

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Royal Holloway, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 30 Philosophy		
Title of case study: Increasing Mental Wellbeing with Stoic Philosophy		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: September 2017 – July 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr John Sellars	Reader in Philosophy	September 2017 - Date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2017 – July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Research on ancient Stoicism is improving the psychological wellbeing of individuals around the world. Dr John Sellars is a founding member of Modern Stoicism, a small group of academics and psychotherapists who run Stoic Week and associated public events, Stoicon and Stoicon-x. Between 2017 and 2020, over 25,000 people from around the world participated in Stoic Week. Data from 3 years of detailed questionnaires completed before and after Stoic Week, report participants achieve, on average, a 14% reduction in negative emotions and a 13% increase in overall life satisfaction. Narrative feedback from the live events also reported a positive and sustained impact on attendees' outlook. Dr Sellars has contributed to the wider public debate on wellbeing via print, broadcast media, and a popular book on Stoicism.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Stoic philosophy argues that an individual's wellbeing depends solely their internal mental state and advocates the cultivation of a calm and rational character embodying the virtues of courage, justice, and moderation. The surviving texts of the Roman Stoics contain a variety of practical techniques designed to help achieve this. Sellars is an established expert on this topic. The research that underpins this case study builds upon earlier work dating back to his 2003 monograph <i>The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy</i> and focuses on the practical aspects of Stoicism in the Hellenistic period (R.3) and in the later Roman Stoic authors (R.1, R.2, R.6). His work also engages critically with modern philosophers who have advocated a revival of ancient Stoic practices, such as Pierre Hadot (R.4) and Michel Foucault (R.5).</p> <p>His recent work on Roman Stoicism has continued to focus both on the practical framework they employed and specific techniques they used, paying particular attention to Marcus Aurelius' <i>Meditations</i> (R.1, R.6). It includes work on the ancient idea of 'taking care of oneself' that dates back to Socrates, the virtue of self-control, and the role of written exercises in efforts at self-transformation (R.1). The latter in particular has fed into the Stoic Week training programme.</p> <p>Sellars has also highlighted the practical aspects of earlier, Athenian Stoicism as part of a wider study of Hellenistic philosophy (R.3). While many modern admirers of ancient Stoicism tend to focus on the practical exercises found in the writings of the Roman Stoics, neglecting their foundation in the ethical theory of the Athenian Stoics, Sellars has drawn out practical material from the earlier Stoics that is more explicitly integrated with wider Stoic ethical theory and might be useful for people today. One example is Antipater's analogy between virtuous action and archery, where it is suggested that focus ought to be placed on performing as best as one can rather than fixating on outcomes. This has fed into his impact activities and a summary was published online for a wider audience at the Modern Stoicism website.</p>		

He has also undertaken a comparative study of Stoic attitudes of attention with modern mindfulness techniques inspired by Buddhism (R.2). Although popular discourse has often assumed a natural affinity between Stoicism and modern mindfulness, Sellars has shown that in fact their attitudes and approaches are quite different. Whereas modern mindfulness tends to focus on the benefits of letting go of unwanted thoughts, focusing attention instead on perceptual experience such as breathing, what Sellars has called 'Stoic mindfulness' advocates paying close and constant attention to key philosophical ideas, keeping them always ready to hand. This makes it quite different from modern mindfulness in terms of both its goal and its techniques. The aim is not merely to avoid negative rumination but, more importantly, to embed Stoic principles via repetition so that they can shape one's everyday interactions with the world.

3. References to the research

Key Outputs:

R1. Sellars, John, 'Socratic Themes in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius', in C. Moore, ed., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Socrates* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 293-310. Available from HEI on request.

R.2. Sellars, John, 'Roman Stoic Mindfulness: An Ancient Technology of the Self.' In M. Dennis and S. Werkhoven, eds, *Ethics and Self-Cultivation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2018), 15-29, Available from HEI on request.

R.3. Sellars, John, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), xii + 260 pp. Available from HEI on request.

R.4. Sellars, John, 'What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?', *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy* 28 (2017), 40-56 https://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia28/parrhesia28_sellars.pdf .

