

CHAPTER THREE

STOIC ENDURANCE

IT IS probably safe to say that the majority of people govern their conduct by a sort of instinctive hedonism, limited by social custom, early training, and fear of the policeman on the corner. The best proof of this is the prevalence of the capitalistic system, whose profit motive is based on the assumption that for most people the highest good is money and the things money will buy. Only a few rationally question personal success and happiness as the end of life, and still fewer deliberately substitute a different ethical aim. Though men generally deny that they are hedonists, they often act as if they were. Yet in every age some have acted otherwise, insisting that it is beneath the dignity of man to base his conduct on the dictates of the senses, and upholding instead some other element of human nature: the will, the reason, or the higher emotions.

The earliest important theory of this sort was the doctrine known as Stoicism, arising in Athens about the time of Epicurus and reaching its highest influence in the Roman Empire. During the fourth century B. C. a group of anti-hedonists called Cynics were attacking and satirizing the

conventional seekers after pleasure and power in Athenian society, and by the beginning of the third century these attacks had crystallized into a definite philosophy first preached by Zeno of Citium (336-264). After flourishing for many years in Athens, this philosophy proved attractive to the Roman conquerors and became the doctrine most typical of the Roman temperament, spreading among all classes of society and growing more influential in the later days of the Empire.¹

The general popularity of Stoic ethics is illustrated by the fact that the two most readable accounts of it were the work respectively of a freed slave and of an emperor. Epictetus, a Greek born about 50 A. D., transported to Rome as a slave during the reign of Nero, found time and inclination to study philosophy. After gaining his freedom, he worked as best he could to promulgate ethical ideals in a fascist state, ever on guard against the emperor's Gestapo, who, as disciples or table-companions, would try to lure him into subversive utterances. Banished by the Emperor Domitian in the year 94, he set up a little school in Nicopolis and lectured effectively for a number of years. Though no writings of his own survive, his lectures were taken down and published by his pupil Arrian in the form of a long series of *Discourses* and a briefer summary called the *Encheiridion* or handbook. Nearly a century later the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, his sincere desire for culture and peace frustrated by court intriguers, importunate office-seekers, and incessant wars, wrote his *Meditations* in the intervals of campaigns against invading Parthians and rebellious German tribes. The composition of these books under the circumstances confronting both men is evidence of the power of Stoic philosophy to achieve tolerance of outlook and tranquillity of mind in the midst of difficulties.

It is interesting to analyze Stoicism as it is pictured by these two men, using examples from later literature to illustrate special points. Both the *Discourses* and the *Meditations*

will repay any modern reader; indeed, he will find them of real help in difficult times. They are very different from each other. Marcus Aurelius had a poetic imagination, a quiet common sense, a disarmingly tolerant spirit, and a cheerful yet slightly tired acceptance of the fluctuations of life; Epictetus was a teacher, with a flair for concrete and homely illustration, a keen wit, and an admirable resilience in the face of physical illness and persecution. What, then, is the doctrine espoused by two such opposite characters?²

On the negative side, it begins with a double attack on hedonism, with which the Stoics had no patience. (Reliance on pleasure, they asserted, is both weak and futile. It is weak because either an active search for pleasure or a retreat from pain is cowardly, unworthy of a man.) Undoubtedly, says Marcus Aurelius, it is more pleasant to lie in bed in the morning than to get up; but when tempted to oversleep, remember that you were created to help build a world, not to find pleasure.³ If you think back over history, you will realize that men are praised, not for having experienced pleasure, but for goodness, stamina, and positive achievement. (Even harmless enjoyments, even general happiness, are unthinkable as an end of life. Though it may be pardonable to accept them as an occasional by-product, it is shameful to pursue them as the highest good.)

The other part of the Stoic attack involves an objection to hedonism which we have already examined: to depend on pleasure is futile. Why even argue about the value of the quest when its chances of success are so slight? It leaves the hedonist exposed to circumstances. When the immediate pleasure is gone, he has nothing to fall back on; when pain comes, he has no defence against it. Better depend on nothing than on such quicksand. The Stoic would deny that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. By refusing to rely on the permanence of the delight, he would prepare

himself for a disappointment which he would regard as inevitable and even proper in the nature of things. "He that dreads pain will some day be in dread of something that must be in the world."⁴ To the Stoic, the hedonist is a man demented, led by a will-o'-the-wisp into the mire. It is as if he should exalt the sun as his highest good, and then, when the sun disappeared, should run frantically through the night to overtake it, oblivious of the precipice in front of him. Much better be realistic, accept the inescapable night as part of nature, and see whether some illumination cannot be found. Indeed, a large part of Stoicism may be described as the attempt to light a candle in the dark.

The flame of the candle, and the highest good in the Stoic system, is the ideal of duty. In general, doing your duty means establishing a standard and making yourself conform to it. The standard may vary in details; in fact, the Stoic advises that, as regards specific daily actions, you follow the moral code in favor at your time, because that represents long racial experience. The emphasis is not upon the exact code to be followed, but upon the firmness and constancy with which you follow it. Beware of every impulse which urges you to make an exception to your standard. Be "impervious to all passions," whether of hunger, lust, anger, vengeance, greed, or sloth. Control your emotions instead of letting them control you.

