How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life by Massimo Pigliucci

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Stoicism is a guide to living a happy, peaceful, and fearless life. It may be two thousand years old, but what it says – especially its way of life which the Stoics called “ethics” – is as applicable today as it has ever been. Stoicism doesn’t need “improvement” but it does need to be expressed in current English and the examples need to be updated so it is relevant to modern life. There have been several attempts to do this. For example, Donald Robertson’s Stoicism and the Art of Happiness and The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy explain Stoicism in specific contexts. My own Unshakable Freedom: Ancient Stoic Secrets Applied to Modern Life is also an application of Stoic philosophy to a specific area of life – achieving personal freedom. William Irvine’s A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy takes a more comprehensive view of Stoicism. There is much to like in this book, but I felt Irvine was unduly defensive about Stoicism and deviated from it in some aspects.

Therefore, I was looking for a comprehensive book on Stoicism that would be true to the original Stoic thoughts, but would express them in current English with modern examples, without being defensive about it. In Massimo Pigliucci’s How to be a Stoic, I found such a book. I got it yesterday, read it overnight, and I like it. Here is why. It is clearly written. Stoic thinkers were also excellent communicators and good at expressing their thoughts. And there are many translations of their works which are also excellent. The problem is, when 2,000-year-old texts are translated they sound stilted to the modern ear. Sometimes the sentences are too long, the references too obscure, and the examples too far removed from our experience.

Massimo’s book, on the other hand, uses relatively shorter sentences, familiar words, contemporary idioms, and examples that are of immediate relevance. It is easier to read and understand. The examples refer to problems we face today. The ancient Stoics faced imminent execution, exile, and arbitrary punishment. When Stoicism is explained using those examples, it can sound far removed from our concerns. Massimo applies Stoicism to our current concerns. This not only modernizes the Stoic examples, but points to solutions to problems that many people face. It answers objections to Stoicism without being defensive. Anyone who tries to interpret Stoicism to a modern reader has this challenge: How to relate our current life situation to what the Stoics said some two thousand years ago? Massimo uses a clever device to achieve this just like Epicureans did. While Epicureans had an imaginary conversation with Zeus, Massimo has several imaginary conversations with Epicurus. Pigliucci brings his concerns to Epicurus who then deconstructs them and shows how the Stoic solution really works. What I really liked here was the fact that the responses of this imaginary Epicurus are not a pale imitation of what Epicurus actually taught, but a clear interpretation of it. The result is a compelling picture of a Stoic way of life that is compatible with modern life. It uses personal experiences to illustrate the principles. Throughout the book, Massimo uses personal experiences. This works because it is immediate. It shows how he applied Stoicism in his own life. It is difficult to identify yourself with someone living today, leading a “normal” life than with someone who lived 2000 years ago under very different conditions. The book, in the tradition of Pierre Hadot, uses the framework of three disciplines of the Stoics: Desire, Action, and Assent. It starts with the basic premise of Stoicism that, “Some things are up to us and others are not.” Here Massimo discusses the dichotomy of control and why it makes sense. Then he goes on to discuss questions like: What does “living according to nature” mean? Why is life “playing ball?” How do preferred and dispreferred indifferents work? Most importantly, does God exist or is the universe a case of swirling atoms? While Epicurus (and other Stoics) were firmly in God’s camp, Massimo is not so sure. He prefers to be a skeptic, which should assure agnostics and atheists that the practice of Stoicism is open to anyone, believer or not. Then the book moves on to the discipline of action or how to live in this world. It starts discussing character (virtue) and provides several examples such as Helvidius Priscus and Malala Yousafzai. Massimo mentions that the virtues of Stoicism can also be found in various religions and it is important to preserve one’s integrity. We need to develop cohesion toward others. One way to achieve this is to remember that people do bad things because they lack wisdom, rather than out of pure malice.

Habit role models can help us put things in perspective, so we can become better human beings. This section of the book concludes with a particularly good and useful discussion of coping with disability and mental illness, and the relevance of Stoic principles in such contexts. The third section of the book, the discipline of assent or how to react to situations, starts with a discussion of death and suicide. We are bothered by death because we are capable of contemplating it. Massimo believes that death is inevitable and takes issue with Ray Kurzweil (who believes in things like extraordinarily long life and singularity) for never wanting to “leave the party.” If you are thinking or worried about death, you may want to read this chapter. It moves on to dealing with anger, anxiety, and loneliness. Here he reprises the idea that people do bad things because they don’t know any better. Think rationally about the situation to avert negative emotions. As Epicurus says “Logic defeats anger, because anger, even when it is justified, can quickly become irrational. So use cold, hard logic on yourself.” Massimo also discusses love and friendship before concluding the section with practical exercises. The Appendix section of the book has a brief but useful outline of the Hellenistic schools of practical philosophy. Massimo’s agnosticism and focus on Epicurus as the chief exponent of Stoicism parallel my own approach to Stoicism. I enjoyed reading the book. Reading it is like walking with a friend, who practices Stoicism, trying to explain to you what it is all about and how it helped him in his own life. A good read.
I bought this book after hearing Sheila speak some time ago and started reading it. Philosophy set it aside. Hard to find book on this sect of Buddhism. the adorable baked alaska lemons. Who died in 2002 and then pages of useful addresses. If you have tk friends who play poker but DON'T own this book. What is a Front End Load Plan. They contain graphic content of a questionable and VERY TABOO nature. An honest and raw peak into the lives of Chinese immigrants in NYC, written so creatively and brilliantly that I felt like I was there to witness it all in person. 442.10.32338 A bookish Philosophy, a mamas boy as he describes himself, Bazzett grew up on a farm where there was not much money to spare. Russell's wit and bountiful common sense sweeten what may seem a bitter brew to the leery. It opens several months after The Bronze Key Lief and takes off from there. Nor did any of the drafts of E. They came in very good condition. Certainly I will NOT to buy the volume one. I bought the audio version as well. Nowadays we know Wolverine's past (after House of M.

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