

# REGISTRY REPORT

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*Stoicus communitas : Stoikos koinonia*



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## New Stoa News

**COMMUNITY INFORMATION OFFICER.** Due to increasing demand for coordination of community information, Erik and Brett Wheat-Simms huddled together and created a new high-profile position, the Community Information Officer (CIO). Brett Wheat-Simms is the new CIO and will assume responsibility for that office immediately.

The CIO will be the first member of the community to greet New Stoa inquiries and requests for information, technical explanations, and/or membership. He is also available to assist existing members who wish to become more actively involved in community activities. His email address is [stoic1975@gmail.com](mailto:stoic1975@gmail.com). In addition to these responsibilities, Brett is operating the newly created New Stoa Twitter site.

**TWITTER HAS ARRIVED!** In an attempt to keep you abreast of the news, updates, and the activities of the members of New Stoa, you are invited to join us at [www.twitter.com/newstoa](http://www.twitter.com/newstoa). Twitter "tweets" are not more than 140 characters in length and deal with one simple question: what are you doing right now. Come and join us. If you have any questions, Brett, our new CIO, will help. It's FREE!

**FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE COLLEGE.** July 5<sup>th</sup> marks the first anniversary of the College of Stoic Philosophers. Growth and progress is far greater than ever dreamed possible one year ago. We currently have more than 20 students, 7 Tutors, and have recently appointed a President and Dean of Students. Currently the Tutors are in an extended Google Group meeting to examine the curriculum in detail. For information on the College, go to our website at: <http://sites.google.com/site/thecollegeofstoicphilosophers/Home>.

## New Members

**Guillaume Andrieu (1981- )** wrote, "I am French and currently reside in southern France where I work as a software developer for aircraft documentation. I request to be counted as a member of the New Stoa, because I would like to get in touch with the thoughts of other people who have been exposed to Stoic ideas and think of them as the way to build a human future."

**Eduardo Novais (1974- )** lives in Portugal where he works as a risk analyst for Coface Portugal, a credit insurance company in Lisbon. He wrote, "I am quite fascinated by Roman Empire History and have read a few books on Stoicism in the last few years. I'd like to communicate with other people interested in these subjects and how they think Stoicism has an influence on today's culture."

**DT Strain (1971- )** considers himself a Humanist Stoic. He is a writer, artist, and Humanist minister living in Houston, Texas. A blogger for [Examiner.com](http://Examiner.com), he frequently speaks and writes on a wide variety of philosophic subjects, often touching on Stoicism and Buddhism. His writings have appeared in several newsletters and in the national journal of the *American Humanist Association*. He also maintains a personal website, The [Humanist Contemplative](http://HumanistContemplative.com), which includes several essays and thoughts on Stoicism.

**Rohan (1986- )** is a psychedelic, rock, and folk musician living and working in Dublin, Ireland, who has studied and practiced Stoic philosophy for about 4 years. He wrote, "I've read many times Epictetus' *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion* as well as Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, Seneca's *Letters*, etc. I love it. I think its the perfect philosophy. Its almost too good to be true: no catches, no "faith," no special conditions or tedious rituals beyond the core beliefs, and it doesn't cost anything! Its the only belief system that exists which tells you straight up that you were born with everything you need, and no priest or holy building or holy relic can offer you anything, as its all already there in your nature and your will. Also, the name of my third album is 'The Discourses,' and my sixth, 'The Enchiridion'." To see and listen to Rohan's performances go to his YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/rohanmusic>

## Spotlight on Arturo Brillembourg

### Stoicism and the financial crisis

an interview with Arturo Brillembourg

by Jules Evans



Arturo Brillembourg

*Arturo Brillembourg is a 62-year-old economist and asset manager, who has worked at the International Monetary Fund in Washington, and then founded and is CEO of Farmington Asset Management. He is one of the original members of the Stoic community at New Stoa, dating his membership back to 1996. His wife, Hilda, is also a high-flying financier, having worked at the World Bank before founding Strategic Investment Group, a top manager of customized portfolios for institutional and private investors. Both are from Venezuela, and now live in Washington DC, where they are a prominent part of the social scene and active philanthropists.*

*We hooked up with Arturo over Skype to discuss his long-term interest in Stoicism.*

### **Thanks for taking the time to talk to us, Arturo. So how did you first get interested in Stoicism?**

I've been a consumer of religions since a teenager. Brought up a Catholic, I experienced the joys of the Christian vision, but as I grew up and delved deeper I found the answers of the Catholic Church no longer satisfactory. I looked elsewhere: to Kashmir Shivism, to Dzogchen Buddhism, to the Catholic Mystics, to the Muslim mystics, and along the way I also became very interested in Stoicism. I had been exposed to the Stoic ideas as a child. In many ways my father was a Stoic, not in the traditional sense, but he was a lawyer, so he studied ancient Greek and Roman jurisprudence, and he loved to read and refer to the ancient Greek thinkers.

