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THE STOIC VIRTUES SERIES

DISCIPLINE IS DESTINY

THE POWER OF SELF-CONTROL



RYAN HOLIDAY

#1 *New York Times*-bestselling author of
The Obstacle is the Way and *The Daily Stoic*

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States of America in 2022 by
Portfolio Penguin, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

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Book design by Daniel Lagin

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 633 1
eISBN 978 1 78283 758 9

Two words should be taken to heart and obeyed when exerting ourselves for good and restraining ourselves from evil—words that will ensure a blameless and untroubled life: persist and resist.

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The Four Virtues



It was long ago now that Hercules came to the crossroads.

At a quiet intersection in the hills of Greece, in the shade of knobby pine trees, the great hero of Greek myth first met his destiny.

Where exactly it was or when, no one knows. We hear of this moment in the stories of Socrates. We can see it captured in the most beautiful art of the Renaissance. We can feel his budding energy, his strapping muscles, and his anguish in the classic Bach cantata. If John Adams had had his way in 1776, Hercules at the crossroads would have been immortalized on the official seal of the newly founded United States.

Because there, before the man's undying fame, before the twelve labors, before he changed the world, Hercules faced a crisis, one as life-changing and real as any of us have ever faced.

Where was he headed? Where was he trying to go? That's the point of the story. Alone, unknown, unsure, Hercules, like so many, did not know.

Where the road diverged lay a beautiful goddess who offered him every temptation he could imagine. Adorned in finery, she promised him a life of ease. She swore he'd never taste want or unhappiness or fear or pain. Follow her, she said, and his every desire would be fulfilled.

On the other path stood a sterner goddess in a pure white robe. She made a quieter call. She promised no rewards except those that came as a result of hard work. It would be a long journey, she said. There would be sacrifice. There would be scary moments. But it was a journey fit for a god. It would make him the person his ancestors meant him to be.

Was this real? Did it really happen?

If it's only a legend, does it matter?

Yes, because this is a story about us.

About our dilemma. About our own crossroads.

For Hercules, the choice was between vice and virtue, the easy way and the hard way, the well-trod path and the road less traveled. We all face this choice.

Hesitating only for a second, Hercules chose the one that made all the difference.

He chose virtue. “Virtue” can seem old-fashioned. Yet virtue—*arete*—translates to something very simple and very timeless: Excellence. Moral. Physical. Mental.

In the ancient world, virtue was comprised of four key components.

Courage.

Temperance.

Justice.

Wisdom.

The “touchstones of goodness,” the philosopher-king Marcus Aurelius called them. To millions, they’re known as the cardinal virtues, four near-universal ideals adopted by Christianity and most of Western philosophy, but equally valued in Buddhism, Hinduism, and just about every other philosophy you can imagine. They’re called “cardinal,” C. S. Lewis pointed out, not because they come down from church authorities but because they originate from the Latin *cardo*, or hinge.

It’s *pivotal* stuff. It’s the stuff that the door to the good life hangs on.

They are also our topic for this book, and for this series.

Four books.* Four virtues.

One aim: to help you choose ...

Courage, bravery, fortitude, honor, sacrifice ...

Temperance, self-control, moderation, composure, balance ...

Justice, fairness, service, fellowship, goodness, kindness ...

Wisdom, knowledge, education, truth, self-reflection, peace ...

These are the key to a life of honor, of glory, of *excellence* in every sense. Character traits that John Steinbeck perfectly described as “pleasant and desirable to [their] owner and makes him perform acts of which he can be proud and with which he can be pleased.” But the *he* must be taken to mean all of humankind.

There was no feminine version of the word *virtus* in Rome. Virtue wasn’t male or female, it just *was*.

It still is. It doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman. It doesn’t matter if you’re physically strong or painfully shy, a genius or of average intelligence. Virtue is a universal imperative.

The virtues are interrelated and inseparable, yet each is distinct from the others. Doing the right thing almost always takes courage, just as discipline is impossible without the wisdom to know what is worth choosing. What good is courage if not applied to justice? What good is wisdom if it doesn't make us more modest?

North, south, east, west—the four virtues are a kind of compass (there's a reason that the four points on a compass are called the “cardinal directions”). They guide us. They show us where we are and what is true.

Aristotle described virtue as a kind of craft, something to pursue just as one pursues the mastery of any profession or skill. “We become builders by building and we become harpists by playing the harp,” he wrote. “Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.”

Virtue is something we do.

It's something we choose.

Not once, for Hercules's crossroads was not a singular event. It's a daily challenge, one we face not once but constantly, repeatedly. Will we be selfish or selfless? Brave or afraid? Strong or weak? Wise or stupid? Will we cultivate a good habit or a bad one? Courage or cowardice? The bliss of ignorance or the challenge of a new idea?

