'A message all of us need to hear'
Arnold Schwarzenegger

THE STOIC VIRTUES SERIES

RIGHT THING, RIGHT NOW

GOOD VALUES. GOOD CHARACTER. GOOD DEEDS.

RYAN HOLIDAY

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY AND *THE DAILY STOIC*

'A message all of us need to hear'
Arnold Schwarzenegger

THE STOIC VIRTUES SERIES

RIGHT THING, RIGHT NOW

GOOD VALUES. GOOD CHARACTER. GOOD DEEDS.

RYAN HOLIDAY

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY AND *THE DAILY STOIC*

▶ Description

RIGHT THING, RIGHT NOW

RIGHT THING, RIGHT NOW

GOOD VALUES. GOOD CHARACTER. GOOD DEEDS.

RYAN HOLIDAY

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

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

Book design by Daniel Lagin

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN 978 1 78816 631 7
eISBN 978 1 78283 757 2

Injustice is a kind of blasphemy. Nature designed rational beings for each other's sake: to help— not harm—one another, as they deserve. To transgress its will, then, is to blaspheme against the oldest of the gods.

— MARCUS AURELIUS

CONTENTS

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, Hercules at the crossroads would have been immortalized on the official seal of the newly founded United States.

Because there, before his 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 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, the way of his ancestors. It would make him the man he was meant 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. The same goes for us.

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

He chose virtue.

"Virtue" can seem old-fashioned. In fact, 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, endurance, 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 the good life, a life of honor, of glory, of *excellence* in every sense. Character traits, which John Steinbeck perfectly described as "pleasant and desirable to [their] owner and makes him perform acts of which he can be proud and 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 universal. The imperative remains universal.

The virtues are interrelated and inseparable, yet each is distinct from the others. Doing the right thing almost always takes courage, just as moderation 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 writes. "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 3.

Introduction

Justice, that brightest adornment of virtue by which a good person gains the title of good.

— CICERO

The clearest evidence that justice is the most important of all the virtues comes from what happens when you remove it. It's remarkably stark: The presence of injustice instantly renders any act of virtue—courage, discipline, wisdom—any skill, any achievement, worthless . . . or worse.

Courage in the pursuit of evil? A brilliant person with no morals? Self-discipline to the point of perfect selfishness? There's an argument that if everyone acted with justice all the time, we wouldn't have so much need for courage. While discretion moderates bravery and pleasure provides us relief from excessive self-control, the ancients would point out that there is no virtue to counterbalance justice.

It just is.

It just *is the whole point.*

Of every virtue. Of every action. Of our very lives.

Nothing is right if we're not doing what is right.

It probably says something about our world today, however, that when people hear the word "justice," their first thought is not of decency or duty but of the legal system. They think attorneys. They think politics. We are concerned with what's lawful, we fight for "our rights" a lot more than *what is right.* It might be too on the nose to call this an "indictment" of modern values, but it's hard to see it as anything else.

"Justice means much more than the sort of thing that goes on in law courts," C. S. Lewis would remind listeners in a famous lecture series. "It is the old name for everything we should now call 'fairness'; it includes honesty, give and take, truthfulness, keeping promises, and all that side of life."

Very simple ideas, yet very rare indeed.

We need to understand that justice isn't simply something between a citizen and the state. Forget due process; what are *you* doing? *Stare decisis*? Justice stares us in the face. Do we act with it? Not only in big moments of responsibility but the little ones— how we treat a stranger, how we conduct our business, the seriousness with which we take our obligations, the way we do our job, the impact we have on the world around us.

Of course, we love to debate justice. *What is it? Whom do we owe it to?* Starting at childhood, nothing animates people more than an argument about fairness, about whether someone has been screwed over or not, about whether we should be allowed to do something. We love vexing hypotheticals, we'll endlessly debate the tricky exceptions to the rules, the moral consequences that prove nobody is perfect.

Modern philosophy twists itself into knots over complicated dilemmas like the so-called

trolley problem or whether free will exists. Historians debate the right and wrongness of the military and political and business decisions that have shaped our world, in one turn reveling in the ambiguities while in another making sweeping black- and-white judgments about the endlessly gray.

As if these moral choices are clear and easy, or as if they are one-offs instead of ever present. As if we are the ones asking the question, instead of life asking them of us.

Meanwhile, just in the first few hours of the day, each and every person has made dozens of ethical and moral decisions of no small significance, many of which we do not bother to give even one-tenth of the consideration. As we think about what we might do in some unlikely high-stakes situation, there exist at any moment an *infinite* number of opportunities to engage with these ideas in a real way in real life. Naturally, we prefer justice as an abstraction to distract from having to act— however imperfectly— with justice.

