

# Being true to ourselves

SHARON LEBELL



## Being true to ourselves

*Implant in Yourself the Ideals You Ought to Cherish: Attach yourself to what is spiritually superior, regardless of what other people think or do. Hold to your true aspirations no matter what is going on around you. - Epictetus (from The Art of Living, by Sharon Lebell)*

For me one of the bonuses of studying Stoicism has been an exposure of how much we moderns are infected by the ironic attitude that is part of mass culture. Across ordinary discourse, the arts, advertising, and especially the media in general, we find a “just-kidding” kind of sarcasm; a world-weary, apathetic, flippant, and jaded attitude that is ostensibly humorous but actually animated by despair.

## Irony fosters moral disengagement

Irony is a way of looking at life that can seem vigorous, witty, and subversive, but it fosters moral disengagement and alienation. It militates against unguarded, open-hearted expressions of truth. Stoicism is, after all, in the truth business, because it elevates virtue above all else. But truth must be anchored to a foundation for it to grow. That foundation is sincerity.

## Toward a truthful life

Sincerity is the unsung attitude one brings to living a truthful life. It means conducting one’s affairs in good faith, with genuineness and authenticity. It means being free from hypocrisy, pretense, and deceit. From the point of view of irony culture, this could seem vulnerable and uncool, but Stoics know better.

The quotation above from Epictetus offers what I believe to be a paean to sincerity. It describes a way of seeing the world that is viewed through a healthier and more gratifying lens. When we boldly name and

aspire to particular human ideals, it becomes clear that ironic detachment is not a mark of sophistication, but the easy way out. The ironists prove to be the scaredy cats. Embracing and ordering your life around your ideals takes bravery, steadfastness, and accountability.

## Being truthful to ourselves is practicing the virtue of courage

Speaking of virtue, each of the four Stoic cardinal virtues courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom are themselves predicated on sincerity. Holding to our true aspirations no matter what is going on around us is an endeavour that naturally arises from courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom.

*We are born into essential goodness, endowed with natural intuitions about what is good and worthy and what is not. This endemic moral capacity must then be trained deliberately and systematically to bring out its best in full maturity. (ibid.)*

This teaching by Epictetus suggests that goodness and the inclination toward virtue are part of our nature, yet can only fully come to fruition through deliberate training and education. One of the ways each of us can contribute to the moral education of us all is to deliberately model sincerity in our dealings with others. By doing so we remind ourselves and all with whom we come in contact that truth and good will are welcome. They are bedrock. In this way we are making a home for courage, wisdom, moderation, and justice.

*Sharon Lebell is the author of The Art of Living: The Classic Manual on Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness, the first modern interpretation of Epictetus’ teachings. She tweets @SharonLebell.*

**“Holding to our true aspirations no matter what is going on around us is an endeavour that naturally arises from courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom.”**