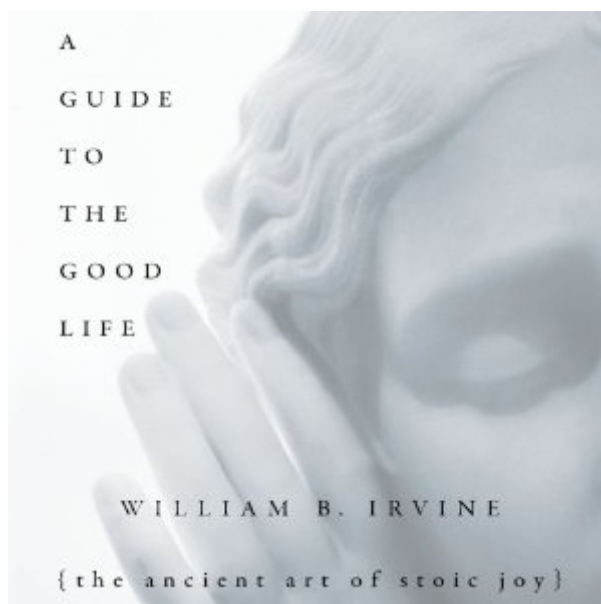


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A Guide To The Good Life: The Ancient Art Of Stoic Joy



Synopsis

One of the great fears many of us face is that despite all our effort and striving, we will discover at the end that we have wasted our life. In *A Guide to the Good Life*, William B. Irvine plumbs the wisdom of Stoic philosophy, one of the most popular and successful schools of thought in ancient Rome, and shows how its insight and advice are still remarkably applicable to modern lives. In *A Guide to the Good Life*, Irvine offers a refreshing presentation of Stoicism, showing how this ancient philosophy can still direct us toward a better life. Using the psychological insights and the practical techniques of the Stoics, Irvine offers a roadmap for anyone seeking to avoid the feelings of chronic dissatisfaction that plague so many of us. Irvine looks at various Stoic techniques for attaining tranquility and shows how to put these techniques to work in our own life. As he does so, he describes his own experiences practicing Stoicism and offers valuable first-hand advice for anyone wishing to live better by following in the footsteps of these ancient philosophers. Listeners learn how to minimize worry, how to let go of the past and focus our efforts on the things we can control, and how to deal with insults, grief, old age, and the distracting temptations of fame and fortune. We learn from Marcus Aurelius the importance of prizing only things of true value, and from Epictetus we learn how to be more content with what we have. Finally, *A Guide to the Good Life* shows listeners how to become thoughtful observers of their own lives. If we watch ourselves as we go about our daily business and later reflect on what we saw, we can better identify the sources of distress and eventually avoid that pain in our life. By doing this, the Stoics thought, we can hope to attain a truly joyful life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I first read Marcus Aurelius' "Meditations" while flying to the eastern United States for a scientific meeting. It was during a rather difficult period in my life and I had picked up on "Meditations" because of a mention of this work by Edwin Way Teale in "Near Horizons" as a book he turned to in times of trouble. I was not disappointed by these insightful notes written for his own use nearly 2000 years ago by the Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher. It was thus that I was primed to read William B. Irvine's "A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy." This is one of those books that can be really life changing, if the reader is ready for it. Irvine briefly discusses the history of Stoic philosophy and its relationship to other philosophies in ancient Greece and Rome. He concentrates most of the book, however, on the Stoics of the Roman Empire, namely Seneca, Gaius Musonius Rufus, Epictetus and of course, Marcus Aurelius. After his historical review Irvine spends some time on the practical aspects of Stoicism, including negative visualization (visualizing how your life could be worse), dichotomy of control (what we can and cannot control), fatalism (about the past and present, not the future), self-denial (putting off pleasure so as to appreciate it more when you have it), duty (what we owe to others), social relations (how we relate to others), insults (how to react to them), grief (how to deal with loss), anger (how to turn it to humor), personal values (how to deal with fame and fortune, or the lack thereof), old age (how to deal with the aging process), and dying (how to prepare for this certainty). The last part of the book is devoted to the practice of Stoicism in the modern world, with both its pluses and minuses.

Once in a while, one comes across an idea so profound that it has the power to change one's life. So was the case for me yesterday on my way to Columbus, OH. Feeling like Christopher Columbus (re)discovering the Americas, I re-discovered the ancient Stoic philosophy through the reading of A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy by William B Irvine's, thanks to a program I recently listened to on KPFA. I had never read the philosophy of Zeno of Citium, Epictetus, Seneca, or Marcus Aurelius, but I knew in my heart that such a liberating yet deceptively simple way of living must have been devised before. I just did not know where to look for it. And much like the author, I had been recently intrigued by Zen Buddhism, but could not fully relate to its esoteric nature. Classic Stoicism preaches a way of life that can bring tranquility and joy to anyone. Through simple psychological techniques such as negative visualization, dichotomy (/trichotomy) of control, or internalization of goals--all brilliantly described in Irvine's book--one can suppress negative feelings

such as anxiety, fear, or frustration, while learning how to better deal with insult or grief, and why fame and luxury should not be looked for (more on this later). While reading through the 336 pages of Irvine's book, I was amazed at how natural the overall philosophy felt to me. Its guiding principles were some of the very few absolute values that I could genuinely call mine, and many of its techniques I had discovered myself over time. In the author's words, I must be a "congenital Stoic." Nevertheless, I had never been able to spell out such a coherent system on my own, nor had I come across anyone who had until now.

In 'A Guide to the Good Life' William Irvine makes a case for Stoicism in the modern Western world. A short popular work, the text does not presuppose or require prior acquaintance with philosophy in general or stoicism in particular. The following comments are offered for potential readers. First a few words with respect to context. Along with Epicureanism and Cynicism Stoicism was a well-known school of Greek philosophy in the ancient world that thrived for many centuries. Stoicism is often divided into three periods, Early Stoicism (Zeno and Chrysippus), Middle Stoicism (Panaetius and Posidonius) and Late Stoicism (Seneca, Musonius, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius). Irvine's book centered on the latter Roman period which has a pragmatic rather than theoretical focus; at least the extant texts are skewed in this direction. With the exception of some occasional pockets of resurgence Stoicism vanished from the intellectual landscape in the early centuries of the Common Era. While I appreciate stoicism and think that it has something to offer to contemporary society, I have mixed feelings about this text. On the positive side Irvine writes in a manner that is accessible to a broad non-academic audience and as such may expose Stoicism to readers that it might not otherwise reach. His observations, while overly general, regarding the superficial and commercial nature of modern Western society are worth noting and likely to resonate with reflective readers. Additionally he does an adequate job of introducing and discussing some Stoic techniques for dealing the challenges of life (e.g. desire, anxiety and anger), and attempts to dispel the stereotype of stoics as cold and joyless people.

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