Stoics shared the cynics' admiration for Socrates. They accepted the fundamental cynical premise that excessive desires are a prescription for unhappiness, and that the best form of life is characterized by detachment, courage, dignity, and self-control. Though Socrates was neither a cynic nor a stoic, he was a model for both.

PHILOSOPHERS IN ACTION

Individually, or in small groups, try to name any philosophical thinkers or great leaders whose lives have prematurely ended in tragedy. What ideals or principles did these people stand for? How did they act? How did others respond to them? Were any of these individuals considered a social threat like Socrates? If so, why? If philosophy is irrelevant and useless, as many claim, then why would any of these philosophical thinkers be considered dangerous? Discuss.

"Events do not just happen, but arrive by appointment."
EPICTETUS

The Stoic Universe

A great source of anxiety in the modern world derives from the prospect that life could be meaningless, that things might occur by fluke happenstance, and that the future offers only chaos and dangerous unpredictability. In an uncertain world, people can often feel hopelessly alone and abandoned. If, indeed, you feel this way yourself, you might find some sort of psycho-spiritual help in the therapeutic philosophy of the stoics.

According to the stoics, we live in an **ordered universe.** This means the universe is rational, structured, and shaped by design. Nothing that happens is random or serendipitous. For example, when two old friends bump into each other on the street, apparently by chance, they really don't; their meeting is evidence of what Carl Jung calls **synchronicity,** or meaningful coincidence. There is a reason behind it. Epictetus puts it so: *Events do not just happen, but arrive by appointment.* As Chrysippus argued, everything that happens is **fated,** predetermined, and according to plan. For stoics, the power behind the plan is God. Be careful, however, how you interpret the notion of God. Depending on your religious belief system, if you have one, you may tend to see God in essentially superhuman terms, as some kind of extraordinary being. Some Christians believe we are created in God's image as humans, only less than perfect. The stoics, by contrast, made God synonymous with Zeus, creative fire, ether, the Word (Logos), World Reason, Fate, Providence, Destiny, and the Law of Nature. In fact, in their **monistic universe,** there is no difference between God and all the things in the world; they are one. Thus, God, Zeus, the Logos (or whatever you choose to call this elemental force) is not somehow above or be-

yond us. God is **immanent** in everything. God is the determining element in all physical objects and events. As for humans, because we possess the power of reason, we have the spark of divinity emanating from our original Source. Under the guidance of the divine Logos, the universe displays a rational order. Everything is connected and happens for a reason—one that is divinely ordained (see Table 2.1).

How to Live in a Fated Universe

From the philosophical notion of stoic determinism follow a number of practical, moral, and behavioral prescriptions for action. These prescriptions ultimately derive from the belief that God orders all things for the best. This stoic belief offers us a great measure of reassurance. Whatever is, or whatever happens, is or does so by design and with a purpose. Nothing in the stoic universe is out of place. This, of course, raises the problem of evil in the world, to which stoicism has the following reply: Good cannot exist without evil; evil throws the good into greater relief in the same way that the contrast of light and shadow

TABLE 2.1 Periods and Proponents of Stoicism

Early Stoa (Third Century B.C.E.)	
Zeno (336–264 B.C.E.)	Founder of Stoicism; lectured at the Painted Porch (*Stoa Poikile*) in Athens; emphasized strength of character in ethical and political action
Cleanthes of Assos (331–232 B.C.E.)	Successor to Zeno; poet and religious visionary
Chrysippus of Soloi (279–206 B.C.E.)	Third leader of the stoa at Athens; successor to Cleathes; advocated living in accordance with reason; saw emotions as great obstacles to happiness that required eradication
Middle Stoa (second and first centuries B.C.E.)	
Panaetius of Rhodes (185–110 B.C.E.)	Softened asceticism of early stoa; attached moral value to external goods; spoke in terms of gradual moral progress
Posidonius of Apamea (135–51 B.C.E.)	Pupil of Panaetius; brought rigor and detail to the stoic system; developed stoic belief in the indivisibility of cosmos
Late Stoa (first and second century C.E.)	
Seneca (4 B.C.E.–65 C.E.)	Most sympathetic to Posidonius, minister of Nero; writer of tragedies; developer of stoic ethics: tranquility and social duty
Epictetus (50–138 C.E.)	Freed slave; member of Nero's bodyguard; distinguished between what we can and cannot control; believed in innate moral predispositions
Marcus Aurelius (121–180 C.E.)	Last of the great stoics; emphasized inward self-control and useful citizenship in the cosmopolis

SOURCE: Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), pp. 19–22.