Although such control is difficult, nature has fortunately provided us with a contrivance for effecting it: namely, our will. The will is the powerful but often atrophied moral force within every person, a force so great as to amount almost to a separate element of the personality, by means of which one part of us can stand aside, observe the actions of the rest, lay hold of recalcitrant impulses, and compel them to do its bidding. Stoics insist that men, unlike animals, are their own masters and can make themselves do anything. Most people, they point out, act on this assumption as far as other persons

are concerned; any belief in moral training, any reliance on reward or punishment, assumes that we are free to will either right or wrong. It is only when the same standard is applied to ourselves that the weaker among us hesitate. Physical determinism the Stoics accept—the external world is subject to unchanging laws of cause and effect. But moral determinism is hateful to them; the human mind is free, not to interrupt causal laws, but to decide whether it will flourish by co-operating with them or come to ruin by opposing them. As human beings, we should prize this freedom as our most precious possession.

The change from the ideal of pleasure to that of duty does not mean that we are fated to a life of unhappy struggle. Indeed, it may bring a real sense of relief, because we are no longer the prey of chance impulses, but have solid standards on which to lean. This point is made with quiet convincingness by Wordsworth in his *Ode to Duty*.⁵ For a number of years Wordsworth had lived in the country surrounded by the natural beauty which he loved, and had felt an almost continual emotional exaltation from the hills and woods of his native lake district. When he reached his middle thirties, however, this early feeling of "splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower" began to diminish, and he reached out in several directions for a firmer basis of moral life. Among other things he called upon Duty, the stern but kind lawgiver, to mould and strengthen his will. In this poem, Duty is not a slave driver, but a refuge.

Thou, who art victory and law
When empty terrors overawe;
From vain temptations dost set free,
And calm'st the weary strife of frail humanity.

Some people, it seems, can lead good lives by instinct; but usually they must resort in the end to some consciously-willed standard. The poet himself has hitherto avoided duty for

impulse; now he seeks to restrain impulse by will, not from a feeling of having done wrong, but from a sense of having dissipated his energies. He says:

Me this unchartered freedom tires;
I feel the weight of chance desires;
My hopes no more must change their name;
I long for a repose that ever is the same.

In the most effective stanza of the poem, Wordsworth shows that his idea is typically stoic by equating duty with natural law. Man's highest moral standards are at bottom the same as the forces governing the whole universe. Therefore, however strict they may be, they arouse in us a sense of fitness and beauty.

Stern Lawgiver! yet thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace;
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face.
Flowers laugh before thee on their beds
And fragrance in thy footing treads;
Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong;
And the most ancient heavens, through thee,
are fresh and strong.

This association of duty with nature is the very center of Stoic doctrine. Supposing that we have attained control of our impulses and a willingness to adhere to some form of duty or external standard, we may now ask in what that external standard consists. The Stoic believes that it consists in following natural law; an action is right if it is in accord with universal nature.

The union of man and nature has been urged by many philosophers, who differ mainly in their views of where nature is and how to get there. Some would ascend to nature; others retreat to it; still others return; a few even plunge. The Stoics would have us merely open our eyes and co-operate with an obviously good universe. To them, nature as a standard was

both a symbol and a literal fact. As a symbol of the good life, nothing could be more apt than the imperturbable round of natural processes. Nature does not complain of dullness or difficulty, but goes on about its business. This comparison is made by Matthew Arnold, who could find little in the contemporary world of men to reassure him, and who alternated between lamenting the time's decay and trying to convince others and himself that they should not lament it. In *Self-Dependence*, he represents himself as ashamed of his constant complaining:

Wearied of myself, and sick of asking
What I am, and what I ought to be,
At this vessel's prow I stand, which bears me
Forwards, forwards, o'er the starlit sea.

Knowing that from his childhood the stars have always had a quieting effect on him, he now calls upon them to exert it again; and from the sky a voice reminds him that if he desires the freedom and calmness of the stars he must become like them. The stars, representing the natural universe,

Unaffrighted by the silence round them,
Undistracted by the sights they see,
These demand not that the things without them
Yield them love, amusement, sympathy.

And with joy the stars perform their shining,
And the sea its long, moon-silver'd roll;
For self-poised they live, nor pine with noting
All the fever of some differing soul.

Bounded by themselves, and unregardful
In what state God's other works may be,
In their own tasks all their powers pouring,
These attain the mighty life you see.

If we take this literally, we may ask by what right the stars are asserted to be joyful. If the idea is to have meaning,

it must be accepted as a symbol. Happy or not, the stars certainly appear imperturbable, and the early Stoics frequently noted that fact. Marcus Aurelius, for example, says: "Watch the stars in their courses as one that runneth about with them therein, and think constantly upon the reciprocal changes of the elements, for thoughts on these things cleanse away the mire of our earthly life."

To follow natural law, however, was not primarily a symbol in the Stoic doctrine. Rather it was a plain and positive fact, easy to understand, the very key to the control of life. The cosmic plan, always moving, endlessly developing seeds into trees and savage tribes into cities, inevitably includes man in its spacious mechanism. Not figuratively, but actually, every man is a part of nature, placed on earth to accomplish a small task in the whole process. To try as best he can to discover the plan and carry out the small task is his duty and his highest good, providing him with the external standard to which his will may be faithful. Nothing is good for me which is not good for the whole universe. "To a rational creature the same act is at once according to nature and according to reason." The universe is often compared to a texture of cloth, in which each thread (or each tiny action) is interwoven with every other. If one insists on cutting through a section of the fabric in search of individual pleasure, then he merely causes himself pain by falling through the hole he has made and seeing the universe move on without him. When phenomena are regarded as parts of such a coherent universe, they are transformed. Trivial creatures and events take on significance; ugly ones achieve at least the beauty of fitting the end for which they were intended. As Marcus Aurelius observes, even the gaping jaws of a lion, horrible and terrifying in themselves, are beautifully suited to perform their function.

