

## Education for the Twenty-*Second* Century

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“It is worse, much worse, than you think.” With these words David Wallace-Wells introduces *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*. Wallace-Wells extrapolates from present conditions and the predictions of climate scientists to paint a picture of the kind of world that awaits our children and their children. It is a world of physical and mental suffering, displacement, and violent conflict brought on by intensifying global warming. Keep in mind as well that violent conflict tends to weaken support for democracy and the rule of law.

We do not know the precise shape such suffering would take, cannot predict with certainty exactly how many acres of forest will burn each year of the next century, releasing into the air centuries of stored carbon; or how many hurricanes will flatten each Caribbean island; or where megadroughts are likely to produce mass famines first; or which will be the first great pandemic to be produced by global warming. But we know enough to see, even now, that the new world we are stepping into will be so alien from our own, it might as well be another planet entire.<sup>1</sup>

In a section on global warming’s impact on mental health, Wallace-Wells writes that, “Perhaps the most predictable vector is trauma: between a quarter and a half of all those exposed to extreme weather events will experience them as an ongoing shock to their mental health.”<sup>2</sup> He notes that climate trauma is especially harsh in the young.<sup>3</sup> Citing a study that was done after the 1998 hurricane Mitch, the second deadliest hurricane on record, which left 11,000 dead in Central America, Wallace-Wells claims that,

27% had a chance of having been seriously injured, a 31% chance of having lost a family member, and a 63% chance of their home having been damaged or destroyed. . . . Ninety percent of adolescents in the area were left with PTSD. . . .

Six months after the storm, four out of every five teenage survivors. . . . suffered from depression; more than half, the study found, compulsively nursed what the authors called, a bit euphemistically “vengeful thoughts.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps Wallace-Wells exaggerates the dangers, but even if he depicts a worst-case scenario, worst cases can occur. But we need not look into our own uncertain future. Many millions of children today, victims of wars, gang depredations, and devastation brought on by natural disasters, *already* live in a “worst-case” world.<sup>5</sup> Whether we think of current conditions in huge areas of the world devastated by floods (for example, Pakistan), forest fires (for example, Brazil) and ongoing wars (for example, Ukraine), or the likely future everywhere, philosophers of education need to confront this question: In a world which resembles one most of us have only experienced vicariously in ancient myths and contemporary science-fiction, a world of violent conflict generated by scarcity and displacement, what kind of education is appropriate? I shall argue that the most fitting response is provided by the Hellenistic school of philosophy known as Stoicism. At first blush, it might seem preposterous that a philosophy articulated in the centuries just preceding and succeeding the birth of the common era should have relevance two millennia later; but actually, it makes sense to look to an educational theory that responded to an era marked by turmoil and insecurity. Martha Nussbaum, in her exposition and analysis of the diverse Hellenistic philosophical schools, cites the Epicurean who lived in the first century BCE: “Lucretius describes the menacing face of the world of Nature as if the elements themselves were willing aggressors.”<sup>6</sup> And as Massimo Pigliucci notes in his recent introduction to Stoicism, it “originated and thrived in times of political instability; people’s lives could be upturned at a moment’s notice, and death could befall anyone, at any age.”<sup>7</sup>

But there are additional reasons for identifying Stoicism as providing a uniquely appropriate philosophy of education for the kind of turbulent time envisaged by Wallace-Wells. First, though Stoicism offers a coherent doctrine, it is first and foremost a practical philosophy; its goal is to transform the *psyches* of its devotees, not to inculcate doctrine. Second, Stoic psychology and ethics,

though woven into a broader philosophical schema that includes logic, epistemology and metaphysics can be separated from that schema without losing its legitimacy. Third, the Stoics were principally educators. Perhaps *re*-educators is a better term because their students had to be weaned from the miseducation supplied by the societies in which they grew up. The Stoics did not simply try to reason their students out of false beliefs; they collectively introduced a repertoire of practical exercises designed to help initiates develop and sustain the mindset they were trying to instill, and they recognized the importance of providing role models. Finally, the Stoic approach to living well is enjoying a contemporary revival, which includes an annual worldwide Stoic Week organized by the University of Exeter in England. What, then, is Stoicism?

