The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection, Gretchen Reydams-Schils, University of Chicago Press, 2005, 0226308375, 9780226308371, 210 pages. Roman Stoic thinkers in the imperial period adapted Greek doctrine to create a model of the self that served to connect philosophical ideals with traditional societal values. The Roman Stoics—the most prominent being Marcus Aurelius—engaged in rigorous self-examination that enabled them to integrate philosophy into the practice of living. Gretchen Reydams-Schils's innovative new book shows how these Romans applied their distinct brand of social ethics to everyday relations and responsibilities. The Roman Stoics reexamine the philosophical basis that instructed social practice in friendship, marriage, parenting, and community. From this analysis emerge Stoics who were neither cold nor detached, as the stereotype has it, but all too aware of their human weaknesses. In a valuable contribution to current discussions in the humanities on identity, autonomy, and altruism, Reydams-Schils ultimately conveys the wisdom of Stoics to the citizens of modern society.

Naturalistic Psychology in Galen and Stoicism, Christopher Gill, Oct 28, 2010, Literary Criticism, 396 pages. A study of the psychological ideas of Galen (AD 129-c.210, the most important medical writer in antiquity) and Stoicism (a major philosophical theory in the Hellenistic and....

The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought, Christopher Gill, Apr 6, 2006, Literary Criticism, 522 pages. Christopher Gill offers a wide-ranging and original account of what is new and distinctive in Hellenistic and Roman ideas about selfhood and personality. He focuses upon Stoic....

Antiquity and Humanity Essays on Ancient Religion and Philosophy: Presented to Hans Dieter Betz on His 70th Birthday, Hans Dieter Betz, Adela Yarbro Collins, Margaret Mary Mitchell, 2001, Religion, 561 pages. This volume pays tribute to the remarkable scholarship of Hans Dieter Betz, which has combined amazing range with consistency of vision. Defying the traditional boundaries of....


The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics, Brad Inwood, May 5, 2003, Philosophy, 438 pages. This unique volume offers an odyssey through the ideas of the Stoics in three particular ways: first, through the historical trajectory of the school itself and its influence....


Annales, Cornelius Tacitus, 1989, History, 281 pages. The fourth book of Tacitus' Annals has been described as "the best that Tacitus ever wrote." It covers the years AD 23-28, starting when Tacitus noted a significant....

Roman Stoicism Being Lectures on the History of the Stoic Philosophy with Special Reference to Its Development Within the Roman Empire, Edward Vernon Arnold, 1958, Philosophy, Ancient, 468 pages.

Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism A Comparative Study of Ancient Morality, Runar Thorsteinsson, May 27, 2010, Philosophy, 248 pages. Runar M. Thorsteinsson presents a challenge to the view that Christianity introduced an entirely new, better, and decidedly universal morality into the ancient world....


Epitome of Stoic ethics, Didymos (ho Areios.), Arthur John Pomeroy, 1999, Philosophy, 160 pages. Presents a work by a prominent Alexandrian philosopher, giving an individualistic example of Stoic thought as it existed in the late first century BC. Endnotes are aimed at....
Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy, Susanne Bobzien, 1998, Philosophy, 441 pages. The author presents a study of one of the most important intellectual legacies of the ancient Greek world. She identifies the problems that the Stoic tradition addressed and ....

Foucault's Askesis An Introduction to the Philosophical Life, Edward F. McGushin, Apr 3, 2007, Philosophy, 347 pages. In his renowned courses at the Collège de France from 1982 to 1984, Michel Foucault devoted his lectures to meticulous readings and interpretations of the works of Plato ....

Reading Seneca Stoic Philosophy at Rome, Brad Inwood, Jun 16, 2005, Philosophy, 376 pages. Brad Inwood presents a selection of his most influential essays on the philosophy of Seneca, the Roman Stoic thinker, statesman, and tragedian of the first century AD ....

The Stoics, F. H. Sandbach, 1994, Literary Criticism, 190 pages. .

Roman Stoics of the imperial period developed a distinctive model of social ethics, one which adapted the ideal philosophical life to existing communities and everyday societal values. Gretchen Reydams-Schils's innovative book shows how these Romans; including such philosophers as Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Hierocles, and Epictetus; applied their distinct brand of social ethics to daily relations and responsibilities, creating an effective model of involvement and ethical behavior in the classical world.

