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## Stoicism and the art of friendship

### A curious philosophy

Stoicism is a curious philosophy. At its core is the strong conviction that we need nothing and need no one to be happy. Epictetus clearly summarizes this conviction.

*Sick and yet happy, in danger and yet happy; dying and yet happy; condemned to exile and yet happy; lost his reputation and yet happy. (Epictetus, Discourses 2.19)*

So a Stoic needs nothing that the outside world can give her. She is self-sufficient—doesn't need wealth, health or even life itself; doesn't need company; and certainly doesn't need other people's approval.

### 'Preferred' indifferents

The curious part is this. In Stoicism, the term 'preferred indifferent' is not an oxymoron, but a guiding principle. Stoics may not *need* any of the 'good things' others have, but they would rather have these than not. The Cynics, who came before the Stoics, made no such distinction between the two. They had no reason to want what they didn't need.

The Stoics softened their approach by introducing the concept of *preferred indifferents*. You are free to enjoy anything that life may offer you, as long as the payment for it does not include compromising your virtues.

As I said earlier, the concept of preferred indifferents is not an oxymoron in Stoicism. The Stoics point out that we are free to acquire and enjoy wealth as long as the price

we pay for it does not include stupidity, cowardice, excessiveness, and injustice. This enabled them to 'want' things that they did not 'need,' leading to statements like these:

### Is health 'good'?

*Health is good when used well, and bad when used ill. (Epictetus, Discourses 3.20)*

### Is poverty 'bad'?

*It is not poverty that we should reject, but our judgment regarding it, and then we shall be at peace. (Epictetus, Discourses 3.20)*

Now that's settled, where do the Stoics stand on friendship? Like they stand on anything external. Friendship is a highly preferred indifferent. It is something you can live without, but life is better with it.

### False friendships

In his discourse on friendship, Epictetus has got this to say:

*Haven't you thought, 'nothing could be friendlier,' when you saw little dogs playing and fawning on one another? But just throw some meat in the middle, and you will know what this friendship is. (Epictetus, Discourses 2.22)*

Seneca is even more forceful.

*He who regards himself only, and enters upon friendships for this reason, reckons wrongly. The end will be like the beginning: he has made friends with one who might assist him out of bondage; at the first rattle of the chain, such a friend will desert him. These are the so-called "fair-weather" friendships; one who is chosen for the sake of utility will be satisfactory only so long as*

he is useful. (Seneca, Moral Letters, On philosophy and friendship)

Marcus Aurelius sees our relationships in a larger context. Everyone is your sibling. How would he deal with a false friend? He assumes that you will meet people

...who are interfering, ungrateful, arrogant, disloyal, jealous, and selfish.

However, you shouldn't be upset about it. Why not?

I realize that the wrongdoer is my brother, not in a physical sense, but as a rational being who shares the divine with me. [...] I cannot be angry with my brother or hate him. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 2.1)

So, for Marcus, false friendship is a non-issue. False friendships are born of ignorance, and we can't be upset about that.

In general, Stoics view friendship as a part of a bigger picture. It is our nature to be a part of the whole, to be cosmopolitan, and, therefore, we forgive the transgressions of others, who are our brothers and sisters. In any case, others' transgressions, being externals to us, cannot affect us anyway.

### Friendship as giving, not taking

Here is another paradox. Why do we make friends if we don't expect to benefit from them? If we do make friends because we benefit from them, what keeps us friends, if the benefit ceases?

Seneca says that friendship is not about getting something, but giving something.

For what purpose, then, do I make a man my friend? In order to have someone for whom I may die, whom I may follow into exile, against whose death I may stake my own life, and pay the pledge, too. (Seneca, Moral Letters, On philosophy and friendship)

This is an interesting concept. Here we are not suspiciously looking to avoid 'friends' with ulterior motives, because

we don't really need anything others can give us. Rather we make friends so we may enrich their lives. In the process of enriching our friends, we may also reciprocally benefit. If not, it doesn't matter one bit. It's an external, and we are not after it.

### Friendship is not one-sided

And yet, you don't befriend anyone without discrimination. If someone is your friend, you should be able to trust him implicitly. You should, therefore, be very careful in choosing a friend.

Ponder for a long time whether you shall admit a given person to your friendship, but when you have decided to admit him, welcome him with all your heart and soul. Speak as



boldly with him as with yourself... Regard him as loyal, and you will make him loyal. (Seneca, Moral Letters, On true and false friendship)

### In brief

1. Stoics don't need friendship and yet value it. Stoics realize that they are a part of a larger society.
2. Stoics are not offended when a friend betrays them.
3. And yet, Stoics choose their friends with great care and trusts them implicitly.
4. Stoics care about what they can do for their friend rather the other way around.

### Friendship in the time of Covid

Generally, we take for granted our relationship with others, including our friendships. If we set aside our Facebook 'friends' for now, our current situation does not permit us as much contact with our friends as we would like.

When our contact with others become limited, as is the case now, our thoughts return to our relationship with others, including our friends. What should friendship mean to us?

### Seek the company of those who uplift you

Quoting Epictetus, Sharon Lebell offers this advice: *Keep company only with people who uplift you, whose presence calls forth your best.* There is value in superficial friendships based on common interests, but we've all heard of someone who started "running with a bad crowd," which became his undoing. So it pays to be careful in choosing our friends.

### View this as an opportunity to develop personal virtue

Meredith Kunz sees it as an opportunity to develop our own personal virtues. "The kind of isolation and loss

that many are feeling today as the lockdowns and limitations extend due to Covid-19 are, for some, an echo of the experience of banishment. And many are dying, too. Let's nourish our friendships—not just to lean on our friends, but to ask them to lean on us."

### Being compassionate

During this pandemic, some have lost their loved ones, some their health, some their job, and some their sanity.

*This is the first premise that philosophy holds out to us: fellow feeling, humanity, sociability.* (Seneca, Moral Letters 5-4)

This is the topic - being compassionate – that we deal with in our article "Everyday Stoicism: Being compassionate," elsewhere in this issue.