

REGISTRY REPORT

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for the Stoic community

Stoicus communitas:Stoikos koinonia



THE NEWS

PEOPLE

SPOTLIGHT

THE PORCH

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THE NEWS

This month of May is the twelfth anniversary of The Stoic Registry and the first anniversary of the *Registry Report*. As you can see we have been busy. Rather than expound upon what you can see with your own eyes I would simply like to quote a short paragraph I read recently from *Botany for Gardeners* (Timber Press, 1990), by Brian Capon.

“Rocks shattered by growing roots, often seen in road cuttings and other excavations, offer impressive testimony to the power of living cells that appear so fragile under a microscope. Their slow, persistent growth was all it took to accomplish such a feat.”

We have a great issue this month. Please continue. EW

PEOPLE

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS:

Robert Gambill (1983-) Edmond, Oklahoma. Robert said, “Strangely enough, I became interested in Stoicism after watching the calm, cool demeanor of Brutus in the 1950 film ‘Julius Caesar.’ Since then, I’ve been steadily digesting the writings of Epictetus, Cicero, Aurelius, and Seneca. My goal is to develop the Stoic’s disposition of self-mastery and contentment – tapping into the Logos of the universe.”

Donald Kelpinski (1961-), M.Ed./Psy, said, “Stoic thought provides me with some assistance in living life well and in the service of my fellow man. I have been a Counselor, Psychotherapist, Social worker, and Teacher to the educated and regular folk. I seek to assist and raise up my fellow person through engaging in conversation and thought/questions. I seek to light a candle in the darkness rather than curse it! I live out in the desert in the Inland Empire, California, and lawlessness is all around. I do, however, hold and note all around me that there is a powerful law at work, and there is a logos to all this. Fight against this law and all goes badly. Work and seek to apply the law and all flows harmoniously! I would be honored to journey with you all and most of all listen and seek to deepen ideas!

Brad McKenzie (1978-) received his Master's Degree in Rural Development from Brandon University. He works as an economic development professional in Saskatchewan, Canada. Growing up on a family farm in many ways seemed to lead naturally toward identifying with Stoic principles, particularly a closeness to nature, simplicity, purposeful living, and the knowledge that your thinking creates your world. Brad has always taken joy, calm, and personal growth out of simply being reasonable, decent, and direct (although he can't always claim to hit the mark or live up to his goals). As an adult, Brad read Stoics and students of Stoicism for their great insight into the qualities necessary to perform as an effective, trusted and upright professional.

SPOTLIGHT

on William O. Stephens

On the Missouri River running south and east across the American heartland lies Omaha. Omaha, Nebraska, home to a half million people rich in socio-economic diversity ranging from producers of world-famous Omaha Beef Steaks to recognition as one of the top ten high-tech havens in the country. Omaha boasts numerous outstanding cultural centers, including Creighton University, a Jesuit institution of higher learning with undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as Schools of Medicine and Law. On the campus of Creighton in the Philosophy Department of the College of Arts & Sciences, William O. Stephens, Ph.D., is professor of Philosophy and Classical & Near Eastern Studies. It was indeed an honor to interview Dr. Stephens, a fact of which I'm sure you will recognize as you continue to read. But, before we get into that interview we should begin at the beginning.

William was born June 10, 1962 in Lafayette, Indiana, nearly 1000 kilometers east of Omaha, into a distinguished family of intellectuals. His father has a Ph.D. in psychology and taught at Purdue. His mother has a Ph.D. in psycholinguistics and retired as a Professor Emerita and an award-winning teacher from Northern Illinois University. She authored the Stephens Oral Language Screening Test, which is widely used by clinicians for diagnosing speech problems. His older brother has a Ph.D. in conflict management and dispute resolution and works at the School of Government at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. And, Dr. Stephens has three half-siblings, the oldest of which, his younger brother, has a Ph.D. in chemistry.