The Roman Stoics reexamines the philosophical basis that instructed social practice in friendship, marriage, parenting, and community life. From this analysis, Stoics emerge as neither cold nor detached, as the stereotype has it, but all too aware of their human weaknesses. In a valuable contribution to current discussions in the humanities on identity, autonomy, and altruism, Reydams-Schils ultimately conveys the wisdom of Stoics to the citizens of modern society.

"Reydams-Schils provides a well-balanced, thoughtful, and suggestive account of Roman Stoic thought. Original and innovative, The Roman Stoics is successful in bringing out interest in Roman Stoicism for areas of contemporary concern, without any loss of historical perspective. It is an interesting and useful addition to scholarship in an area that is at the forefront of current scholarly concern and also of wider public appeal."

"Reydams-Schils's thoughtful, well-documented argument gives the lie to the 'stereotypical image of the Stoics as being cold and detached.' Rather, Roman Stoicism in its late flowering, from Seneca and Musonius Rufus to Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, reveals itself as a difficult, challenging, indeed 'lifelong balancing act' between self-care and involvement with others, philosophical ideals and everyday circumstances, moral reserve and personal affection; not least between husband and wife."

"In her fine and innovative treatment of the Roman Stoics, Gretchen Reydams-Schils shows that their theorization of the embedded self and their consistent attention to questions of practical ethics should not be interpreted as an uncritical endorsement of the social conditions of imperial Rome. Reydams-Schils highlights the egalitarian thrust of Stoicism: putting the nobility of the soul above nobility of birth, and positing an equal capacity for reason in both men and women, the Roman Stoics transcended the conventional morality of their society. Given the great significance of Stoicism for the ulterior history of European thought, this book makes a major contribution to intellectual history."

"In this clear and well-argued book, Reydams-Schils studies the philosophical basis that underpins the way Roman Stoics integrated philosophy into the social practice of living. . . . Classicists, philosophers, and a wider public interested in the issues discussed here will no doubt benefit from the reading of this excellent book. . . . A very valuable (and enjoyable) contribution to Stoic scholarship."
"Taken as a whole, the book seems to me highly successful. It offers what is, to my knowledge, the first sustained account of social ethics in Roman Stoicism. . . . The emphasis on social and familial embeddedness captures a genuine dimension of Stoicism and one that is often understated or undervalued by scholars. . . . The book is written in an accessible and informative style that will make it useful to scholars and students of Roman social history as well as ancient philosophy."

Roman Stoic thinkers in the imperial period adapted Greek doctrine to create a model of the self that served to connect philosophical ideals with traditional societal values. Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, Hierocles, and Marcus Aurelius all engaged in rigorous self-examination that enabled them to integrate philosophy into the practice of living. Gretchen Reydams-Schils's innovative new book shows how these thinkers applied their distinct brand of social ethics to everyday relations and responsibilities.

On the other hand, it also exemplifies several of the ways in which I think overtly feminist scholarship has deepened our understanding of the past both philosophically and as pure history. A scholar/philosopher like a Martha Nussbaum or a Gretchen Reydams-Schils reacts differently while reading the central texts of Western culture. Feminists bring different sorts of awarenesses to those readings, they ask different questions and they look into ignored corners. This has been a very good thing. The humanities should embrace many different approaches and methodologies to their fields. There is much to be learned from the great man approach to history and from the social historians. There is much to be learned from a Straussian reading of the Platonic corpus and from a feminist reading. Life is not neat. Humans are not very neat. Our humanities should be a bit messy as well.

In her first chapter, RS outlines the late Stoic notion of the self. Her thesis is that it is part of the most unified theory of soul of that period of philosophy. As with most of the philosophies of the Hellenistic period, the fundamentals of the theory was based in their view of nature and how that self was aligned to nature. From this arose their ethics and politics. In her second chapter, she explores how those ethics are embedded in the Stoic ideals of community and their sense of duties involved with our various social roles. She sketches out the beginning of her reading of the Stoics as parents and spouses. In her next chapter, she discusses the politics derived from this theory. One of the most fascinating aspects of the history of Stoicism is the fact that three of the major theorists RS discusses (Cicero, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius) were major political players in their time. Marcus Aurelius, of course, was an emperor. The Stoic writers were thus able to discuss their struggles which actualizing their theories in the actual politics of their day.