Take some time to think about a setback or disappointment in your life. It could have occurred at home, with your friends, at work or at school perhaps. What happened exactly? Why was the incident so upsetting? How could it serve, or has it served, as a preparation for your current and future life? Do you think the stoics were correct in saying that everything happens for a reason? Why or why not? Continue to record your thoughts in your meditative journal.

is pleasing in a picture. In a similar vein, Chrysippus said: "Comedies have in them ludicrous verses which, though bad in themselves, nevertheless lend a certain grace to the whole play."[3] Furthermore, apparent evil that befalls the good may be turned into a blessing in disguise. Individuals may overcome tragedies and transform them into personal triumphs. Physical diseases may stimulate medical research that ends in cures. Today's misfortunes may also become the open doorways for tomorrow's successes.

I'm reminded here of a former student of mine who transferred to General Arts and Science after flunking out of a sports injury management course. She was severely anxious and depressed by her removal from the program. In time, this student discovered she had an aptitude for philosophy, and as a result, she decided to proceed with future university studies to become a lawyer. The last time we spoke, she was delighted by this "twist of fate" which, at the outset, was painful but now seemed for the best. Her "failure" was simply a preparation for a new beginning, though she couldn't appreciate this fact at the time of her ejection. Just think, every joy, success, setback, disappointment, trauma, or failure that you've experienced constitute, in a stoic universe, simply the perfect preparation for what you're doing right now in your life.

Freedom and Value

Because things happen as they should, in the **cosmology** of the stoics, no act is evil or reprehensible in itself. As stoics point out, it is "the intention, the moral condition of the agent from whom the act proceeds, that makes the act evil; the act as a physical entity is indifferent."[4] Moral evil manifests itself when the human will is out of harmony with right reason. Personal freedom in a stoic universe does not come from doing anything you want, but by choosing to act according to nature. A form of **interior freedom** is possible when individuals alter their **judgments** on events and **attitudes** toward them, perceiving them and welcoming them as the expressions of God's will. The stoic's advice is that we develop a psychological posture of **courageous acceptance.** Although we cannot control world events, we have complete (interior) freedom to respond emotionally and psychologically. We cannot choose life's roles (being born male or female, into a rich or poor family); we can only choose how well to play the roles assigned us. As I read on a bumper sticker once: *Attitude is everything.* (I didn't know a stoic was driving the car ahead of me—likely one of those closet-philosopher types I talked about in Chapter One!)

"Live according to Nature."
STOIC MAXIM

Purpose of Life

In the stoic universe, the ultimate goal of life is to live according to nature. Doing so will lead to a state of spiritual peace and well-being, sometimes referred to as **stoic apathy** (from *apatheia*) or at other times as ***eudaimonia.*** The notion of *eudaimonia,* sometimes loosely translated as happiness, should not be

interpreted in psychological terms, however, but rather in a normative fashion. The *eudaimon,* one who has achieved happiness, is someone who flourishes from stoic apathy, living the virtuous life. This person, whose human will accords with Divine Reason, lives life according to nature. Nothing else besides virtue has value in itself. External goods are neither parts of *eudaimonia,* nor necessary for it.[5] Things like health, wealth, pleasure, or absence of pain are, in fact, morally indifferent to the virtuous life. *Eudaimonia* is possible with or without them. One person can be sick and poor and still be virtuous. Another can be healthy and wealthy and yet be disturbed as well as miserably corrupt. Of course, given the choice, health is to be preferred over sickness, wealth over poverty, and freedom from pain over suffering. We should all try to conduct our affairs and influence events in our lives to enhance the former in each case and to minimize the latter.

Things like health and wealth do possess a "second grade worth" within the stoic hierarchical scale of values. What the stoic recognizes, however, is that such things are ultimately beyond our control. You may choose to live a healthy lifestyle, for instance, but suddenly be hit by a car, leaving you permanently disabled. You may also have made prudent financial investments for years, only to discover one morning that the stock market has crashed and left you personally bankrupt. As devastating as such events may seem, according to stoicism, they should not be cause for psychological disturbance. They only affect you if you let them, and you only let them if you allow yourself to become attached to worldly things. Personally, I find this stoic insight immensely liberating. Just think, nothing that happens in your life—no misfortune, accident, trauma, or tragedy—can ever prevent you from living life as it should be lived.

