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Stoicism and Food

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Synonyms

[Abstaining from animal food](#); [Roman Stoics](#); [Stoics and food](#); [Vegetarianism](#)

Introduction

The ancient Stoics believed that virtue is the only true good and as such both necessary and sufficient for happiness. Accordingly, they classified food as among the things that are neither good nor bad but indifferent. These indifferents included health, illness, wealth, poverty, good and bad reputation, life, death, pleasure, and pain. How one deals with having or lacking these things reflects one's virtue or vice and thus determines one's happiness or misery. So, while the Stoics held that food in itself contributes nothing to a person's happiness, how one obtains, prepares, and serves it, and both what and how one eats, all reveal a person's character as good or bad. Thus, understanding the purpose of food, the necessity of frugality, and the virtue of temperance are all important in Stoicism.

Stoicism was the most important and influential school of Hellenistic philosophy. It became the foremost philosophy among the educated elite in Greece and Rome. Stoicism exerted a profound influence on Christianity and a pervasive impact on the history of western philosophy and culture through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and up to modern times. The

history of the ancient Stoa is typically divided into the early (Zeno through Antipater), middle (Panaetius and Posidonius), and late (Roman) periods. Since the vast bulk of the surviving texts about Stoicism come from the late period, the Roman Stoics' views about food will dominate here.

The Early Stoics

Around 301 BCE, after being stranded by shipwreck, Zeno of Citium, a merchant from the isle of Cyprus, began philosophizing in the Painted Colonnade (*Stoa*) of the great piazza of ancient Athens. The members of the school he founded were called Stoics. To help illustrate the art of living described by this philosophy, the early Stoics developed a model of the perfect human being called the wise man or sage. The sage represented a theoretical ideal which aspiring Stoics could strive to approach. One of the few surviving sources on the early Stoics, Diogenes Laertius (D.L.), reports that the Stoics attributed many perfections to the sage. They said the sage will never form mere opinions, will never assent to anything false, is infallible, does all things well, and does no harm to others or to himself. D.L. adds that the Stoics say that the sage "will even turn cannibal under stress of circumstances" (Laertius 1925, vii. 121). Such circumstances could perhaps have been during a siege, for example, when starvation would be the only alternative to anthropophagy. The idea seems to be that the sage would infallibly recognize those (rare) circumstances in which eating human flesh would be wise. Thus, the early Stoics evidently believed that cannibalism is not absolutely prohibited for the wise.

Chrysippus, the third head of the Stoa, supposedly reasoned that since the body is of as little importance to us as our nails or hair, it requires minimal attention, and so we should use the simplest method to bury our parents when they die. If human flesh is useful as food, he argued, then people should make use of it. Our amputated limbs should not be buried or discarded but rather eaten so that they will

give being to our other parts (Avramescu 2003). If a motive implicit in Chrysippus' view of anthropophagy is to conserve edible food and avoid waste, then he shares the value of frugality with the Roman Stoics.

The Stoics of the Roman Empire

Food and banquets were highly significant in Roman culture, religion, literature, and law. Roman sumptuary laws regulated and reinforced social hierarchies and moral norms by restricting food, clothing, and luxury expenditures, often according to a person's social rank. Accordingly, the Roman Stoics praised frugality, simplicity, self-control, and strategic abstinence, while condemning indulgence and worries about either eating or starving.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BCE to 65 CE)

The philosopher, statesman, orator, tragedian, and satirist Seneca the Younger was the leading intellectual of Rome in the mid-first century CE. Born to a wealthy family in Cordoba, Spain, he pursued a career in politics and law in Rome. In 41 CE, emperor Claudius charged Seneca with committing adultery with Claudius' niece and banished him to the island of Corsica. After Claudius was murdered in 54 CE, Seneca and his friends grew powerful. He became tutor and then adviser to the emperor Nero. In 65 CE, his enemies accused him of being an accomplice in the conspiracy of Piso to murder Nero. Ordered to commit suicide, Seneca met death with courage and calm. His vast wealth colored his perspective on food.

