

REGISTRY REPORT

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Erik Wiegardt, Editor

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New Members

Mike Mariano (1962-) lives in Enfield, Connecticut, USA, where he is a History/Geography teacher “...who's studied philosophy on my own and as part of my Education course work. I've read the basic Stoic works: Epictetus' *Handbook* and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, as well as F.H. Sandbach's *The Stoics*, J. Rist, Pierre Hadot, Cicero, and Seneca's essays and letters. I'd like to hear others' opinions on these works, especially those who've had to apply their lessons in tough situations.”

Ronil Tataria (1981-) lives in Fullerton, California, and works as a Consulting Analyst for Moss Adams, Certified Public Accountants. He has been interested in Stoicism since 1999.

Spotlight

on

The Stoic Revivalist

Interview by Jules Evans

Anthony A. Long, 71-year-old professor of classics at Berkeley, is one of the most influential scholars in Hellenistic philosophy of modern times. He can claim a leading role in the revival of both academic and popular interest in Stoicism in the last 30 years. In a telephone interview, he discusses how the study of Stoicism has changed since he began working in the 1960s, how Brits and Americans differ in their attitude to Stoicism, and why writing about Epictetus in his latest book made him change his own relationship with Stoicism.



Anthony A. Long

What was the state of Stoic studies when you began working on it in the 1960s?

I started working on Stoicism in the middle of the 1960s. I think my first article was published in 1967. At that time it was very weak indeed. My revered teacher, David Furley, who had done excellent work on Epicureanism, said it was the most neglected field in ancient philosophy. I was challenged by the

idea that, instead of working off other people's articles, I'd be working directly on primary sources. It was virgin terrain, relatively speaking.

I received a lot of early positive feedback in England. In 1970, I held eight seminars at Oxford, which were quite well attended. Then I was invited to write *Hellenistic Philosophy* [published in 1974, since translated into seven languages], and it took off from there.

Why, when you began working, were Stoic studies in such a dire state?

At that time, the dominant philosophers were Plato and Aristotle. The Oxford philosophy course, for example, went straight from Aristotle to Descartes, with nothing in between. There were good reasons for this. If you're looking for the most exciting and intellectually challenging texts, that's Plato and Aristotle.

Also, we've lost most of the original works of Stoicism, so for any understanding of ancient Stoicism, you have to dig around in all kinds of arcane sources. Or you read the Roman Stoics – Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Cicero, Seneca. By the standards of the time, these authors were seen as very second rate intellectually, they were seen as rhetorical rather than analytical.

And there was something deeper at work as well – a British suspicion of therapy, a sense that 'we're British, we don't delve into such matters.'

But I thought Stoicism, particularly Marcus Aurelius, had been popular in the nineteenth century?

Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius had certainly been very popular in the late 17th and early 18th century, with philosophers like Butler, Shaftesbury and Adam Smith. Stoicism offered a kind of rational theistic alternative to Christianity. You could be a Stoic and bow politely at the Church.

In the UK, it declines after that. Epictetus was very popular up to the French Revolution, but he wasn't very prominent in the nineteenth century, when Plato and Aristotle were much more popular, partly as a result of the nineteenth century revival of the curriculum. But what happened in the UK was not necessarily what happened elsewhere. France is the one European country where Stoicism has always enjoyed a big standing. Epictetus and Seneca have always been widely read in France.

To the extent that there's a revival today, it's much more in the US [where Long became a naturalized citizen, having originally been born in the UK]. Stoicism has never really gone away in the US. If you look at the nineteenth century, you can see the influence of Stoicism in Emerson, Thoreau, Dreiser [whose final novel was titled *The Stoic*], right the way up to Tom Wolfe.

In the US, you have an ideology of personal responsibility, of not expecting the outside world to help you, to keep a cheerful response to natural disasters. In California, you sometimes get serious forest fires and floods, and people lose their homes. But when you see them interviewed on TV, rather than be bereft, they are often resilient and Stoic.

There's also a sense that life needs to have meaning, that there's more to it than just our world. There's extreme hedonism here, but on the other hand, there's the ecology movement and the simple life attitude.

Americans think they should take themselves seriously, that their lives should be taken seriously. It can be tedious. It's far from the British 'don't be daft' response to earnestness. That British response can be healthy, but it can also be insidiously cynical.

Do you think Stoicism does well in the US partly because of the self-help movement?

Absolutely. I recently did a piece on Seneca in which I referred to a woman's magazine called *Self*, which is mainly about having a nice butt and things like that, but the page I quoted was pure Stoicism. It said: 'Are you happy? Are you really happy? True happiness is more a state of mind than a set of circumstances.' You couldn't get a more pithy summary of Stoicism.

Of course, there's been a greater interest in Stoicism in academia as well over the last 20 years through people like Becker, Nussbaum, and myself. There's even a club of Stoics, they have their own web page and everything.

That's us! So are you a Stoic?

Before I wrote my book on Epictetus, I would say that I wasn't a Stoic. I was an academic writing about Stoicism. But when I was writing the book, I was living with him intensely, the book lived with me a lot, and I internalised it. It altered my mindset. Now, little phrases of it pop into my head. If I do find myself in a tricky situation, I say to myself, what would Epictetus do in this situation? I use one of his distancing techniques.

For example, if there is a situation of fear or desire, you can recognise that this isn't just a blind force, but a judgment. And you can say to yourself, 'Could I look at this situation a different way?'