R.5. Sellars, John, 'Indifference versus Affirmation: Michel Foucault on the Stoic Idea of Life as a Test', in K. Lampe and J. Scholtz, eds, *French and Italian Stoicisms* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 113-26. Available from HEI on request.

R.6. Sellars, John, *Marcus Aurelius* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), x + 146 pp, Available from HEI on request.

Evidence of the Quality of the Research:

R3 is published by Oxford University Press, went through extensive peer review and has received very favourable reviews since publication: a "fascinating [... and] important work"; "excellent"; "the definitive guide to this fundamental period of philosophy". Outputs R.1, R.2, and R.5 were invited contributions based on Sellars' established reputation as an expert in his field. All three went through critical peer review by the editors. R.4 is based on an invited keynote presentation to the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy.

4. Details of the impact

Can Stoic philosophy contribute to an individual's mental wellbeing? Do the practical techniques aimed at achieving this reported by the Roman Stoics actually work? In the context of an ongoing mental health crisis, can Stoicism offer solutions to the demands and pressures of modern life? Through a series of activities, it has been shown that Stoicism does indeed improve mental health.

4.1. Stoic Week.

Sellars is one of the founding members (and currently Chair) of Modern Stoicism, an organization (incorporated as a non-profit company) that runs Stoic Week, a global online training programme based on ideas and exercises drawn from ancient Stoic philosophy. It invites

participants to 'live like a Stoic for a week' in order to test the claims of both ancient Stoics and modern admirers that Stoicism offers a therapy for mental disturbances and a guide to living well. First run in Autumn 2012, over the years 2017 to 2019, approximately 25,000 members of the public registered for Stoic Week from all over the world. In 2018, for instance, participants were from the USA (37%), UK (22%), Europe (15%), Canada (8%), Australia (4%), and elsewhere (14%) (E1).

Participants complete a set of online questionnaires at the beginning of the week to assess their subjective sense of wellbeing. Over the next seven days they follow a series of practices and exercises outlined in the Stoic Week Handbook, all drawn from ancient Stoic texts. These include analysing the value judgements behind one's emotional responses to situations and reflecting on potential future adversities. At the end of the week, participants complete the same set of questionnaires in order to determine the impact of following Stoic life guidance. Sellars was the co-author of the Stoic Week Handbook in 2013, collaborating with psychotherapist and author Donald Robertson. That version has been the basis for subsequent versions, which have undergone annual revisions by Sellars and other members of the Modern Stoicism team, enabling the most recent research to be incorporated.

The Stoic Week training programme drawing on Sellars' research has directly affected participants' subjective sense of wellbeing. Over the 2017 and 2018 iterations of Stoic Week approximately 1,500 participants completed a questionnaire (a 25% completion rate) and reported an average 14% reduction in negative emotions, an average 10% increase in positive emotions and an average 13% increase in life satisfaction after a single week of following the programme. These results were correlated with a 10% increase in Stoic attitudes (E1, E2). More specifically, after the particular training session undertaken on using Stoic exercises to enhance feelings of purpose and meaning, there was (according to the 'Diener Flourishing scale' (E2)) a remarkable 12-point increase in feelings of purpose and meaning among users: one wrote, "It really helped me deal with my emotions in a healthy way, which is something I struggle with greatly", and another remarked, "[I am] slightly awed about just how much has changed for me."

A variety of groups have independently taken up Stoic Week resources, including groups in schools and prisons. Andrew Small, a Senior Officer at HM Prison Huntercombe, has used Stoic Week with inmates as part of their rehabilitation training. In his own words, "Four years ago we started teaching Stoic Philosophy to the men in our care. The results of our interventions have been remarkable. From the outset we have used materials created by Dr John Sellars. Prisoners at Huntercombe have taken part in Stoic Week and used the booklets as a daily meditation; there are many well-read, dog-eared copies in cells months after the event. The Gym at Huntercombe has a Stoic Philosophy Library; we have several copies of [Sellars' book] *Lessons in Stoicism* which are continuously booked out to prisoners and staff" (E3)

The findings from Stoic Week have been confirmed by a longer, four-week online course, Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training (SMRT). The latest iteration in May 2020, funded via Royal Holloway and attracting 5,017 participants, found a 12% increase in resilience, a 13% increase in flourishing, and a 15% increase in life satisfaction.

