



# A Guide to Stoicism

by St. George Stock



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## *Foreword*

If you strip Stoicism of its paradoxes and its wilful misuse of language, what is left is simply the moral philosophy of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, dashed with the physics of Heraclitus. Stoicism was not so much a new doctrine as the form under which the old Greek philosophy finally presented itself to the world at large. It owed its popularity in some measure to its extravagance. A great deal might be said about Stoicism as a religion and about the part it played in the formation of Christianity but these subjects were excluded by the plan of this volume which was to present a sketch of the Stoic doctrine based on the original authorities.

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## *Philosophy Among the Greeks and Romans*

**A**mong the Greeks and Romans of the classical age philosophy occupied the place taken by religion among ourselves. Their appeal was to reason not to revelation. To what, asks Cicero in his Offices, are we to look for training in virtue, if not to philosophy? Now, if truth is believed to rest upon authority it is natural that it should be impressed upon the mind from the earliest age, since the essential thing is that it should be believed, but a truth which makes its appeal to reason must be content to wait till reason is developed. We are born into the Eastern, Western or Anglican communion or some other denomination, but it was of his own free choice that the serious minded young Greek or Roman embraced the tenets of one of the great sects which divided the world of philosophy. The motive which led him to do so in the first instance may have been merely the influence of a friend or a discourse from some eloquent speaker, but the choice once made was his own choice, and he adhered to it

as such. Conversions from one sect to another were of quite rare occurrence. A certain Dionysius of Heraclea, who went over from the Stoics to the Cyrenaics, was ever afterward known as “the deserter.” It was as difficult to be independent in philosophy as it is with us to be independent in politics. When a young man joined a school, he committed himself to all its opinions, not only as to the end of life, which was the main point of division, but as to all questions on all subjects. The Stoic did not differ merely in his ethics from the Epicurean; he differed also in his theology and his physics and his metaphysics. Aristotle, as Shakespeare knew, thought young men “unfit to hear moral philosophy”. And yet it was a question—or rather the question—of moral philosophy, the answer to which decided the young man’s opinions on all other points. The language which Cicero sometimes uses about the seriousness of the choice made in early life and how a young man gets entrammelled by a school before he is really able to judge, reminds us of what we hear said nowadays about the danger of a young man’s taking orders before his opinions are formed. To this it was replied that a young man only exercised the right of private judgment in selecting the authority whom he should follow, and, having once done that, trusted to him for all the rest. With the analogue of this contention also we are familiar in modern times. Cicero allows that there would be something in it, if the selection of the true philosopher did not above all things require the philosophic mind. But in those days it was probably the case, as it is now, that, if a man did not form speculative opinions in youth, the pressure of affairs would not leave him leisure to do so later.

The life span of Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, was from B.C. 347 to 275. He did not begin teaching till 315, at the mature age of forty. Aristotle had passed away in 322, and with him closed the great constructive era of Greek thought. The Ionian philosophers had speculated on the physical constitution of the universe, the Pythagoreans on the mystical properties of numbers; Heraclitus had propounded his philosophy of fire, Democritus and Leucippus had struck out a rude form of the atomic theory, Socrates had raised questions relating to man, Plato had discussed them with all the freedom of the dialogue, while Aristotle had systematically worked them out. The later schools did not add much to the body of philosophy. What they did was to emphasize different sides of the doctrine of their predecessors and to drive views to their logical consequences. The great lesson of Greek philosophy is that it is worth while to do right irrespective of reward and punishment and regardless of the shortness of life. This lesson the Stoics so enforced by the earnestness of their lives and the influence of their moral teaching that it has become associated more particularly with them. Cicero, though he always classed himself as an Academic, exclaims in one place that he is afraid the Stoics are the only philosophers, and whenever he is combating Epicureanism his language is that of a Stoic. Some of Vergil's most eloquent passages seem to be inspired by Stoic speculation. Even Horace, despite his banter about the sage, in his serious moods borrows the language of the Stoics. It was they who inspired the highest flights of declamatory eloquence in Persius and Juvenal. Their moral philosophy affected the world through Roman law, the great masters of which were brought up

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