As one might expect, William was an exceptional student. He received his B.A. in Philosophy from Earlham College (Quaker) in Richmond, Indiana, and Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania. He joined Creighton University as a



William O. Stephens

full-time faculty member in 1990, promoting to Full Professor in 2005. His complete curriculum vitae, a most impressive record, outlines his accomplishments at <http://puffin.creighton.edu/phil/bill.htm>.

Dr. Stephens, a scion of this unusual family, added, “My father’s mother taught ancient Greek, Latin, and the Classics, and wrote poetry. She attended DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, in the 1930s or so when it was still very unusual for women to do so. My father’s ancestors founded Stephensport, Kentucky, and also settled in parts of southern Indiana. My father’s father was a physician.

“My mother’s father was born in Mousehill (pronounced MAO-zul), Cornwall, near Penzance. After some harrowing experiences in the Cornish tin mines and harsh treatment in his effort to organize a union for the miners, he emigrated to Ohio. My grandfather learned a trade, plastering, and worked his tail off in the Akron area. He worked his way up, eventually coming to own his own business, which prospered. He was a strong believer in higher education and, with his prosperity, was able to send his five children to college, including my mother. My mother was the youngest, and my grandfather supported her throughout her college years at DePauw University, where she met my father.”

Dr. Stephens is married to Susan T. Bart, a Fellow of the American College of Trust & Estate Counsel, a partner with Sidley Austin LLP in Chicago, and a nationally renowned expert in the field of trusts and estates.

The Interview

ERIK: *Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Dr. Stephens. I'd like to begin with a brief inquiry into your earliest attraction to the subject of philosophy. At what age did you decide you wanted to pursue the study of philosophy, and was there an event, a teacher, a book, or a class that helped you make that decision?*

DR. STEPHENS: I discovered the ancient Greek philosophers, in a way, when I was a sophomore in high school. I had a marvelous Latin teacher who would post quotations from Socrates and company on the walls of his classroom. I loved studying ancient civilizations with him. I'd browse through the A's in our 1972 *World Book Encyclopedia* and discover entries on thinkers with bizarre names: Anaximander, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Aristotle. Though I didn't understand their ideas very well, I knew I wanted to learn much more about them, and take a philosophy course, when I went off to college.

At the College of Wooster (Wooster, Ohio), as a prospective student still in high school, I attended a class on ancient philosophy taught by Prof. James Haden. I asked him if it would be alright for me to quietly sit in on his class. He told me I could, but only on the condition that I feel welcome to speak up and participate. So he was teaching his class and talking about ancient Greek myths and brought up the myth of Orpheus traveling to Hades to bring back his wife. He asked the class what the name of Orpheus' wife was, but none of the college students in the class answered. So I timidly raised my hand, he called on me, and I said "Eurydice." He was very impressed and praised my knowledge. Watching him in action, I knew that I wanted to attend Wooster.

I took as many courses with Haden as I could my two years at Wooster. He was a wonderful curmudgeon who never relaxed his standards, always prodded his students to excel, and was one of the most dedicated, uncompromising teachers I've ever known. I learned a great deal from him. He was very tough on the early papers I wrote for him, and I was determined to improve my writing skills. At the end of a Philosophy of Education course I took with him, he gave me a high A on the last paper. Haden inspired me to do philosophy in the clearest, most rigorous, and most precise way I could.

ERIK: From your academic title, Professor of Philosophy and Classical & Near Eastern Studies, it appears you teach from a rather wide range of philosophers, concepts, and periods. From the many possible areas of specialization you have apparently chosen to focus on the Stoa. Why?

DR. STEPHENS: I do teach a very wide array of courses in philosophy, many I was trained in at the University of Pennsylvania; others, like environmental ethics, I developed as a competence after coming to Creighton. My major professor at Penn, Charles Kahn, knowing my interest in the Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues, suggested I read Epictetus when I was considering what to write my dissertation on. I was enthralled by the candor, verve, and urgency of Epictetus' *Discourses* from the very beginning. The wisdom of Stoicism struck me as so penetrating, so perceptive, that I knew immediately that I would write my dissertation on Epictetus' ethics.