Secondly, they were very focused on improvement not on perfection. Theirs was not a philosophy that would lead to wholesale changes, let alone revolution. Change had to occur through reason, one does not force change. Obviously, this leads to a fairly conservative politics and one that can suffer reverses of fortune as bad men rise to power.

Which leads to the third aspect of Stoic politics- the balance desired between the leisure necessary for the philosophical investigation and the life of the active politician. This is mirrored by the Stoic detachment from result versus the duty of trying to create progress in the political life of the community.

Her last two chapters go back to the themes of the philosopher as parent and as marriage partner. This last theme is where the feminism of the author is to the fore. I liked it. She gave me another way of looking at Xanthippe and her relationship to Socrates. I also liked the way she brings to the fore Paulina’s part in the death scene of Seneca to be found in Tacitus.

There are many graces to this book. I found her scholarship to be careful and well-grounded in the work in her field. She seems to know the literature now only in the original but in the secondary sources in French, German, Italian as well as English. (Of course, I am no expert but these are my impressions). She is sensitive to many aspects of the writings of her ancient authors. She understands them as exercises in literary form, as political rhetoric, as philosophical argument and as ethical exhortations. She sees them as one of the means by which her authors tried to create selves; indeed, souls that were true to their communities and their social roles but also to their larger
In this clear and well-argued book, Reydams-Schils (hereafter RS) studies the philosophical basis that underpins the way Roman Stoics integrated philosophy into the social practice of living, above all friendship, political community, parenting and marriage. By "Roman Stoics", RS means only a group of thinkers (Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and to a less extent Hierocles) who have in common a methodological and, in a way, a thematic, approach. Therefore, one is entitled to study this group of thinkers as a whole; that doesn't mean one ignores their differences, only that one doesn't focus on them. According to RS, "the Roman adaptation of originally Greek Stoic doctrine shows a distinctive pattern of emphasizing social responsibility" (p. 3). This supposes that the Roman Stoics were not pale copies of their Greek predecessors and had something interesting to say on their own. On the whole, RS is, to my mind, perfectly right to think so. The position of Roman Stoics, as pictured by her study, deserves wide consideration, both for philosophical and historical reasons (it has much to say for it, and it significantly influenced the history of Western thought). Classicists, philosophers, and a wider public interested in the issues discussed here will no doubt benefit from the reading of this excellent book.

First of all, RS has to defend Roman Stoics against two criticisms, which are in fact two faces of the same coin. These objections concern the way Roman Stoics adapted, or (according to their critics) failed to accept, Early Greek Stoicism. There was in the political philosophy of Zeno and Chrysippus a utopian and radical facet absent from Roman Stoic works. One may think, therefore, that the Roman Stoics waver between evasiveness and conformism. Indeed, it seems that they lead something like a double life: they are psychologically in a kind of inner fortress, while continuing, at the same time, to live outwardly like other people. Such an attitude implies coldness and detachment (a blame Stoics of all times faced).1 Furthermore, this kind of (alleged) reciprocal insulation of philosophy and social behaviour is unsatisfying: the Roman Stoics should live according to their principles. Severing the connection between their philosophy and their outward and social behaviour means, in a way, giving up Stoicism, at least if one remains faithful to what appears as the core of Stoicism. Moreover, precisely because they live like other people and do not set out a radical critique of existing society, Roman Stoics seem to have given up the project of the original Zenonian Republic (a utopian city unified by love, concord and wisdom among its citizens). There is here a kind of mildness that critics of Stoicism have been prompt to blame -- see, for example, Paul Veyne, who sees in Roman Stoicism "little more than a sophisticated version of prevailing morality: a man's duties to himself and others were identified with institutions, which this bastard doctrine ingeniously sought to internalize as moral precepts".2 RS' overall project can be described as a rehabilitation of Roman Stoicism, paying special attention to these issues. RS shows that there is no tension between the Stoic inner fortress and the way they cope with existing conventions. On the contrary, the Roman Stoics urge us to mediate with social norms from the vantage point of the good as defined by philosophy (p. 8). In a word, the book's main thesis is that the Roman Stoics "successfully established a connection between a philosophical ideal and ordinary, everyday-life circumstances, and between a community shaped by Stoic wisdom and society as it is" (p. 1). The whole book may be seen as a development and vindication of this assertion. To put things briefly, Roman Stoicism argues for a transformation of traditional modes of engaging with others from within and for a subtle balance between self-care and involvement with others, between detachment and engagement in the political life, between acceptance and challenge of existing social conventions.

