James Bond
The Life Worth Living
By
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During the 1992 televised debate between Vice Presidential candidates Al Gore, Dan Quail, and billionaire populist Ross Perot's choice for a running mate, James Stockdale, the latter introduced himself to the nation by uttering two questions; *Who am I? Why am I here?* They were the perfect questions to set the nation at ease with this unfamiliar, unvetted Washington outsider. Almost everyone had been wondering the same thing about Stockdale, who was he and why was he Perot's pick? The live audience laughed and his self-deprecating humor, which also immediately endeared him to viewers all over the country. Unfortunately for Stockdale, and Ross Perot, his moment as a wise, funny, white-headed grandfatherly figure didn't last long. As the evening transpired his inability to intelligibly answer questions just as quickly turned him into a national joke, including being portrayed on *Saturday Night Live* as a befuddled, senile, old man by comedian Phil Hartman. He became the Sarah Palin of his day. By the time the debate was over, perhaps the only people left whom Stockdale had permanently endeared himself to were the nation's philosophers, whose minds were made up about him almost the moment he started speaking. He had us with, *Who am I? Why am I here?*

Today, even those unfamiliar with philosophy understand these are quintessential philosophical questions—perennial questions dating back thousands of years. We can trace them back at least to Athens in the 4th century BCE, about 300 years after philosophy simultaneously began in Greece, China, and India. Prior to this, philosophy professor, William Irvine says, "philosophers were primarily interested in explaining the world around them—and the phenomenon of that world—in doing what we would now call science."[1] This changed when Socrates came long in the 4th century BCE, whom, as one translator puts it, "was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil."[2]

In his general introduction to *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, W.J. Oates, who describes philosophy, "as the speculative spirit of inquiry into the of life and the universe," confirms, "In its earlier stages the orientation of philosophy was to the external world."[3] Philosophers initially tried to figure out its physics and how things worked. Thales thought it was made of water, Anaximenes said it was air, and Heraclitus argued fire was the primary element within all things. It wasn't long before Democritus became the first person in history to come up with an atomic theory of reality, way back in the 5th century BCE. Of course, that was the Golden Age of Greek civilization, when the Athenians could enjoy the freedom to make such speculations. A hundred year later, after the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, Athens lay in ruins, its countryside destroyed, widespread poverty ensued, and the citizens of Greece's strongest city-state ever became completely subjugated. With the breakdown of

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[1] Irvine, William B., *A Guide to the Good Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009, p. 19.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Oates, W.J., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, Random House, New York, NY, 1940, p. xiii.

the small Greek city-state," Samuel Enoch Stumpf writes, "individual citizens lost the sense of their own importance and their ability to control or perfect their social and political destiny. Individuals increasingly felt this loss over collective life as they were absorbed into the growing Roman Empire."[4] Broken, oppressed, despondent, always anxious about the future, the Greeks were no longer interested in theoretical speculations about the nature of reality, for they already knew too well the painful nature of their own reality. "What they needed," Stumpf says, "was a practical philosophy to give life direction under changing conditions… Philosophy, therefore, shifted to this practical emphasis in a mood of increasing concern for the immediate world of the individual."[5] As one of those ancient philosophers, Epictetus, said, "What do I care whether all existing things are composed of atoms, or of indivisibilities, or of fire and earth? Is it not enough to learn the true nature of the good and the evil?"[6]

Epictetus represents one of a handful of philosophies at the time that began emphasizing *ataraxia*, which means, "peace of mind," the philosophy I want to talk about today, *Stoicism.* To do so, I thought it might be fun to talk about one of my favorite stoics, James Bond, who relies upon its wisdom to survive a horrible ordeal. His fans may have read about the time he was piloting a small plane over enemy territory. He always keeps a copy of Epictetus' *Handbook* with him, much of which he's memorized. Epictetus was born a Roman slave around 50 CE, only to become one of the most revered Stoic philosophers of all time. James Bond discovered him while studying International Relations at the university and, feeling bored, wandered into the philosophy department where a kindly professor gave him a copy of Epictetus' writings.

