DRST 003: Directed Studies: Philosophy
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Nick Liu

Why I Won't Be an Investment Banker

by Nick Liu '27

Lucretius says that the universe is devoid of any intrinsic meaning, and that any value we place in things stems from the pleasure they elicit in us. My father says that I should become an investment banker like him. Are either of these two sages right? Is there no great cosmological structure to which we belong? Should I go to that "Careers in Finance" panel this weekend? Faced with these two, equally weighty questions and an unmistakable air of existential dread, I prepare to venture through Stoic philosophy. First, I elaborate on what Epictetus means in his *Discourses* 2.5 and 2.6 when he urges us to exist in a way consistent with the way the foot exists in relation to the body. Next, I show how living as a foot is congruent with the rational order of Stoic cosmology. To respond to a few doubts about what it actually means to live like a Stoic, I then discuss how rationality should properly carry over into Stoic ethics. Ultimately, I try to conclude that living as a foot means committing to the process of striving towards a fulfillment of our roles in the cosmos. Alongside this, I decide that I will stay away from investment banking for as long as I can.

Epictetus' discussion of the role of the foot in the human body seeks to show how the nature of the individual can become compatible with membership to a group or higher order. "Nature" refers to the ordained, teleological purpose that everything has in the Stoic universe. When things exist in isolation, they "go with nature" in the sense that they serve a unilateral purpose. For example, a foot that exists "according to nature" should be clean (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.5.24). Similarly, a human being can fulfill their nature by living a long life

abundant in health and wealth (*Discourses* 2.5.25). Epictetus provides us with a helpful parable to illustrate why it is advantageous to live according to one's nature. A man, instructed to visit a friend at his residence, is met with a closed and locked door.[1] The man, puzzled as to whether he should enter through the window or seek another means of reaching his friend, is inevitably frustrated. Epictetus offers a piece of advice: "If you always remember what is yours and what concerns someone else, you will never be disturbed" (2.6.6-8). Following one's nature means defining the boundary between what reasonably belongs to oneself, and what reasonably belongs to others. The locked door from the parable is a clear example of what a boundary can be—in thinking about climbing through a window, the man has shown that he is ignorant of what is his and has encroached on that which does not belong to him. When "what comes next is non-evident," as Epictetus quotes Chrysippus, it is safest to "cling" to one's own place. The idea of an individual's "nature," then, is important to the Stoics because it allows them to discover a path forward in a time of uncertainty.

Epictetus admits that the isolated nature is imperfect in two ways. Firstly, one may not always be able to acquire that which "goes with nature" (2.5.24). Secondly, what comes next is usually not "non-evident" for the true Stoic. Fortunately, we can solve both these problems after we accept that we belong to a higher order. In doing so, we can overcome both the insecurity of an isolated pursuit and the unknowingness of what our next steps are. Returning to his previous example, Epictetus explains that though a foot is clean according to nature, it will assuredly come across filth and hardship as it supports the human body (2.5.24). Accordingly, most humans will at some point encounter injury, challenge, and even death. Should we, or our feet, be bothered by these inevitabilities? The Stoic would answer no—though it is natural for us to pursue that which betters us, it is even more so to understand that we belong to something greater

[1] I have taken philosophical liberty in imagining Epictetus' "Mr. So-and-So" to be a friend.

than ourselves. A foot is really only a foot, or at least only a properly-functioning, useful foot, when it is attached to the body (2.5.26). The body, in performing the physical labor needed to maintain a human existence, will naturally lead the feet to some discomfort. In thus participating in the body, the foot's own nature to be clean becomes secondary.

Epictetus furthers that as our feet are not hermits, neither are we. We all belong to two "cities": a lesser one of political organization, which is a "small-scale imitation" of the greater one of "gods and humans," referring to the entirety of the cosmos (2.5.26). In supporting the well-being of either one of these cities (say, defending one's hometown from attack, or laying outside in the cold to gaze at the stars), it is very likely for humans to come to some harm, which would be against our individual natures. Acknowledging our belonging to something greater, however, allows us to be fine with this. As belonging has been shown to be the "what comes next" that is in fact evidence, we now understand that not only is it understandable, but natural for our individual natures to not be fulfilled. In this way, Epictetus has gotten around the problem of the isolated nature and shown that what really matters is finding our place.

For the Stoic, the more rational nature is always superior to the less rational one. "For my foot," he writes, "if it had brains, would seek to be muddied" (2.6.10). The brain, more rational than the foot, understands and embraces the fact that sacrifices must be made for a greater purpose. Similarly, the two cities to which we belong both seek higher functions in providing for the well-being of a collective. Thus, the proper management of either one of them would by nature be more rational than the courses of our individual lives.