Seneca is clear that the purpose of food is to relieve, not arouse, hunger (Seneca 2015, 95.15–18). He argues that a human being's frontal part is virtue itself, whereas the unserviceable and unstable flesh attached to it is a mere repository for food (Seneca 2015, 92.10). Seneca believes that virtue calls for limiting our wants to our basic needs. Our needs are established by nature, and nature desires nothing except a meal. Hunger, he infers, is not ambitious. Hunger is satisfied to stop, and it does not much care what

makes it stop. Once hunger is stopped, only the torments of a wretched self-indulgence look for ways to stimulate hunger after it is sated. Thus, only the vice of self-indulgence drives a person to keep stuffing his filled stomach (Seneca 2015, 119.13–14).

By comparing the size of human beings to those of larger animals, Seneca reasons that we can and should feed ourselves more easily than they do. "Has nature given us such an insatiable maw that although the bodies we are given are of modest size, we yet surpass the largest, most ravenous eaters of the animal world? That is not the case, for how small are our natural requirements! It takes only a little to satisfy nature's demands. It is not bodily hunger that runs up the bill but ambition. Therefore let us regard those who, as Sallust says, 'heed the belly' as belonging to the race of animals rather than of humans" (Seneca 2015, 60.3–4). Ambition causes vicious eating, and to eat viciously is to degenerate from a human being into a beast. Thus, Seneca advises indulging the body only to the extent that suffices for health. One must deal sternly with one's body, lest it fail to obey one's mind. "Let food be for appeasing hunger, drink for satisfying thirst" (Seneca 2015, 8.5).

Food is more welcome to one who is hungry (Seneca 2015, 78.22). Thus, it is wise to know when to stop eating and drinking, as nonhuman animals do (Seneca 2015, 59.13). We ought to eat moderately (Seneca 2015, 114.26–27), not greedily (Seneca 2015, 94.22). Seneca believes that meals ought to be eaten during the customary times of the day (Seneca 2015, 122.9–10) and in the company of others. He recommends reflecting carefully beforehand with whom you are to eat and drink, rather than what you are to eat and drink, for feeding without a friend is the life of a lion or a wolf (Seneca 2015, 19.10).

Seneca notes that luxurious eating causes many complex, manifold diseases and disorders. He criticizes gourmandizing and fancy foods like mushrooms, delicately prepared oysters, mussels, sea urchins, garum (fermented fish sauce), and filleted, deboned mullets (Seneca 2015, 95.25–29). Seneca reports that he abstains from

eating oysters and mushrooms because “These are not food; they are only tidbits meant to entice those who are full to eat some more (which is what the glutton wants, to stuff himself beyond capacity), for they go down easily, and come back up easily too” (Seneca 2015, 108.15).

The most shameful scourge that assails fortunes is the kitchen (Seneca 1989, *Ben.* 1.10.2). Seneca deplores spending lots of money on delicacies. He tells the story of two men bidding against each other to buy a 4½ lb mullet. The winner paid the extravagant sum of 5000 sesterces for the fish (Seneca 2015, 95.42). Even worse, the emperor Gaius Caesar demonstrated supreme vice combined with supreme power when he dined one day at the astronomical cost of ten million sesterces (Seneca 2014, *Helv.* 10.4). “How wretched are the people whose appetite is stimulated only by costly foods! But what makes them costly is not their exquisite flavor or some pleasant sensation in the throat but their rarity and the difficulty of obtaining them. Otherwise, if these people would willingly return to sanity, what need of so many professional skills that serve the belly? What need of imports, or of devastating forests, or of scourging the sea? All about us lie the foods which nature has made available in every place; but these people pass them by as if blind, and they roam through every country, they cross the seas, and though they could allay their hunger at a trifling cost, they excite it at great expense” (Seneca 2014, *Helv.* 10.5). Exotic seafoods and mushrooms require great time, effort, and resources to obtain. Garum requires much time, labor, and resources to produce and import. So, Seneca condemns all such foods as decadent luxuries.