Stay the same ... or grow?

The easy way or the right way?

* This is book 2.

Introduction



Would you have a great empire? Rule over yourself.

PUBLILIUS SYRUS

We live in times of plenty and freedom that would have been unfathomable to even our most recent ancestors.

An ordinary person in a developed nation has at their disposal luxuries and opportunities that all-powerful kings were once impotent to acquire. We are warm in the winter, cool in the summer, stuffed full far more often than hungry. We can go where we want. Do what we want. Believe what we want. With the snap of our fingers, pleasures and distractions appear.

Bored where you are? Travel.

Hate your job? Change it.

Crave it? Have it.

Think it? Say it.

Want it? Buy it.

Dream it? Chase it.

Nearly anything you want, whenever you want it, however you'd like it, it's yours.

This is our human right. As it should be.

And yet ... what do we have to show for all this? Certainly not widespread flourishing. Empowered, unshackled, blessed beyond expectation—why are we so damn unhappy?

Because we mistake liberty for license. Freedom, as Eisenhower famously said, is actually only the “*opportunity for self-discipline.*” Unless we'd rather be adrift, vulnerable, disordered, disconnected, we are responsible for ourselves. Technology, access, success, power, privilege—this is only a blessing when accompanied by the second of the cardinal virtues: self-restraint.

Temperantia.

Moderatio.

Enkrateia.

Sophrosyne.

Majjhimāpatipadā.

Zhongyong.

Wasat.

From Aristotle to Heraclitus, St. Thomas Aquinas to the Stoics, from *The Iliad* to the Bible, in Buddhism, in Confucianism, in Islam—the ancients had many words and many symbols for what amounts to a timeless law of the universe: We must keep ourselves in check or risk ruin. Or imbalance. Or dysfunction. Or dependency.

Of course, not everyone's problems are a result of plenty, but *everybody* benefits from self-discipline and self-control. Life is not fair. Gifts are not handed out evenly. And the reality of this inequity is that those of us coming from a disadvantage have to be even more disciplined to have a chance. They have to work harder, they have less room for error. Even those with fewer freedoms still face countless daily choices about which urges to indulge, what actions they'll take, what they'll accept or demand from themselves.



In this sense, we're all in the same boat: The fortunate as well as the unfortunate must figure out how to manage their emotions, abstain from what should be abstained from, choose what standards to observe. We must master ourselves unless we'd prefer to be mastered by someone or something else.

We can say that each of us has a higher and lower self, and that these two selves are in a constant battle with each other. The *can* versus the *should*. What we can get away with, and what's *best*. The side that can focus, and the side that is easily distracted. The side that strives and reaches, the side that stoops and compromises. The side that seeks balance, the side that loves chaos and excess.

The word for this inner battle to the ancients was *akrasia*, but it's really that same Herculean crossroads once again.

What will we choose?

Which side will win?

Who will you be?

THE ULTIMATE FORM OF GREATNESS

In the first book of this series on the cardinal virtues, courage was defined as the willingness to put your ass on the line—for something, for someone, for what you know you need to do. Self-discipline—the virtue of temperance—is even more important, the ability to keep your ass *in line*.

The ability ...

... to work hard

... to say no

... to practice good habits and set boundaries

... to train and to prepare

... to ignore temptations and provocations

... to keep your emotions in check

... to endure painful difficulties.

Self-discipline is giving everything you have ... and knowing what to hold back. Is there some contradiction in this? No, only *balance*. Some things we resist, some things we pursue; in all things, we proceed with moderation, intentionally, reasonably, without being consumed or carried away.

Temperance is not deprivation but command of oneself physically, mentally, spiritually—demanding the best of oneself, even when no one is looking, even when allowed less. It takes courage to live this way—not just because it's hard, but because it sets you apart.

Discipline, then, is both predictive and deterministic. It makes it more likely you'll be successful and it ensures, success or failure, that whatever happens, *you are great*. The converse is also true: a lack of discipline puts you in danger; it also colors who and what you are.

~

Let us go back to Eisenhower and his idea that freedom is the opportunity for self-discipline. Does his own life not prove this? He plodded through some thirty years of unglamorous military postings before earning the rank

of general and had to watch, stateside, as his colleagues won medals and acclaim on the battlefield. In 1944, when he was appointed Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in World War II, he suddenly controlled an army of some three million men, the tip of a war effort that ultimately involved more than fifty million people. There, at the head of an alliance of nations totaling upward of seven hundred million citizens, he discovered that far from being exempt from the rules, he had to be stricter with himself than ever. He came to find that the best way to lead was not by force or fiat, but through persuasion, through compromise, through patience, by controlling his temper, and, most of all, by example.