Until we stop debating, we can't start *doing*. We keep debating so we don't have to start doing.

JUSTICE AS A WAY OF LIFE

Earlier in this Stoic Virtues series, we defined courage as putting our ass on the line, and self-discipline as getting your ass in line. To continue this metaphor, we may define justice as *holding the line*— or drawing up our "Flat-Ass Rules," to borrow a phrase from the great General James Mattis. That is, the line between good and evil, right and wrong, ethical and unethical, fair and unfair.

What you will do.

What you won't.

What you *must* do.

How you do it.

Whom you do it for.

What you're willing to give for them.

Is there a certain amount of relativity in all this? Does it sometimes involve trade-offs? Sure, sure, but somehow still in practice, across the ages and across cultures, we find a reassuring amount of timelessness and universality— a remarkable amount of agreement about *the right thing*. You will notice that the heroes in this book, for all their differences— of gender and background, of war and peace, the powerful and the powerless, presidents and the impoverished, activists to abolitionists, diplomats to doctors— are remarkably aligned in matters of conscience and honor. Indeed, the tastes of human beings have changed constantly over the centuries, yet a consensus remains: We admire those who keep their word. We hate liars and cheats. We celebrate those who sacrifice for the common good, abhor those who grow rich or famous at the expense of others.

No one admires selfishness. In the end, we despise evil and greed and indifference.

Psychologists have reason to believe even infants can feel and understand these notions, which is more evidence still that "the hunger and the thirst for righteousness" is there within us from our earliest days.

The "right thing" is complicated . . . but it's also pretty straight-forward.

All the philosophical and religious traditions— from Confucius to Christianity, Plato to Hobbes and Kant— revolve around some version of the golden rule. In the first century BC,

Hillel, the Jewish elder, was asked by a skeptic if he could summarize the Torah while standing on one foot. In fact, he could do it in ten words. “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” Hillel told the man. “All the rest is commentary.”

Care about others.

Treat them as you would wish to be treated.

Not just when it’s convenient or recognized, but especially when it isn’t.

Even when it’s not returned. Even when it costs you.

“The words of truth are simple and justice needs no subtle interpretations, for it hath fitness in itself,” the playwright Euripides said, “but the words of injustice, being rotten in themselves, require clever treatment.” You know justice when you see it— or, on a more visceral level, you *feel* it, especially its absence and its opposite.

A boy named Hyman Rickover came to America in 1906, his family fleeing the Jewish pogroms of Russia. He worked his way through the US Naval Academy, where he was steeped in the classical virtues. Over a long career, which stretched across thirteen presidents— from Woodrow Wilson to Ronald Reagan—Rickover quietly became one of the most powerful men in the world, pioneering the idea of nuclear ships and submarines, ultimately heading programs responsible for billions of dollars of machinery, tens of thousands of soldiers and workers, along with weapons of enormous destructive potential. Across six decades and global wars in which the threat of apocalyptic nuclear conflict was ever present, when even just an accident at a nuclear facility or onboard a ship could have devastating consequences, Rickover came to wield influence over a generation of the best and brightest officers in the world.

Rickover sometimes told these future leaders that a person should act as if the fate of the world rested on their shoulders— paraphrasing Confucius actually—and this was something that was, at times in his career, quite nearly true. But Rickover was also just a regular human being, someone with a temper, someone with colleagues and subordinates, a spouse, a son, parents, neighbors, bills to pay, traffic to navigate. What guided him, what he spoke about repeatedly in speeches and briefings, was the importance of this idea of a sense of right and wrong, a sense of duty and honor that would guide a person through the infinite dilemmas and decisions they would find themselves in. “Life is not meaningless for the man who considers certain actions wrong simply because they are wrong, whether or not they violate the law,” he once explained. “This kind of moral code gives a person a focus, a basis on which to conduct himself.”

That kind of code is what this book is about. There will be no complicated legalism or clever witticisms. We will not explore the biological or metaphysical roots of right and wrong. While we will consider the profound moral dilemmas of life, the purpose will be to cut through them— as the human beings who lived through them had to do— not bog you down with hopeless abstractions. There will be no grand theory of the law here, nor will there be any offers of heaven or threats of hell. The aim in this book is much simpler, much more practical— following in the tradition of the ancients who saw justice as a habit or a craft, a way of living.

Because that’s what justice should be— not a noun but a verb.

Something we do, not something we get.

A form of human excellence.