In contrast, he praises Gaius Fabricius Luscinus for happily dining on those very roots and grasses he picked clearing his fields. “Would he have been happier if he had crammed into his belly fish from distant shores, and exotic birds? If he had roused his slow and sickened stomach with shellfish from the upper and lower [Adriatic and Tyrrhenian] seas? If he had arrayed a huge pile of fruits around highly sought-after beasts caught at great loss of hunters’ lives?” (Seneca 2014, *Prov.* 3.6). Importing foods from afar is entirely

unnecessary, and hunting dangerous animals is reckless because locally grown crops are readily available. Thus, only wasteful, dissipated fools demand exotic, imported foods.

Seneca believes that the needs of the body greatly outnumber the needs of the mind. “For the body needs many things in order to thrive, but the mind grows by itself, feeds itself, trains itself. Athletes require a great deal of food and drink, much oil, and lengthy exercises; but virtue will be yours without any supplies or expenses. Anything that can make you a good person is already in your possession” (Seneca 2015, 80.3). The Stoics highly valued self-sufficiency. Seneca commends the mind’s pursuit of virtue because it costs no money and requires no equipment, whereas to build an athletic body requires much food, drink, and time-consuming exercises. He thinks that bodybuilding and the heavy diet that goes with it don’t befit an educated man, because a brawny, bulky body burdens the mind and makes it less agile (Seneca 2015, 15.2–3). Instead, he instructs his friend to set himself a period of days in which he will be content with very small amounts of food, and the cheapest kinds, in order to dispel his fear of frugality (Seneca 2015, 18.5). Seneca contends that fearless, frugal eating makes you a better person than a muscular physique does.

Seneca writes: “I like food that is neither prepared nor watched by troops of servants, not something ordered many days ahead and proffered by many hands, but available and easily so, with no exotic or precious ingredients. This will not run out on any occasion, or be a burden to my budget or my body, or be brought up in vomiting” (Seneca 2014, *Tranq.* 1.6). He reports taking a trip with a friend during which his frugal habits included lunching on dried figs, sometimes with bread (Seneca 2015, 87.3).

Seneca’s thoughts about and experience with vegetarianism were complex. The belief that it is wrong to eat animals was shared by the prominent ancient Greek philosophers Pythagoras, Empedocles, Theophrastus, and perhaps Plato. In his youth, Seneca was taken with the philosophy of Pythagoras. Seneca’s teacher Sotion explained both Pythagoras’ and Sextius’ reasons for

abstaining from animal food. “Sextius held that a person could get enough to eat without resorting to butchery; and that when bloodshed is adapted to the purposes of pleasure, one develops a habit of cruelty. He also used to say that one should pare away the resources of self-indulgence, and he offered reasoning to show that variety in food is alien to our bodies and detrimental to health” (Seneca 2015, 108.17–18). Pythagoras, on the other hand, believed in the kinship of all living things and held that souls never die but only transmigrate from one animal’s body, when it dies, into the next, whether it be that of a human or a nonhuman. “Pythagoras instilled in humankind a fear of wrongdoing – more specifically, of parricide. For if some spirit related to them happened to be dwelling in a given body, they might, without realizing it, assault the soul of their parent with the knife or with their teeth” (Seneca 2015, 108.19). Sotion reasoned that if these beliefs are true, then abstaining from animal foods means not harming anyone. If they are false, then vegetarianism is economical. Seneca, persuaded by Sotion of the savagery of eating flesh as lions and vultures do, adopted the habit of abstaining from animal food. He says this diet became easy and pleasant for him and made his mind livelier. Later, however, abstinence from animal food was seen as adherence to religions of foreign origin banned by the emperor. So, when his father asked him to give up his vegetarian diet, Seneca complied. He returned to a temperate but nonvegetarian diet.