4.2. Enhancing lives via Stoicon events.

In conjunction with Stoic Week, Sellars has organized a number of parallel public events, enabling participants and other interested parties to discuss face-to-face the benefits of adopting Stoic life guidance. These events combined public talks and practical training sessions aimed at showing ways in which participants might embed Stoic principles into their daily lives. The largest of these was Stoicon, held in London in September 2018, attracting a sell-out audience of approximately 350 people (E5). Two smaller events (Stoicon-x) took place in October 2017 and October 2019, each attracting over 80 participants. With financial support from Royal Holloway, the talks from Stoicon 2018 were made freely available online via the Modern Stoicism YouTube channel (14,300 subscribers) and, to date, have been viewed over 29,000 times (E4).

The qualitative feedback from participants at these events makes clear the changes in individual well-being that was brought about. Attendees reported the following changes in attitudes: “There’s a different way to view, live and behave in this world. And that I have more control over my life than I think”; “life can be improved by putting these ideas into practice”; “I want to rethink my strategies in life and be more courageous about some changes I want to make”; “[I will] work to make it part of my daily life and practice”; “I will endeavour to be more open-minded and thoughtful on a daily basis”; “I will try to manage my anger better”; “I will try and practice more self-reflection and try to avoid quick judgements”; “it will make me reflect more on the things I value and care about”; “trying to integrate Stoic ways of thinking into daily life”. Of participants who completed post-event questionnaires, 94% reported that they would recommend Stoicism to others as useful life guidance (E5).

A follow-up survey of participants at Stoicon 2018 undertaken nine months after the event demonstrated its ongoing impact. Respondents had by no means forgotten the event, still describing it as “fantastic”, “excellent”, “a great experience”, “inspirational”, “an invaluable experience”, and “extremely rewarding and informative”. One person commented that “Stoicon 2018 has impacted my life profoundly”. Others reported that they “have tried to incorporate the principles into [...] day to day interactions with other people” and that “attending Stoicon 2018 has contributed to my [...] being able to apply it [Stoicism] to my daily life and improve my general well-being”. In the wake of the event one respondent commented that encountering Stoicism via Stoicon 2018 “has been a life-changing experience [...] It continues to be a source of daily inspiration”. Others reported specific benefits: “my contentment in life has increased substantially”; “I have found the methods have a calming effects when troubles arise”; “I am more able to accept areas that are not within my control and focus on those that I have influence over. As I supervise staff, I have been able to utilise this in work with colleagues and this has had evident benefits”. Another participant reported that they had “benefited greatly from Stoicon 2018” and were becoming “a convert to this mode of thinking”. The event had “encouraged me to research and read more on the topic and most importantly to take action” (E5).

4.3. Informing Public Debate.

Extensive media engagement has seen Sellars’ research reach an even wider audience, introducing readers and listeners to the psychological benefits of Stoicism. He has been interviewed by journalists for pieces in *The Daily Mail* (14 January, 2019, circulation: c. 1,200,000) and *The Daily Telegraph* (20 March 2019, circulation: c. 363,000) about the Stoic Week training programme, and its implementation led to a news article in *The Times* (21 September 2018, circulation: c. 417,000) (E6). It also featured in BBC Radio 4’s ‘Hacking Happiness’ broadcast. He has also been interviewed for *The New Statesman*, the BBC World Service, the BBC Culture website, and the Norwegian newspaper *Dagens Naeringsliv* (4 October 2019) (E6). He has written a popular article, ‘Want to be happy? Then live like a Stoic for a week’, first commissioned by *The Conversation* and subsequently re-published by *Newsweek*, *The Independent*, *Metro*, and *World Economic Forum*; to date it has been read over 350,000 times (E7). In 2019 Sellars published a short book with Penguin aimed at a wide audience, based on his research: *Lessons in Stoicism*. This sold 10,000 copies in the first nine months after publication. The book was reported in *The Daily Mail*, where it prompted a piece in Liz Jones’s Diary (8 September 2019), and was reviewed in *The Guardian*, *The Scotsman*, and London’s *Evening Standard* (E8). Foreign rights have been sold for North America, Greece, Italy, Spain, Russia, Poland, Taiwan, and Korea; the Greek and Korean editions are now published. He also spoke about the book and its themes at the Ilkley Literature Festival (October 2019).