Stoicism presents itself as a philosophy that demands hard work, commitment, persistence, and relentless self-discipline. As such, it puts off the vast majority of people who tend to want easy affirmations and to have their self-esteem stroked. The Stoics never offer their philosophy as appealing to the many, to the majority. But the ideal of the Stoic sage is so ennobling, so powerful, that it has held my fascination for two decades now.

ERIK: From your description of the demands of the Stoa as hard work, commitment, et cetera, do you believe, either in theory or practice, that one can make progress in the acquisition of virtue on the path of the Stoic?

DR. STEPHENS: Emphatically yes, and in practice, is my answer. The discipline required to progress is considerable, but no less possible than what devotees of, for example, Eastern religions have achieved. As Epictetus says, however, you cannot expect to make progress as a Stoic **and** devote lots of time to collecting fine furniture and art work for your house, working to add to your wealth every month, and similar pursuits for externals.

ERIK: You speak with enthusiasm about the progress one can make in following the path of the sage, but does such progress matter to us when, as Plutarch reports Chrysippus saying, one can drown as readily one cubit beneath the surface of the sea as he can 500 fathoms beneath it? Haven't Stoics always been taken to task for believing people were either sages, perfect in all ways, or slaves and fools who were downright mad? How do we overcome this absolutist notion?

DR. STEPHENS: The harsh dichotomy of sage vs. fool does indeed characterize the early Stoics. But Epictetus emphasizes the progress that he and his students can make. Approaching virtue is within our grasp, and it is as urgent as anything in the world can be. Similarly, Seneca talks about the *bonus vir*, the "good man." We can aspire to being good, to becoming better, without fooling ourselves into thinking that we necessary will—or even can—become

sages. Epictetus says he **wants** to be Socrates, and he strives for Socrates' wisdom and equanimity, his courage and gratitude, even though he realizes he cannot **be** Socrates. Taking the steps along a long, arduous journey are each possible, one at a time, even when the destination seems impossibly distant. Progress is made one good deed at a time. One corrected mistake at a time. One successful day at a time. The rest will take care of itself.

ERIK: *A much better perspective, even inspirational. Let's move along to your own work. If you were to pick three subjects from your extensive CV that best represented your Stoic interests, which would they be?*

DR. STEPHENS: You ask a tough question. Very tough question. Well, the big interest is thinking about which aspects of the ancient Stoic philosophy are applicable to everyday life today. Lawrence Becker's book [Stoic Registry member Lawrence C. Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton, 1998)] was a tremendous eye-opener for me, and especially satisfying given its rich conceptual sophistication. My work on Stoic love continues to hold my interest. I've been working on Epictetus' account of death for some time (and revisited it recently), and how to cope with the death of loved ones, human and nonhuman, is certainly a big, ongoing interest of mine. So I guess love and death would be my two foremost Stoic interests. Reconciling the Stoic understanding of nonhuman animals would be a third, and my paper on that subject continues to beckon to me as well.

ERIK: *I want to get back to each of these subjects, but first perhaps you could say a little about your school. I see that Creighton is "a Jesuit university, rooted in the Catholic tradition." I read recently that not all Catholic universities are the same and that there has been added pressure for some faculty to be members of the faith. Locally, the University of San Diego, a Catholic university not affiliated with the Jesuits, maintains that "students, faculty and staff of all faiths are welcome." Would you say that is the same at Creighton, or is a Catholic identity more essential at a Jesuit school?*

DR. STEPHENS: This is a bit complicated. Students of all faiths are welcome. Staff members of all faiths are, so far as I can tell, welcome. When it comes to hiring faculty, however, the Mission plays a more restrictive role. In some departments in my college, the College of Arts & Sciences, faculty who can express broad comfort with the Catholic identity of CU are viable candidates. For other departments, something like a litmus test is applied. The litmus test isn't simply a test of the profession of faith. Instead, in a much more subtle way, candidates are screened on the basis of their letters of application and their educational background to see if they fit the right ideological orientation. This involves the right kind of political world view much, much more than a certain religious devotion.