## **What attracts you to Stoicism?**

The main tenant of Stoicism is that you're responsible for yourself. It's not unique in emphasizing that, but it's very unique in being so radical in its insistence that your ability to control your happiness depends solely on your beliefs and opinions.

My own sense of personal responsibility is very important for me. That's the essence of capitalism, of contracts. This is not easy for me or anyone else. We have a tendency to escape this responsibility by appealing to external forces. We are attracted to the idea of a deity or perhaps a tradition or a duty who tells us what to do. Even I find that idea attractive – I enjoy the feeling of a devotion to another entity. But I don't think you can get away from your own responsibility for yourself.

I also particularly enjoy Stoicism's understanding that we're all part of nature. It's different from the Christian idea that, while we're created beings, we're separate from nature, special in some sense. I like the idea in Stoicism that New York is as much part of nature as the Amazon jungle.

## **That's interesting. Though of course, Stoicism also suggested that a lot of the beliefs and practices of civilisation were somehow 'against nature', didn't they?**

Yes. We're in a very important stage of history. In my lifetime, the population of the world has doubled. We're running out of resources, out of food and water. The industrial revolution has taken us out of balance with nature. We're like a teenager who has grown too fast. But I'm very optimistic that the population growth will level off, and in 200-300 years we will develop institutions that will allow us to husband our resources more effectively.

## **So you don't think we need more global regulation now to cope with climate change?**

I don't buy the arguments of climate change. They're not based on facts or economics. Green campaigners tell us the science is not debatable, that we have to defer to the experts. But the first principle of Stoicism is that you have to be responsible for yourself. If you want to change the world, you have to do it yourself, not depend on experts to do it for you.

People are quite willing to believe without debate. But I'm a believer in the Socratic method, rather than the Napoleonic method – we need real debate, about climate change and other issues. We should demand that experts bring their arguments down to a level we can understand and debate.

While I believe that a carbon tax may be a useful tool, I am much more worried about the law of unforeseen consequences. These large scale laws that affect so many interest groups have a way of being derailed in the political process of passing them and often create worse distortions than the harm they are intended to cure. I much prefer the slower process of working through education, to explain to each individual what and why they need to change. You have to build the building brick by brick, through each of our individual actions. No one knows what the building will look like, but hopefully it will be more sturdy than if it was designed by one person.

## **It sounds like you're not a great fan of regulation. So, as an economist, do you dispute the idea that the financial crisis was in part down to a lack of strong financial regulation?**

Financial crises are part of nature. We've always had them. It's part of nature to have species die out.

**But governments didn't let failed banks die. On the contrary, they propped them up with**

## **tax-payers' money.**

It's very difficult to know what is the best solution to all of this. There are definitely many voices I respect who believe we should have left the banks to go bust. The government let Lehman Brothers go bust, but after that, after the dislocation that Lehman's bankruptcy caused, it understood how much of a disaster it would be if several banks went bust, and had to bail everyone out.

At this point, should they let some banks go bust? Maybe, at this point, they could without risking the system. On the other hand, the additional cost is not big. It seems like the worst is over.

## **So what's the solution to the crisis, and what lessons can Stoicism show us?**

The solution is for individuals to accept the riskiness of life, and the riskiness of markets, and to behave accordingly.

Before the crisis, global risk spreads fell to really low levels. People felt we were living in a world where risk had mainly disappeared. So banks consumed more risk and leveraged up. But it turned out to be wrong – risk had not gone away.

People need to have a longer memory. There was this idea that markets had changed completely since 20 years ago, that we'd reached a 'new paradigm'. But markets don't fundamentally change that much.

So you have to accept risk as a continual fact of life. But I don't think you should then try to live protected from as many risks as possible. The Stoics are very good about this. They say you could be king, and then overthrown.

The way I try to manage money is through the two principles of optimization and robustness. When you optimize, you try to find the best way to act in a situation. But it also has to be robust, it has to be the best way to act not just in one scenario, but in many different risk scenarios. You can't have rigid expectations of reality, you have to stay flexible. As the Buddhists put it, you can love the world, without holding on to it too tightly.

## **So, you're obviously a wealthy man, and you move in wealthy circles. Would you say in your *mileu*, it is difficult not to get attached to wealth?**

I can't talk about others, but for myself, I find the difficulty is not getting attached to my habits, my beliefs. I have some deeply entrenched habits. For example, some people have a tremendous sense of empathy. You feel like they understand you, like they get you. Other people, when they talk to you, you feel like you're being lectured. I belong to the second group. I have a tendency to come across as one without empathy.

