

William FERRAILOLO, *A Life Worth Living: Meditations on God, Death and Stoicism*. Alresford UK, O-Books, 2020, 14,1 × 21,4 cm, 192 p., ISBN 978-1-78904-304-4

Matthew Allen Newland

Volume 74, numéro 1, janvier–avril 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084596ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Collège universitaire dominicain, Ottawa

ISSN

0316-5345 (imprimé)

2562-9905 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Newland, M. A. (2022). Compte rendu de [William FERRAILOLO, *A Life Worth Living: Meditations on God, Death and Stoicism*. Alresford UK, O-Books, 2020, 14,1 × 21,4 cm, 192 p., ISBN 978-1-78904-304-4]. *Science et Esprit*, 74(1), 137–139.

RECENSIONS ET COMPTES RENDUS

PHILOSOPHIE

William FERRAILOLO, **A Life Worth Living: Meditations on God, Death and Stoicism**. Alresford UK, O-Books, 2020, 14,1 × 21,4 cm, 192 p., ISBN 978-1-78904-304-4.

William Ferraiolo's recent book, *A Life Worth Living: Meditations on God, Death and Stoicism* (2020), offers a contemporary summary and exploration of Stoic philosophy, explaining the fundamental ideas and attitudes of Stoicism clearly early on, before moving on to discuss more specific aspects/situations through the lens of the Stoic mindset. This book is more accurately understood as a collected series of papers, written by the author on a number of topics, both effectively introducing the tenants of Stoic philosophy for the novice or unacquainted reader, while also discussing tangentially related topics in an interesting, thoughtful way, while constantly looking back to the Stoic principles set forth and introduced at the start of the book by such thinkers as Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and other Roman Stoics of the classical age. This review will briefly assess and summarize each chapter, evaluate the book as whole, and consider its effectiveness as an introduction to, and defense of, the principles of Stoic philosophy.

Chapter 1 provides the reader with an overview of Stoicism, summarizing its main ideas, explaining and defending the efficacy of Stoic methods, and demonstrating how, some 2000 years after they were conceived, they remain effective (for, as Ferraiolo notes, human nature has not changed that much in that time) (p. 4). Ferraiolo also introduces the IDEA method, as a means of applying Stoicism's principles: (I)dentify the problem, (D)istinguish what can be changed, (E)xert effort, and (A)ccept the rest (p. 13).

Moving from general explanation of what Stoicism is to more specific applications of Stoic philosophy to everyday life, Chapter 2 focuses on the phenomenon of anxiety, a feeling experienced by many in the world today. By considering it in light of the understanding of the Roman Stoics, Ferraiolo analyzes the suffering anxiety causes and prescribes a means of treatment, based on reasonable reflection and awareness of one's own feelings and attitudes. With the IDEA method in hand, one can relinquish "irrational attachments to any external conditions that do not conform to the dictates of the will" (p. 17). These ideas, Ferraiolo concludes, some two millennia old, remain an effective means of overcoming anxiety and refocusing one's attitudes, up until the present day.

Chapter 3, entitled "Stoic Simplicity," narrows the focus of Chapter 1 to describe the attitude one must adopt in order to enjoy the good, undemanding life, while

Chapter 4 spreads the focus further, to the world at large, and all the situations/causes which lead to the human experience of worry or anxiety: terrorism, nuclear war, (pandemics), etc. Ferraiolo reminds us of the Stoic's reasoning that such things, being beyond our power to control, cease to be of concern to us (for what will be, will be). Therefore, the true sage "suffers no harm, and lives free of fear and perturbation" (p. 36).

Chapter 5 discusses the purpose of living according to Stoic principles in light of determinism, a worldview that would render the Stoic life pointless: if we live in a predetermined world, and if the world's events are beyond our control, then one's actions are futile and meaningless, whether one is a Stoic or not. Ferraiolo responds by combining the points of the previous two chapters: one's attitude towards life, and the peace one feels by accepting the world as it is. By doing each of these, the Stoic will be "unhindered and free, finding fault with nothing and no one, suffering no enemies, and coming to no harm" (p. 39). Chapter 6 then continues this discussion, but this time bearing in mind the question of the existence of God: whether the will of God, or the necessary predetermined unfolding of the universe, the outcome remains the same, as does the Stoic's acceptance of whatever might come to pass.

