

A wisdom handbook

The following is the epitome of a 16th century wisdom handbook—*The Moral Philosophy of the Stoics*, by Guillaume du Vair, which itself was based on the *Handbook of Epictetus*, the 2nd century Stoic. From it you can get an idea of the sort of approach to wisdom that was followed by philosophical schools from the time of Plato, or rather, by sages from (at least) the beginning of written literature, in the time of the Sumerian Šuruppag. These principles were meant to be memorized and internalized. More than that, they are to be lived. Cognitive knowledge is good and important, but it is no more than a shadow. What counts is to live according to these precepts.

Du Vair's book was licensed to be published in 1585, but the actual date of publishing is not known. A cleric engaged in civic affairs, Du Vair was internationally influential. Writing at a time of agonizing religious wars, he wrote for the general public (his compositions were in the vernacular; scholarly works would have been composed in Latin), and articulated a standard for thinking and living that could help readers endure the calamities of the times.

In the twenty years between 1580 and 1604, four extraordinary writers contributed similar approaches to a world in the throes of a revolution in people's way of viewing reality. The European world was transitioning from a long period of religious domination of thought to what has become the modern secular period (itself now transitioning to a more holistic period). The authors were Michelle Montaigne (*Essais*); the philologist Justus Lipsius (*De Constantia; Manuductio ad Stoicam Philosophiam*), who began the philosophical movement of Neostoicism to which the other two contributed: Guillaume du Vair (whose works in this vein are, besides the present *La Philosophie Morale des Stoïques*, *La Sainte Philosophie*; and *De la Constance et Consolation ès Calamités Publiques*, composed during the siege of Paris in 1589); and Pierre Charron, whose *De la Sagesse* marked a watershed in the history of thought concerning wisdom—a watershed soon to suffer drought as Europe turned to science, technology, and economics and away from the religion that led to such horrid wars, and whose tenets seemed incompatible with the picture of the world emerging from new discoveries.

Outline of *Philosophie Morale des Stoïques*¹

All things have a goal. Humans' goal is the good. (The treatise begins, Il n'y a rien au monde qui ne tende à quelque fin.)

The good is the essence and usage of a thing according to nature.

The good and happiness of a person consists in the right use of reason. For a human, this is to live according to nature. This is virtue—a constant disposition of will to follow that which is

¹ Note: Versions used for this epitome are *De la Sainte Philosophie et Philosophie Morale des Stoïques*, ed. annotée par G. Michaut, Paris: Vrin, 1946, and *The Moral Philosophy of the Stoicks*, Englished by Thomas James, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Rudolf Kirk, 1951, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

honest and appropriate. (Le bien donc de l'homme consistera en l'usage de la droite raison,--qui est à dire en la vertu, laquelle n'est autre chose que la ferme disposition de notre volonté à suivre ce que est honnête et convenable.)

This goal is attainable. Nothing that is not in a person's control can prevent him from attaining this goal.

The things which are in our power are to approve, undertake, desire, and reject a matter—in a word, all our actions. For our will can govern actions according to reason, until they come to the place from whence our good and happiness must come.

The things which are out of our power are riches, reputation, and briefly, all that does not depend on our will.

Furthermore, the will gives us power of using well all that which happens to us from without.

To live according to nature is to act according to reason at all times, untroubled by any passions or perturbations of the mind.

Wisdom is the thing that will enable us to do this. Wisdom causes us to have an exact and true knowledge of the condition and quality of things; wisdom teaches us what is according to nature and what is to be desired and followed.

Wisdom removes all false opinions from our mind, makes our affections kind and natural, and rules all other virtues.

(Or ce qui peut le plus pour nous mettre en ce chemin et nous apprendre à avoir les mouvements de l'esprit droits et la volonté réglée par la raison, c'est la PRUDENCE, qui est, à mon avis, et le commencement et la fin de toutes les vertus. Car, nous faisant exactement et au vrai connaître la condition et qualité des choses qui s'offrent à nous, elle nous apprend ce que est selon la nature ou non, ce que nous devons suivre ou fuir. Elle nous ôte les fausses opinions qui nous troublent, nous rend nos naturelles affections; et à sa suite viennent toutes les autres vertus, desquelles elle est la mère, la nourrice et la garde tout ensemble.)

Wisdom has two properties and uses:

1. To incite us toward the good
2. To restrain us from evil

The first step toward knowing the right use of wisdom is to purge the mind of all passions which disturb it.

Passions are violent or vehement motion of the soul in the sensitive part (i.e., the part of the soul responsive to sensory input), caused by following what appears good or rejecting what appears evil.

The soul is the cause of life and source of all actions.

There are many faculties of the soul. In one instance it causes vegetation, or motion, or sense. In another it causes desire or appetite, and imagination, memory, reason, discourse.

All other faculties of the soul are ministers and couriers of the sovereign part. Their duty is to recall things past and advise concerning what is to be done. They go astray when they disquiet the higher faculties.

The four primary passions are hope, despair, fear, and anger.

The passions lead us into error by presenting as good or evil things that are not good or evil.

The good for a human consists in fashioning the will to the right use of things according to reason.

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A person's evil comes from a disordered or unskillful use of things.

This fashioning of the will lies wholly in our power, and thus attainment of our good is wholly within our power.

Du Vair follows the understanding of the soul as possessing three powers: the two lower powers: appetitive (desiring), and the irascible, and the higher, the intellective.

The concupiscible is the power by which the soul desires a sensible object that appears good to it, and the irascible is the function by which the soul seeks to obtain or avoid that which appears good or evil.

There is no greater wisdom than to bear others' folly with patience. (Il n'y a pas une plus grande sagesse ni plus utile au monde que d'endurer la folie d'autrui.)

Nature has established an order, a hierarchy of priorities and values:

- To know and obey God

- To accord with the heavenly powers (no further details given than that they are "ordained by God, for administration and government of the world")

- To be dutiful to our country, parents, children, wives, and kinfolk (in that order)

- To love and honor virtuous people

- To fulfill duties to oneself, that is, to follow right ordered reason, cultivating the body so that it is able to obey the reason.

We can do no more than undertake a matter with wisdom, pursue it with hope, and be ready to suffer the results with patience. (Nous ne sommes maîtres que de nos conseils et de nos mouvements; tout le reste dépend d'ailleurs. C'est pourquoi tout ce que nous pouvons faire est d'entreprendre avec prudence, poursuivre avec espérance et supporter ce qui arrive avec patience.)

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It is easy to see how du Vair's philosophy grew from within his historical context. Assumptions he makes could not be made today. From this we can understand that our own assumptions, which seem so obviously superior and irrefutable, will one day fade. Future generations will be unable to comprehend their reality. We live within our assumptions, unable to view them from outside, other than by analogy from such examples as the *Philosophie Moral des Stoïques*.

It is not, however, the errors or quaintness of the treatise that are of significance, but its deeper intuition. That is, the sense that there is an order in nature—not merely a physical, but a value order—and that wholeness for humans consists in following this order. That there is a goal for life, potentially attainable for all. This is the insight that powered the human pursuit of wisdom from the beginning, from "those days, those far remote days; those nights, those faraway nights; those years, those far remote years, when the wise one, who knew how to speak in elaborate words, lived in the Land, and Šuruppag gave instructions to his son. . ."

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