Asserting, then, that man, the only being endowed with consciousness to understand his actions, should try to gain

accord with natural law, the Stoics now ask how he can gain it. How does one act according to nature? Their answers to this question involve three general lines of approach, closely related. Let us summarize them first, in the form of three maxims:

1. Perform your function well;
2. Distinguish between what you can and what you cannot control;
3. Comply gladly with necessity.

The first maxim is a simple and practical one. Whatever your particular function happens to be, perform it the best you know how. If you make shoes, let them be good ones; if you fight in the army, do it fiercely and efficiently. Do not complain because your function is different from what you would have chosen. "Does the sun take upon himself to discharge the functions of the rain? or Asclepius of the Fruit-Bearer? And what of each particular star? Do they not differ in glory yet co-operate to the same end?"⁶ No matter what your talents may be, do not worry about being useless to your country. What do you mean by useless? No one can do everything. The iron-worker does not make shoes for the country, nor the cobbler arms. Whatever your particular duty may be, your real function is to provide the state with a good free citizen, of moral integrity and independence.⁷

The fulfillment of this maxim is illustrated in Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the story of how a young man carries out a self-imposed responsibility. Robert Jordan, a teacher of Spanish in an American university, enlists in the Loyalist army during the Spanish Civil War because he feels that, as a member of the human race, his duty is to oppose fascism before it spreads over the world. No one forces or even urges him to do this; he takes the step because his sense of duty convinces him it is right. In the army

he becomes a dynamiter, traveling behind the fascist lines, making contact with the guerilla bands in the mountains, and blowing up the bridges and railroads over which the enemy reinforcements are moved. Though he does not care for the job, he performs it steadily and successfully. During the four days covered by the story his duty is to blow up a certain bridge at the precise moment to prevent reserves being brought across it to stop a Loyalist offensive. Confronted by external and internal obstacles, he focusses his mind on the one objective and forces his reluctant will to remain firm. When a treacherous guerilla leader steals his detonator, he makes another out of hand-grenades. When he perceives that news of the attack has leaked out and that the enemy has already advanced mechanized columns before the bridge can be blown, he nevertheless does his business in the hope of delaying even a small number of the fascists. Wounded and facing certain capture, he still tries to disorganize the enemy slightly by killing one fascist officer. All this time, he is haunted by the realization that the government for which he is fighting is often corrupt and cruel, and by doubts of the wisdom of the whole procedure. By a deliberate effort of will he suppresses these doubts, reminding himself that he made the decision voluntarily and that now nothing matters but the carrying out of his duty. As a morally independent, rationally responsible citizen, he performs his function.

It is interesting to see so clear an example of Stoicism in a man fighting for democratic principles, because the Stoic assertion that man's first duty is to the State might sound like totalitarianism. To merge oneself in the social group is the reiterated aim of the Stoics. Epictetus repeatedly affirms that the function of anything detached differs from its function as part of a whole; for example, it is natural for the foot, taken as a separate entity, to remain clean, but taken as part of the body it is natural for it to step in mud. So with the fate of a man: "If you regard yourself as a thing detached, it is

natural for you to live to old age, be rich, enjoy health. But if you regard yourself as part of some whole, on account of that whole it is fitting for you now to be sick, now to make a voyage and run risks, now to be in want, now to die before your time. Why then are you vexed? Do you not know that as the foot, if detached, will no longer be a foot, so you too, if detached, will no longer be a man? For what is a man? A part of a state." ⁸

If we stop here, this sounds like good totalitarian doctrine. But we must not forget that the Stoic must be not only a citizen but a free citizen, and that he has a function to perform, not only as a citizen, but as a man. For the nature and purpose of man is opposed to that of animals, and Epictetus has a section on this difference.⁹ A man, he asserts, is gentle and reasonable, an animal brutal and contentious. "Here is a man who does not listen to reason, does not understand when he is confuted; he is an ass. Here is one whose sense of self-respect has grown numb; he is useless, a sheep, anything but a human being. Here is a man who is looking for someone to punch in the head; so that he is not even a sheep or an ass, but some wild beast." Fascists who teach their children that violence is the height of moral grandeur would not agree with this part of Stoic doctrine.

This first maxim, then, urges one to go about his business as a man and a citizen, not to be seduced by frivolous pleasures or intimidated by dangers, but to take that place in the universe where duty calls him. Epictetus even outlines a typical "Stoic personality" that will result from doing these things, a personality at once admirable and distasteful.¹⁰ "Lay down for yourself at the outset a certain stamp and type of character which you are to maintain whether you are by yourself or meeting with people." The essence of this character is dignity and gravity. He does not talk or laugh much, or make others laugh. He neither chatters about

himself nor gossips about others. He eats sparingly, and owns nothing that might hint of luxury. Though personally continent, he does not censure those who indulge sexually. He is modest; if someone speaks ill of him, he does not defend himself, but says, "If he had known me better, he would have found more to criticize." He never shows emotion, whether it is excitement, pleasure or disapproval. In this picture, where there is no room for human weakness, joy of living, or relaxation with a friend, we see how the Stoic felt that a good man should perform his function.