His philosophy can almost be summed up in a line my stoic friend Dan Eacret often says, "You've got to take the hand you're dealt and play it the best you can," which, for the Stoic, means being your best even in the worst of times. James Bond had just been thinking of something Epictetus said when he was dealt and unexpectedly bad hand; his aircraft was struck by enemy fire, forcing him to eject. As his parachute opens and he realizes he's floating down into enemy hands, he thinks, "I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus."[7]

Before saying more about what happens next, I should tell you I've been playing a bit of a trick. For I'm not talking about the familiar James Bond character created by fiction writer, Ian Flemming in 1953. I'm talking about the original James Bond, the real James Bond, born thirty years earlier, in 1923. I'm talking about James Bond Stockdale, the same bumbling debater who may have single-handedly ruined Ross Perot's chances of ever becoming President of the United States. During a speech on Stoicism that he later gave before the U.S.

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[4] Stumpf, Samuel Enoch, *Philosophy: History and Problems,* 3rd ed., McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, NY, 1971, 1983, p. 106.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Stockdale, James B., *The Stoic Warrior's Triad: Tranquility, Fearlessness, and Freedom,* A lecture to the student body of the Marine Amphibian Warfare School, Quantico, VA, April 18, 1995.

[7] Stockdale, James B., *Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus' Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior*, Speech delivered at the Great Hall, King's College, London, Monday, November 15, 1993, p. 7.

Navel Academy, the retired Vice Admiral, the only three-star navel officer in history to wear both aviator wings and the Medal honor, along with two Flying Crosses, three Distinguished Service medals, four Silver Stars, and two Purple Hearts, began by explaining;

> When I debated Al Gore and Dan Quayle on television in October 1992, as candidates for Vice President, I began my remarks with two questions that are perennially debated by every thinking human being: Who am I? Why am I here? The questions were relevant in terms of the evening's purpose, which was to introduce myself and let the American people know where I was coming from. But I also chose them for their broader relevance to my life: I am a philosopher.[8]

In addition to his extraordinary military honors, after retiring from the Navy, James Bond Stockdale served as President of the Citadel for a year and as a college professor in Stanford University's philosophy department, where he served as a senior research fellow of Stoicism for 15 years. He also held 11 honorary degrees and many other honors too numerous to mention here. And a few years prior to that infamous 1992 debate, he'd already been portrayed on TV by another famous actor, James Wood, in a 1987 movie based on the book, *In Love and War*, cowritten with his wife Sybil, about her fight for humane treatment of POWs during Vietnam.

Once on the ground, James Bond Stockdale was immediately mobbed and brutally beaten, his arms bound tight behind his back, forcing him to walk hunched almost in half, with a badly broken leg that would hobble him for the rest of his life. Stoicism's first principle, which Epictetus' *Handbook* begins with, is, "Some things are up to us and some are not up to us."[9] Learning to distinguish between what we can and can't control is the essence of Stoic wisdom. What is, "Up to me," Stockdale understood, even during the panic of his capture, his body broken and inflamed, his fate uncertain, though certainly not good, "within my power, within my will, are my opinions, my aims, my aversions, my own grief, my own joy, my attitude about what is going on, my own good, and my own evil."[10]

It was this belief, no matter how harsh his circumstances, no matter how brutally he was treated, he could remain master of his fate that allowed James Bond Stockdale to survive nearly eight years of imprisonment, torture, leg irons, and solitary confinement, without losing his soul or his sanity. His tormenters may have had control over his body, but only he could control his attitude about it all, which kept him free and powerful. But Stoicism should not for a moment be confused with the power of positive thinking, or with denial and ignorance. "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose," Stockdale says, "with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."[11] For Stoicism is based on three foundations, *physics*, by which is meant empiricism and objectivity, dealing with world as it is, with the facts, on its own terms, outside one's wishes and imagination; *ethics*, which means remaining

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[8] Stockdale, James B., *Master of My Fate: A Stoic Philosopher in a Hanoi Prison*, published by Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics, 2001, p. 1.

[9] Irvine, ibid., p. 86.

[10] Stockdale, ibid., p. 5.

[11] Pigliucci, Massimo, *How to be a Stoic,* Basic Books, New York, NY, 2017, p. 125.

true to oneself whatever one's reality is; and *reason*, which means being self-aware, consciously deciding how we will respond to life, and knowing the difference between what we can and can't control.