A statement of purpose.

A series of actions.

In a world of so much uncertainty, in a world where so much is out of our control, where evil does exist and regularly goes unpunished, the commitment to live rightly is a redoubt in the

storm, a light in the dark.

This is what we are after, affixing justice as north on our compass, the North Star to our lives, letting it guide and direct us, through good times and bad. As it did for Harry S. Truman and Gandhi alike, Marcus Aurelius and Martin Luther King Jr., Emmeline Pankhurst and Sojourner Truth, Buddha and Jesus Christ.

When Admiral Rickover slammed down the receiver at the end of a phone call, or brought a meeting to a close, he didn't belabor his exacting expectations or give specific instructions on how he wanted something done. Instead he would leave his subordinates with something that was at once much higher level and yet also clarifyingly down to earth:

"Do what is right!"

So we might end this introduction with that same command:

Do what is right.

Do it right now.

For yourself.

For others.

For the world.

And in these pages, we'll discuss how.

PART I

THE ME
(PERSONAL)

> The virtue of a person is measured not by his outstanding efforts but by his everyday behavior.
>
> — BLAISE PASCAL

The pursuit of justice does not begin in far-flung places. It begins at home. It begins with you. It begins with the decision about *who you are going to be.* The old-fashioned values of personal integrity, of honesty, of dignity and honor. The basic behaviors in which these ideals manifest themselves: Doing what you say. Doing business the right way. Treating people well. The Stoics said that the chief task in life is to focus on what you control. Injustice and unfairness and outright cruelty may well rule the world, but it is within the power of each of us to be an exception to that rule. To be a person of *rectitude* and *dignity*. Whatever the law, whatever the culture, whatever we could get away with, we can choose to adhere to our own code— a rigorous and just code. Some might feel that all this is restrictive. We find that the opposite is true: Our code frees us, gives us meaning, and, most of all, makes a positive difference. We preach this gospel not with words but with actions— knowing that each action is like a lantern that hollows out the dark, each decision to do the right thing a statement that our peers, children, and future generation can hear.

To Stand Before Kings . . .

It was perhaps the most precarious moment in the history of the world. A beloved president lay in state. A war raged on two fronts. In Europe, the killing continued and the death camps kept firing their awful furnaces and gas chambers. In the Pacific, the long campaign to take island after island ground on, bringing closer each day a dreaded invasion that would dwarf the landing at Normandy.

A ghastly nuclear age— still shrouded in secrecy— had just begun. A racial reckoning, hundreds of years delayed, could not be avoided. The storm clouds of a cold war between great, victorious powers loomed on the horizon.

There, as millions of lives hung in the balance, as uncertain, difficult times beckoned, a man was to meet his moment. Who had the gods sent? What had destiny produced for this crucible?

A small-town Missouri farmer. A short man with glasses so thick and concave they made his eyes bulge. A failed clothing store owner who didn't graduate from college. A former senator from one of the most corrupt states in the country, who had entered politics having failed at nearly everything he'd done in his life. A vice presidential pick that the now-deceased Franklin Roosevelt had barely bothered to brief for the job.

The moment met the man: Harry S. Truman.

The shock of it soon gave way to dread, not just to the people of the United States and the armies abroad, but in Truman himself. "I don't know if you fellas ever had a load of hay fall on you," Roosevelt's successor would tell the press, "but when they told me what happened yesterday, I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me." And when Truman asked if he could do anything for the former first lady, Roosevelt's grieving widow shook her head somberly and said, "Is there anything we can do for *you*? For you're the one in trouble now."

Yet not all despaired. "Oh, I felt good," one of the most powerful and experienced men in Washington would reflect, "because I *knew* him. I knew what kind of man he was." Indeed, the people who actually knew Truman were not concerned at all, because, as a Missouri railroad foreman who'd met the future president when the boy was supporting his mother on $35 a month said, Truman was "all right from his asshole out in every direction."

And so began what we might call an incredible experiment, in which a seemingly ordinary person was thrust not just into the limelight but into a position of nearly superhuman responsibility. Could an average person succeed at such a monumental task? Could they not only keep their character intact but prove that character actually counted for something in this crazy modern world?

The answer for Harry Truman was yes. Absolutely yes.

But this experiment did not begin in Washington. Nor in 1945. It began many years earlier with the simple study of virtue, and the example of a man we have already studied in this series. "His real name was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus," Truman would later recount, "and he was one of the great ones." We don't know who introduced Truman to Marcus, but we know what Marcus introduced to Truman. "What he wrote in his *Meditations*," Truman explained of the