The second maxim, a necessary complement of the first, is less easy to understand. In order to follow natural law, the Stoic says, a man must distinguish between what he can control and what he cannot, for upon that distinction depends his whole confidence in the will. This confidence is not easy to justify. The reader probably felt skeptical about it when we began our study of Stoicism. Is not the power of the will very limited? Is there any use in trusting it, since it must inevitably be overcome by circumstances? No amount of willing can make a person taller or more intelligent. Admitting this fact, the Stoic nevertheless insisted that a proper understanding of nature teaches us to have neither too much nor too little reliance on the will, because it shows what is under our control and what is not.

Common sense tells us that most things are not under our control: our birth and heredity, our appearance, the society in which we are reared, the accidents and illnesses that beset us, the general good or bad fortune that comes to us, and the length of our life. But the Stoic believes that one thing is under our control, and one thing only: our mind. No external power can prescribe our thoughts, perceptions, emotions, reason, moral purpose. Freedom of speech and action may be annihilated; that of thought, never. This is obvious enough, but the Stoic asserts that men have never

properly taken advantage of the fact. He argues that the things not under our control can make no essential difference to us. It is not events, but our reactions to them, that matter—and these we can govern by our will. The opening section of Epictetus's manual for students is devoted to this point. The first lesson, he says, is to avoid mistaking things not under your control (such as body, property, reputation, office) for things under your control (such as choice, desire, aversion, thought). The former are nothing to you, and no one can govern the latter. This he illustrates in many sections of the *Encheiridion* and the *Discourses*. We shall look briefly at three of these passages.

In *Discourses* III, viii, he shows that no external event is either good or evil, but is given significance only by a man's inner response to it. For example, "So-and-so's son is dead. Answer, 'That lies outside the sphere of the moral purpose; it is not an evil.' . . . But he was grieved at it. 'That lies within the sphere of the moral purpose; it is an evil.' Or again, he has borne up under it manfully. 'That lies within the sphere of the moral purpose; it is a good'."

In *Encheiridion* 43 the idea reappears in the form of a striking image. "Everything has two handles, by one of which it ought to be carried and by the other not." If your brother wrongs you, you cannot help that, but you can decide which handle of the fact you should take hold of: (a) he has cheated me, and I must hate him; or (b) we were brought up together, I understand and am fond of him, and so I shall forgive him. Only your will can determine which handle you will grasp.

Finally, in *Discourses* III, xix, Epictetus inquires what is the difference between a layman and a Stoic philosopher, and answers, "The layman says, 'Woe is me because of my child, my brother, my father. The philosopher, if he can ever be compelled to say, 'Woe is me,' adds after a pause, 'because of myself.' For nothing outside the sphere of the moral purpose can hamper or injure the moral purpose."

Such is the distinction which the second maxim insists on. From it the Stoics drew far-reaching conclusions. If a man can once realize that external events are of no account compared to internal reactions, then he is released from most sources of pain and sorrow—he has achieved freedom. If we are accustomed to think of freedom as involving the power of overcoming external obstacles, of gaining control over what was formerly beyond us, then this Stoic version may seem a diluted substitute. Even its name is likely to be misinterpreted: the Stoics called it “apathy.” They meant, however, not lethargy, but a calm conquest of one’s emotions, a realization that the will does control the most important part of life. Though a man may be enslaved physically, yet he is free if he does not desire any other life. The value of this apparently ersatz freedom Epictetus defends in vigorous terms: “He is free who lives as he wills, who is subject neither to compulsion nor hindrance nor force, whose choices are unhampered, whose desires attain their end, whose aversions do not fall into what they would avoid.”¹¹ There is only one way of attaining this happy state: in order to get what you want, want only what you can get. If you submit to a desire, you are not free; but your desire is completely under your control—you can be forced to do something, but not to desire it. The best analogy of this is given by Epictetus in *Discourses* III, ix, 22, when he is talking to a man who desires state honors and is discontented at not getting them: “Your strong desire is insatiate; mine is already satisfied. The same thing happens to a child who puts his hand into a narrow-necked jar and tries to take out figs and nuts; if he gets his hand full he can’t get it out, and then he cries. Drop a few and you will get it out. And so too drop your desire; do not set your heart upon many things, and you will obtain.” This freedom, then, is achieved only by understanding the difference between what a person can and what he cannot get.

There is, however, another road to freedom. In discussing it we shall observe in Stoic ethics a new element which may

be troublesome to a reader. This alternative road is that of death, toward which the Stoics had an interesting and logical attitude. Death is not a terror but an opportunity—not for immortal reward, as the Christian believes, but for union with nature. Here the Stoic and the hedonist agree. Both Omar Khayyam and Marcus Aurelius have nothing to anticipate beyond the grave except re-immersion in the cosmic reservoir of life. "You have subsisted as part of the Whole," says Aurelius.¹² "You shall vanish into that which begat you, or rather shall be taken again into its Seminal Reason by a process of change." But whereas the hedonist feels that the finality of death should lead him to seek more happiness in life, the Stoic denies that it should have any effect on his conduct. In any case one's actions should be modeled upon natural law, and death is merely part of that law. Why, then, should it have any influence on one's life?