For Seneca, then, Stoicism calls for simple, simply prepared, frugal meals of foods that are close at hand. “Our aim is to live in accordance with nature, is it not? This is contrary to nature: tormenting one’s body, swearing off simple matters of grooming, affecting a squalid appearance, partaking of foods that are not merely inexpensive but rancid and coarse. A hankering after delicacies is a sign of self-indulgence; by the same token, avoidance of those comforts that are quite ordinary and easy to obtain is an indication of insanity. Philosophy demands self-restraint, not self-abnegation” (Seneca 2015, 5.4–5; cf. 78.22–24). Seneca concludes that moderate, unfussy eating does not require self-deprivation or fasting.

Gaius Musonius Rufus (c. 20–30 to as late as 101 CE)

Born in Volsinii, Italy, Musonius was a Roman knight (*equus*), the class of aristocracy ranked second only to senators. He taught and practiced Stoicism in Rome and was exiled first by Nero upon discovery of the conspiracy led by Piso, and later by Vespasian. He had a considerable following during his life. His teachings survive as 32 apothegms and 21 longer discourses, all preserved by others.

Emphasizing the importance of daily practices, Musonius held that mastering one’s appetites for food and drink is the basis for self-control, a vital virtue. He agrees with Seneca that the purpose of food is to nourish and strengthen the body and to sustain life, not to provide pleasure. Digesting our food gives us no pleasure, and the time spent digesting food far exceeds the time spent consuming it. It is not consumption but digestion that nourishes the body. Therefore, he reasons that the food we eat serves its purpose when we’re digesting it, not when we’re tasting it (Rufus 2010, *Lecture* 18).

Musonius argues that the proper diet is lacto-vegetarian. These foods are least expensive and most readily available: raw fruits in season, certain raw vegetables, milk, cheese, and honeycombs. Cooked grains and some cooked vegetables are also suitable for humans, whereas a meat-based diet is too crude for human beings and is more suitable for wild beasts. Musonius thought that those who eat relatively large amounts of meat seem slow-witted (Rufus 2010, *Lecture* 18).

We are worse than nonhuman animals when it comes to food, Musonius believes, because we are obsessed with embellishing how our food is presented and fuss about what we eat and how we prepare it merely to amuse our palates. Moreover, too much rich food harms the body. So, he judges that gastronomic pleasure is undoubtedly the most difficult pleasure to combat (Rufus 2010, *Lecture* 18). Consequently, he, like Seneca, rejects gourmet cuisine and delicacies as a dangerous habit. He regards craving gourmet food to be most shameful and to show a lack of temperance. Musonius thinks that those who eat inexpensive

food can work harder; are the least fatigued by working; become sick less often; tolerate cold, heat, and lack of sleep better; and are stronger, than those who eat expensive food (Rufus 2010, *Lecture* 18). He concludes that responsible people favor what is easy to obtain over what is difficult, what involves no trouble over what does, and what is available over what isn't. These preferences promote self-control and goodness.

Epictetus (c. 55 to c. 135 CE)

Epictetus was born a slave in Hierapolis in what is today southwestern Turkey. He traveled to Rome where his master permitted him to attend the lectures of Musonius. After he was freed, Epictetus practiced and taught Stoicism. When the emperor Domitian, who suspected them of republican sympathies, expelled all philosophers from Rome, Epictetus moved to Nicopolis on the northwestern coast of Greece. There he founded a school which earned an outstanding reputation. His student Arrian recorded Epictetus' teachings in the *Discourses*, four books of which survive, and a compendium titled the *Handbook*.

