



# STOIC AND ISLAMIC THOUGHTS

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People often ask me whether there's any relationship between Stoic philosophy and Islam. The writings of Arab Muslim scholar Al-Kindi may provide the best example of a more direct link between Islam and Stoicism. The writings of Arab Muslim scholar Al-Kindi may provide the best example of a more direct link between Islam and Stoicism.

## Overcoming sorrows

In his text *Consolatio* offers this advice on overcoming life's sorrows: Emotional pain is caused by failing to obtain what we desire, or losing what we love. The Stoics say something very similar:

*Pleasure and pain supervene on these, pleasure when we achieve what we desired or escape what we were afraid of, pain when we miss achieving what we desired or meet with what we were afraid of. — Stobaeus*

We find this basic premise throughout the main surviving works of Stoicism, especially *The Discourses* of Epictetus.

## Inner kingdom

Like the Stoics, Al-Kindi, compares this inner state to true kingship. This is the noble attitude of a king: "they enjoy everything that is a present object of observation to them with the firmest action, and with the clearest indication of not needing it. By contrast, the mean-spirited crave with eager anticipation the coming of every material blessing and bid farewell to every departing one with painful sorrow. The small-minded lack gratitude and acceptance, and can neither receive nor let go of good

fortune wisely. We should rather "make ourselves, by means of good habit, content with every situation so as to be always happy."

## Enduring hardships

People, he says, go to great lengths, even enduring painful medical procedures, to look after the health of their bodies. We should therefore be more willing to endure hardship for the sake of our own minds or souls. Our soul is our true nature, he says, the body merely its instrument.

In language, again reminiscent of Epictetus, he says that we should train ourselves to master our desires, building habits, beginning with small things and then progressing "from the smallest to the largest issues."

## Psychological strategies

The first psychological strategy he recommends consists of dividing our sorrows into two categories, depending on whether they originate in our own actions or the actions of others.

Again, this is like Stoicism but slightly different. The Stoics typically employed this general strategy of dividing things into two broad categories, for simple decision-making. Most famously, although this is not the only example, the *Handbook* of Epictetus begins by advising us to distinguish between things that are "up to us" and things that are not.

Al-Kindi goes on to say regarding the forms of suffering caused by our own actions that we should simply stop doing them. However, if the cause of our suffering has to do with the actions

of another we should ask ourselves whether resolving it is up to us or not. If it is up to us then we should resolve it. If it is something that is up to another person then, at the very least, we should not allow ourselves to be sad in anticipation, before the event happens, because the other person may still resolve what is upsetting us.

Moreover, we should remember that time heals all wounds: "*Every sorrow is necessarily dispelled by solace in some period of time if the sorrowful one does not die from the sorrow or at the beginning of the sorrow.*"

## Death is not bad

Regarding death, Al-Kindi says, "As for death, it is the completion of our nature; for if there were no death there would be no human beings existing at all."

The saying that death is not bad, but rather our fear of death is bad, is classic Stoicism. This is true more generally: our own passions, such as fear and anger, do us more harm than the things of which we're afraid or about which we're angry. The notion that death is natural, and should therefore be viewed with relative indifference, is a recurring theme in Stoicism, particularly in *The Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius.

Al-Kindi also concludes by saying some very Stoic-sounding things. We should learn the true nature of evil, that it resides in our own moral errors, and thereby transpose our aversion from external things onto the vicious dispositions of our own soul.

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