ALSO BY MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI

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HOW TO BE A STOIC

USING ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY TO LIVE A MODERN LIFE

MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI

Ch.9

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Chapter 9

THE ROLE OF ROLE MODELS

> What would Heracles have been if he had said, "How am I to prevent a big lion from appearing, or a big boar, or brutal men?" What care you, I say? If a big boar appears, you will have a greater struggle to engage in; if evil men appear, you will free the world from evil men.
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> —Epictetus, *Discourses*, IV.10

On October 13, 1992, I was watching the vice presidential debate of the American electoral season. I had moved to the United States from Rome a couple of years earlier, and the whole idea of televised debates as "infotainment" was very new to me. There were three men onstage: Al Gore and Dan Quayle, two career politicians, and an awkward guy named James Stockdale. It was not a good night for Stockdale, who began the debate with the amusing statement, "Who am I? Why am I here?" People initially took his remarks as endearingly self-deprecating, but then he quickly showed that he really had very little clue as to what he was doing there. He seemed foolish, but little did I know that Stockdale would become one of my role models, several decades after that night

and about ten years after his death. Stockdale, you see, was a modern Stoic, and one whose story is well worth telling.

To do so, we have to go back to September 9, 1965. American involvement in the Vietnam War had started in earnest the year before, after the bizarre "incident" of the Tonkin Gulf: American warships fired at nothing in the middle of the night, and President Lyndon Johnson used that as the official excuse to begin "retaliatory" bombing raids on North Vietnam. Hearing the news, Stockdale, who was commander of Fighter Squadron 51 of the US Navy and who had actually been at Tonkin, commented, "Retaliation for what?" He was ordered to keep silent.

On September 9, Stockdale was flying over North Vietnam when he was shot down and captured. He would spend seven and a half years in the so-called Hanoi Hilton, enduring an ordeal that included beatings and torture, as well as being regularly locked up in leg irons and confined to a three-by-nine-foot cell without windows. Despite these incredibly trying circumstances, Stockdale managed to organize his fellow prisoners, creating and enforcing a code of conduct to regulate their behavior. Moreover, in order not to be used for propaganda by the North Vietnamese, he first slit his scalp with a razor, to disfigure himself, and when that didn't work he proceeded to bash his face with a stool to make it swollen and himself useless to the enemy. At one point he even slit his wrists to avoid being tortured and revealing the underground activities of his comrades. Eventually Stockdale was released and came back to the United States, in horrible physical condition. He began to recover, however, and in 1976 he was awarded the Medal of Honor, the highest military

recognition, given for acts of valor above and beyond the call of duty.

When he was asked in an interview who didn't make it out of the Hanoi Hilton, Stockdale replied:

> Oh, that's easy, the optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, "We're going to be out by Christmas." And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, "We're going to be out by Easter." And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart. . . . This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

The interviewer referred to this as the Stockdale Paradox, but he might as well have attributed it to the original source: Epictetus. Stockdale, back in 1959, had been sent by the Navy to study at Stanford University in pursuit of a master's degree in international relations and—of all things—comparative Marxist thought. Finding himself rather bored with his regular studies, he wandered into the Philosophy Department. There he met Prof. Phil Rhinelander, who changed Stockdale's life profoundly. The Navy student enrolled in Rhinelander's two-term course, "The Problems of Good and Evil," midway through the first term. To make up for the delay, the professor offered Stockdale one-on-one tutoring in his office, to catch up with the other students. In their last session,

Rhinelander picked up a copy of Epictetus's *Handbook* and gave it to Stockdale, saying: "As a military man, I think you'll have special interest in this. Frederick the Great never went on a campaign without a copy of this handbook in his kit." Stockdale eventually read both the *Handbook* and the *Discourses* many times, and he later credited Epictetus with saving his life in Vietnam by giving him the moral strength to overcome his ordeal, as well as the rational lucidity to see what could and could not be done about it. It was a terrible application of the Stoic dichotomy of control. In 1981 Stockdale became a fellow of the Hoover Institution, based at Stanford, and for twelve years there he wrote and lectured extensively about Stoicism.

Nothing of what you are about to read should be construed as either a defense of the American intervention in Vietnam (which Stockdale knew was based on a lie) or an attempt to demonize the North Vietnamese. It is only a personal human story that we all ought to reflect on. Stockdale understood an important truth about war that applies to life in general: holding the moral high ground and maintaining self-respect is more important than the facts on the ground, be they the weaponry on each side (in the case of war) or the circumstances of our ordinary lives. Doing so involves a mind game, however, and that is why Stoicism is so useful: it is a major mind game centered on keeping one's moral high ground and self-respect.