Epictetus' experiences as a slave inform his views of Stoicism and food. Real slavery, he believes, is living in fear. So, he urges his students to get rid of all fears regarding eating. When a student frets about being too poor to be able to eat, Epictetus scolds him for lacking confidence in being able to fend for himself as successfully as slaves and runaways do. A worrywart who fears starving must believe he is stupider and less resourceful than irrational beasts, all of whom are self-sufficient and provided with food and a mode of survival adapted to and in harmony with their nature (Epictetus 2008, *Disc.* 1.9.8–9). Epictetus notes that neither runaway slaves nor old beggars starve, so we have no good reason to worry that our food will run out. Instead, we should concern ourselves with becoming good. "Does any good man fear that food may fail him? It does not fail the blind, it does not fail the lame. Shall it fail a good man?" (Epictetus 1995, *Disc.* 3.26.27). For Epictetus "dishonor does not consist in not having anything to eat, but in not having reason enough to exempt you from fear or

sorrow" (Epictetus 1995, *Disc.* 3.24.116). A good person uses reason to overcome fear and sorrow.

Epictetus believes that god (nature) both provides and takes away all our material possessions. "It is another who gives you food, and property, and can also take them away, and your paltry body too. You should, then, accept the material you are given and set to work on it" (Epictetus 1995, *Disc.* 2.5.22). And if god no longer provides food, then this could only mean that, like a good general, god has given the signal to withdraw, god is sounding the recall, opening the door, and saying to "Come" (Epictetus 1995, *Disc.* 3.13.13–14). Epictetus says he will obey while speaking well of his leader and praising his works (Epictetus 1995, *Disc.* 3.26.29). If starvation ever does become inevitable, the Stoic accepts it calmly. In contrast, the non-Stoic weeping about going hungry foolishly makes himself a slave to his fear. "No sooner have you eaten your fill today than you sit and start worrying about where tomorrow's food will come from. Look, if you get it, slave, then you will have it; if not, you will depart this life: the door is open. Why complain? What place is there left for tears?" (Epictetus 2008, *Disc.* 1.9.19–20). Thus, Epictetus sees no reason to fear starving to death. God will either provide us food or not. If so, then there's nothing to fear. If not, then there's no dishonor in exiting life when god decides it is our time to die. After all, only mortals need food.

Epictetus agrees with Seneca and Musonius that the purpose of eating is not to feel pleasure (Epictetus 1995, *Disc.* 3.24.37–38). We should take only what the body strictly needs in food, drink, clothing, and shelter and eliminate luxury and ostentation altogether (Epictetus 2008, *Ench.* 33.7). Each gift in our lives is granted to us only for the time being, neither irrevocably nor forever, "like a fig or a bunch of grapes in the appointed season; and if you long for it in the winter, you are a fool" (Epictetus 1995, *Disc.* 3.24.86). We must adapt our desire to what is available when it is available. Also, Epictetus denies that the conflicting opinions concerning food of Jews, Syrians, Egyptians, and Romans could all be right (Epictetus 2008, *Disc.* 1.11.12–13). Those who have truly digested their philosophical principles show it by eating, drinking, dressing,

marrying, having children, and being citizens, as a human being should (Epictetus 1995, *Disc.* 3.21.1–5).

Epictetus does not share Musonius' vegetarianism. He declares that "god created some beasts to be eaten, some to be used in farming, some to supply us with cheese, and so on" (Epictetus 2008, *Disc.* 1.6.18). He mentions that dinner guests ought to take only their polite share of the roast (Epictetus 2008, *Disc.* 2.4.8). Like Seneca, however, Epictetus commends strategic abstinence in order to discipline one's desires. "Practice living as an invalid at one time, so that you may live like a healthy man at another. Abstain from food. Keep to water. Abstain from desire altogether for the present, to exercise it later, in accordance with reason" (Epictetus 1995, *Disc.* 3.13.21). Thus, Epictetus calls for eating and drinking only what is strictly necessary, eliminating all luxuries, and vanquishing all worries about food.

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (121 to 180)

Born in Rome to a prominent family of Spanish ancestry, Marcus' father died when he was young. Frank, sincere, sensitive in character, and austere, Marcus impressed the emperor Hadrian, who nicknamed him *Verissimus*, "the most truthful." Hadrian arranged for his successor, Antoninus Pius, to adopt Marcus. He learned rhetoric, grammar, philosophy, and law from the best teachers of his day. His thought was deeply influenced by Epictetus. Marcus reigned as emperor from 161 CE until his death. During years on campaign on the empire's northern frontier, he wrote a series of private reflections on time, transience, self-improvement, and his place in the universe. These exercises in philosophical therapy came to be called the *Meditations*.

