

Put virtue first, joy will follow

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“This is the genius of Stoicism: removing the factors that eclipse joy.”



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Joy in Stoicism

More than a few friends have asked, “So where is joy to be found in this Stoic philosophy of yours?” It’s a fair question, because it’s true that the role of positive emotions is not explicitly emphasized in the writings of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus. While these philosophers acknowledge the power of all emotions as motivating factors of attraction and repulsion, they often focus on the destructive impact of unchecked emotion. This is especially true when these teachers warn that an undisciplined, non-rational relationship with emotion can derail us from our paramount path of flourishing.

Joy shines through

But, make no mistake, joy shines through the life organized around Stoic principles. It is even the hallmark of such a life. The Stoic simply reorders the commonplace hierarchy of values that would elevate the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, lack, or discomfort to the top of the list. Instead virtue is our aim and purpose: plain and simple. Virtue is the highest (and absolute) value.

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What does virtue do with joy?

What does putting virtue first have to do with joy? The lifelong project of seeking to embody virtue in thought, word, and deed yields happiness, tranquility, and an absence of anxiety. This makes sense, because in a way joy is what’s left over after you have been freed from such mental prisons as anger, resentment, jealousy, shame, hopelessness, or fear of what other people

think about you. Once these thorns-in-the-flesh are removed, what’s left in their place is joy. The Stoics know that attention misplaced on “externals” is the path to chaos, devolution, and joylessness.

The genius of Stoicism

Joy is commonly viewed as a feeling of triumph after a hard-won goal is achieved or one has experienced some happy event. True enough, but joy is more than that. It points to an unencumbered state of being, an experience of the soul being free from its quotidian agonies. This is the genius of Stoicism: removing the factors that eclipse joy.

The Stoic recognizes that you don’t get joy from pursuing joy itself. It appears as a byproduct of identifying and engaging with one’s duties and embracing one’s responsibilities. The Stoic who learns what is within one’s power and what isn’t and steadfastly pursues excellence in worthy endeavours is bound to be visited by joy. When we are patient, gentle, just, even-tempered, dispassionate, courageous, and kind, we have built joy’s natural habitat.

The Stoics carefully examined what makes life meaningful to human beings. They considered riches, creativity, reputation, the pursuit of humanitarian ideals, the realization of one’s individual talents, love, the search for truth, the full use of one’s energies, and much more. From this they concluded that virtue itself is supreme. This insight is profound in its application to any individual’s life. We can become so confused about what we should do with ourselves, whom we should be with, how we should act, or where we should put our energies. All we have to remember is to put virtue first and joy will, in the fullness of time, follow. Knowing this our souls can relax.