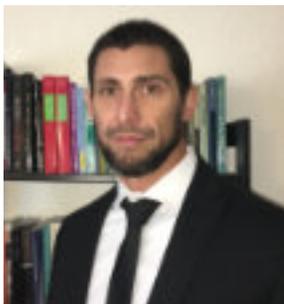


Be better

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEO KONSTANTAKOS

“We should always strive to be excellent human beings, but can only do so from within our own perspectives and idiosyncratic natures.”



Leonidas Konstantakos is a co-author of Being Better: Stoicism for a World Worth Living In, with Kai Whiting. He teaches in the international relations department at Florida International University. Leo spoke with THE STOIC about the book and the challenge of Stoicism.

Cleanthes, my favourite Stoic

Introductory books on Stoicism talk mostly about the three best known Stoics: Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Seneca. But, in your book, you talk about a number of ancient Stoics as well. Of all the Stoics you talk about, who is your favourite and why?

These days, it is Cleanthes, an immigrant to Athens and a former boxer who had to work multiple night jobs while his fellow Stoics were sleeping. He had to write on shards of pottery and cow bones because of his poverty. He was so slow-witted (possibly brain-damaged from fighting) that even his colleagues teased him and called him “the Donkey”. But Cleanthes never let that stop him. He ‘owned’ the nickname, taking it to mean that he alone had the brawn to carry the Stoic message to the next generation – which he did, by becoming the head of the Stoic school after Zeno’s death.

Environmentalism and Stoicism

You discuss various things from a Stoic perspective. But it is not always obvious how to apply Stoic principles in practice. Is there any topic that challenged you? Why?

Environmentalism. Today we have problems the Stoics could barely have imagined in terms of climate change, mass extinction, and pollution. Although the Stoics certainly lived through environ-

mental degradation (extinction of animals for entertainment in the arena, for instance), the problems today are exponentially more serious and ‘dispreferred’. Fortunately, we can follow the principles laid out by those Stoics, like Posidonius, who understood the interconnectedness of nature and humanity, or Hierocles, who saw all relationships in terms of concentric circles. They saw the world as something we are an integral part of and responsible for, rather than as natural resources to be turned into raw materials merely for our pleasure and comfort.

Stoicism and the pandemic

Stoicism is of little value if it doesn’t help us deal with our everyday crises, such as the current pandemic. How did Stoicism help you in the pandemic?

Stoicism helps us realize that the cosmos has its own plan which very often is not consistent with ours. By realizing what is in our control and what isn’t, we can do our part to strive for prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, instead of giving into panic fear, hoarding, misinformation, or selfish actions at the cost of our loved ones and our neighbours.

Striving for excellence

One thing I liked about your book is your perspective: It doesn’t provide answers but improves

the quality of your questions. How so?

Often people think of Stoicism as a ‘how-to’ book for life hacking. We instead looked at actions we admire from some of the ancient Stoics, each with their own circumstances, difficulties, and privileges. We wanted to show that we should always strive to be excellent human beings, but can only do so from within our own perspectives and idiosyncratic natures. By using the examples from Stoic history, and comparing them with modern people who have done amazing things, we can ask what the virtues might look like for each of us, with our own strengths, circumstances, and challenges.

The challenge of working together

Did you find working with a coauthor easy or difficult? Why?

This book would have been impossible individually, since Kai and I have different areas of interest, and are quite different in temperament and personality as well. But it wasn’t easy. We had to do this over email and long phone calls, without ever having met in person. Fortunately, Stoicism is the glue (or perhaps, “pneuma”) that kept us connected and made *Being Better: Stoicism for a World Worth Living In* the project we felt contemporary Stoicism needs right now.