

Seeing virtue as the answer

“Virtue is the answer to just about any of our questions.”



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@Sharon-Lebell.

Human imperfections are everywhere

Virtue is the answer to just about any of our questions. The steady cultivation of our character in the direction of virtue is more to the point. One of Marcus Aurelius' favorite contemplations is the transitory nature of existence as it entwines with the faithful repetition of human foibles across epoch, culture, and locale. In other words, human imperfection is everywhere, all the time. A dispiriting conclusion; but it doesn't have to be.

What is badness?

Marcus opens Book 7 of *Meditations* with the bald question and answer,

What is badness? It is that which thou hast often seen. - Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 7.1

He is simultaneously reminding us of the pervasiveness of “badness,” its perniciousness, as well as its banality. That “badness” is commonplace might weaken some people's resolve to do anything about it. When something is dull or the normal default setting, it can fail to invite attention or inspire the will to change.

However, Marcus prods us to wake up:

To recover thy life is in thy power. Look at things again as thou didst use to look at them; for in this consists the recovery of thy life. - Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 7.2

Recovering is within our power

This is terrific news. To “recover” our lives, our character, our nature, however riddled we are with weakness and sundry character flaws, is actually within our power. Marcus reminds us that not only can we recover our lives, i.e., our dignity and a self-sufficient, even serenely elegant mind, but we shouldn't waste any time, and get down to business

doing so.

Where does this project of elevating our character begin? Like the great minister Harry Emerson Fosdick said in his 1943 book *On Being a Real Person*,

The beginning of worth-while living is...the confrontation with ourselves.

Pausing on a regular basis to face the self, i.e., “confronting” our souls is the essence of the Stoic enterprise.

Self-scrutiny with humility

This is where all of the Stoics chime in to enjoin us to begin this self-scrutiny now and with humility. Why humility? The culture in which we currently live, for example, does not promote humility as a starting point, but rather urges us to celebrate our selves, to listen to “our inner voices,” to proclaim “our own truths”. All of this is well and good, but it is wildly tilted toward self-concern to such a degree as to make us often unteachable, unable to grow in wisdom. The social and political commentator David Brooks advises us that “wisdom isn't a body of information. It's the moral quality of knowing what you don't know and figuring out a way to handle your ignorance, uncertainty, and limitation”.

Beginning of true freedom

Stoicism tells us that the prize is eudaimonia, a kind of serene happiness that arises from being free inside. Humility is the launching pad for this inner freedom, because it unchains us from the need to prove we are superior all the time and instead directs our attention to the effort to amplify what is best in ourselves and to learn from our weak places so that we might overcome, however gradually, the “badness” of our natures.

This is the beginning of true freedom. Marcus is right. This freedom is worth the struggle.