When "the good life" is equated with the virtuous life, which accords with the Logos or God's will, a certain self-possession and **emotional detachment** from worldly affairs can manifest itself in tranquility and peace of mind. If you are currently upset by life, then, from a stoic vantage point, you probably exhibit bad thinking and poor character development, confusing what you can and cannot control, placing value in things that have no intrinsic, ultimate worth. If you are unhappy, it is not because something has happened to you or because something has failed to happen; it is because *you* are the problem. To illustrate how the problem is "in you" not "out there," consider the fact that not everybody is upset by the same insult. You may become infuriated, while someone else could be left unaffected. News of a job loss could depress you but exhilarate someone elated by the prospect of challenging new opportunities. Insults and bad news affect different people in different ways. The upset is therefore not in the insult or the bad news, but in the person. What is important to recognize is that nothing or nobody can make you glad, mad, or sad without your permission. When it comes to your attitudes and emotions, the stoic maintains that you are ultimately in control. Marcus Aurelius says: *If you are pained by any external thing, it is not the thing that disturbs you, but your judgment about it. And, it is in your power to wipe out this judgment now.*

STOICISM AND STRESS MANAGEMENT

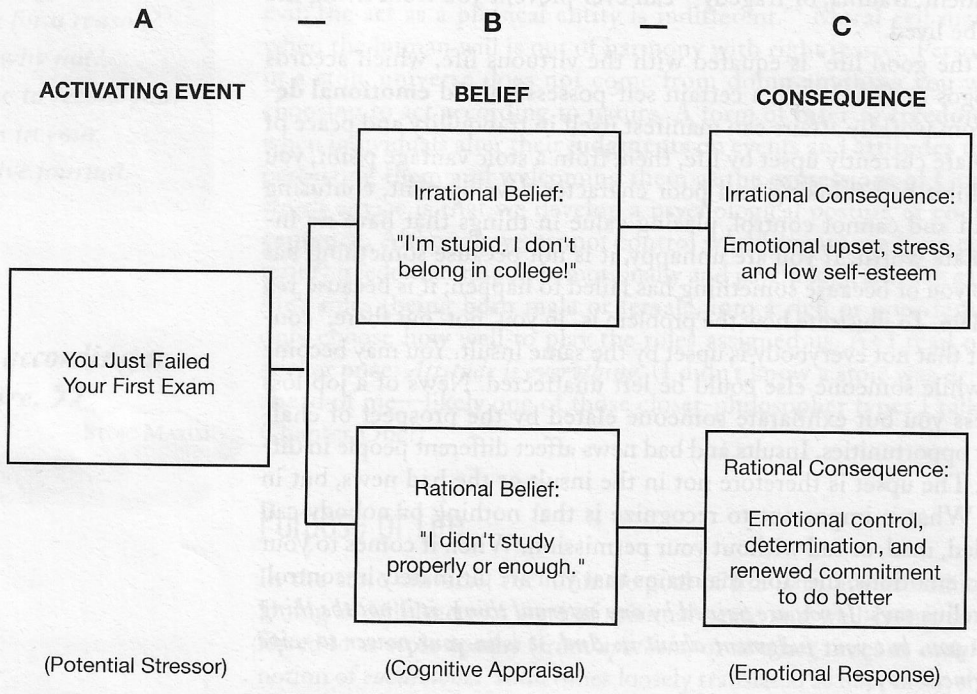
Things themselves touch not the soul, not in the least degree.

MARCUS AURELIUS

The psychologically healing powers of stoic wisdom have managed to trickle down into contemporary society through psychotherapeutic practices of stress management. **Albert Ellis,** the internationally recognized developer of **Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy,** has found through research and clinical practice that people feel largely the way they do because of how they think. Ellis says that, " . . . what we label our emotional reactions are mainly caused by our conscious and unconscious evaluations, interpretations and philosophies."[6] When we feel anxious, worried, or stressed, it is frequently due to the irrational assumptions we make and the foolish beliefs to which we cling. Consistent with stoic thinking, Ellis argues that things and events, in themselves, don't *make us unhappy;* rather our interpretations of them do. Therefore, if we could identify our irrational assumptions and beliefs and then abandon them, we would then begin to live a more rational lifestyle, one with significantly less stress and less negative emotion. By clinging to irrationality, we become architects of our own emotional disturbance and "dis-ease."

To illustrate how this is so, Ellis has conceptualized an A–B–C Model of psychological functioning, which he incorporated into his therapeutic methods (Figure 2.2). The *A* represents the activating event—the real-life occurrence that is potentially stressful, although not necessarily so. The activating event could be a failure, loss, hurt, or anything else that could produce stress in your life. Intuitively, some of us think that such events automatically cause a stress response. However, the emotional consequence *C*—of failure, loss, or hurt—is not necessarily determined by such things. Coming between the activating event (*A*) and the ultimate emotional response or consequence (*C*) is the belief (*B*) about what just happened (*A*). The cognitive interpretation and appraisal of the activating event will ultimately determine the emotional response. Figure 2.2 also serves to underscore the insight of Epictetus the stoic that *Men are not disturbed by things, but by the view which they take of them.*

FIGURE 2.2 Albert Ellis's "A–B–C" model.