The first real test for Stockdale came when he was shot down on that September 9. As he put it: "After ejection I had about 30 seconds to make my last statement in freedom before I landed on the main street of that little village right ahead.

And so help me, I whispered to myself: 'Five years down there at the least. I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus.'"

As soon as he landed and was captured, Stockdale understood all too well Epictetus's dichotomy of control, specifically concerning his own stature in life. In a matter of minutes, he went from being an admired officer, commanding 100 pilots and over 1,000 men, to "taking the ropes" and being vilified as a criminal. After quickly freeing himself from his parachute, he was surrounded by a dozen men: "By the time the tackling and pummeling and twisting and wrenching were over, and it lasted for three or more minutes before the guy in the pith helmet got there to blow his whistle, I had a very badly broken leg that I felt sure would be with me for life. And that hunch turned out to be right." He later recalled that Epictetus too had been crippled for life after his leg was broken by his first master, and that Epictetus's assessment of that fact had been: "Lameness is an impediment to the leg, but not to the will; and say this to yourself with regard to everything that happens. For you will find it to be an impediment to something else, but not truly to yourself." Stockdale had seven and a half more years to truly appreciate just how right the Greek philosopher was.

By the time he was brought into the Hanoi Hilton, Stockdale had resolved to do precisely what Epictetus advised: to play whatever part Fate had allotted to him to the best of his abilities. He constantly kept in mind that his enemies would win only if he succumbed to two things: fear and loss of self-respect. Stockdale studied his captors, and particularly the man who was in charge of torturing him. As Epictetus

and Arendt would both see, had they been there, he came to understand that the man was not evil, but rather that he was doing his job with what he perceived as integrity. Perhaps surprisingly, Stockdale developed not hatred, but respect for him. A torturer's job is to break the prisoner's spirit, to instill fear. Knowing this, Epictetus arrived at the only possible response: "When a man who has set his will neither on dying nor upon living at any cost, comes into the presence of the tyrant, what is there to prevent him from being without fear? Nothing."

Thanks to having internalized Epictetus's philosophy, Stockdale was a man on a mission, even in prison and with a broken leg. He created a secret society of prisoners to whom, as the highest-ranking officer, he would do his best to issue sensible orders to resist the enemy. He gave his soldiers practical advice as to what was and was not permissible to admit under torture. Realizing that the US government's official policy of providing the enemy only with name, rank, serial number, and date of birth would quickly get many of them killed, Stockdale devised alternative guidelines of his own, which included not bowing in public and not admitting to any crime—all designed to thwart the attempts of the North Vietnamese to exploit prisoners for propaganda purposes. Sure enough, the propaganda footage that was put out backfired, since many soldiers used their appearances on film to engage in jokes at the expense of their captors. On one occasion, Nels Tanner, a friend of Stockdale's, answered a request for the names of pilots who had turned in their wings to express opposition to the war by providing two: Lieutenants Clark Kent and Ben Casey. Tanner endured the consequences

of his defiance: three successive days of rope torture followed by 123 days in leg stocks and isolation.

Eventually, the North Vietnamese understood the inner workings of the resistance within the American group and sent Stockdale and nine others to solitary confinement for periods ranging from three and a half to more than four years. Another of Stockdale's companions, Howie Rutledge, enrolled in a master's degree program when he finally made it back home and wrote a thesis on whether torture or solitary confinement was more likely to break a person's spirit. To collect his research data he sent out questionnaires to his comrades and to others who had been prisoners of war. The results were striking: those who had spent less than two years in confinement said that torture was the worst; those who had spent more than two years in isolation said that the latter experience trumped even torture. That's because, after going that long without seeing anyone, a person desperately needs friends, quite regardless of who they are, their ideologies, or their politics. Stockdale interpreted Rutledge's finding in the light of Epictetus's teachings—that it is shame, not physical pain, that truly brings down a human being. When he himself emerged from that experience, he remembered that, asked what was going to be the fruit of all his teachings, Epictetus replied: "Tranquillity, fearlessness, and freedom." That certainly came true for James Stockdale.

One important question is whether it was truly Stoicism that made Stockdale invulnerable to torture and solitary confinement, or whether Stoicism was simply an after-the-fact rationalization of feats that resulted from his innate character. A more philosophical way to put this is: can virtue be

taught, or are people born with whatever virtue they have? Not only did the ancient Greeks debate this issue in detail, but modern biology and developmental psychology have uncovered a significant amount of empirical evidence that is very relevant to it.

