5. Roman Stoicism

William Haines, July 24, 2026

"At Rome," writes Martha Nussbaum, "Stoicism is represented by Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Hierocles."[1] The latter three wrote in Greek. The lives of these five spanned the first two centuries AD, when Stoicism was perhaps the leading school of moral philosophy in the West. Much of their work survives, but most has been lost (along with virtually all the work of the much earlier Greek founders of the school). Cicero, of the previous century, is sometimes called a Stoic, though he may better be seen as eclectic.

The age of empire meant less authority for small community deliberation. Though many cities retained important kinds of autonomy, much was out of their control. The vision of a town as *a society* receded, and creative redesign of the empire was not accessible. Perhaps largely for these reasons, there was less profound practical thinking about institutional design, about what roles and relations there should be. There was less creative thinking about what kinds of civic institutional structure work for or against virtue, as there was less opportunity to experiment. Roman Stoics tended to focus instead on techniques and theories of cultivating *oneself*.[2] And like the early Confucians, they focused more on civic than familial moral aspiration. Like Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics tried to identify a person's good with a person's goodness. And as suited their

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[1] Nussbaum 1994, p. 515. Elizabeth Gloyn argues that for Seneca, the family "serves as a model of the wider patterns in which Seneca grounds his work," and "serves a central role in an individual's moral development – both the family as conventionally understood, and the wider conceptual family which Stoicism constructs" (Gloyn 2017, p. 1).

[2] Seneca's Letter 94, to Lucilius, presents and refutes a lengthy argument by Antiochus that the philosopher should focus on the most general theory rather than offering pithy sayings and precepts for specific kinds of case.

times, their ideas tended to focus more than yours and mine may do on the project of coping psychologically with personal disaster, such as the loss of loved ones. So some of their advice on equanimity can sound a little cold.

The Stoics' main term for their conception of the path of moral progress and the natural and correct form of appropriate relating was *oikeiōsis* (οἰκείωσις). The term might almost be translated as "familying," or as "selfing." It derives from the noun *oikos* (or the rough synonym Aristotle preferred, *oikia*[3]), which we have already met. The adjective form of the short noun is *oikeios* (οἰκεῖος), sometimes translated as *akin (to)* and sometimes as *proper (to). Oikeiōsis* means regarding and treating something as *oikeios* to oneself, or coming to do so. Ultimately, nothing human is alien to me. This cluster of cognate terms might be compared with the Chinese *qīn* 親.

Oikeiōsis was seen as profoundly natural. Plutarch complained of the early Greek Stoic Chrysippus' emphasis on *oikeiōsis*:

> Why then again for heaven's sake in every book on physics and ethics does he weary us to death in writing that we "have an appropriate disposition" to ourselves as soon as we are born, and to our parts and our offspring? In his *On Justice* Book I he says that even the beasts "have an appropriate disposition" to their offspring in harmony with their needs, except for fish, since their spawn is nurtured through itself.[4]

What our English translator here renders as "have an appropriate disposition" is the Greek verb *oikeiousthai* (οἰκειοῦσθαι), the verb form of *oikeiōsis*. Some accounts of the Stoic term *oikeiōsis* by leading modern interpreters may be helpful.[5]

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3 See my Sketch 4, "Aristotle," forthcoming.

4 Long & Sedley 1987, p. 348, translation slightly modified.

5 Other notable discussions include White 1979, Striker 1983, and Klein 2015.

Although the word *oikeiosis* is difficult to translate adequately, it is not hard to formulate the core thesis of the Stoic theory. They held that man is not motivated solely by self-interest, but has a natural impulse to *identify* with other humans, perceiving them as related to himself, and being concerned for them on that account.[6]

The word *oikeiosis* is a nominal form of the verb *oikeiousthai*, 'to make familiar, make one's own, introduce'. The verb in turn derives from an adjective *oikeios*, which often has the sense of 'one's own, properly belonging to someone'. The verb's overtones of affection are quite strong, and it is often used of family members and intimate friends. *Oikeiosis* is a difficult term even to translate; I will use 'affiliation', though most attempts to capture its sense have been unsatisfactory.[7]