#### WHAT IS STOICISM?

The Stoic teachers span a 500-year period, from 300 BCE to 200 CE. What we know about Stoic teaching is based partly on students' lecture notes and partly on texts, of which only fragments remain, so it is not surprising that exponents and commentators differ in their emphases and that some conclusions are contested. That being said, I have found that a diverse number of interpreters have reached a remarkable consensus on the principal concepts and ideas that form the heart of the movement.<sup>8</sup>

The Stoics saw themselves as spiritual and intellectual descendants of Socrates, sharing his belief that philosophy is aimed at teaching people how to live; that virtue—a disposition of the soul or psyche—is the preeminent good; that reason should reign in the soul; and that vice and unhappiness derive from mistaken beliefs. The Stoics saw themselves as doctors of the soul, modeling physicians of the body; their tutelage aimed at instilling equanimity and tranquility of mind in the face of misfortune and danger.

The Stoics urged living in accordance with nature—our own, and nature more generally. Following Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, they stressed rationality as humanity's core attribute. They focused most of their ethical teachings on the emotions, perceiving that many people are robbed of happiness by irrational, out-of-control emotions, notably fear, anger, and sadness.

Although there is some ambiguity regarding the precise relationship between belief and emotion in Stoicism, all Stoics held that deleterious emotions derive from mistaken evaluations and beliefs. Virtue is the ultimate good, both necessary and sufficient for happiness; it is good in all circumstances. Everything else they designated as *indifferents*. But are there no other goods? Is health, for example, not a good? The Stoics dealt with this question by distinguishing between *preferred* and *non-preferred* indifferents. Health is a preferred indifferent, disease a *non-preferred* indifferent. Does that not set up a potential tension between virtue and, for example, health, requiring a tradeoff between the two? Not according to the Stoics: nothing may be traded off for one's virtue. Pigliucci suggests that the economists' notion of lexicographic ordering provides an incisive way of formulating the relationship between virtue and preferred indifferents. There are tradeoffs among the latter, between a good meal and a ticket to the theater, for example, but one ought not to compromise one's integrity to even a minor extent for either. One ought not to cut into the ticket line, for example.<sup>9</sup>

What explains the difference between virtue and the other goods? Here, the Stoics draw on the most important distinction in their philosophy, that between those things we can control and those we cannot. Epictetus, one of the most important Stoics, who lived at the end of the first century and into the second century CE marks the distinction like this:

Of things some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are opinion, movement toward a thing, desire, aversion. . . . not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices (magisterial power), and in a word, whatever are not our own acts. . . . the things in our power are by nature free . . . but the things not in our power are weak, slavish. . . . Remember then that if you think the things which are by nature slavish to be free, and the things which are in the power of others to be your own . . . you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will blame both gods and men.<sup>10</sup>

This passage seems to embody a mistake and is easily subject to misinterpretation. The apparent mistake is in thinking that our opinions, desires, and

aversions are chosen when many are not; there are those that are simply inborn or appropriated from parents and the social milieu within which we grow up. And if taken literally, Epictetus seems to imply that whatever issues from those opinions and inclinations ought to be simply accepted and endorsed. This is far from what Epictetus is trying to say. A concrete example will provide clarification: A few months ago I felt a pain in my foot when I walked. When the pain did not go away, I did not simply resign myself to feeling pain but made a choice to go to my doctor for a diagnosis and subsequent treatment. But, of course, my doctor could not guarantee healing would take place, and months later the pain is still there. Would recriminations against the doctor or myself be appropriate? According to the Stoics, no. Healing depends on a myriad of variables that are not all within the doctor's control. Would it be appropriate to recriminate against myself? Maybe I should have chosen a different doctor? According to the Stoics, the past is what it is and cannot be changed. No good comes from second guessing myself, only frustration leading to anger. I should live the best I can, not focusing not on the painful foot but on the things that engender satisfaction, which are legion.

