

Lessons in Stoicism by John Sellars



John Sellars
LESSONS
in Stoicism

What ancient
philosophy
teach us about
how to live

Lessons in Stoicism is by John Sellars, a prominent modern Stoic scholar. His name should be familiar to our readers—he is on our Advisory Board and he writes to the magazine occasionally.

This is a short book—just 96 pages. It can be read in one sitting. Its aim is not to give a comprehensive introduction to Stoicism (for that you may want to read Brad Inman’s excellent *Stoicism: A Very Short Introduction*), but to provide a clear understanding of what Stoicism aims to do and how it can help us live better lives. Reading this book is like chatting with a knowledgeable friend who takes the time to explain what Stoicism is. In setting out to explain Stoicism, Sellars answers these fundamental questions:

What is the purpose of Stoicism?

Sellars starts by pointing out that Stoicism was conceived as psychotherapy, “a hospital for souls” (Epictetus) When viewed this way, modern Stoic self-help authors are not diluting Stoic principles but applying the, the way they should.

What is under our control?

Sellars then discusses in detail probably the most important notion of Stoicism: *some things are up to us and others or not* (the dichotomy of control). He points out

that our voluntary judgements are the only things under our control. Nothing else is.

Are Stoics devoid of emotions?

Modern usage of the word “stoic” would have us believe that Stoics are unfeeling human beings. This, of course is a distortion. Sellars points out that

We’ll still have the usual reactions to events—we’ll jump, flinch, get momentarily frightened or embarrassed, cry—and we’ll still have strong caring relationships with those close to us. What we won’t do, however, is develop the negative emotions of anger, resentment, bitterness, jealousy, obsession, perpetual fear or excessive attachment. These are the things that can ruin a life and that the Stoics think are best avoided.

Why is complaining meaningless?

Some believe that Stoics are fatalists. John Sellars points out that this is not true. Stoics face adversity when it is handed to them without complaining, not because they are fatalistic but because there’s no point complaining about reality.

Do you have to believe in god?

The ancient Stoics talked a lot about

god. Sellars suggests that they did not use the term as we do now. Rather they used the terms god and Nature interchangeably. (But they also attributed “rationality” to Nature, making the present reviewer wonder if their god is really the same as what we call “nature.”)

How to live and die

Life is given to us to enjoy and can be taken away at any time. We don’t have to resent it. We can accept it and cultivate excellence while we are still alive.

Should we care for others?

The firm belief of Stoicism—that our good and evil comes only from us and our happiness does not depend on others may give the impression that Stoicism is self-centered. But what Stoics like Epictetus actually said was that human beings, by nature, are social and political animals. So we have a duty to fulfil our social and natural role.

John Sellars’ exposition is clear, his choice of topics is relevant and the book is short and to the point. Recommended for all Stoics, but especially for potential newcomers to Stoicism.

Chuck Chakrapani

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