Zeno etymologised the key notion of *kathekon*, appropriate behaviour, as what 'proceeds in accordance with' the nature of humans or animals or plants or whatever …. To spell out the theory: the Stoics proposed that humans are naturally programmed by what they called *oikeiosis*, 'affinity',

> 1. both for behaving in ways that promote, for example, their own health, wealth, or reputation, and for acquiring the qualities required to do that appropriately – notably moderation (the virtue concerned with the stable condition of their impulses) and courage (the virtue concerned with acts of endurance);
> 2. for identifying with the interests of, for example, one's parents, friends, and country, and so for justice (the virtue concerned with weighing up varying interests as they deserve); and so in general
> 3. for 'discovering what is appropriate' – the job of *phronesis*, wisdom or understanding.[8]

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6 Schofield 1999, p. 761. (Against Schofield's remark, I submit that caring for someone on account of identifying with her is not exactly a departure from the erroneous idea that we are fundamentally concerned only for ourselves.)

7 Inwood & Donini 1999, p. 677.

8 Schofield 2003, p. 242f.

That is to say, the Stoics saw moral motivation as being rooted in one's natural relation to oneself and to one's closest kin. We see this vision in another way in Cicero's *De Finibus*, in which the character Cato represents the Stoics. Cato says,

> It is important to understand that nature creates in parents an affection for their children; and parental affection is the germ of that social community of the human race to which we afterwards attain. … Even in the lower animals nature's operation can be clearly discerned; when we observe the labour that they spend on bearing and rearing their young, we seem to be listening to the actual voice of nature. Hence as it is manifest that it is natural for us to shrink from pain, so it is clear that we derive from nature herself the impulse to love those to whom we have given birth. From this impulse is developed the sense of mutual attraction which unites human being as such …. The mere fact of their common humanity requires that one man should feel another man to be akin to him.[9]

Incidentally, Cicero himself held a related view, as we may read in an often-quoted passage of his *De Officiis* (On Duties), elaborating Aristotle's natural radial extension view:

> For since it is by nature common to all animals that they have a drive to procreate, the first fellowship [*societas*] exists within marriage itself, and the next with one's children. Then, there is the one house in which everything is shared. Indeed that is the principle [*principium*] of a city and the seed-bed [*seminarium*], as it were, of a political community. Next there follow bonds between brothers, and then between first cousins and second cousins, who cannot be contained in one house and go out to other houses, as if to colonies. Finally there follow marriages and those connections of marriage from which even more relations arise. In such propagation and increase political communities have their origin. Moreover, the bonding of

[9] Cicero 2014, pp. 281, 283.

> blood holds men together by goodwill and by love, for it is a great thing to have the same ancestral memorials, to practice the same religious rites, and to share common ancestral tombs.[10]

Like Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics emphasized relational roles. When the third-century historian of philosophy Diogenes Laertius briefly sketches Stoicism and in particular the Stoic vision of the "proper functions" dictated by reason, the examples of proper functions he gives are "honoring parents, brothers and country, spending time with friends."[11] And when Epictetus classifies the training of the good man into three branches: (1) desires and aversions, (2) actions and avoidances, (3) reason and proper care in thought, his whole brief overview of (2) is the following:

> The second has to do with proper function [*to kathekon*; alt. trans. *the appropriate*]; for I ought not to be impassive like a statue, but maintain my natural and acquired relationships, as a religious man, a son, a brother, a father, and a citizen.[12]

Epictetus, aiming at everyday practical guidance, writes in another place,

> How is it proper to discover proper functions from titles? Consider who you are: in the first place, a human being, that is, someone who has nothing more authoritative than moral purpose, but subordinates everything else to this and keeps it free from slavery and subordination …. Furthermore, you are a citizen of the world and a part of it, not one of the underlings but one of the foremost constituents. For you are capable of attending to the divine government and of calculating its consequences. What then is a citizen's profession? To regard nothing as of private interest, to deliberate about nothing as though one were cut off [i.e. from the