In the *Meditations*, Marcus often reminds himself to strip away the illusions that beguile people into craving fame, riches, luxuries, and carnal pleasures. For example, when beholding a fancy plate of meat or a pricey glass of wine, some see fabulous delicacies and swoon. But Marcus cautions himself to see what they really are. "Like seeing roasted meat and other dishes in front of you and suddenly realizing: This is a dead fish.

A dead bird. A dead pig. Or that this noble vintage is grape juice. . . . Perceptions like that – latching onto things and piercing through them, so we see what they really are. That's what we need to do all the time – all through our lives when things lay claim to our trust – to lay them bare and see how pointless they are, to strip away the legend that encrusts them. Pride is a master of deception: when you think you're occupied in the weightiest business, that's when he has you in his spell" (Aurelius 2003, vi. 13). To gourmandize meat is to fool yourself into believing that it is more than a corpse. To glorify sumptuous food and drink is to be bewitched into cherishing calories. According to Marcus, calories are garbage compared to a sound, righteous mind.

Summary

The Stoics defined the goal in life as living in agreement with nature. For human beings, this means especially living in agreement with reason. The perfection of reason is virtue, which includes the virtues of wisdom and temperance. Living wisely and temperately, they reasoned, rids us of fears, including fear of poverty, illness, hunger, and not getting what we want to eat. The wise and temperate know that simple, inexpensive foods in moderate amounts produced locally are easy to get and prepare, healthy for the body, and good for the mind. Thus, Stoicism dictates frugality of diet and the rejection of ambitious eating, gluttony, luxuries, delicacies, and gustatory extravagance. Some Stoics favor vegetarianism. All Stoics think it wise to limit eating and drinking to strict bodily need and to eradicate all food anxieties.

Cross-References

- [Cannibalism](#)
- [Eating Disorders](#)
- [Epicureanism and Food](#)
- [Food-body Relationship](#)
- [Gluttony](#)
- [Gustatory Pleasure and Food](#)
- [Hunting](#)

- [Meat: Ethical Considerations](#)
- [Plato and Food](#)
- [Poverty and Basic Needs](#)
- [Vegetarianism](#)

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Stoics and Food

- [Stoicism and Food](#)

Structural Inequality

- [Resource Conflict, Food, and Agriculture](#)

Styles of Farming

- [Farmer Types and Motivation](#)

Sub-Saharan African Agriculture

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Synonyms

[Africa](#); [Agriculture](#)

Introduction

Agriculture employs two-thirds of Sub-Saharan Africa's (SSA) workforce and a majority of the continent's poor (IFPRI 2004). As a result, agricultural productivity growth offers a singularly powerful lever for raising incomes and reducing poverty across the continent (Thirtle et al. 2003; de Janvry and Sadoulet 2010; Christiaensen et al. 2010). Recent estimates from Kenya and Rwanda, for example, indicate that a 1% increase in national income coming from the agricultural sector leads to three to four times as much poverty reduction as comparable income gains in non-agricultural sectors of the economy (Diao et al. 2012).

Agricultural growth is, likewise, a key driver of economic growth and structural transformation. Because agriculture accounts for 25% of Sub-Saharan Africa's gross domestic product, and up to 50% in poor countries, productivity gains in agriculture translate directly into broad-based per capita income gains (IFPRI 2004; Diao et al. 2012). Over the long run, improved agricultural technology, agronomic practices, and marketing systems will enable a minority of well-managed smallholder farms to transition into high-value commercial agriculture. In contrast, the majority of today's smallholder farmers will follow an alternate pathway, as elsewhere, gradually exiting agriculture in favor of nonfarm occupations. But in Africa, as in other settings before, this exit will require prior broad-based agricultural