Stockdale could not control falling into enemy hands, or being beaten and tortured, or being in pain, or being arrested and treated as a criminal. Yet, by the time he was finally brought to the Hanoi Hilton, stoic philosopher Massimo Pigliucci says, "Stockdale had resolved to do precisely as Epictetus advised; to play whatever part Fate had allotted him to the best of his abilities."[12] During his seven-and-a-half years as a POW, more than half of which he spent in solitary confinement, two of them in leg irons, he held know ill will toward his captors, even though they tortured him 15 times. As the highest-ranking officer present, he managed to organize the other American prisoners, which grew from about 30 to 466 over the years of his imprisonment, and he developed policies that allowed them to survive torture without giving valuable information away, and to help them maintain their own integrity and sense of dignity. Though he never mentioned the word *stoicism* to any of them, Stockdale says it was Epictetus who made it all possible;

> He's been in combat with me, leg irons with me, spent month-long stretches in blindfolds with me, has been in the ropes with me, has taught me that my *true business* is maintaining control over my moral purpose, in fact that my moral purpose *is* who I am. He taught me that I am totally responsible for everything I do and say; and that it is *I* who decides on and controls my own destructions and own deliverance.[13]

While imprisoned he sometimes injured his own face, so his image couldn't be used as propaganda, and, before it was over, after he'd finally been completely isolated to prevent him from encouraging the other prisoners, Stockdale decided to commit suicide. This wasn't because he was depressed or lost hope, but because stoicism keeps an "open door" policy when it comes to death. They didn't consider life always a good or death always an evil. In general, as Epictetus beloved teacher, Musonius Rufus, "the Roman Socrates," said, stoics believe, "One who by living is of use to many has not the right to choose to die unless by dying one may be of use to more."[14] Yet, Musonius also taught, "Since the Fates have spun out the lot of death for all alike, one is blessed who dies not late but well."[15] The Stoic view on death was inspired by the death of Socrates, who died with integrity, even though he was wrongly accused and falsely sentenced, and had every opportunity to escape.

Though they considered it unethical and cowardice to commit suicide just to avoid life, they also believed the fear of death negatively impacts our peace of mind, our *ataraxia*. Musonius said we should "think of death as not an evil and life not as a good,"[16] that, in other words, there are things worse than dying, and the inevitability of dying is one of those things that is out of our control. "Given that all of us must die," Musonius said, "it is better to die well, than

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[12] Pigliuccci, ibid., p. 127.

[13] Stockdale, *The Warrior's Triad*, ibid.

[14] Lutz, ibid., (saying 24) p. 133.

[15] Ibid., (saying 35), p. 135

[16] Lutz, Cora E., Musonius Rufus: "The Roman Socrates", *Yale Classical Studies Vol. 10,* Bellinger, Alfred R., ed., Yale University Press, U.S., 1947, p. 43.

live long."[17] Perhaps it was the statement made by his ancient mentor, Epictetus himself, that inspired James Bond Stockdale to step through the open door. "I must die, must I?" Epictetus said. "If at once, then I am dying: if soon, I dine now, as it is time for dinner, and afterwards when the time comes I will die. And die how? As befits one who gives back what is not his own."[18]

Fortunately, Stockdale was discovered before he died and saved by his captors. He was soon after released as the nightmarish war came to and. He went on to talk much about his experiments in what he called his Stoic "laboratory" at the Hanoi Hilton, and to unintentionally help prevent Ross Perot from become President. After all, who wants a billionaire populist in the White House?

So, let me now turn to a more direct explanation of Stoicism and why I think it's important for us today. It was founded by Zeno of Citium, Cypress, around 300 BCE. While shipwrecked in Athens he went to a bookseller and asked where he might meet a philosopher. At that moment, Crates the Cynic happened by and the bookseller exclaimed, "Follow yonder man." Zeno became Crates' student but eventually began teaching his own philosophy to those who assembled to hear him on the *Stoa Poikile*, which means, "Painted Porch." That's how the Stoics got their name, "the porch people," those who gather at the porch.

Stoicism is based on the premise that virtue is the greatest good because it is the only thing that is valuable in all circumstances, everything else is indifferent. Unlike the other philosophies seeking *eudaimonia*, happiness through *ataraxia*, peace of mind—Epicureanism, which pursued it through pleasure, and Cynicism, which did so through abstinence and discomfort—Stoics are allowed to seek *preferred indifferents* and avoid *dispreferred indifferents* (things that don't matter) so long as doing either, seeking pleasure or avoiding pain, doesn't diminish their virtue. By *virtue*, the mean *wisdom*, the ability to know the difference between what can and can't be controlled; *courage*, the ability to maintain one's integrity even in the face of suffering and death; *justice*, recognizing that we are social creatures and must care and take responsibility for the welfare of others; and *temperance*, being able to restrain oneself, that is, to be in control of the things we *can* control.