As well as providing a pathway to impact, these media activities have also led to a change in practice among journalists working in the health and well-being sector, who have not only made use of Sellars’ research findings but have also had their professional understanding of mindfulness changed considerably by them. For example, journalist Victoria Lambert, who interviewed Sellars for *The Daily Mail*, remarks that, on the basis of his findings, “I was

immediately taken by the idea that we can use the wisdom of the ancient Greeks and Romans to help us live our lives with more meaning and peace”, and continues, “It was interesting to see that the online comments [for the article]—which are often meaningless or irrelevant to whatever is written—were supportive and interested.” In fact, she remarks that she found Sellars’ training programme “incredibly interesting and effective as a mindfulness tool personally”: she and her family “are still practising” the exercises (E9).

4.4. Influencing Careers and leadership training.

Sellars is also a founder member of The Aurelius Foundation, a collaboration between himself and a number of leading business figures who draw on Stoic ideas in their own business and personal lives. The aim of the foundation is to provide young adults (target age group: 18 to 25) with advice and guidance in their future careers based on Stoic principles.

The Aurelius Foundation’s inaugural public event took place in March 2020 and was attended by both senior business leaders and younger people working in the corporate sector. The talks were recorded and are freely available online at the Foundation’s website, including Sellars’ two-hour keynote session. Unsolicited feedback received after the event was overwhelmingly positive: “I can quite honestly say it’s been life changing!”; “It really has been an incredible day and for me I honestly think a turning point in my life”; “I don’t believe I would have heard of Stoicism if it weren’t for your foundation and now that I’ve had an introduction to it I’m looking forward to implementing it into my lifestyle”; “After listening to your speakers about how practically applicable it is to everyday life, I left ready to use those lessons both in my professional and personal lives. And I must admit, I already feel happier” (E10) Since then, during lockdown, Sellars has participated in two webinars run by the Foundation (May 2020, July 2020), discussing central ideas in Stoicism and their application today. These were recorded and are freely available online (E10).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

E1. Numbers and demographics of participants at Stoic Week 2018 cited from the official ‘Stoic Week 2018 Demographics Report’ by Tim LeBon, available at: <https://modernstoicism.com/stoic-week-2018-demographics-report-by-tim-lebon/>. Further enrolments figures can be found via further reports <https://modernstoicism.com/research/>.

E2. Figures and qualitative feedback relating to changes in Stoic Week participants sense of well-being cited from part 3 the official reports for the 2017 and 2018 events, accessible via <https://modernstoicism.com/research/>. The ‘Diener Flourishing Scale’ is set out in E. Diener *et al.*, ‘New measures of well-being: Flourishing and positive and negative feelings’, *Social Indicators Research* 39 (2009), 247-66, Available from HEI on Request.

E3. Quotation from Andrew Small, Senior Officer at HM Prison Huntercombe, comes from a written testimonial.

E4. Link to the presentation at Stoicon 2018 presentations available on YouTube (including viewing figures) from: <https://www.youtube.com/c/ModernStoicism>.

E5. Qualitative and quantitative feedback from Stoicon 2018 are available in a separate PDF file.

E6. Evidence of print media coverage of Stoic Week and Dr Sellars’ work is available in a separate PDF file.

E7. John Sellars, ‘Want to be happy? Then live like a Stoic for a week’, *The Conversation*, 28/9/18 (<https://theconversation.com/want-to-be-happy-then-live-like-a-stoic-for-a-week-103117>); details of republication and view figures are in a separate PDF file.

E8. Media reports and reviews of *Lessons in Stoicism* are documented in a separate PDF file.

E9. Quotations from Victoria Lambert, a freelance health and well-being journalist, are taken from a written testimonial.

E10. Feedback from the inaugural Aurelius Foundation event is available in a separate PDF file. Recordings from the inaugural event and subsequent webinars are all available at <https://www.aureliusfoundation.com>