ERIK: *Your teaching situation at a Jesuit university prompts another question that has been of interest to me since the founding of the Registry. That is, do you believe there is an inherent conflict in simultaneously following a religious faith and the Stoa? (As you may have noted we have an Orthodox Jew, a Presbyterian minister, and others who embrace various religious outlooks.)*

DR. STEPHENS: This is a good question. The ancient Stoics all held some core of beliefs in common that justified them, in their own minds, in identifying themselves as Stoics. A number of views of Posidonius diverged from those of Chrysippus. And, certainly Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius each have a number of distinctive views, some of which may not be easy to reconcile. Lawrence Becker, as you know, has developed an account of secular stoicism that abandons all the theological doctrines of the ancient Stoics, including belief in Providence, belief that the universe is a rational, living being, and any belief in Zeus. Perhaps this is why Becker calls his philosophy stoicism with a small "s", to distinguish it from ancient Stoicism.

The tough question, then, is whether there is a core set of beliefs that all stoics (and Stoics) share that is philosophically distinctive, and which non-Stoics reject. I doubt that many contemporary self-identified Stoics accept Stoic physics. So I would guess that it is Stoic ethics that tends to claim the allegiance of folk like us. Then we can ask whether the ethical doctrines of Stoicism harmonize with the ethical doctrines of Presbyterianism, Orthodox Judaism, and other religions. Here I am skeptical that the details of Stoic ethics can be interpreted as fully consistent with the details of Christian ethics, although I could be persuaded otherwise.

But Stoics take naturalism very seriously—on this I quite agree with Becker. According to the ancient Stoics, only time, place, space, and the lekta subsist as non-physical things. Everything else that is real is a body that exists. So the very notion of a supernatural entity is ruled out by Stoic naturalism. I can't see how someone who believes that there are non-physical souls or an afterlife of some kind, as most Christians do, could consider himself to be a Stoic. He could find some ideas and doctrines in Stoicism, most of the ethics, perhaps, as appealing. But Stoics are physicalists,

not substance dualists. The ancient Stoics had no religiously dictated dietary restrictions, as Orthodox Jews do. I can't see how a full-blooded Stoic could believe that Jesus is the Son of God, died on the cross, arose days later, died for the sins of humanity, and so on. These theological beliefs, and the metaphysical assumptions they presuppose, fly in the face of Stoic naturalism. Perhaps the Stoic notion of providence could be interpreted to be similar to the Christian notion of providence, but even here the doctrine of Final Judgment, Apocalypse, clearly is foreign to Stoic thought. Would an Orthodox Jew or a Presbyterian accept the Stoic belief in the *ekpurosis* (the periodic world-conflagration)? I can't see it.

If we limit ourselves strictly to Stoic ethics, then could a Christian accept the prescriptive ideal of the Stoic sage? Belief in original sin doesn't sit well with the idea that it is possible to perfect one's reason and become unwaveringly virtuous. What would it mean to say that a Stoic sage is, since human, in a fallen state of sinfulness? I don't see how, say, a Catholic who believes in a triune God, the Trinity, could be a Stoic in any meaningful sense. We could water down some ethical doctrines in Stoicism so much that it would look pretty darn similar to Aristotelian ethics. But then we lose the important differences between these two eudaimonist philosophies. So I think I have convinced myself that a religionized Stoicism isn't Stoicism. Faith commitments push out the rationalism, naturalism, physicalism, and eudaimonism of Stoicism.

THE PORCH

ERIK: *Thank you for that elucidation. And now, without further digression, I would like to return to the subjects you indicated are of greatest interest to you. We can begin with animals, if you wish.*

I've always been uncomfortable with the Stoic's rather Old Testament attitude towards the other animals, that they are greatly inferior to us and placed here at our disposal. But rather than focus on the kindness and other benefits of not eating them, I wonder if you would elaborate on your interest in "reconceiving the Stoic understanding on nonhuman animals." More specifically, under what circumstances do you believe it appropriate for us to "reconceive" any aspect of Stoicism?

