it only takes one turd to spoil it for everyone. I also realized the toxic, insidious effect *facebook* was having on my life, personally. I suspended my account, walked away and have been much happier and more productive since then. Sometimes the best play is not to play!



That will do for now! I have kept this pamphlet short so it may be easily re-read whenever you feel the need.

***Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
the wisdom to know the difference,
and the patience not to bash sense into some dumb idiot with
a brick.***

Experience the Joy of Giving :P