



Keep Calm and Carry On :: Stoic Philosophy & Modern Life

ARTSSCI 1138.xx, First-Year Seminar

Date and Location TBD

Professor Jacob Risinger (risinger.13@osu.edu)

Office Hours: Tues and Thurs TBD and by appointment (Denney 561)

Description

As the COVID pandemic swept through the world, the popularity of Stoic philosophy skyrocketed. Around the globe, readers found comfort in the teachings of the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius, who once asserted, “The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it.”

In this convivial seminar, we’ll explore some of the teachings of the Roman Stoics, but we’ll also pay attention to the outsized impact that Stoicism has had on modern literature, culture, and thought. How does Stoic philosophy purport to restore balance and perspective amidst the anxieties of everyday life? What role should emotion play in our individual and collective decision-making? Is it possible that a life of cool detachment might be more radical than a life of passionate engagement? And how has the figure of the Stoic been celebrated, maligned, and (mis)understood over time? Come along for the ride

as we investigate a philosophy that has captivated figures ranging from George Washington and Adam Smith to J.K. Rowling and Anna Kendrick.

Texts

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (trans. Gregory Hays, Modern Library, \$8)

Seneca, *Selected Letters* (trans. Robin Campbell, Penguin, \$15)

Assorted Readings on Carmen

Requirements

- Active, conversational participation. Each week, we'll work together to tackle our readings from a variety of angles. Your perspective and participation is essential. To that end, you should arrive in class with two or three pre-formulated questions and/or provocations each week.
- A weekly, hybrid journal. Over the course of the semester, you will keep a hybrid journal with at least one entry per week. This journal can be a space to track your own thoughts on the readings that we discuss in seminar, or a space to reflect on how the readings we do in class intersect with your experience of real life. You'll have (optional) opportunities to share excerpts from your journal with other members of the seminar throughout the semester, and I'll read/respond to your journal at several points throughout the term.
- Stoic Show and Tell. Hardly a week goes by when the word "stoic" doesn't feature prominently in various news reports. (As I draft this syllabus, for example, it's been a fixture of reporting from the Olympics in Beijing). It's a word used a lot, even if it's often used in misleading ways. Your job this semester is to use your various news feeds, social media, and internet searches to keep an eye out for the term. Over the course of the semester, everyone must **bring in 3 examples of Stoicism in practice** from the wider world of art, news, sports, and culture. Bring a printout or screen shot to class, and be ready to give us a brief sense of why you found this particular invocation of Stoicism fascinating.

Course Objectives

- To survey the intellectual tradition of Stoicism, especially the writings of three Roman philosophers whose writings continue to be influential.
- To gain a sense of the significant impact Stoicism had on the Enlightenment and the "Age of Revolutions," and hence of the significant role Stoicism played in the formation of modernity.
- To think more pressingly about the relationship between philosophy, literature, and culture.
- To consider how Stoic ideas and practices might still be relevant to college students navigating life in the twenty-first century.
- To foster critical and reflective writing skills, as well as a new appreciation for and sense of ease in collective conversation and dialogue.

Grading

- Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory
Class Participation: 50%
Stoic Show and Tell : 20%
Weekly Journal: 30%

Biographical Statement

For the past eight years, I've taught in the English Department at Ohio State, where I get to teach and think about all kinds of literature, especially British and American Romanticism. I think literature and philosophy go as well together as bread and butter, and last year I published my first book, *Stoic Romanticism and the Ethics of Emotion*. I teach a range of courses, from "Introduction to Poetry" to "Romanticism and Revolutionary Experience." In 2017, the English Undergraduate Organization named me Undergraduate Professor of the Year.

Schedule

Week One	Introducing the Stoics
Week Two	Marcus Aurelius, Books II & III (pp. 15-34)
Week Three	Marcus Aurelius, Books IV & V (pp. 35-66)
Week Four	Marcus Aurelius, Books VI & VII (pp. 67-98)
Week Five	Epictetus, <i>Enchiridion</i> (trans. by Elizabeth Carter, on Carmen)
Week Six	Seneca, <i>Letters</i> : "Living to Oneself," "The Friendship of Kindred Minds," "The Shortness of Life," "Pleasures and Joy," and "Groundless Fears"
Week Seven	Seneca, <i>Letters</i> : "On Business as the Enemy of Philosophy," "On Ill-Health and the Endurance of Suffering," "Some Arguments in Favor of the Simple Life," "Master and Slave," and "On the Happy Life"
Week Eight	Seneca, <i>Letters</i> : "The Futility of Planning Ahead," "Facing Hardships," "The Degeneracy of the Age," and "Facing the World with Confidence"
Week Nine	International Stoic Week :: class participates in broader discourse and events, details tbd

- Week Ten *Stoicism & The Founding of the United States*
- excerpts from George Washington, Thomas Jefferson (Carmen)
- Week Eleven *Stoicism & The French Revolution*
- excerpts from and/or related to Maximilien Robespierre, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and Toussaint L'Ouverture (Carmen)
- Week Twelve *Stoicism, Sympathy, & Cosmopolitan Justice*
- excerpts from Adam Smith and Martha Nussbaum (Carmen)
- Week Thirteen *Stoicism on a Fragile Planet*
- excerpts from Henry David Thoreau (Carmen)
- Week Fourteen *A Stoic Symposium*
- debate with last thoughts from Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book XII (pp. 159-170)

Course Policies:

ATTENDANCE: Our weekly conversations—and your participation in those conversations—are essential to your experience of the course. To that end, attendance is mandatory, and I take it every session. If you know you have to miss a class, please let me know in advance. Everyone is given one excused absence, no questions asked, and I will grant additional excused absences for documented medical and family emergencies.

Statement on Academic Misconduct: It is the responsibility of the Committee on Academic Misconduct to investigate or establish procedures for the investigation of all reported cases of student academic misconduct. The term “academic misconduct” includes all forms of student academic misconduct wherever committed; illustrated by, but not limited to, cases of plagiarism and dishonest practices in connection with examinations. Instructors shall report all instances of alleged academic misconduct to the committee (Faculty Rule 3335-5-487). For additional information, see the Code of Student Conduct <http://studentlife.osu.edu/csc/>.

DISABILITY SERVICES: Students with disabilities (including mental health, chronic or temporary medical conditions) that have been certified by the Office of Student Life Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated and should inform the instructor as soon as possible of their needs. The Office of Student Life Disability Services is located in 098 Baker Hall, 113 W. 12th Avenue; telephone 614- 292- 3307, slds@osu.edu; slds.osu.edu.

OFFICE HOURS: You should think of office hours as an important extension of our time in the classroom. I encourage each of you to drop by my office hours, or schedule an appointment via email. I'm always happy to discuss your journals or any questions you have about our shared readings. If you are struggling or confused at any point in the semester, please be in touch. I'm also happy to help as you settle into life in a new place—feel free to think of me as a friendly, first port of call as you acclimate to life on campus.