This belief, that some natures are superior to others, and that it becomes us to follow the more rational nature, ultimately stems from the Stoic belief that the universe is a united, rational animal. Cicero makes at least two compelling arguments for why this is the case in Book II of his

On the Nature of the Gods, one about the nature of production and another on the ordered beauty of the universe. Firstly, he discusses how our own rational existences are proof of the universe's rationality. Quoting from Zeno, he presents the first principle that "nothing which lacks life and reason can produce from itself something which is alive and rational" (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.22). This principle, challenged as it can be, is foundational to Cicero's belief. As we have been created from the universe, and we both exist and can formulate thought (or so we hope), it is evident that the universe has produced something both alive and rational. Thus, it is entirely impossible for the cosmos to also not be this way. Secondly, Cicero writes that simply gazing upon the elegance of the heavenly realm is enough proof of rationality. He writes:

> *[There is] the regularity of the motions and revolutions of the heaven and the distinctive and varied, yet orderly beauty of the sun, moon, and all the stars; just looking at them indicates clearly enough that these things are not the result of chance.*
>
> (*On the Nature of the Gods* 2.15)

The position and movement of the stars, planets, and other bodies are predictable enough to the point that they can be calculated with mathematical formulae. Today, we understand this to be the product of gravity and other physical forces. To Cicero, predictable order is symptomatic of intelligent design, proof that "there is someone who is in charge and runs things" (2.15). His second argument can also be read as testament to a sense of enthrallment that the universe evokes in us. Just looking is enough for Cicero; it is like falling in love. Is the universe not like this? Is gazing upwards and reveling in the splendor of it all not exactly as he describes? His delicate prose is the ultimate reminder that Stoics are not those heartless brutes that many take them as. Rather, he shows here that the human condition could be bounded in that we are only able to describe intellectual wonder with the limited vocabulary of an intimate, personal

relationship. He finds in the cosmos—as we all apt to when looking upon something so faultless and alluring—an undeniable sense of personality. It is enough to move one to tears.[2]

The structure of this universe provides the greater city in which Epictetus urges us to participate in his *Discourses*. Cicero is clear about how the order of the universe is not the "result of chance," but that of intended creation. He introduces the concept of the Stoic gods, divine beings as infinitely rational as they are providential. With a higher faculty for deliberation and reason, they serve as the universe's rulers and magistrates, cherishing and taking care of humankind in whatever small part (2.79-80). In doing so, they are "bound to each other by a kind of political affinity and society," fulfilling the needs of their heavenly city (2.78).

As the foot plays a crucial role to the body, so do we have a role to play in this cosmological city. Cicero writes:

> *A human being himself was born for the sake of contemplating and imitating the cosmos—he is not at all perfect, but he is a certain small portion of what is perfect.*
>
> (2.37)

Human nature—that individual, isolated pursuit that Epictetus had previously outlined—is deeply flawed. Still, we hold integral parts of the universe within ourselves: rationality, and also virtue. There is a goodness in each of us, one that we are mandated to use in turning our intellects towards the heavens (2.39). Our role in the universe is a corrective one: in aspiring towards a comprehension of that greater than ourselves, we both fulfill a higher function and discover the grand unity to which we belong.

How, then, should we act? With our established picture of a perfectly-ordered cosmology, deriving Stoic ethics from a first principle of rationality may not be a very enjoyable process.

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[2] Manly, Stoic tears, of course. I think I am really a Stoic in the sense that some Stoics were probably kicked out of the original academy.

The Stoic requirement that one should always strive for a rational existence may be at a disadvantage, for two reasons. Firstly, a practice of constant striving could face individuals with an inescapable sense of inadequacy. After all, an ethical maxim that aligns human behavior with the rigidity of the universe certainly feels demanding. Given that the Epicureans search for a pleasant, stable happiness and that the Skeptics have reconciled themselves with living by instinct and appearances, the encouragement a Stoic faces to "live like the universe lives" could seem unnecessarily high mark to aim for. Faced with the vastness of the cosmos, with the compelling harmony of celestial bodies in motion—how could we ever measure up? Secondly, a practice aimed solely towards reason could feel unfulfilling. Hasn't contemporary psychology already shown that the human mind only seeks to be rational part of the time, if at all? And aren't we told that *emotion*—that delicate, wonderful, ethereal spark in us all—is what gives existence color, and makes life worth living? Rationality, ordered as it may be, is *boring*. Nor can it fully speak to the entirety of the human condition, emotional creatures that we are. Even if we can see the order that thinkers like Epictetus and Cicero have placed into the world, why should we live by a standard that we neither can nor want to obtain?

I answer this question by discussing in brief two tenets of Stoic ethics: belonging to the "great commonwealth," as Seneca discusses in *On the Private Life*, and the full embodiment of interpersonal roles, as detailed in Epictetus' *Discourses* 2.10.

