

Keep calm and get your stoic on: more people today are heeding the advice than perhaps ever before **From Cynicism to Stoicism**

No one expects the Spanish Inquisition, to paraphrase Monty Python. We live in strange times. But few people could have expected today's rise of a [global movement](#) of self-describing Stoic online communities numbering over 100,000 participants.

Stoicism was the ancient Greek and then Roman philosophy founded in the last decades of the fourth century BCE by a merchant, [Zeno of Citium](#) (modern Cyprus). The latter's vessel had sunk on route to Athens, taking Zeno's cargo down with it.

Zeno, it is said, made his way up to the Athenian agora. There, with his few remaining coins, he bought and read a copy of Xenophon's [Memorabilia of Socrates](#). "Where can I find a man like this?", he is supposed to have asked the bookseller.

Zeno was pointed towards one Crates, a philosopher from the Cynical school. [The Cynics](#) were a kind of radical break-away group from the circles surrounding the Platonic Academy and Aristotelian Lyceum. The Cynics claimed to live "according to nature". They completely shunned social conventions and lived as simply as dogs (*kynes*), whence the name.

Some years later, Zeno founded his own school. He would deliver lectures to the public on the steps of Athens' painted Stoa (whence "Stoicism", aka "the porch"), whose foundations today lie half-concealed beneath surrounding restaurants.



Why Stoicism?

But why Stoicism, and why now? I recently asked these and other questions to several of the leading figures associated with the new Stoic movement, and spent time investigating their sites and stories.

The core of the answer has to be the enduring pertinence of Stoic ethics, especially as it has come down to us through the Roman Stoics Seneca, Epictetus, Musonius Rufus and Marcus Aurelius.

The pertinence hinges upon a few very simple, powerfully intuitive observations and principles.

These begin with [Epictetus](#) ' simple call to people to always distinguish between what is, and is not in our control. There is, at some basic level, no rational point in being unhappy about the things we can't change. Learning to let go of these things, in order to focus on what we can affect—our own present impulses, thoughts, and actions—just *has* to be both philosophically astute, as well as a psychological boon.

Imagine that all of the mental energy people spend worrying about what others think, tweet, like or say (or don't) about them, what may happen in the future (but may not), and what cannot be changed in the past, could be freed up to attend solely to the things we each can presently alter.

This thought will bring you close to what the Stoics promise, via their (Socratic) stress that peoples' inner character (or "virtue") is the most important good anyone can prize or pursue.

Stoicism 5.0: The unlikely 21st century reboot of an ancient philosophy

Written by Matthew Sharpe, Associate Professor in Philosophy, Deakin University



Why now and how?

One old criticism of the Stoics, from the German philosopher Hegel, is that Stoicism is a philosophy for times of de-democratisation.

It emerged after classical Greece's autonomous, democratic city-states had undergone terminal decline. The philosophy re-empowers people individually, in a world where everything else is at the disposal of powers, like the Hellenistic Kings and Roman Emperors, who can at any moment rob us of all our worldly possessions.

There are real historical problems with this idea. But perhaps it captures something about the attractions of Stoicism today. We are entering into a period in which the postwar liberal-democratic consensus is straining. Meanwhile, the security and surveillance apparatus of modern corporations and nation-states increasingly call into question what privacy could mean in the internet age.

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The internet itself is the more material cause underlying today's proliferation of Stoic practical philosophy, outside of the walls of academe.



Zeno the founding Stoic's statue in modern Larnaka (ancient Citium/Kition) in Southern Cyprus.

What we might call this “fifth Stoa” or “Stoicism 5.0”—counting the early, middle and late ancient periods scholars divide, plus the early modern “neoStoicism” of figures like [Justus Lipsius](#)—had humble beginnings.

Nobody's ship was sunk. But the people associated with these beginnings had no idea how quickly their progeny would grow.

According to Donald Robertson, author of [The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy](#)

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Patrick Ussher, a PhD student at Essex University used it with a group of students who were trying to live for a week following the advice of Galen, Marcus Aurelius' physician. His professor in the classics department at Essex, Chris Gill, organized for a group of people who had written about these things, including myself, Tim LeBon, and Jules Evans to meet with them and Stoic Week was born. There's [a video](#) of that workshop at Exeter in 2012. That's exactly how our Modern Stoicism project was born.

This project now includes several Facebook groups (the largest of which has, as of this week, over 25, 000 members), the Stoicism Subreddit (over 54,000 subscribers), email lists within

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which fierce debates rage on points of theoretical detail: numerous Stoic blogs, some Stoic consultants, and hundreds of Youtube videos.

There is the site “ [Traditional Stoicism](#) ” which has broken away from the other “modern” groups on grounds of an insistence that living according to Stoic ethics requires a commitment to the ancient Stoic physics and theology.

There are the “ [Modern Stoicism](#) ” and “ [How to be a Stoic](#) ” email feeds, on which articles on Stoic figures, texts and subjects—and, in the latter case, a popular Stoic Advice column—are posted every other day.

Some groups recommend Eastern meditative practices of “mindfulness” alongside, or as the corollary, of Stoic practices. [Others demur](#) .

Then there is a site like “ [Daily Stoic](#) ” which sends daily Stoic meditation themes to subscribers’ email addresses: whether quotes from the great Hellenistic and Roman Stoics, or from works of literature and philosophy on Stoic themes.

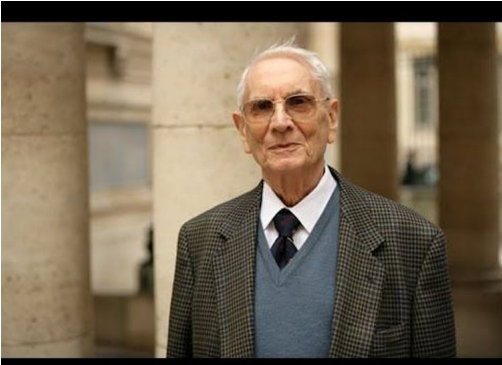
A way of life, not just a theory

All of these online communities are united by the conviction that Stoicism was and remains, at its core, a way of life. Their founding father, in this regard, is the great French classicist and historian of philosophy, [Pierre Hadot](#) .

In a series of works written after 1970, based upon an exacting apprenticeship in theology and [philology](#) , Hadot became convinced that the only way to make sense of what the ancient Stoics (and Epicureans and Pyrrhonians) wrote was if we suppose that they conceived philosophy as what the Stoics called “ [an art of living](#) ” .

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[what you may happen](#)
Disclosure

Matthew Sharpe works for Deakin University. He is part of an AR-funded grant on modern reinventions of the ancient idea of philosophy as a way of life, and is presently working on a book on a coauthored monograph on the subject. He wishes to thank John Sellars, Massimo Pigliucci, and Donald Robertson for their time, suggestions, corrections and thoughts.

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