Chapter 1 ("The Self as a Mediator", pp. 15-52) studies the nature of the "self", according to the Stoics. It provides the conceptual tools for the analyses that follow in the subsequent chapters. What is striking in Roman Stoics is the importance of a self-reflexive language (see the omnipresence of reflexive pronouns). RS sets out the main tenets of Stoic psychology and carefully examines their consequences for the Stoic notion of selfhood. Borrowing a happy formula from Christopher Gill,3 RS characterizes the Stoic self as "objective-participant" (p. 37): it is objective in as much as it presents a view of human nature as part of the nature of this universe that holds independently of individual preferences; it is participant in as much as it locates the self in a network of relationships. For example, Panaetius posited four factors that shape the identity of each individual human being (see Cicero, De Officiis 1.107-17; the text is discussed by RS on pp. 27-29): first, rationality, which
all human beings have in common (all human beings are endowed with a hêgemonikon capable of reason; it is the governing principle of the soul, whose proper functioning is virtue); second, the individual dispositions (bodily, temperamental, and mental); third, the circumstances that govern one's position in life; and fourth, individual choices having to do with how to lead one's life. In other words, and to borrow now RS' expression, the Stoic self is "fundamentally embedded" (p. 17): the self is anchored both in a body and in a rational order structured by an immanent divine principle. This rational order has a social aspect: the self is connected to others in a network of relationships, with its set of social and moral duties. Thus, even if Roman Stoics display an increased interest in interiority, that doesn't mean they promote an egoist or detached self -- quite the contrary: the Stoic self has a true altruistic outlook.

Whereas the first chapter had focused on the relationship between human and divine reason, chapter 2 ("From Self-Sufficiency to Human Bonding", pp. 53-82) addresses more directly the topic of human sociability, since it deals with the connection between individual people in local communities and universal humanity in the community of gods and men. Roman Stoics are not always very clear on this point, notably Epictetus, who sometimes employs formulas that may give the impression that the Stoics escape affective bonds. But RS shows convincingly that human affection and social affective bonds are very significant for Roman Stoics (as they were for Early Stoics). Indeed, human sociability is directly anchored in reason and divine will (p. 57). In other words, the Stoic sage doesn't want to dismiss all kinds of attachment: Stoic love, for example, comes from its willingness to sacrifice everything except virtue (that is, the excellence in the exercise of rational agency) for love, not from its lack of attachment. As Epictetus tells us, unless we make the right kind of value judgments, we will not be able to love other people truly (see Epictetus, Diss. 2.22).

Chapter 3 ("Politics, the Philosophical Life, and Leisure", pp. 83-113) focuses on the question of political responsibility, most notably the circumstances and manner in which the philosopher should become involved in the state. Roman Stoics argue for equilibrium between involvement and detachment. The value of political office is not an absolute good, and the correctness of one's choice to engage depends on circumstances. However, political responsibilities belong to the social duties that require a special reason for dispensing with them (p. 104).

With chapters 4 (pp. 115-141) and 5 (pp. 143-176), which examine respectively parenthood and marriage, we now turn to the domain of close relationships. RS examines how Stoic philosophical discourse responds and at times challenges accepted cultural standards of affection. The relational aspect of reason is no longer limited to the friendship among the wise but opens up to embrace more traditional relationships such as marriage and parenthood, as long as they are transformed in order to meet the conditions of the shared life of reason (p. 116). Chapter 4 sets out the high opinion Roman Stoics have of the relationship between parents and children, showing how it is based on their views on procreation and embryology. Chapter 5, relying heavily on Musonius Rufus' famous reflections on marriage, shows how marriage can achieve the philosophical way of life, since (unlike parenthood) it is a relationship between two human beings equal in their capacity for wisdom.