When I've talked to some psychologists, they are often very sceptical, and say 'The trauma is too deep.' It may well be so. But it can be not such deep trauma, but something tractable.

So I find Epictetus very helpful. It provides solace during the difficult periods that we all experience. And of course, his gallows humour can be very effective.

And the Stoic outlook, far from being individualistic and isolated, is more in line with EM Forster – 'only connect.' It's very much a philosophy of interconnectedness.

The most powerful image is that of Hierocles. One should think of oneself as a centre of concentric circles – your self, your family, your friends, your neighbourhood, your city, your country, your continent, and the entire human race. And you try and bring all of these circles closer to the centre, so that you cease to think of anyone as an alien. And don't think your good could be reasonably achieved without the good of other people as well. If you believe we are basically similar, then how is it reasonable for me to do something and it not be allowed for you?

So you think one can turn ancient Stoicism into a genuine contemporary way of life?

If you try to turn it into a practical ethics, then clearly some things have to be given up. The Candidean optimism, the idea that this is the best of all possible worlds, doesn't fit our world. It doesn't fit Darfur. The theism has to go. You could reinterpret it, so that when Stoics talk about God, you could instead talk about perfect rationality.

Couldn't you say that Stoicism fits our nature? So to follow it is to follow our nature?

Well, you have to be careful. Hitler would say he is just following his nature. Actually, the Stoic idea of being true to one's nature is not subjective at all. It's more like mathematics.

In some ways, it is like the 'ethics of authenticity' that Charles Taylor talks about, the idea of being true to your deep nature. On the other hand, it's nothing like the Sixties idea of authenticity, because it's not about just 'doing your thing,' but about following a universal law.

Epictetus is good on this. He says, 'If you're Agamemnon, do this; if you're Thersites, do that.' This is the person I take myself to be, and this is the ideal.

Anyway, to go back to the question of can Stoicism be a practical ethics. Stoic ethics don't make sense unless you have a) universal determinism and b) universal providence.

If you believe these two things, then the main axioms of Stoic ethics are the only viable way to live. If you jettison one or both of them, then it doesn't make sense to say that humans can flourish under all circumstances.

And the free will issue is thorny. The ancient Stoics say we have freedom only in whether we assent to impressions, and not at all in the external world. But how we interpret events affects how we act, so we must be free to some extent to affect the external world.

The whole thing about free will is it's a paradoxical notion wherever you go with it. What Stoics are trying to say is, we are a product of antecedent causes, yet we are also self-conscious, so we can determine our lives. We are part of the causal system. We are part of God. We create the Logos. And the Logos also creates us. It can't function the way it does independently of us. We're part of it. And not just a mechanical part. The Stoics are really compatibilists. They accept causality, but believe it is also compatible with a degree of human independence.

So could you live by Stoic values?

I can't agree that all values beyond the self are indifferent. I prefer the Aristotelian idea that there are goods and bads external to oneself. It's the notion of a child dying of malnutrition, and we could have done something about it. For the Stoics, that child is a matter of indifference. Whatever happened, it was meant to be so.

There's the point of view of the potentially virtuous agent, who can suffer any situation and use it as an opportunity to practice virtue. But what about the purely passive victim, the child?

Still, many people manage to extract the core of Stoicism – the cognitive theory of the emotions – and live by that without caring about some of the more obtuse aspects of dogma.

Absolutely. As with so many would-be curative strategies, if it works, it works. No one wants to foreclose this. A worthwhile human life can exist under many different circumstances – look at *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. We can certainly extract a core of practical attitudes. It's just a question of how far you want to push it and say, 'This is Stoicism.'

Of course, in the ancient world there were certainly different emphases. The Stoicism of Marcus

Aurelius was different from the Stoicism of Cicero.

How appropriate would you say Stoicism is to our time?

Look at where and when it tends to flourish. It flourished during the Hundred Years War, when Lipsius wrote *De Constantia*. It was immensely popular then. It flourished during the Vietnam War, via James Stockdale. I got to know him quite well, in fact. He'd call me up to ask me some technical points. So it seems it flourishes in times of upheaval, and we are living through such a time now.

I was recently asked to give a lecture at San Quentin prison. And I decided to talk about Epictetus, to read some passages of him and then bring in Tom Wolfe. I was trying to challenge the inmates to think, 'You're only in prison if you're not there of your own will.' And these guys were very interested in this. They tended to be rather sympathetic. I find it absolutely amazing that they didn't say 'This is complete bullshit.'

So it seems you've been taking the message of Stoicism beyond the walls of academia?

Yes, perhaps I have, since living in the US. Last year, I gave some talks in southern California, with a Buddhist, on 'how to be good when times are bad.' I find it very interesting how responsive people tend to be. Just recently, a student came up to me and said, 'You are lecturing on Stoicism next term, aren't you?' There was a real urgency there.

But I guess there are risks as well, when a philosopher leaves academia and goes philosophizing in the street?

I felt I was taking a risk in San Quentin. I was being asked to give a talk on ancient history, but I found it impossible without getting the audience to think about whether it made sense to them.

But the danger is you end up with a person who is very distressed or disturbed asking for help, and it's beyond one's training.

Yes. There's a fine line between academia and therapy. I've fortunately never been in the situation where someone is really desperate.

So would you describe yourself as a Stoic?

I would describe myself as a rather inconstant Stoic.

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Best Wishes for the Holidays,
Erik & Jules