Marcus Aurelius approaches this subject in his usual poetic mood, with calm admiration of the great universal cycles. "Pass through this tiny span of time in accordance with Nature, and come to thy journey's end with a good grace, just as an olive falls when it is fully ripe, praising the earth that bare it and grateful to the tree that gave it growth."¹³ With special emphasis he says, "Despise not death, but welcome it, for nature wills it like all else. For dissolution is but one of the processes of Nature, associated with thy life's various seasons, such as to be young, to be old, to wax to our prime and reach it, to grow teeth and beard and gray hairs, to beget, conceive, and bring forth. . . . Look for the hour when thy soul shall emerge from this its sheath as now thou waitest the moment when the child she carries shall come forth from thy wife's womb."¹⁴

Epictetus's views, as always, are more matter-of-fact. Any man of sense can understand that death, as one of the parts of nature over which we have no control, should be regarded with interest but no immediate concern. Apparently some people are paralyzed by the idea, unable to make any plans

for fear of dying. "Well," he remarks, "since you have to die in any event, you must be found doing something or other—farming, or digging, or engaged in commerce, or holding a consulship, or suffering with dyspepsia or dysentery. What is it, then, you wish to be doing when death finds you? I should wish it to be some work that befits a man."¹⁵

One is tempted to comment that, while this is well enough for an old man, "like a ripe olive," it is hard to see the proper work of natural law in a young man cut off with his promise unfulfilled. The Stoics spend some time in answering this objection. An early death, they assert, is just as natural as a late one, because no one can possess or use either the past or the future. All he has, and therefore all he can be deprived of, is the present—the same whether he is young or old. To complain at having no more years to live is as silly as complaining because one does not weigh three hundred pounds. Moreover, he who fears death at one age would fear it equally at another; if he lived thirty thousand years death would still be a deprivation. "The longest life and the shortest amount to but the same. For the present time is of equal duration for all, while that which we lose is not ours. . . . No man can part with either the past or the future. . . . It is but the present that a man can be deprived of."¹⁶

So far we see the Stoics urging that death should not be feared, but should be accepted with the same equanimity that should characterize all our living. But they did not stop at this point. Death is to be welcomed as a natural process and even as a source of freedom—yes, but it may also be summoned as an escape from life. From this escape a good man need not shrink. If a sincere attempt to live according to nature fails, then he does not complain, but quietly chooses death. The ultimate possibility of suicide is always in the background of Stoic ethics. The door is always open, say both writers; walk through it if necessary. To the Stoic the alternative is: die or adapt yourself, but do not complain!

"Remember that the door is open. Do not become a greater coward than the children, but just as they say, 'I won't play any longer,' when the thing does not please them, so do you also, when things seem to you to have reached that stage, merely say, 'I won't play any longer,' and take your departure. *But if you stay, stop lamenting.*"¹⁷

In beginning the discussion of the second maxim, we said that one thing not under man's control is the length of his life. This statement must now be modified. He cannot lengthen his life, but he can shorten it. He is in control of life's cessation, not of its continuance; and this control follows from his reason, attitude, or moral purpose. The value of this attitude toward death will be considered later in the general estimate of stoicism.

Let us now examine the third maxim. If you do your duty, if you understand what you can and what you cannot get, then you are ready to see that whatever happens must be in accord with natural law. By fighting against it you accomplish nothing but grief for yourself. Why not adapt your life to conditions of the universe instead of struggling vainly against them? Therefore the final maxim is, "Comply gladly with necessity." This is the typical Stoic attitude; this is what we mean in common speech by a stoical acceptance of hardship.

The popular conception, however, is not always clear or accurate. Sometimes being stoical is interpreted as steeling oneself, setting one's teeth and enduring pain like a martyr. But the Stoic is not a martyr; he prefers to be happy, and does not go out of his way to show fortitude. When misfortune comes, he welcomes it calmly as an inevitable part of the environment. He complies gladly with necessity. The difference may be illustrated by a popular poem, which, though it is often referred to as a fine example of Stoic endurance, does not truly reflect the doctrine. This is

William Ernest Henley's *Invictus*, written by a man in whom a long struggle with pain and invalidism had developed strength and courage. As we read it, or especially as we hear it sung over the radio, it seems impressively Stoic:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll;
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

What, we ask, should Stoicism be if not this? Here is the emphasis on strength of will, the highest courage in meeting difficulties, the waiving of any hope of reward in a future life. But look closely at the poem, and then compare it with the real Stoic passages which follow. Henley does not give the impression of calm conquest of emotion and performance of one's normal function. Instead he is highly emotional, even theatrical. He insists so strongly on his own intrepidity that we may wonder whether he was trying to convince himself about it. Might it have been an attempt to compensate for a subconscious feeling of weakness and failure? Moreover, he hates the clutch of circumstance and the bludgeonings of chance; to him the world holds menace. There is no gladness in his compliance. He avows courage

to accept his wounds, but not willingness to endure his fate. The Stoic temper is much calmer than this. Henley is perturbed but resolute; the Stoic is imperturbable, and even finds quiet joy in meeting adversity. His custom is "to delight in and welcome what befalls and what is spun for him by destiny."

Epictetus gives the following neat formula for a serene life: "Do not seek to have everything that happens happen as you wish, but wish for everything to happen as it actually does happen." Nothing could be more sensible, Marcus Aurelius echoes, than this obvious procedure which most people overlook. Why should we wish things to be otherwise than they are? An act of treachery by an unscrupulous man is nothing to be surprised at; it is his nature, and must be accepted as we accept the hardness of a stone. "He that would not have the wicked do wrong is as one who would not have the fig tree secrete acrid juice in its fruit, would not have babies cry, or the horse neigh, or any other things be that must be." Analogies are found from medicine and athletics. Just as a doctor prescribes medicine or cold baths or exercise, so nature prescribes sickness, deprivation, or sorrow. Just as young athletes appreciate having a strong wrestling partner to toughen them, so we should appreciate having a strong difficulty to wrestle with.

