

Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180)

George Washington's Anglicanism

The Belief System of One of the Greatest Founding

Fathers

Feb 12, 2010 [Michael Streich](#)

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Although Washington regularly attended church and even visited Quaker meeting houses and the sanctuaries of other faith traditions, he was also a Freemason and, as Shorto correctly stated, “Steeped in an Enlightenment rationalism...” At best it can be said that Washington was an Enlightenment Christian whose view of the Creator was strong but transcendent. Washington’s primary religious experiences were tied to Anglicanism and the “high church” tradition that developed alongside the more fervent and emotional revivalist approaches of cyclical evangelicalism.

Washington belief system was also strongly influenced by the Stoicism of classical Rome. Historian Henry Wiencek notes Washington’s keen interest in Addison’s 1713 play *Cato*, which highlighted Cato the Younger’s devotion to republican virtue. Wiencek also notes the influence of Seneca on Washington. “All of this was not veneer,” Wiencek writes, “but the struts and trusses of Washington’s frame of mind.” Washington’s Anglicanism cannot be separated from the impact of these strong challenges that, “Profoundly influenced Washington’s generation.”

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Stoicism (Greek *Στοά*) was a school of Hellenistic philosophy founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium in the early 3rd century BC. The Stoics considered destructive emotions to be the result of errors in judgment, and that a [sage](#), or person of "moral and intellectual perfection," would not suffer such emotions.^[1] Stoics were concerned with the active relationship between cosmic [determinism](#) and human [freedom](#), and the belief that it is [virtuous](#) to maintain a [will](#) (called *prohairesis*) that is in accord with nature. Because of this, the Stoics presented their philosophy as a way of life, and they thought that the best indication of an individual's philosophy was not what a person said but how he behaved.^[2] Later Stoics, such as [Seneca](#) and [Epictetus](#), emphasized that because "virtue is sufficient for happiness," a sage was immune to misfortune. This belief is similar to the meaning of the phrase 'stoic calm', though the phrase does not include the "radical ethical" Stoic views that only a *sage* can be considered truly free, and that all moral corruptions are equally vicious.^[1]

Stoic doctrine was a popular and durable philosophy, with a following throughout [Greece](#) and the [Roman Empire](#), from its founding until the closing of all philosophy schools in 529 AD by order of the Emperor [Justinian I](#), who perceived their [pagan](#) character to be at odds with the Christian faith.^{[3][4]}

Stoicism became the foremost popular philosophy among the educated elite in the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire,^[9] to the point where, in the words of [Gilbert Murray](#) "nearly all the [successors of Alexander](#) [...] professed themselves Stoics."^[10]

A distinctive feature of Stoicism is its [cosmopolitanism](#): All people are manifestations of the one universal spirit and should, according to the Stoics, live in brotherly love and readily help one another. In the *Discourses*, [Epictetus](#) comments on man's relationship with the world: "Each human being is primarily a citizen of his own commonwealth; but he is also a member of the great city of gods and men, where of the city political is only a copy."^[30] This sentiment echoes that of [Socrates](#), who said "I am not an [Athenian](#) or a [Corinthian](#), but a citizen of the world."^[31]

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On Happiness: Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics

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The Stoics, like the Epicureans, make God material. But while the Epicureans think the gods are too busy being blessed and happy to be bothered with the governance of the universe, the Stoic God is immanent throughout the whole of creation and directs its development down to the smallest detail.

The Epicureans believed that a person's life was random and caused by chance, whereas the Stoics believed "Nature" directed all things. Nature is rational and in fact is Reason, itself. God is equal with Nature, thus God is identified with eternal reason.

What does this have to do with happiness? Seneca says, "The Stoics maintain that happiness is living in accordance with Nature... Only that which is perfectly in accordance with nature as whole is truly perfect. And Nature as a whole is rational."

Thus, to be happy or free from anxiety or distress is to be in perfect harmony with Reason. Whereas the Epicurean emphasizes the mere acting in moderation to achieve a pleasurable feeling free from anxiety or pain, the Stoic relies on Reason because it is for them what enables one to actually achieve the governing capacity to control their emotions and actions through moderation and thus bring about the state of a painless, anxiety free reality. For the Stoics self-discipline, perseverance, as well as proper thinking achieved through logic and physics became vital to achieve this goal of actually attaining happiness.