In sum, RS proposes a fine treatment of Roman Stoicism. For achieving her defence of Roman Stoics, she draws on nearly all aspects of Stoic philosophy: that makes her book hard to summarize, and the present review has passed many things over silence. I have only minor points of disagreements with RS, as well as some reservations (but that may look like splitting hairs): when confronting Stoicism and Platonism, RS could perhaps have been more sympathetic to Platonic political philosophy, and the brief discussion of time and memory (pp. 29-34) may have included at least a brief reference to Victor Goldschmidt's classic book. Anyway, this book, which follows the footsteps of recent works, such as those of Christopher Gill, Brad Inwood, and Pierre Hadot, is a very valuable (and enjoyable) contribution to Stoic scholarship.

In The Roman Stoics, Gretchen Reydams-Schils draws broadly from Cicero, Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, Hierocles, Marcus Aurelius, and a couple of others, but her purpose is neither comprehensive nor introductory. Rather, she focuses on issues in their work that are less prominent in what survives from earlier Greek Stoics. Musonius Rufus, Hierocles, and an Antipater (possibly
Antipater of Tarsus, as Reydams-Schils assumes) all leave works on marriage, and Cicero, Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus give extended attention to personal relationships. Reydams-Schils asks how Stoics integrate personal relationships into their apparently impersonal philosophical outlook.

Drawing on Foucault's and Hadot's picture of ancient philosophy as care for the self, Reydams-Schils argues that the Roman Stoics cultivate the self to mediate between their philosophical ideals and their particular social situation. This mediating self, Reydams-Schils believes, allows the Stoics to put their ideals into practice without "as many have charged simply conforming to their society."

After a brief introduction, The Roman Stoics divides into five chapters. The first chapter develops the idea of the self as a mediator. The second addresses Stoic thoughts about social relationships generally. The third through fifth concern relationships with fellow-citizens, children, and spouses, respectively.

The book is ambitious in its scope, clear in its prose, and filled with perceptive, judicious readings of well-chosen passages. Reydams-Schils has her finger on a central question about the practice of Stoicism, and offers a plausible way of addressing it. Anyone who still believes that Stoics were impersonal, or doubts that the Roman Stoics offer anything worth philosophical attention, should read this book.

Still, I have some quibbles. Reydams-Schils speaks broadly of "the Roman Stoics" and usually gives the impression of general agreement among them, but I doubt that the figures she treats agree deeply on all the issues she addresses. More attention to their varying responses to the Cynic side of Stoicism would bring this out. She also, at least occasionally (e.g., 81-82), suggests that the Roman Stoics' attachment to personal relationships surpasses that of the earlier Greek Stoics, but I doubt this. She does not treat enough evidence to sustain such a sweeping claim, and I do not think that there is enough evidence for it.

These quibbles are not heavy news certainly not to Reydams-Schils, who knows that the details are messy. But some of the messy details that are offstage in The Roman Stoics concern the metaphor that characterizes how to put Stoic ideals into social practice. Here my historical quibbles ride tandem with some philosophical worries that go to the heart of Reydams-Schils' project.

The metaphor of mediation suggests that the Stoic has two sets of commitments between which he or she needs to negotiate. Some of the texts suggest this picture, such as the account of duties that correspond to different roles (personae) (see esp. Cicero, de Officiis, I, 93-151). As a human being, I have a role to play and a corresponding set of duties. As a person in a particular social situation, I have another role to play and another corresponding set of duties. To live well, I need to negotiate between these sets of duties. Perhaps this means that we must mediate between ideals and ordinary social practices.

This idea might be useful for advising others who are far from Stoic sagacity, and for coming to grips with our own dilemmas. But the metaphor of mediation unfortunately suggests that philosophical ideals and our social situation call independently for distinct practices between which one must negotiate. There are other, more promising strands of Stoic thinking about the relation between general preferences and particular commitments, including a suggestive strand about responding to one's particular circumstances.

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