That's why I cherish my loving family, because they give me feedback. You might not like it at the time, but it helps you question your habits and beliefs.

The challenge is how to make Stoicism alive, so you're not just using Greek words or arguing over what people meant 2000 years ago. For example, I wrote down some things for this interview, but it was all very abstract. What counts is living Stoicism.

## **That's what we're trying to do with things like the Stoic college: show that Stoicism is not just something you learn, but something you live.**

I hope that's how the Stoic college starts to develop. It shouldn't be too academic. The Old Stoa didn't rely on books. They had very few manuscripts, which probably only the teachers had access

to. It should be more of an interaction through interviews and talks. I'm a believer in the mentor and apprentice system. And the teachers should go through the same system, like psychotherapists do.

So a big part of the college system should be interaction, through networks, through online technology. The Stoics never developed hierarchical institutions, because of their emphasis on individual responsibility. But today we have networks, which are a looser form of institution. What I'm hoping is the college will develop into a kind of network.

**Let's talk about the idea of cosmopolitanism in Stoicism, of the idea of our obligation to the broader community of humanity, because I know that's an important idea for you.**

It's very important for me. I take it to heart in a personal way. I'm the product of immigrants. We all are. We're a very young species, so we're all each other's cousins.

My family left Holland in around 1800 to go to Venezuela. It's hard to understand the motive. They left the country with the highest GDP per capita at that time, and went to Venezuela, which at that time was a disease-ridden swamp where there was real poverty. I have now settled in the US with my immediate family enjoying the opportunities available in the US.

But higher than an attachment to any one nation-state is our obligation to humanity. That's why my wife and I are active philanthropists. For example, we support the Youth Orchestra of the Americas. It includes four different languages, and very different people from different countries, but the kids are very disciplined. The discipline of learning an instrument transcends national boundaries. And in an orchestra, you learn that you're part of a greater community, so you have to treat each other with respect.

**Are you worried we might be entering a period where globalization is reversed?**

Globalization may well be entering a period of reversal. There will always be a sense of otherness, of tribal loyalty, and that may strengthen as resources become scarce.

Maybe governments don't want us to globalize, so that we're fearful – of our neighbours, of epidemics, of terrorism. But we still have common aims. We are confronted with issues that no single country can deal with. In the end, we will remain a global human community.

The world of ideas will remain global. All it takes is for an idea to be invented once, and the world learns it. Think of the Arabic numeral system. It was invented once, and then spread all over the world. Big ideas and innovations won't stop spreading all over the world, and bringing us closer together.

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## Book Review

### *Philosophy as a Way of Life*

*Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*

by Pierre Hadot (1922- ), trans. Michael Chase  
(Blackwell, 2003) 309 pages.

*Pierre Hadot is a French academic and philosopher who performed one of the great acts of kindness in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this book. The title explains what he believed and what he wrote about: philosophy as a way of life. How one lives philosophy, not just talks about it, is one of the greatest challenges of our time and in our Stoic community. But rather than the usual book*

review, I'm going to simply quote one page from his book and let you decide if it should have a place in your personal library.

**page 83**

In [the Stoic] view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory...but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom.

In the view of all [classical] philosophical schools, mankind's principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears. People are prevented from truly living, it was taught, because they are dominated by worries. Philosophy thus appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions.... Each school has its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation.

To begin with, let us consider the example of the Stoics. For them, all mankind's woes derive from the fact that he seeks to acquire or to keep possessions that he may either lose or fail to obtain, and from the fact that he tries to avoid misfortunes which are often inevitable. The task of philosophy, then, is to educate people, so that they seek only the goods they are able to obtain, and try to avoid only those evils which it is possible to avoid. In order for something good to be always obtainable, or an evil always avoidable, they must depend exclusively on man's freedom; but the only things which fulfill these conditions are *moral* good and evil. They alone depend on us; everything else does *not* depend on us. Here, 'everything else,' which does not depend on us, refers to the necessary linkage of cause and effect, which is not subject to our freedom. It must be indifferent to us: that is, we must not introduce any differences into it, but accept it in its entirety, as willed by fate. This is the domain of nature.

We have here a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things. We are to switch from our 'human' vision of reality, in which our values depend on our passions, to a 'natural' vision of things, which replaces each event within the perspective of universal nature.

Such a transformation of vision is not easy, and it is precisely here that spiritual exercises come in. Little by little, they make possible the indispensable metamorphosis of our inner self. . . .

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Thank you for reading,

Erik