In Plato's *Meno,* Socrates is asked by the character bearing that name: "Can you tell me, Socrates, is human excellence something teachable? Or, if not teachable, is it something to be acquired by training? Or, if it cannot be acquired either by training or by teaching, does it accrue to me at birth or in some other way?" After a lengthy discussion, Socrates concludes that "excellence" (or virtue) *may* be teachable in principle, but as there are no teachers of it to be found anywhere, in practice it is not. The implication, then, is that people who have it probably acquire a propensity for it as an endowment at birth. Aristotle, however, had different ideas. He made a crucial distinction between *moral* virtue and *intellectual* virtue, the former arising from both natural disposition and habit acquired while growing up and the latter resulting from reflection in a mature mind. It follows, then, that there are three sources of virtue: some comes from our natural endowment, some is obtained by habit, especially early in life, and some can be acquired intellectually and therefore can be taught.

This "mixed" model of the acquisition of virtue happens to work well with Stoic philosophy and is also favored by modern research in cognitive psychology. The Stoics, as we have seen, held a developmental model of morality, thinking that we naturally come equipped with the ability to have regard not just for ourselves but also for our caretakers and other people with whom we come into regular contact early

on in life. Once the age of reason arrives, however, when we are about seven or eight years old, we can begin to further build our virtuous character by two means: habit and (more so later in life) explicit philosophical reflection.

In modern psychology, perhaps the most famous attempt to summarize how people develop morally is Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of six stages of moral development, which builds on Jean Piaget's original work, as well as on a significant amount of modern empirical evidence. The six stages described by Kohlberg are grouped into three phases: pre-conventional morality (which begins with a stage regulated by obedience and punishment and then moves to a stage of self-orientation), conventional morality (from a stage of interpersonal accord and conformity to one of maintenance of social order and response to authority), and post-conventional morality (from a stage of response to a perceived social contract to one of adherence to universal ethical principles). Kohlberg's theory has been criticized on a number of levels, including too much emphasis on rational decision-making and on the ethical concept of justice (as opposed to, respectively, the role of instinctual judgments and of other ethical virtues, such as care for others). But it does seem to hold fairly well across cultures, even though people go through the different stages at different rates, and distinct cultures emphasize some aspects of the model more than others. Regardless, we do not have to buy into a specific modern theory of moral-psychological development to agree with the general idea that we get our ethics from a combination of instincts, training, and—for those so inclined—explicit critical reflection. This theory is in accord with repeated findings by biologists who study gene-environment interactions in a

variety of living organisms: complex traits, especially behavioral ones, seem almost always to develop through a continuous feedback of genes and environments, nature intermingled with nurture. And of course, for human beings a major aspect of the environment is our culture and our social interactions with other members of our species. Which is all we need to get back to Stoicism.

Role models such as James Stockdale, Paconius Agrippinus, Helvidius Priscus, and Malala Yousafzai highlight the point that Stoicism is a practical philosophy, not abstract theorizing. While Stoics of course put forth ethical principles for how to conduct ourselves and live the eudaimonic life, their emphasis was on how real people behave, not just how they talk. Observing and imitating role models, then, is one powerful way to work on our own virtue. We do something like this in modern societies as well, whenever we hold up public figures as examples to our younger generations. The problem nowadays is that, by and large, we do a pretty bad job of picking role models. We glorify actors, singers, athletes, and generic "celebrities," only to be disappointed when—predictably—it turns out that their excellence at reciting, singing, playing basketball, or racking up Facebook likes and Twitter followers has pretty much nothing to do with their moral fiber.

A similar problem arises with the contemporary, highly inflated use of the word "hero," especially in the United States. Some brave people who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the common good truly deserve that appellative (though they don't have to be almost exclusively drawn from the ranks of the military or the police). But someone who dies, say, as a result of a terrorist attack is not a hero—he is a victim. He

probably did not display courage and other-regard; he just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. We should most certainly mourn him, but labeling him a "hero" does not do justice to what actually happened, and it does a great injustice to actual heroes, confusing people about the very meaning of the term.

The other thing to remember about role models—and the Stoics understood this very well—is that they are not perfect human beings, for the simple reason that there is no such thing. Moreover, making perfection an integral part of our concept of role model means that we are setting a standard that is impossibly high. Some religions do this of course. For Christians, the model of universally good behavior is Jesus, but that's a tough role model to actually attempt to emulate, since believers are literally trying to be like gods. Bound to fail, we have to accept the divinity's mercy as our path to salvation.

The Stoics, eminently practical and good connoisseurs of human psychology that they were, approached things differently. Seneca wrote an essay on the nature of the wise person, the ideal Stoic role model, or Sage. Here is how he responded to his critics who thought that he was setting the bar too high for anyone to actually succeed at being wise: "You have no cause for saying, as you are wont [sic] to do, that this wise man of ours is nowhere to be found; we do not invent him as an unreal glory of the human race, or conceive a mighty shadow of an untruth, but we have displayed and will display him just as we sketch him, though he may perhaps be uncommon, and only one appears at long intervals; for what is great and transcends the common ordinary type is not often produced; but this very

Marcus Cato himself, the mention of whom started this discussion, was a man who I fancy even surpassed our model."