Perhaps not essential for living well, health is a good thing to have in almost all circumstances. However, the Stoics argue that the goods many of us focus on, such as fortune, honor, and power, are not what they seem. They frequently bring disappointment and unhappiness in their wake. To give a few common examples: Rich people or celebrities often do not know whether others are attracted to them because of their wealth or position or because of their personal qualities. Those who are dominant in some arena often wonder if they are genuinely respected or if people hover around them because of what they hope to gain for themselves, or even because they hope to dethrone them. People with enormous political power can feel very insecure as we've seen so often since Plato first called our attention to the phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> Those who focus all their youthful energies on career advancement often regret their inability to establish close relations with friends or family. For the Stoic, all these suboptimal choices are the result of limited rationality.

The Stoic philosophy is a philosophy for all seasons, helping us confront

the vicissitudes that inevitably accompany our lives, like a sprained foot, but I believe it is especially appropriate in times of crisis. Why? Recall Wallace-Wells's report on the psychological consequences of survivors of hurricane Mitch: the incidence of depression and anger. These emotions are nothing if not "natural." If the Stoic goal is to live in accordance with nature, on what basis can Stoics criticize them? Recall that for the Stoics, rationality is what distinguishes us from our primate relatives. Failing to use our reasoning capacities properly, we confuse facts with evaluations, not realizing that "good" and "bad" are judgments *we* make of things. These judgments put us on an emotional roller-coaster. An illustration may help convey the Stoic position.

Commentators discuss an incident recorded by the anthologist Aulus Gellius in which he and a Stoic philosopher experience a typhoon while at sea. Like the rest of the passengers, the Stoic philosopher turns pale and his hands tremble; only subsequently does he regain his composure. When asked for an explanation, the philosopher produces a text by Epictetus, saying in part that,

the wise person, although he experiences a brief and superficial response in color and expression, does not 'assent' but maintains the state and strength of his opinion which he has always had about impressions of that kind, namely, that they are not at all to be feared but alarm us by false appearance and empty fright.<sup>12</sup>

How can the Stoic hold such an opinion? The answer is succinctly given by John Sellars: "But for the Stoics every external event is, strictly speaking, a matter of indifference; they can never be inherently good or bad."<sup>13</sup> Even one's own death? Yes, Epictetus puts it this way, "I have to die. If it is now, well then I die now; if later, then now I will take my lunch, since the hour for lunch has arrived—and dying I will tend to later."<sup>14</sup>

Consider those whose homes are battered mercilessly by flooding, those whose crops are failing due to drought, those who have lost friends or family members to forest fires. Of course, their—as our—initial reaction would be depression and rage. But if they could assume the attitudes of the

Stoic sages, or at least approach their perspective, they would realize that these responses are irrational and recover their equanimity. But why, for the Stoics, is rage at the loss of one's home to fire irrational? Because it is a consequence of basing one's happiness in an external object over which, obviously, one has no control. Does this imply that the Stoic should simply give up, remain passive, mutely await whatever fate has in store for her and those she cares about? No. Self-preservation and an innate orientation to others are basic human instincts and provide the foundations of ethics. Concern for others begins with immediate family but radiates outward to community, polis, and ultimately humanity everywhere. Commenting on a fragmentary text by Hierocles, Margaret Graver notes,

Just as it is in the nature of these social animals for each to behave in ways that promote the interests of the group, so it is natural for humans to act sometimes on behalf of others. From this it is inferred that every person has an obligation to consider the interests of others in determining how to act.<sup>15</sup>

Stoicism, then, does not counsel a withdrawal from the world; after all, one of the leading Stoics was Emperor Marcus Aurelius. That being said, there does seem to be a tension between the Stoic injunction against emotional investment in anything beyond one's control and the Stoic recognition that a virtuous life involves commitments to and concern for others. It is to this tension that I now turn.

### EMOTION AND LIVING WELL

The tension can be exposed by taking a look at two passages from Epictetus's *Discourses*. In Book I, Epictetus dialogues with a man who abandoned his sick daughter because he could not bear to see her suffering. Epictetus first gets the man to agree that "whatever is rational will not be in conflict with family affection" and then convinces him that if all those who have feelings for the girl would have abandoned her the result would be that, "owing to the affection on the part of parents as well as guardians, the girl would have been completely forsaken by those who love and protect her, to die in the company

of people who had no part in bringing her up, and therefore no special feelings for her,” which would obviously be tragic.<sup>16</sup> Epictetus then convinces the man that if the mother and nurse should stay with the daughter, reason prohibits him from making an exception for himself. Finally, Epictetus gets the man to agree that if he himself were ill, he would want his family around him, so the man ultimately recognizes that leaving his daughter was irrational and “no act of affection at all.”