[10] Cicero 1991, i:54, 23.
[11] Long & Sedley 1987, 59E
[12] Long & Sedley 1987, 56C

> whole] … Next keep in mind that you are a son … next know that you are also a brother … next if you are a town councilor, remember that you are a councilor; if young, that you are young, if old, that you are old; if a father, that you are a father. For each of these titles, when rationally considered, always suggests the actions appropriate to it.[13]

On the one hand, Stoic ethics resembled early Confucianism in not giving more philosophical attention to family relations than to other duties and aspirations. On the other hand, some leading Stoics did give more attention to family. Christopher Gill discusses Epictetus' teacher Musonius (c. 30-100):

> In the teachings of Musonius Rufus, a striking feature (and one of special interest to modern readers) is the high valuation he places on marriage and family life. For instance, he presents women as equally capable of virtue (and of philosophy) as men; he also criticises double standards about male and female sexual activity outside marriage. He presents marriage as a context for 'shared life' and mutual concern as well as child-rearing, and claims that marriage and child-rearing are compatible with doing philosophy. He also advises people to have large families rather than to dispose of unwanted children in infancy. …
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> These emphases, taken in isolation, might seem unorthodox and to reflect Musonius' personal views. But, in fact, the view of women as equally capable of virtue and the idea of marriage as a context for fully shared life have parallels in much earlier Stoic thinking. Musonius' views on the value of women and family life have roots in such central Stoic ideas as that 'all human beings have the starting points of virtue' and that the parent-child relationship is a central paradigm of human sociability and of the desire to express virtue in action.[14]

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13 Long & Sedley 1987, 59Q

14 Gill 2003, p. 46.

Gill is of course right to speak of the recognition that women's abilities are equal to men's as an "instance" of high valuation of family life. The premise that a man's wife is rather a fellow than a servant elevates the moral importance for him of his relationship with her, making it possible to hold that the heterosexual household nuclear family involves intimate *fellowship* among adults, at least if it is done right. That point in turn is necessary to the idea that *family* life in the focal sense is a model for good social life generally, consistent with a conception of social life stressing mutual respect and fellowship. (Conversely, again, in real life the premise of gender equality is profoundly at odds with the vision of society as composed of distinct exogamous descent groups; and profoundly at odds with the idea that certain chain of one's progenitors are distinctively one's ancestors.)

Unfortunately, political interest weighed heavily on Roman thought about the family. Peter Brown comments on a difference between the period of the Stoics considered here and the period just after:

> The Roman view of marriage, as a free consensus of man and wife, has been acclaimed … By the beginning of the late antique period, however, the vast weight of Empire had ensured that the Roman ideal of marital concord had taken on a crystalline hardness: the married couple were presented less as a pair of equal lovers than as a reassuring microcosm of the social order.[15]

Hierocles[16] laid out a detailed road-map for moral self-cultivation, which scholars generally regard as his account of the path of *oikeiōsis*, though he does not there use the term.[17] After laying out a role ethic for the household family, he writes:

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15 Brown 1988, p. 16f.

16 For a discussion of Hierocles in relation to Chinese thought, Yu 2017. I am grateful to Yu Jiangxia for a copy of her paper.

17 Writing explicitly of *oikeiosis* elsewhere, Hierocles says,

> The appropriate disposition relative to oneself is benevolence, while that to one's kindred is affection … Just as our appropriate disposition relative

It goes along with what has been said concerning behavior toward parents and brothers and wife and children, to add also a discussion of relatives, which feels more or less like those others and for this very reason can be expounded concisely. For each of us, most generally, is circumscribed as though by many circles, some smaller, some larger, some surrounding others, some surrounded, according to their different and unequal relations to one another.