Whether or not one of these paths seems to be fulfilling depends on the degree of the actual truth of the theory. Happiness is achieved, naturally, through knowing what happiness is- that is to say, it is achieved, first, through understanding the truth of it. If one does not understand the nature of happiness, how will they know when they have achieved it?

So the question must be asked: What is happiness? Both Epicureans and the Stoics agree that happiness is some sort of painless existence evidenced by an anxiety free reality, which is called pleasure. But is this happiness?

To say that you have achieved happiness merely because you have achieved this pleasurable existence is to beg the question; it is to assume, without demonstration, that the good that you have arrived is itself the highest good. What if there is yet a higher good, that is itself so good it exceeds our present ability to desire that good?

As said at the beginning, happiness is the highest of all goods; it is that which all men strive to achieve. If this is the case, then happiness is achieved by actually living in continual relation to the purpose of existence. In order to achieve happiness one must actually live properly and in accordance to the nature of things.

These ideas, of course, put me at odds with Epicureanism, for it argues that things are random and lack purpose. It's interesting that Epicurus actually advocates any sort

highest good or ethical theory since his worldview of a purposeless universe actually contradicts his idea that humans can have something to achieve. Humans cannot have a purpose if the universe is itself purposeless. And although I do not agree with everything the Stoics advocate, their idea of the nature of things being equal with reason is more plausible, and thus more fulfilling.

Richard Kraut summarizes the nature of reasons involvement in the attainment of happiness,

“The good of a human being must have something to do with being human; and what sets humanity off from other species, giving us the potential to live a better life, is our capacity to guide ourselves by using reason. If we use reason well, we live well as human beings; or, to be more precise, using reason well over the course of a full life is what happiness consists in. Doing anything well requires virtue or excellence, and therefore living well consists in activities caused by the rational soul in accordance with virtue or excellence.” (emphasis mine).

Reason is necessary for happiness because it is what enables us to live a life of virtue. However, happiness is not merely virtue, rather happiness consists in doing virtuous activity. In order to experience the highest good, one must be actually becoming good themselves.

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Although Roman authors like Cicero and Seneca examined all aspects of Stoic doctrine, later writers, for example [Epictetus](#) (fl. 90–115 C.E.) and [Marcus Aurelius](#) (emperor of Rome, 161–180), were primarily interested in the ethical teachings. Their works were known in various forms throughout the Middle Ages but received new attention when [humanist](#) philological skills were applied to newly available Greek texts during the Renaissance, and the recovery of Diogenes Laertius provided new information on both Stoic doctrines and the biographies of the founders. Early modern interest in Stoicism developed from an initial phase, in which Stoic ideas were combined eclectically with other doctrines, until writers like Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) attempted to renovate the Stoic doctrines as a distinct school. Parallel to this later stage, Stoic physical ideas were briefly important in debates on the nature of the heavens and planetary motion.

Throughout this period Stoic doctrines entered humanist literature, although they were limited and conditioned by the authors' Christian opinions. [Petrarch](#) (1304–1374) advocated an essentially Stoic scheme for the subjugation of the passions in *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* (Remedies against good and ill fortune) and became the first of many Renaissance writers to borrow Stoic providential design arguments to prove the existence of God. Politian (Angelo Ambrogini; 1454–1494) translated Epictetus's *Enchiridion* (Handbook) into Latin; Politian's translation appeared in 1497, and the work was

published in Greek in 1528. François Rabelais's *Pantagruel* stories appeared between 1532 and 1564. Later books in the series presented central characters who exemplified the virtues of Stoic sages and a Stoic worldview identifying God and nature as a single, all-pervasive creative principle. However, Desiderius Erasmus and later Michel de Montaigne denied that a Stoic sage could achieve happiness without divine assistance, while Philipp Melanchthon criticized the Stoic ambition to achieve by human reason what can only be achieved with God's assistance, although he freely used the same Stoic proofs of God's existence that had attracted Petrarch.

The most important reviver of Stoic doctrines was Lipsius, who taught at Louvain. In 1584 he published *De Constantia* (On constancy), the title indicating a form of *apatheia* that would help its readers cope with the religious and civil [strife](#) of their times. Lipsius attempted to [collate](#) the surviving fragments of Stoic doctrine in ancient literature in his *Manuductionis ad Stoicam Philosophiam* (1604; Guide to Stoic philosophy). In his *Physiologiae Stoicorum* (1604; Physiology of the Stoics) he attempted to reconcile Stoicism with Christian doctrine. At about the same time, translations of Epictetus appeared in France, England, and Spain.

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