Now, consider the following passage from Book IV:

Those are the reflections you should recur to morning and night. Start with things that are least valuable and most liable to be lost—things such as a jug or a glass—and proceed to apply the same ideas to clothes, pets, livestock, property; then to yourself, your body, the body’s parts, your children, your siblings, and your wife. Look on every side and mentally discard them. Purify your thoughts, in case of an attachment or devotion to something that doesn’t belong to you and will hurt to have wrenched away.<sup>17</sup>

Is there a way to reconcile the recommendation to mentally train yourself to accept losing that which is precious to you, while at the same time pursuing the obligation, born of love, to be solicitous of family and others dependent on you? Perhaps one way of resolving it is by modifying your own psychology so that you obey the dictates of reason while at the same time limiting the emotional investment you make in other people, including your own family, lest you become overwhelmed by anxiety at the possibility of losing them. This is consistent with advice that Epictetus gives about seeing “a person weeping in sorrow either when a child goes abroad or when he is dead”: “So far as words, then, do not be unwilling to show him sympathy, and even if it happens so, to lament with him. But take care that you do not lament internally.”<sup>18</sup> Are the Stoics, then, saying that all emotions are irrational and must be eliminated, or rather, that there are rational and irrational emotions and only the latter need to be extirpated? The Stoics did posit three good emotions in the sage, joy,

caution, and wishing, which suggests that the latter is the case. But what is the quality of emotional life enjoyed by the Stoic sage?

Contemporary commentators have answered this question very differently. Martha Nussbaum paints an unflattering picture of the Stoic's emotional life compared to ours: "It is the change from suspense and elation to solid self-absorption; from surprise and spontaneity to measured watchfulness; from wonder at the separate and external to security in that which is oneself and one's own."<sup>19</sup> Margaret Graver paints a very different picture:

I have argued here that the friendships and love relations which would be found among the wise are not, for Stoics, entirely austere relations but are rich in affect, charged with powerful response to the goods exhibited by the other, or in the case of the immature beloved, to the nature which is well-suited to develop those goods.<sup>20</sup>

There are two questions here, the exegetical and the philosophical. Regarding the first I do not have enough expertise to choose between them, though I must admit Nussbaum's position seems more consistent with the essential core of Stoic teaching. But which vision is more attractive? Each conjures up a different "form of life," to use Wittgenstein's phrase. I maintain that though we may disagree about which quality of emotional life is more appealing to us here and now, Nussbaum's "measured watchfulness" seems appropriate for the dystopian world "so different from our own" that Wallace-Wells anticipates. Why? Nussbaum identifies "suspense and elation," "surprise and spontaneity" as qualities of life that *we* rightly value, qualities that would be lost if we were Stoics. Now ask yourself, under what circumstances are surprise and spontaneity desirable? Under circumstances in which the surprises are likely to be pleasant and agreeable. Under circumstances in which the surprises are likely to be nasty, a world of surprises is not to be wished for. A simple thought experiment will confirm this: Would you rather wander around Tokyo, one of the safest cities in the world, or Kinshasa (Capital of Democratic Republic of Congo) one of the most dangerous cities in the world? Of course, if nasty encounters become the rule, they will no longer surprise.

## STOIC EDUCATION

The Stoic masters Epictetus and his teacher Musonius Rufus deployed a variety of teaching strategies, including lecture, readings, and recitation, but two distinguishing features were Socratic dialectic and practical exercises designed to help aspirants internalize the Stoic outlook.<sup>21</sup> This repertoire of training exercises, devised by Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius—the three most famous Stoic authors—is perhaps the best way to appreciate both the aims and the methods of the Stoic re-educators. I already quoted one, the mental relinquishing of increasingly valuable objects. Here is one from Marcus Aurelius:

You can remove out of the way many useless things among those which disturb you, for they lie entirely in your opinion; and you will gain for yourself ample space by comprehending the whole universe in your mind, by contemplating the eternity of time, and observing the rapid change of every several thing, how short is the time from birth to dissolution, and the illimitable time before birth as well as the equally boundless time after dissolution.<sup>22</sup>