The first and closest circle is that which each person draws around his own mind, as the center: in this circle is enclosed the body and whatever is employed for the sake of the body. For this circle is the shortest and all but touches its own center. The second after this one, standing further away from the center and enclosing the first, is that within which our parents, siblings, wife, and children are ranged. Third, after these, is that in which there are uncles and aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers, the children of one's siblings, and also cousins. After this comes the one that embraces all other relatives. Next upon this is the circle of the members of one's deme, then that of the members of one's tribe, next that of one's fellow citizens, and so, finally, that of those who border one's city and that of people of like ethnicity. The furthest out and largest one, which surrounds all the circles, is that of the entire race of human beings.

Once these have been thought through, accordingly, it is possible, starting with the most stretched-out one, to draw the circles—concerning the behavior that is due to each group—together in a way, as though toward the center, and with an effort to keep transferring items out of the containing circles into the contained. For example, in respect to love of one's family it is possible to [*lacuna*] parents and siblings [*lacuna*] and

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to our children is affection [literally: it is according to affection that we do *oikeiosis* toward our children], and, to external property, choice, so an animal's appropriate disposition relative to itself is <self-preservation> and, to things which contribute to the needs of its constitution, selection … We are an animal, but a gregarious one which needs someone else as well. For this reason too we live in [*oikoumen*] cities; for there is no human being who is not part of a city. Secondly, we make friendships easily. … 57D

> therefore, in the same proportion, among one's relatives, <to treat> the more elderly men and women as grandparents or uncles and aunts, those of the same age as cousins, and the younger ones as children of one's cousins.[18]

To say that we ought to move people from the outer toward the inner circles is precisely to say that we should extend our ways of relating. It is to invoke

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[18] Ramelli 2009, p. 91. To my knowledge it was in 1947 that the image of concentric circles or ripples began to be associated with traditional Chinese culture or thought, when Fei Xiaotong used the image to make the point that the Chinese outlook does not (while the Western does) demarcate a specific community such as the nuclear family as being "the family" in the primary sense, a cohesive community that can join with other cohesive communities to form larger communities. Rather, he said, the only or primary Chinese image is that any one person is more or less closely related to indefinitely many people. The *movement* of ripples is no part of Fei's idea; think rather of a snapshot of the ripples from many pebbles cast into a pond at once, showing many sets of concentric circles, each circle defined by a sole individual and a distance. I cannot speak to whether this is an accurate picture of the Chinese view of kinship, but it would seem to argue strongly against the idea of an analogy between kinship structures and political structures. Fei's main point was that China did *not* conceive kinship structures as nested groups, analogous to feudal territories or to the nested series town/county/province/nation/empire or to patrilineal descent groups. The suggestion of Fei's imagery is that Chinese kinship is a web of separate beards of individuals, not a common or public organization, and not a matter of groups or communities. E.g. Fei 1992, p. 62f. I suspect Fei's individualistic image is less apt for early China than for the modern West, which associates the image of concentric circles with moral growth. In the mid-19th Century classic *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, the utilitarian W.E.H. Lecky wrote,

> The question of morals must always be a question of proportion or of degree. At one time the benevolent affections embrace merely the family, soon the circle expanding includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity, and finally, its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the animal world. In each of these stages a standard is formed, different from that of the preceding stage, but in each case the same tendency is recognised as virtue. (Lecky 1921, p. 49)

Part of this passage is the epigraph for the utilitarian Peter Singer's book *The Expanding Circle: Ethics & Sociobiology* (Singer 1981).

ordinary or initially natural relating to the people at distance X as a model for *good* relating to the people at distance X+1 and for *very good* relating to X+2—while adding that excellence toward X+n should not be pursued at the cost of excellence toward X, pushing our intimates away. Hence our relating outside the family *should* be modeled on our family relating, and good relating outside the family *is* modeled on our family relating.