The point is argued with some elaborateness by Epictetus in *Discourses* I, xii, showing that the ultimate aim of this maxim, as of the preceding one, is to gain freedom. He begins by drawing the analogy of language. Suppose a person should insist on being free to write any words he chooses (such as *purgle* or *spomff*). No one will stop him, but it will do him no good. Since he cannot communicate with others—which is the function of language—his so-called freedom will be irrelevant. First he must learn the language, and follow its conventions of meaning and grammar. Though this apparently restricts him, yet only when he undergoes such

restriction is he really free to express himself. Epictetus now draws the conclusion that the same is true of freedom in general: it comes only from complying with the rules of the universe—in other words, it comes when we desire each event to be exactly as it happens, and keep our wills in harmony with the facts. If we do not learn this lesson, our failure is its own inherent punishment: "What, then, is the punishment of those who do not accept? To be just as they are. Is one peevish because he is alone? Let him be in solitude. Is he peevish with his parents? Let him be an evil son and grieve. His prison is where he is now, for he is there against his will." This is one of the most interesting and plausible of the Stoic arguments; the reader should test its cogency in his own mind before we estimate its value.

William Wordsworth is the most definitely Stoic of modern poets.¹⁸ In his *Ode to Duty* we have seen how a voluntary surrender to duty may lead to a kind of freedom through the release of tension. Now, in the poem awkwardly entitled *Resolution and Independence*, he gives a more concrete example of the maxim of compliance with necessity. He describes how, on a gleaming sunny morning, he started out for a walk on the moor, delightedly watching a rabbit kicking up a mist behind it in the wet grass. Anyone should have been happy that morning; but suddenly a mood of despondency settled on him. He began to worry. Everything was well enough now, but suppose misfortune should come, as it so often seemed to come to poets? Think of Burns and Chatterton, for instance; they began with bright hopes, but died young and miserable. He became querulous. Why were not things different? Why did he not have a more secure source of income, and more assurance of success as a poet? In short, why were things as they were? At that moment he caught sight of a very old man, so ancient and so motionless that he seemed more like a part of nature than a person—a huge stone on a hilltop, or a great, slow-moving cloud. He

was sitting beside a little pond, which at intervals he would stir feebly with his staff. The poet, approaching, asked what he was doing; and the old man answered that he was trying to earn an honest living by gathering leeches, which had formerly been plentiful but were now scarce. Yet he did not complain, for there were still just enough to keep him alive, and he asked nothing more. As he listened, Wordsworth felt suddenly ashamed of himself. What had he to complain of compared to this old man? Here was a symbol of one who accepted things as they were without grumbling, and the poet idealized him as the eternal Stoic, honestly contented with his lot as it was.

And soon with this he other matter blended,
Cheerfully uttered, with demeanor kind,
But stately in the main; and, when he ended,
I could have laughed myself to scorn to find
In that decrepit man so firm a mind.

Comply gladly with necessity. He who does so will, like the leech-gatherer, achieve resignation to his fate. The only misfortune a man can really suffer is to complain of his lot. The wiser and better informed he becomes, the less will he dream of blaming anything at all for his misfortunes. It is better, as we have seen, to blame oneself than another; but it is better to rise above all feeling, to be perfectly resigned to what happens. So Epictetus concludes: "It is the part of an uneducated person to blame others where he himself fares ill; to blame himself is the part of one whose education has begun; to blame neither another nor himself is the part of one whose education is already complete." This is the ultimate Stoic reconciliation with fate. Through it he felt able to achieve a calmness and relaxation possible in no other ethical system.

This completes our analysis of the nature of Stoicism. Let us sum it up with four lines of Shakespeare, one of his

finest and most moving passages, characteristically uttered by a Roman general, Octavius Caesar. This is what he says to his sister when her husband Antony abandons her for the Serpent of the Nile. It is the Stoic consolation: let fate bring what it must, and let it do so without complaint.

Be you not troubled with the time, which drives
O'er your content these strong necessities;
But let determined things to destiny
Hold unbewailed their way.¹⁹

Now, having described what the Stoic ethical ideal is, we must inquire what is its value. Does it mean anything to us? Is it a way of life that we can accept and use in the modern world? It is, without question. Indeed, the more directly we face the world of the twentieth century, the more evident it seems that only a Stoic attitude can enable us to live in it. Professor Gilbert Murray once remarked that Stoicism is a philosophy for times of oppression and the decline of civilization; that is why it flourished in the late Roman Empire. It has recently been driven home to us that we must endure certain "strong necessities" whether we like it or not. This fact is so obvious and immediate that we may even tend to overrate the value of an ethic of stern, joyful endurance. Let us, then, analyze as dispassionately as we can its strength and its shortcomings.

At the outset Stoicism seems to have an initial advantage over hedonism in its inherent nobility and dignity. We are not instantly led to admire a hedonist; a real Stoic does arouse admiration. Hedonism makes concessions to human weakness and desire; Stoicism builds on human strength of will. When a man is governing himself he generally appears noble and admirable. The hedonist often admits this by envying the Stoic; one often hears him say, "I wish I had your self-control, but I guess it just isn't in me," He then consoles

himself by deciding that it isn't really in human nature. The Stoic must be a prodigy, no possible model for an ordinary man. The Stoic answers that any worthy system of ethics must be above the ordinary, and that he is merely endeavoring to show what human nature can be at its best, which is when it demonstrates mastery over circumstances. By the exertion of his will, man can achieve dignity and self-respect in the "high Roman fashion." "Every hour," said the Stoic emperor, "make up thy mind sturdily as a Roman and a man to do what thou hast in hand with scrupulous and unaffected dignity and love of thy kind and independence and justice." The appeal of this ideal is very great; the hedonist can offer nothing so inspiring.