The stoics believe people are unhappy because they always want what they don't have. So, to achieve *eudaimonia*, literally, "a good spirit," by achieving "peace of mind," we must find a way to be happy with what we already have. They developed some novel ways of doing this. First, the dichotomy of control, which I've already mentioned, means distinguishing the difference between what we can and can't control. Instead of wasting time worrying about what we can't control, as most people do, we should only concentrate on what we can control, mostly our own attitude about things. Thus, instead of having external goals in our endeavors, we should *internalize* our goals. The runner, for example, should not strive to win a race, but to run one's best whatever the outcome. This can also be aided through *fatalism*, not regarding the future, but recognizing we can't change the past or the present, since one

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[17] Lutz, ibid., (saying 24) p. 133.
[18] Oates, ibid., p. 226.

is over and the other is already upon us. Instead we should do what we can to impact the future for the good without clinging to an outcome.

Another technique for achieving peace of mind, *ataraxia*, to be of good spirit, *eudaimonia*, is practicing *premeditio malorum*, "foreseeing bad things," or negative visualization. This isn't about desensitizing ourselves to loss or grief, but, imaging what it might be like to lose the things we most value, our wealth, our possessions, our reputation, our loved ones, even or own lives, to make us appreciate them all the more in the here and now, rather than taking them for granted. As Musonius said, "It is not possible to live well today unless one thinks of it as one's last."[19]

Although some of their ideas were prudish, the stoics were socially progressive, even by today's standards. Stockdale says, "The Stoics held that all human beings were equal in the eyes of God: male and female, black and white, slave and free."[20] Like many in the ancient world, they believed children should obey their parents, but not indiscriminately, not if a parent asks a child to do something that is wrong. They especially advocated for equality of the sexes and for the education of girls, and for the right of women to study philosophy. Musonius said, "the female has the same sense as the male; namely sight, hearing, smell, and the others. Also both have the same parts of the body, and the one has nothing more than the other."[21] They additionally thought political leaders should study philosophy, for their own good and the good of their citizens. Stockdale may not have made it into the White House, but 2000 years ago, during Stoicism's heyday, a stoic philosopher named Marcus Aurelius became Emperor of Rome. As such, he didn't overspend, respected his Senate, and used his authority with restraint. He was the last of Rome's great Emperors. In the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon wrote, "If [one] were called upon to fix the period in history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, one would without hesitation name that which elapsed between Nirva and the death of Marcus Aurelius... the only period of human history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government."[22]

Today, as in ancient Greece, it seems there is much that is beyond our control. 500-year-old racist systems continue, even as real White Supremacists, White Nationalists, and Nazis march in our streets and draw swastikas on Jewish community centers; our planet is burning up and melting while our government dismantles environmental protections; and the rights and safety of women are once again being trounced upon at the highest levels. Our country has fallen into enemy hands, the Supreme Court being the latest casualty in a once democratic nation that's being "absorbed into a growing [Authoritarian] Empire."

The parallels between ancient Athens and modern American are enough to suggest that rediscovering Stoicism might be of help to us today as well. Epictetus once asked, "What do you think would have become of [Hercules] if there had not been a lion, as in the story, and

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[19] Lutz, ibid., (saying 22), p. 131.

[20] Stockdale, *Master of My Fate*, ibid., p. 2.

[21] Lutz., ibid., p. 39.

[22] Stockdale, *Courage Under Fire*, ibid., p. 4.

a hydra and a stag and a boar and unjust and brutal men, whom he drove forth and cleansed the world of them? What would he have done, if there had been nothing of this sort?"[23] The point is, the challenges Hercules faced allowed him to prove his strength, just as the challenges before us cannot change who we are, and provide us the opportunity to take charge of what we can control, and to be at our best even in the worst of times.

Today, we can't change the outcome of past elections, or alter the makeup of the Supreme Court that exists today. We can waste time worrying about these things, wishing we could change them, or we can strive to be our best in these troubling times, living up to our own standards, to our own values, as people of goodwill and virtue doing what we can to shape tomorrow. Whatever else may befall us, no one can take these things away from us. They are ours, and ours alone. They are what make us free. They are what make life worth living.

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[23] Oates, ibid., p. 235.