Several Western chains we encountered above **begin or end** in the family: Aristotle's analytical chain *city, households, household dyads;* and his origins chain *couple, household*, *village*, *city;* and Cicero's chain that runs from the *married couple* through the nuclear family and then the extended family all the way to *political community*. And yet we may notice that Hierocles' innermost circle is not a family circle; nor is his outermost.

From this observation about Hierocles we might infer that Hierocles' picture does *not* suggest that the family is in any sense the *ultimate* model, the ultimate inspiration for order. Family is not fundamental, it is intermediate.

Similarly, family does not appear at either end of any of the moral-progress chains in *Mencius* 4A5 and 4A12, *Zhongyong* 20 and 22, and *Daxue* 2.[19] So if we decide that family is not fundamental for Hierocles because it does not appear at either terminus of his series, the same inference would apply also to those Chinese chains.

But perhaps the fact that family is at neither end of Hierocles' series does not show that family is in no way fundamental for him. Perhaps both ends of Hierocles' long series are, as it were, extrapolations of the family series in its middle range, or of the long kinship series constituting almost the whole story; as we grasp first and best what is at arm's length, neither very near nor very far. Thus although Hierocles did not see family as the ultimate starting-point of

[19] Something familial is half of the start of Youzi's implicit chain (1) filial piety and elder-respect, (2) enthusiastic service to superiors, (3) support for overall social order at *Analects* 1.2. But the other half of that start would seem to be quite pointedly non-familial, as in Confucius' remarks at *Analects* 1.6 and 13.20 and a long subsequent thread in early thought, as I argue in Haines 2026.

development, nor as the ultimate aim or farthest reach of concern, still his chain suggests that for him family may have been the inspiration for the circles view, and so may have been first in the order of philosophical discovery.[20]

Indeed Hierocles' general account of the circles, quoted above, appears in the *middle* of his series of detailed accounts of the proper relations for each of the circles.

We can get a sense of Hierocles' vision of duties to immediate family from some of his remarks regarding parents,

> whom one would not err in calling as it were second and terrestrial gods, and indeed because of their nearness, if it is lawful to say so, even more to be honored than the gods. It is necessary to posit first, as the only measure of gratitude toward them, a continual and unremitting eagerness to repay their benefaction, for even if we do very many things in their behalf, they will always prove too little. But nevertheless, there is the risk that even these will turn out to be their acts, since they created us who do these things.
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> … They are also our creditors for the most valuable things and ask in return only for those things, the return of which is again a benefaction for us. For what profit for a child is so great as piety and gratitude toward his parents?[21]

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[20] The above reply on Hierocles' behalf is not available to any of the cited Chinese chains. For none of them includes a family series, or even a kinship series. Whereas Hierocles gives at least three consecutive circles to family (and six or eight to kin broadly understood), each of the Chinese chains assigns just *one* link to kin—one out of about five links on average. Thus in these Chinese chains, the idea of a progressive series—or set of concentric circles, to use the longstanding Western image—is not discernibly associated with kinship relations. The composition of none of these Chinese chains points to family or kinship as its source of inspiration or philosophical focus. Of course that fact does not necessarily imply anything about the rest of Confucianism or Chinese culture.

[21] Ramelli 2009, p. 83.

There follows much detail on how we should care for our parents' bodily, social, and spiritual welfare; and reprove them (as especially an adept may have grounds to do) only in the gentlest of ways. In the remarks about parents quoted above one may get a sense of the analogy Hierocles saw between (a) his idea of relating to people as though they were in a *more* central circle than they are, and (b) the idea of aiming to treat others as ourselves, i.e. as though they were in our innermost circle. He remarks in the section on siblings:

> For, for pretty much every role, this argument is sound: that the treatment of anyone is clear from supposing that one is oneself that person and that that person is oneself. For, in fact, a person would treat a slave well, if he considered how he would think the other should behave toward himself, if the other were the master and he himself the slave. And the argument is similar for parents in respect to children and children in respect to parents and, in a word, for all in respect to all.[22]

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[22] Ramelli 2009, p. 87.

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