Striking a powerful resonance with Epictetus' cities, Seneca tells us in his work that there are two commonwealths to which we belong. One is the universal order of the cosmos, which is "great and truly common to all," and the other is the political commonwealth, which we are "enrolled [in] by accident of birth" (Seneca, *On the Private Life* 4.1). As we do not choose what our national affiliations are, but instead they are chosen for us at birth, affiliation with the latter

commonwealth is less important. Instead, it becomes us to do all we can to belong to the former. Seneca's picture of how this belonging can be achieved is also strikingly similar to Epictetus' picture of belonging to a rational universe. We can fulfill our obligation to the greater commonwealth by:

> *enquiring what virtue is, whether it is one or many, whether nature or art makes men good; whether this receptacle of earth and sea and of things attached to earth and sea is one…What service to God is there in this contemplation? That the greatness of his work be not without witness.*
>
> (*On the Private Life* 4.2)

Like Cicero, Seneca calls upon us to witness that which we love. Studying the universe and perceiving it with our capacity for rational intellect is far superior to participation in the political sphere because it speaks to a higher order. In remembering to belong to a more rational nature, a good Stoic would need to see a lower significance in the occupations of the lesser commonwealth.

While Seneca implores us to consider the universe, Epictetus says: "Consider who you are" (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.10.1). Aside from remembering that we are human beings, and as such belong to the order of the universe, we also need to remember that we belong to different roles. Each of us are (at some point, at least) children, parents, siblings, friends, colleagues, and comrades. In each of these roles, we need to embody rationality by maintaining a full view of what the role entails. Being a student, for example, is existentially predicated on the fact that we will sometimes succeed and sometimes fail in our intellectual pursuit. Epictetus' foot reappears here; fulfilling a role can neither be called "pleasurable" or "harmful," rather, it is demonstrating a responsibility for the entire experience that is important. He writes:

> *If you are a* city councilor*, be aware that you are a city councilor. If a* young man*, be aware that you are young. If an* old man*, that you are old. If a* father*, that you are a father.*
>
> (*Discourses* 2.10.10)

To appropriately "be aware" of these roles, we need to hold on to the particular expectations and capacities of the role. A father, as Epictetus would argue, fails to be aware of this particular role when he disciplines his children without also providing for them in body, mind, and spirit. Epictetus asks us all:

> *Do you think it is nothing if you lose your modest demeanor, your dignity, and your gentleness?*
>
> (2.10.15)

As Seneca has shown that belonging to the universe requires us to take on an intellectual burden, Epictetus shows that it is an existential burden that we uphold when proving our belonging to ourselves and to each other.

Fortunately, the Stoic commandment for *awareness* is not as heavy as it seems. After all, our myriad responsibilities speak mainly to our capabilities. Rationality is not as much about fixing a problem as it is about recognizing the need for a solution. We are rational not to the extent that we are perfect fathers, brothers, and students, but to the extent that we are able to acknowledge that we should strive towards such an existence. Similarly, nothing is painful to the rational mind when it is directed towards the universe. We know that we'll never reach the stars, and need to calm ourselves to the incompleteness of the process. It is, I think, a feeling similar to spending a lazy weekend afternoon filling in one of those adult coloring books. There is an impossible intricacy to the observed world; impossibility, however, does not entail terror to the

Stoic. Nor does it serve as a reminder of inadequacy or incompetence. The very fact that we are able to recognize this infinitude—itself a visualization of our very nature—is why we are alive. It is a commitment to the process, and not the completion of an impossible goal, that confirms the purpose of our creation.

The qualm about the fulfillment of emotion is answered bivalently. Firstly, Seneca shows that we can call the color of emotion *curiosity*. Cicero's ponderings of divinity, in demonstrating a sort of investigative wonder, have already done much to show this. Is seeking for answers, for meaning, for an apprehension of order in the cosmos not at its core an emotional process to the Stoic? Secondly, Epictetus reveals that rationality simply means subduing that which does not belong to us. Indeed, emotion—to the degree that it means something similar to kindness, or empathy, or compassionate understanding—is key to the vast majority of roles we fulfill. Is a mother not to be aware that she cherishes her children? Is the author not to remember that there should be color and lively breath in the work he crafts? Embarking on as deep a dive into our own selves as the Stoics have undertaken does not mean forging ourselves into something which we are not. Rather, self-investigation can only show us who we are, in all our fullness and wonderment.

At the end, Epictetus' picture of the foot is like this: only by recognizing that to which we belong can we discover a self that we should strive to become. In studying the universe, we hope to arrive at the realization, improbable as it may be, that we are doing alright in the present moment. After all, we share a city with the stars, and with gods that love us. Compared to this, investment banking reemerges as trivial in comparison. Firmly an occupation of Seneca's lower commonwealth, is a role that the good Stoic would gladly forsake.