Marcus Cato, known as Cato the Younger, was a Roman senator and a political opponent of Julius Caesar. Cato was a Roman aristocrat, and as such a product of his time. He was unable to see, for instance, that the Roman Republic he so idolized was highly unequal (though not as much as it would become under the empire he fought to prevent) and founded on slavery and military conquest. For instance, in 72 BCE, he volunteered to fight against the rebel slave Spartacus, clearly not having paused to consider that the revolt might have been a reaction to extreme injustice. Like most Romans, he was probably also not particularly bothered by the clearly inferior position accorded to women in that society. In other words, he would spectacularly fail a modern test as a role model. But that would be exactly the wrong way to look at him, because it would be an attempt to make him a godlike figure capable of doing what no human being can do: completely transcend his own upbringing. Instead, we should assess him by the standards of his own culture and time. By those standards, he was a role model indeed.

Cato was an unusual kid. At fourteen, he asked his tutor Sarpedon why nobody acted to stop the illegal actions of the dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla, to which Sarpedon replied that people feared Sulla more than they hated him. Cato then said, "Give me a sword, that I might free my country from slavery." Sarpedon never again let Cato play unattended when in Rome, just in case. After he began to study Stoicism, Cato lived very modestly, despite the wealth he inherited. When he was given a military command in Macedon at age

twenty-eight, he marched with his men, sharing their food and sleeping quarters. As a result, he was loved by his legionnaires. Later on, in his political career, Cato quickly built a reputation for incorruptibility—a very unusual trait at that, or any, time. As quaestor, he prosecuted Sulla's informers for illegal appropriation of treasury funds and for murder. When he was sent to Cyprus, he managed the public books with absolute integrity (again, a rare thing indeed), raising 7,000 silver talents for the Republic's treasury. To appreciate the enormity of that sum, consider that a Roman talent weighed 32.3 kilograms (71 pounds) and that a single, smaller, Attic talent was sufficient to pay nine man-years of skilled work—or equivalently, a month's wages for a trireme ship's crew of 200.

Eventually, Cato came into open conflict with Julius Caesar, who followed in the steps of Sulla and declared war against the Roman Senate by crossing the river Rubicon with one of his legions, the occasion on which he famously declared, "Alea iacta est" (The die is cast). The rest, as they say, is history: Caesar's forces, after an initial setback, defeated the Senate's army at Pharsalus, in Greece. Cato refused to concede and retreated to Utica, in modern Tunisia. Caesar pursued Cato and his allies and won a final decisive battle at Thapsus. Cato, refusing to be captured alive by his enemy, who would have used him for political gain, did the Roman thing: he attempted to commit suicide with his dagger. Plutarch tells us the rest of the story:

> Cato did not immediately die of the wound; but struggling, fell off the bed, and throwing down a little mathematical table that stood by, made such a noise that the

> servants, hearing it, cried out. And immediately his son and all his friends came into the chamber, where, seeing him lie weltering in his own blood, great part of his bowels out of his body, but himself still alive and able to look at them, they all stood in horror. The physician went to him, and would have put in his bowels, which were not pierced, and sewed up the wound; but Cato, recovering himself, and understanding the intention, thrust away the physician, plucked out his own bowels, and tearing open the wound, immediately expired.

Caesar was not pleased, commenting: "Cato, I grudge you your death, as you would have grudged me the preservation of your life." You can appreciate why Seneca thinks of this sort of man as a true Stoic role model.

After all this talk of overcoming the hardships of torture and solitary confinement, or of disemboweling oneself in order not to concede political advantage, you might have the impression that Stoicism is not impossible, but it sure is demanding. As the public philosopher, and my colleague, Nigel Warburton asked me during an interview, "What about ordinary life, where people hardly have to face such extreme situations or display such levels of courage and endurance?"

It's a good question, but the answer is simple enough: it is by hearing about great deeds that we not only become inspired by what human beings at their best can do, but also are implicitly reminded of just how much easier most of our lives actually are. That being the case, it shouldn't really take a lot of courage to stand up to your boss when your coworker is being treated badly, no? I mean, the worst that can happen

is that you'll be fired, not put into solitary confinement and tortured. How difficult is it, really, to behave honestly in the course of everyday life, since we are not risking military defeat and the prospect of suicide to save our honor? And yet, imagine how much better the world would be if we all did display just a bit more courage, a slightly more acute sense of justice, more temperance, and more wisdom each day. The Stoic gamble was that hearing about people like Cato, Stockdale, and the others we have encountered here helps us put things into perspective—that is, to become slightly better human beings than we already are.