Stoicism has an even stronger personal advantage in that its highest good need not exclude that of the hedonist, so that it is not impossible to gain the benefits of both systems. The fulfilment of duty often creates a happiness of its own. Far from admitting that he is a martyr, the Stoic meets the hedonist on his own ground by asserting that in the end Stoicism leads to more happiness than the direct search does. This is one evidence that the apparently opposite theories have a paradoxical affinity. The hedonist, we observed, usually finds something wrong with whatever pleasure he attains. Perhaps the result would be better if he stopped trying and concentrated on something else. It is well known that the way to see a dim star is not to look straight at it, but to look at one side of it. The Stoic emphasis on duty not only distracts attention from pleasure, but may bring about conditions in which happiness is more likely. For example, if a man directly seeks pleasure by lying in bed all day, dozing, and stuffing himself with food, he deteriorates so rapidly as to be an easy prey to disease. If, through an effort of will, he hardens himself by activity and exercise, he probably experiences greater pleasure in the end. Likewise the Stoic, toughened by self-control, is not easy prey to emotional or neurotic disturbances.

In another way, also, Stoicism may increase happiness: it saves one from disappointment. The hedonist is easily disillusioned, the Stoic seldom. He manifests an interesting combination of universal optimism with personal pessimism. What natural law brings about is for the best; the cycles of universal change are good. But his own individual place in this scheme is trifling; for the good of the whole he probably must endure trouble. This being true, he expects nothing; consequently any happiness that does come is pure gain. We should not accept this reasoning, however, without thinking about it. It is puzzling and rather tricky. We should ask ourselves: to what extent can a Stoic be conscious of this paradox and still remain a Stoic? If he undertakes voluntary self-control with the feeling that happiness will result from it, then, in aim and purpose, has he not become a hedonist? In fact, the hedonist makes this very charge against the Stoic. Though it occasionally may be true, it seems on the whole unjust, for the distinction remains that the hedonist regards happiness itself as the highest good, while the Stoic regards it only as a possible by-product of doing one's duty.

Furthermore, aside from its personal advantages, Stoicism usually leads to a better society than hedonism. Most of the hedonists whom we met in the last chapter were anti-social: the good of his country meant nothing to Falstaff. Only the most exalted form of hedonism, known as "universal hedonism," holds the happiness of the greatest number as its ideal. The Stoics are more social in outlook. "What is a man? a part of a state," said Epictetus; and natural law brings about the smooth running of the whole machine without regard to the happiness of any individual part. When a man believes that duty is his highest good, he is more likely to allow for the rights of others than when his ideal is pleasure. To perform one's function well, to realize that some things are not in one's control, and to comply gladly with necessity are all social doctrines. And if the Stoic is

more likely to sacrifice his personal profit or ambition for the good of the group, then his value is not negligible in the modern state. The hedonistic reaction that followed the First World War was avenged by nature in the second one. If civilization is to survive, it must achieve duty and discipline. One way is by external force—totalitarianism; a better way is by inner self-discipline.

But before we all decide to become Stoics, we should be aware that the system involves more than one serious weakness. The reader should already be questioning one detail. A code of ethics is an attempt to achieve a good life. Is it not paradoxical and suspicious that this attempt falls back on suicide as one of its tenets? This is almost an admission of defeat. If you can attain a worth-while life, good; if not, you can die. Of course, death is advocated only in extreme cases as a last resort. Yet to advise it at all is to give away the whole game. Moreover, the analogy that Epictetus gives in making this point is not an attractive one. He compares the man who departs from life to the child who, displeased by something in the game, says, "I won't play any longer." But the I-won't-play attitude is not one that a parent cultivates in a child. To pick up his marbles and go home is an easy way out, but one which he is expected to outgrow as he matures. What accounts for this defeatism in Stoic ethics? Probably the fact, already noted, that it is a code for times of difficulty and decay, one that may easily slip into a counsel of desperation. All the more, then, it needs to be examined critically.

For this last resort of suicide is not essential to the system. It is possible to base one's conduct on Stoic principles without even accepting it. The real weaknesses must be sought in the ethic as a whole. In the first place, many people are repelled and frightened by Stoicism. It's all right if you are up to it, they say, but it's not human. They feel beaten from the start. It seems to be a philosophy for a few people

with strong wills and intrepid characters, a stern, forbidding ideal with no allurements or motivating force. Holding out no hope of ultimate victory, it merely urges one to endure and welcome inevitable frustration.

Again, the rigid self-denial may easily turn into coldness and lack of sympathy. If you are convinced that nothing which happens to you is an evil just as long as you endure it firmly, then you may come to believe that nothing which befalls anyone else is an evil either; and you feel some contempt if he does not endure it firmly. My friend's child has died—that is not an evil; he is grieving at the loss—that is an evil! One striking instance of this aspect of Stoicism is given by Epictetus. It is well, he says, to hold everything in life so lightly that you can at any time give it up without regret. Take Hercules, for instance. He traveled rapidly from one country to another, never bewailing the places or the people he left. "He was even in the habit of marrying when he saw fit, begetting children, and deserting his children without either groaning or yearning for them." God will provide for my children, says the noble Stoic; I can leave them without sorrow. Epictetus does not discuss the matter from the point of view of the abandoned wives. Doubtless they should regard their husband's vagaries as part of natural law and comply gladly with necessity.