I claim that inculcation of the Stoic worldview emphasizing not just Stoic doctrine but the kinds of practical exercises illustrated above ought to claim center-stage. Remember, we are talking about education for a world that—if Wallace-Wells is right—will exhibit the characteristics Hobbes applied to human life in the state of nature, “solitary, nasty, poor, brutish, and short.” Because my proposal might appear to be rash, let me try to reply to four likely objections:

1. The mission of schools, especially public schools, is not to promulgate a worldview but, rather, to initiate students into the various academic disciplines and prepare them for democratic citizenship. Exercises that reduce stress may legitimately occupy a part of the school day, but they must remain peripheral to the principal work of schools.

*One of the missions of the Hellenistic philosophers and their descendants down the centuries was to teach young adults how to achieve eudemonia, how to live well. These lessons will retain their relevance to educators, especially if conditions*

*the day after tomorrow are likely to resemble conditions prevalent during Hellenistic times. I present Stoicism as a philosophical orientation to educating young people whose psychic survival is at risk. No institutional implications are implied. Perhaps most children will be homeschooled due to the dangers lurking outside. I imagine that the United States in the twenty-second century will look very different from how it does today with enormous regional and even local variations. One has simply to extrapolate from recent hurricanes, floods, and forest fires to realize the fragility of our civilization. We do not know whether the material and institutional infrastructure needed to maintain a stable, democratic nation will be present in the twenty-second century.*

2. No matter how noble or inspiring the Stoic philosophy, the idea of grounding an education in a single worldview smacks of indoctrination. *I agree that educators should neither produce nor reinforce closed-mindedness, but it is hard to see how educators whose aim is the enhancement of rational choice could be charged with indoctrination. It is true that Stoicism was originally a comprehensive doctrine opposed to conventional religion, but as Pigliucci claims, theists as well as atheists can feel at home in its approach to living well.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the Stoic teacher will be suspect only if the Stoic "channel" is the sole one to which a young person is exposed. The difficulty of adopting and maintaining the Stoic worldview shows that already in Hellenistic times it had to work "against the grain," so to speak. I see no reason why this would not still be the case in the twenty-second century.*
3. While the Stoics were keen observers of human nature, both their techniques and the theoretical foundations on which these rest have been debunked and superseded by scientific psychology and evidence-based psychotherapy.

*This is far from the truth. As a matter of fact, perhaps the best-vetted and currently dominant form of psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, is directly descended from Stoic philosophy. In a recent review article, a distinguished professor of psychiatry identified the following etiological assumptions behind the cognitive-behavioral model of therapy: "Psychopathology is the result of faulty information processing; Distorted and dysfunctional cognitions produce negative affective states and maladaptive behavior."<sup>24</sup> This is nothing but a contemporary rewording of Stoic doctrine. Moreover, and directly relevant to the focus on childhood trauma, an impressive*

*meta-analysis of means of preventing and treating childhood anxiety came to the following conclusion: “CBT [cognitive-behavioral therapy] is effective for preventing and treating childhood anxiety—across a range of ages and formats.”*<sup>25</sup>

4. If the world of the twenty-second century will resemble Hobbes’ state of nature then shouldn’t the focus of education be on survival skills, such as ways to secure food and water, avoid infections and attacks by feral animals, overpower assailants, and the like?

*Of course, depending on conditions, teaching survival skills may become increasingly important, but the Stoics recognized, as I hope you do, that human dignity and integrity trump mere survival. Epictetus put it this way: “The victim may be majestic in suffering, you see, and come through a better, more fortunate person; while the one who really comes to harm, who suffers the most and the most pitifully, is the person who is transformed from human being to wolf, snake or hornet.”*<sup>26</sup>

Stoicism is a venerable yet vital tradition designed for humans at any time and place but especially relevant to a future in which the dire predictions of climate scientists become reality; at least that is what I have tried to argue here.

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## REFERENCES

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<sup>3</sup> Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 137.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 137.

<sup>5</sup> I owe this point to my former mentor Robert McClintock.

<sup>6</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 257.

<sup>7</sup> Massimo Pigliucci, *How to Be a Stoic* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 41-42.

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