Chapter 7 discusses the life of the Stoic among one's fellow human beings; ideas discussed earlier in Chapter 2, including performance anxiety (one among many anxieties mentioned), but also jealousy and grudges, are covered here as well. Ferraiolo argues that, from the Stoic perspective, it is irrational to trouble one's self with anything that does not concern one's own will, and the actions and feelings of other people are frequently among these things beyond our control.

Chapter 8 moves on to a new topic, discussing death as nothing to fear, and offers an account of death and its relation to life, arguing that death is a misfortune only to those who received an earlier, unearned benefit (existence, or life itself). Seen this way, death becomes merely a "propitious misfortune" (p. 71).

In Chapter 9, "The Roman Buddha," Ferraiolo discusses the life and teachings of Epictetus in detail, after having referenced his thoughts throughout all of the book's preceding chapters. This particular chapter contextualizes his ideas and approach to life by describing the events and conditions through/with which he lived. Ferraiolo also contrasts Epictetus' thought with the teachings of the Buddha, to show their universal application: through the similarities shared by both Stoicism and Buddhism, he notes, such ideas have been followed and embraced around the world, across the Roman Empire, Asia, and beyond. As a result, this chapter would have made an effective conclusion for the book, showing the effectiveness of the Stoic approach to life across time and around the world.

While Ferraiolo's book has been focused on a specific topic up until Chapter 9, his book takes an abrupt shift with Chapter 10, with a commentary on the 2007 film *No Country for Old Men*. While this chapter discusses the character, Anton Chigurh, as a metaphor for uncontrollable cosmic events, against which our individual lives are played out, this chapter is very different in its focus and seems rather out of place after the coherent themes binding together the first nine chapters. Unfortunately, this trend continues for the following five chapters, as the questions concerning the soul, the existence of God, and the multiverse are all discussed in detail. While Ferraiolo continues to make references to the Stoics and their thoughts, for each of

these discussions, Stoicism itself is no longer the point of focus in these chapters. Indeed, having earlier discussed the irrelevance of the existence of an omnipotent God (or a predetermined universe, or a multiverse in which every possible outcome is actualized), it seems somewhat unusual (and unnecessary) to spend so much time discussing any of these ideas. (While the chapters being discussed now are all quite engaging and would be of interest to read on their own, in the context of this book they stray far from the topic the reader expects. If these chapters were removed, the book would be more focused/coherent, and improved as a result.)

Thankfully, the final chapter of the book returns to Stoicism once again, and like the earlier chapters, on anxiety, our choice of action, etc., seeks to look at a specific, relevant issue through its lens. The topic is suicide, and using the deaths of Socrates and Cato as examples Ferraiolo puts forth a compelling, rational argument for suicide as a final, rational act of self-determination, in response to one's circumstances.¹

However, the book abruptly ends with this discussion; Ferraiolo offers no final reflection, nor does he revisit the IDEA method and discuss its relevance to the topic of suicide (or apply it to some of the earlier discussions, in retrospect). A chapter in which the IDEA method is specifically used to evaluate some of the later discussions might have been a better inclusion than the chapters on the soul, the multiverse, and the question of God's existence. Also, a Stoic reflection on some of the more irrational aspects of human life, such as art, music, and humor, might have made for interesting discussion (following after Justin E.H. Smith's *Irrationality*², which reflected on our human tendency to over-emphasize the value of the rational – and our inevitable tendency to be irrational in spite of ourselves – thus denying a fundamental part of our experience as human beings). An acknowledgement of, or a response to, this might have made for relevant discussion in place of the less-relevant sections.

Overall, Ferraiolo's book offers a concise explanation of the principles of Stoic philosophy, accessible for the contemporary reader. He not only presents these ideas in a clear, engaging way, but he also pushes these ideas beyond generalities, and explores related topics in depth (suicide, anxiety, the question of the correct course of action, and the fear of death, among them). The book is let down by its abrupt turning away from this investigation in its final third section.

That said, Ferraiolo's individual chapters are also well-structured; he consistently makes his point clear at the start of each chapter, and he never ventures beyond the perimeters he establishes at the start of each chapter. The opening chapter, which introduces Stoicism and the IDEA method, along with the later, more in-depth discussions, are successful, as a result of this.

Matthew Allen NEWLAND

*Adjunct Faculty, Humanities Department
State University of New York at Jefferson*

1. Socrates and Cato on how to be true to one's character in everything: Cato preferred death to Caesar's tyranny; Socrates preferred death do exile (p. 167).

2. Justin E.H. SMITH, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2019.