Emotions in Life

Given the lengthy history of stoicism and its many variations from different periods and geographic locations (Athens and Rome), academic interpretations regarding the stoic position on **emotion** are not entirely consistent. Some analysts claim the stoics rejected all emotions to the extent it was humanly possible; others contend that such a claim is only a half-truth, asserting that what the stoics wished to abolish were the "excessive passions" that led to mental disturbance.[7] The discrepancy seems to come from the fact that interpreters cite different sources in their translations from the Greek that either distinguish, or fail to distinguish, between the notions of *emotion* and *passion*. Where there is a total dismissal of emotion, the distinction appears not to be made; where emotion is countenanced, the difference is recognized. On this latter interpretation, some emotions are acceptable, while others become **excessive passions.** Excessive passions are unreasonable and unnatural. However, a parent's love for a child, for instance, is an acceptable emotion that is natural and consistent with the divine order. Feelings of love for humanity and the attractions of friendship are also natural, so not necessarily to be avoided. By contrast, fear is an exaggerated emotion (a passionate disturbance), to be eliminated because it is contrary to reason. When people experience fear of the future, they may exhibit physical symptoms such as jittery hands or heart palpitations. These physical effects of fear result because of the belief that something bad is about to happen. However, in a fated stoic universe, nothing that happens can be described as bad, for it occurs as a function of God's will. Even things like death, pain, and ill-repute are morally indifferent. The experience of fear is the result of exaggerating their importance and believing that they will bring real harm when, in truth, they leave our essential moral being unaffected.

Other disturbing passions to be avoided include lust for revenge, envy, jealousy, grief, and even pity. The desire for revenge contains a disquieting element of hatred, whereas envy, grief, and jealousy possess some fairly obvious negative qualities of their own, leading to their own 'dis-ease.' As for pity, although it may sound like an admirable emotion, it too should be eliminated for it is based on the (false) belief that something "bad" has happened to someone else. Since no sorrow or resentment should follow from one's own suffering, it should not accompany another's. In the grand scheme of things—that is, from a universal and timeless perspective beyond one's own personal concerns and particular circumstances—all that happens is for the best and by design.

How to Progress Morally

Stoic wisdom offers us not only tranquility and freedom from fear, but also some suggestions for achieving such things. If we wish to develop morally as persons, we must behave in certain ways. First of all, we should live by the Socratic injunction to "Know Thyself." Seneca and Epictetus recommend that we engage in daily self-examinations, monitoring our thoughts, feelings, and actions.[8] This will help us to substitute good habits for bad ones. In this

regard, we should try to avoid temptations and wayward companions. We must become masters in our own psychological homes—controlling, avoiding, or eliminating those excessive emotions contributing to passionate disturbances in our lives. Recognizing the role of divine Providence in all events and seeing how most things desired by people in life are morally indifferent, we should also learn to forgive those who we erroneously thought hurt us or took from us what we once believed was valuable, but now recognize as worthless. From the stoic perspective, it is advantageous to set before our eyes some ideal of virtue (for example, Socrates) and then try to live up to it. As aspiring stoics, we should order our desires and perform our duties in accordance with right reason. Epictetus would recommend that we become indifferent to external goods. If we choose to seek happiness in goods that do not depend entirely on ourselves, we fall into the abyss of nonstop psychological dissatisfaction. Temperance and abstinence are more likely to result in happiness than efforts directed toward never-ending want gratification. Further stoic insights into how life should be lived can be gained in The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius.

ORIGINAL SOURCEWORK

The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius

MARCUS AURELIUS

V

In the morning when thou risest unwillingly, let this thought be present—I am rising to the work of a human being. Why then am I dissatisfied if I am going to do the things for which I exist and for which I was brought into the world? Or have I been made for this, to lie in the bedclothes and keep myself warm?—But this is more pleasant.—Dost thou exist then to take thy pleasure, and not at all for action or exertion? Dost thou not see the little plants, the little birds, the ants, the spiders, the bees working together to put in order their several parts of the universe? And art thou unwilling to do the work of a human being, and dost thou not make haste to do that which is according to thy nature?—But it is necessary to take rest also.—It is necessary: however nature has fixed bounds to this too: she has fixed bounds both to eating and drinking, and yet thou goest beyond these bounds, beyond what is sufficient; yet in thy acts it is not so, but thou stoppest short of what thou canst do. So thou lovest not thyself, for if thou didst, thou wouldst love thy nature and her will. But those who love their several arts exhaust themselves in working at them unwashed and without food; but thou valuest thy own nature less than the turner values the turning art, or the dancer the dancing art, or the lover of money values his money, or the vainglorious man his little glory. And such men, when they have a violent affection to a thing, choose neither to eat nor to sleep rather than to perfect the things which they care for. But are the acts which concern society more vile in thy eyes and less worthy of thy labour?

2. How easy it is to repel and to wipe away every impression which is troublesome or unsuitable, and immediately to be in all tranquility.

Source: Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius.* Trans. George Lang. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–1914.