DR. STEPHENS: In my view, the Stoics were simply wrong, dead wrong, that all nonhuman animals lack reason. Darwin, Jane Goodall and many other primatologists, scientists who study whales and dolphins, Donald R. Griffin, and other ethologists and biologists have more than amply shown that many, many different mammals, birds, and cetaceans have the ability to problem solve, select appropriate means to achieve their desired ends, adapt to circumstances, and find ways to overcome obstacles and threats to their survival. So there is no question that animals have minds. Insects perhaps have quite primitive minds (although honey bees are very impressive), but clearly there are degrees of reason in all sentient animals.

Now Epictetus accepts the orthodox Stoic view that all nonhuman animals lack reason and exist in a great chain of being for the use of human beings. This view is an ineliminable part of his view of divine providence. So there's no explaining away Epictetus' wrong-headed view of the capacities and intrinsic value of nonhuman animals. When I talk about "reconceiving the Stoic understanding on nonhuman animals," what I have in mind is demonstrating how Epictetus himself seems to be inconsistent in recognizing the intelligence of various Nanimals (my shorthand for "nonhuman animals"). There are dozens of examples of admirable, praiseworthy behavior displayed by Nanimals of different species in *The Discourses*. But since Epictetus holds up the example of certain Nanimal behaviors as worthy of his students' emulation, as he clearly does in a number of texts, then Epictetus seems to be ascribing a kind of excellence or virtue to those Nanimals that behave in those ways. Since he praises certain traits they have, he considers them to be good traits, and good traits are virtues of some kind or another. But if some Nanimals have some virtues, and virtue is the perfection of reason, as the Stoics all believe, then Epictetus ***should*** have inferred that some Nanimals have a kind of reason that is the same as, or virtually the same as, our own. In short, Epictetus was very insightful in admiring certain Nanimal behaviors, but he fell short of drawing the right lesson about animal rationality from those admirable behaviors.

Now we can return to Becker's project. If he is right that a contemporary stoic (small "s") would "follow nature" by using the best available empirical science to understand nature and all organisms in nature, then a Beckerian stoic

would embrace Darwinism, evolutionism, and all the latest work by Frans de Waal on primate sociality as the root of morality. So I see no reason why a Beckerian stoic wouldn't have a much better informed view of Nanimals, their abilities, evolutionary kinship to us, and our resulting moral (and ecological) obligations to them than Epictetus, Seneca, and Chrysippus did. A Beckerian stoic would read James Rachels' book *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* and "follow nature" right into a vegetarian diet.

ERIK: *Eliminating world-famous, premium quality, Omaha Steaks, I suppose. Let's go further, if you will, from loving Nanimals to other people. I've read both your work, "Epictetus on How the Stoic Sage Loves" (Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, vol. XIV, 1996) and Kathy Gaca's work on "Early Stoic Eros: The Sexual Ethics of Zeno and Chrysippus . . .," (Apeiron vol. 33, no. 3, 2000). Making a comparison between your work and Professor Gaca's is worthy of a paper in itself, but obviously we don't have the space for such an endeavor.*

At the risk of gross oversimplification I would sound-bite your description of the Roman Stoics as elevating friendship above love, more Platonic than erotic, while the early Greek Stoics proposed a radical form of free love between consenting adults as detailed in Zeno's lost work, Republic, a utopian city named after and dedicated to the god Eros.

Of course, one can opine that the Republic was written while Zeno was still "on the tail of the dog," a Cynic, but that doesn't account for Chrysippus' agreement with such an earthy appreciation of love. I guess my question is, what happened? Which is the real Stoic, the libertine or the prude?