Emerging from the war, he was a victor of victors, having achieved conquest at a level no man-at-arms ever has or hopefully will ever again. Then, as president, overseeing a newfound arsenal of nuclear weapons, he was literally the most powerful human being in the world. There was almost no one or nothing that could tell him what to do, nothing that could stop him, no one who did not look up at him in admiration or away from him in fear. Yet his presidency involved no new wars, no use of those horrible weapons, no escalation of conflict, and he left office with prescient warnings about the machinery that creates war, the so-called military-industrial complex. Indeed, Eisenhower's most notable use of force in office came when he sent the 101st Airborne Division to protect a group of black children on their way to school for the first time.

And where were the scandals? Public enrichment? Broken promises?

There weren't any.

His greatness, like all true greatness, was not rooted in aggression or ego or his appetites or a vast fortune, but in simplicity and restraint—in how he commanded himself, which in turn made him worthy of commanding others. Contrast him with the conquerors of his time: Hitler. Mussolini. Stalin. Contrast him even with his contemporaries: MacArthur. Patton. Montgomery. Contrast him with his peers of the past: Alexander the Great. Xerxes. Napoleon. In the end, what endures, what we truly marvel at, is not the ambition but the self-mastery. The self-awareness. *The temperance.*

As a young man, Eisenhower's mother had quoted him a verse from the Book of Proverbs, "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty," she had told him, "and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city." She taught him the same lesson that Seneca himself tried to instill in the rulers he advised, that "Most powerful is he who has himself in his own power."

And so it goes that Eisenhower quite literally conquered the world by conquering himself first.

Still, there is a part of us that celebrates, perhaps envies, those who let themselves get away with more, who hold themselves to lower standards—the rock stars, the famous, the wicked. It seems easier. It seems like more fun. It might even be the way to get ahead.

Is that right?

No, it is an illusion. Under closer inspection: No one has a harder time than the lazy. No one experiences more pain than the glutton. No success is shorter lived than the reckless or endlessly ambitious. Failing to realize your full potential is a terrible punishment. Greed moves the goalposts, preventing one from ever enjoying what one has. Even if the outside world celebrates them, on the inside there is only misery, self-loathing, and dependence.

With regards to temperance, the ancients were fond of the metaphor of a charioteer. To win the race, one must not only get their horses to run quickly—but also keep the team under control, calm their nerves and jitters, have such a firm grasp on the reins that they can steer with pinpoint precision in even the most difficult of circumstances. The charioteer must figure out how to balance strictness and kindness, the light and the heavy touch. They have to pace themselves and their animals, and find every ounce of speed when it counts. A driver without control will go fast ... but they will inevitably crash. Especially around the hairpin turns of the arena and the winding, pockmarked road of life. Especially when the crowd and the competition are rooting for exactly that.

It is through discipline that not only are all things possible, but also that all things are enhanced.

Name someone truly great without self-discipline. Name one calamitous undoing that was not, at least in part, rooted in a lack of self-discipline.

More than talent, life is about temperament. And temperance.

The people we admire most and will explore in this book—Marcus Aurelius, Queen Elizabeth II, Lou Gehrig, Angela Merkel, Martin Luther King Jr., George Washington, Winston Churchill—inspire us with their restraint and dedication. The cautionary tales of history—Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, King George IV—stun us with their self-inflicted destruction. And because each of us contains multitudes,

sometimes we see both excess and restraint in the same person and can learn from both.

Freedom requires discipline.

Discipline gives us freedom.

Freedom and greatness.

Your destiny is there.

Will you grab the reins?

DISCIPLINE IS DESTINY

PART I

THE EXTERIOR

(THE BODY)



Our body is our glory, our hazard and our care.

MARTHA GRAHAM

We begin with the self—the physical form. In St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we’re told to keep under the body, and bring it into subjection, so that we will not be made a castaway. The Roman tradition, according to the Stoics, was about “endurance, a frugal diet, and a modest use of other material possessions.” They wore functional clothes and shoes, ate off functional plates, drank moderately out of functional glasses, and committed earnestly to the rituals of ancient life. Do we pity this? Or admire its simplicity and dignity? In a world of abundance, each of us must wrestle with our desires, our urges, as well as the timeless battle to strengthen ourselves for the vicissitudes of life. This is not about six-pack abs or the avoidance of all that feels good, but instead about developing the fortitude required for the path we have chosen. It’s about being able to go the distance, and steering clear of the blind alleys and mirages along the way. If we don’t dominate ourselves physically, who and what does dominate? Outside forces. Laziness. Adversity. Entropy. Atrophy. We do the work, today and always, because it’s what we’re here for. And we know that while it might seem easy to take it easy and more pleasurable to indulge our pleasure centers, in the long run, it is a far more painful route.