It is conceivable, then, that the Stoic might come to emphasize will power and control at the expense of everything else; though such a result is not necessary, it is all too likely. Strange as it may seem, this danger is illustrated in Shakespeare's character of Iago. Iago is a villain, not a noble Stoic, and Emperor Aurelius would be indignant at the comparison. Nevertheless, so fair-minded a man would ultimately concede that Iago is essentially Stoic in two fundamental elements of his character: his exaltation of will power, and his reliance on natural law.

Throughout the play Iago demonstrates his belief in the will. He is cold and unemotional, with no understanding of

weakness or the influence of affection in other people. He believes that a man can do whatever he makes himself do. No Stoic could disapprove when Iago utters one of the most inspiring of all exhortations to be captain of one's soul. He is talking to the ingenuous, confiding young Venetian Roderigo, who has boundless faith in Iago as an older and cleverer man. Roderigo has just suffered a sad blow in learning that Desdemona, with whom he thinks himself in love, has eloped with Othello and is leaving the city. This is more than he can endure. The hedonist, deprived of his pleasure, has nothing left, and he disconsolately tells Iago that the only prospect now is to jump in the river. Iago is contemptuous; this is mere weakness, unworthy of a man. "Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon." Roderigo makes the usual excuse: "What should I do? I confess it is my shame to be so fond, but it is not in my virtue to amend it." The word *virtue* here means not goodness, but innate character or essential quality. In other words, Roderigo is saying that he cannot help his actions because his character comes from his parents or his environment—he isn't responsible. Then Iago answers:

Virtue? a fig! 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to which the wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many—either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry—why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills.²⁰

Iago not only preaches control by the will, but practices it too, as we see at the end of the play when he is captured and his villainies exposed. Then he refuses to explain or excuse himself; he makes no appeal for mercy; setting his jaw he says, "From this time forth I never will speak word." Evil though he is, this is Stoic will power; the trouble is that

his self-control is turned to uses destructive of human values.

The other Stoic element in Iago's character is his reliance on natural law. To him the most obviously "natural" law is the survival of the fittest. He feels nothing but puzzled scorn for the honest average man who does his duty and gets nowhere, the

; duteous and knee-crooking knave
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
Wears out his time, much like his master's ass,
For naught but provender. . . .
Whip me such honest knaves!

Instead, he believes that nature favors the animal who kills his enemy by force or guile, and the man who turns his neighbor's scruples into a ladder for his own advancement.

Others there are
Who, trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves;
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by them, and when they have
 lin'd their coats,
Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul.²¹

Though the indignant Stoic would repudiate this picture, he would be left feeling slightly uneasy. Iago is not a typical Stoic. He is a distorted reflection of what Stoicism might become if carried to certain extremes—not a fair example, but a warning of danger.

There are, however, more fundamental questions to be raised about the whole doctrine of complying with necessity. First, we ought to be very sure that it is necessity before we comply with it. Frequently some effort would enable us to mitigate or overcome the evil circumstances; but the Stoic doctrine is likely to emphasize the endurance of trouble rather than the endeavor to oppose it. The danger is that this may lead to passive acceptance of the status quo, to an ignoring

of the necessity of change. What is, must be, says the Stoic; don't change it and don't lament about it. It is a doctrine of endurance rather than amelioration. It gives one courage to suffer toothache in patient silence; it often ignores the fact that proper diet and dental care might prevent another toothache. The hedonists, we noted, urge men to follow the conventional moral code of their time in order to avoid the pain of punishment; the Stoics urge the same thing, but on the ground that this contemporary code is an existing fact of the time, brought about by the natural law of the universe. This seems too conservative a doctrine to give much hope of being a lasting key to the good life. One illuminating sentence of Epictetus reveals the weakness: "We ought not to cast out poverty, but only our judgment about poverty, and so we shall be serene." This is a devastating comment. What can't be cured should be endured; but what can be cured, should be.

In the second place, the whole compliance doctrine is specious and questionable. Reflection shows that it pretends to give more than it can fulfil, and is really arguing in a circle. It is disingenuous to hold out a promise of consolation and then evade it by a rhetorical trick. The following conversation will show the line of reasoning:

Stoic: You are not the plaything of fate, but can achieve a good life by your faculty of will power.

Disciple: But the human will is often powerless in the face of necessity.

Stoic: Not so. Here is a way to guarantee that your will can attain what it seeks.

Disciple: How can that be done?

Stoic: Will to have only what you can get!

This is what the matter really comes down to. It is like the sure cure for potato-bugs advertized several years ago—your

money back if it does not work. The cure consisted of two smooth blocks of wood, with the directions: Place the potato-bug on one block and press firmly with the other. Of course it can't fail. Nor can you fail to get what you want if you want only what you can get. Meanwhile, the potato crop does not thrive.

Finally, we must observe a more technical yet very important weakness in Stoicism as a philosophy. Philosophy, we said, must make as few assumptions as possible; yet the Stoic makes a glaring one. The real center of his belief, the foundation under the ideas of compliance, of internal control, of performing one's function, is a trust in the majestic march of natural law. To believe that everything he does and suffers is an inescapable detail in the plan of beneficent natural law is both noble and consoling. But it is based on the assumption that natural law is beneficent and salutary for man. We hope that it is; but what business has the Stoic to assume it, except wishful thinking? It is unprovable either way, but it is one point that makes many modern people unwilling to accept Stoicism. Yet it is not a belief to be lightly discarded. Like hedonism, it is a wholesome corrective of other systems, and in some circumstances an admirable attitude toward life.