DR. STEPHENS: Well, of course, both Chrysippus and Epictetus are real Stoics! As Seneca observes (I forget where), the Stoics are not automata that slavishly follow one totally inflexible set of doctrines, as the Epicureans seem to have. Each Stoic is a free thinker who expresses his own ideas about a core group of commitments that all Stoics share (living according to nature is the goal, virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness, virtue is the perfection of reason, the cosmos is rationally and providentially ordered, etc.). This latitude allows Zeno and the Roman Stoics to stake out distinctive positions on Eros while maintaining allegiance to those core commitments.

I'm tempted to think of the contrast in views this way. Eros is a powerful thing, considered divine by most ancient Greek thinkers. Perhaps the earliest Stoics believed that Eros could be harnessed so as to promote strong, virtuous relationships among friends. But Epictetus' worry was that Eros can so easily become disruptive to, or even destructive of, virtuous conduct, the proper fulfillment of one's social roles, and equanimity. Epictetus considered Eros to be too dangerous to count as a "preferred indifferent." The earliest Stoics evidently thought they could "handle it."

ERIK: *I would like to get some idea of your vision of the future of the Stoic community. I noticed on your web site, Stephens on Stoicism, an interest in the "rebirth" of the Stoa in American culture as evidenced by Thomas Wolfe's novel, A Man in Full, and the motion picture, Gladiator. Where do you see our place in the world tomorrow?*

DR. STEPHENS: The geo-political challenges that face us today, climate change, terrorism, peak oil prices, and the political, economic, and social instability that these factors will cause, will, I expect, call for a great deal of Stoic self-discipline, calm, self-sufficiency, and vigorous, wise, and prompt ***action*** by individuals. There is a great deal that is up to us that we can change for the better in our lives as citizens, producers, consumers, and co-inhabitants of this planet. Passivity, complacency, and inactivity will spell our doom. But by focusing on what we ***can*** do, the Stoic community can offer the kind of leadership that will be vital if we are to weather the nastiest storms that await us in the all-too-near future.

ERIK: *Indeed. Finally, I'm sure we would all like to hear about your current research/writing project on Stoics and death. I should think this is an essay in itself, so please just give us a brief summary or concluding thought.*

DR. STEPHENS: I'm sketching an account of Epictetus' thanatology (account of death), which explains his position on (1) the fear of being dead, of not existing; (2) the fear that one will die, or apprehension about being mortal; (3) fear of dying prematurely, that is, before one has completed one's goals in life; (4) fear of the process of dying, of how one dies; and (5) fear of the death of others, especially of loved ones. Very briefly, I argue that Epictetus believes that death is a necessary moment or state in the cycle of nature, as necessary and untroubling as birth. Since our lives are gifts from Zeus (Nature) that are on loan, as it were, it is up to us to live in accord with nature, that is, virtuously, until our time ends. Resenting our mortality is as nonsensical as resenting being human. To be human necessitates being mortal. So to accept our nature as human beings, and to affirm our lives, we must accept our mortality as well. Death, Epictetus thinks, is not to be feared. Death is a "bugbear" that only frightens those ignorant of its real nature (like

Halloween masks). Look beyond its appearance, and it is not scary. The FEAR of death is what is to be feared, since it is what propels us to betray friends and country and stoop to despicable deeds in desperately, and vainly, seeking to prolong our lives. What matters is living a good life, not a life prolonged by any means possible.

Moreover, since death is an “open door” that allows us escape from circumstances, we are free to judge to be intolerable, nothing that befalls us in life is difficult, Epictetus insists. Either we will recognize that these “hardships” can be seen as challenges that call us to exercise and develop our virtues, or, if we judge that they are, in fact, too terrible to bear, then we can save ourselves from the putative intolerable suffering and exit from life. Either way, we cannot be trapped in circumstances we judge to be unacceptably burdensome, miserable, or horrible. So Epictetus believes that death is a bugbear that cannot frighten sensible adults who know it for what it is, and death can function as a refuge that allows us to escape from what we judge to be intolerable circumstances. Since death occurs every day to millions of living things, and has done so for eternity, death is much too banal to warrant fear.

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Thank you for reading,

Erik