

Midwest Stoicism, Agrarianism, and Environmental Virtue Ethics

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Global environmental crises are acute and accelerating. Addressing these crises requires aggressive reforms to our systems, institutions, and ways of life. Effective remedies proceed from a holistic understanding of our environment, our place within it, and ourselves. The latter requires a good grasp of the character flaws that allow us to degrade the environment. We urgently need insightful environmental ethics to correct foolish, deeply engrained ways of life. In short, we need more than a little ecological wisdom to sharpen our perceptions and shrink our problems. My aim here is to elucidate the contours of this ecological wisdom in the tradition of virtue ethics.

The disposition of our ecological woes calls for caution. North America's environmental problems are so manifold and vast in scale that modesty requires narrowing the scope of concern here to one region. Where, then, to seek ecological wisdom? The region featured in this chapter is the Midwest. To begin there, however, immediately raises an epistemic quandary: Where *is* the Midwest? And how do we, or can we, *know* where it is? These questions are tackled in the beginning of this chapter. Next, I propose that the history of philosophy offers many sources of ecological wisdom. Specifically, I will argue that many aspects

of the ancient Stoics' understanding of nature makes their philosophy a fertile field of ecological wisdom. The significance of nature in Stoicism occupies the next section. After that, I distinguish Stoic philosophers (Stoics) from stoical non-philosophers (stoics).¹ Nature's lessons for living a good Stoic life follow. A concern could be raised that such lessons in virtuous Stoic living may seem too theoretical to provide much practical guidance. To address this worry, I present several prominent ancient Romans who were lauded for their virtues and who worked the land. The virtues of these stoical Roman agrarians are discussed in the next section. Then I suggest that features of Roman Stoic agrarianism resonate with a contemporary instantiation of Stoicism in the Midwest. My thesis is that a Midwest Stoic agrarian, guided by an array of earthy virtues, will aim to engage in agricultural practices that *harmonize* with nature and support living in *agreement* with nature, while rejecting agricultural practices contrary to nature and propelled by vice. I conclude with reflections on the promise of Midwest Stoic agrarianism for fortifying environmental virtue ethics beyond this region.

Where Is the Midwest?

The seeming innocence of this question belies its deceptive vagueness and barely veils its incendiary potency.² Many who regard themselves as Midwesterners voice strong opinions on the matter. Heated disputes with a fellow philosopher born in rural Kansas and raised just over the border in rural Oklahoma have not shaken my certitude about my own answer. Born and raised a Hoosier, I learned in elementary school that my home state was the Crossroads of America. Crossroads are in the middle. The middle of the United States is the Middle West. Hence, Indiana is at or very near the center of the Midwest. Add to this syllogism the self-evident truth that Chicago is the greatest city of the Midwest. (Sorry, St. Louis.) Given Chicago's proximity to Indiana, support for Hoosiercentrism grows. More evidence comes from sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd, who found their statistical "Middletown" in Muncie, Indiana.³

If the question *Where is the Midwest?* is asking which U.S. states constitute the region, the U.S. Census Bureau answers: Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Missouri, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. This tidy dozen might suit the intuition of a numerologist. My ordering of the first eight states describes a clockwise spiral. These eight states are so undeniably

middle-western that since six of them have a coastline on a Great Lake, it seems apt to dub them the Great Eight.⁴ The final four Plains States come last because they fringe states undeniably out west. Call these Plains States the Fringe Four. Moreover, consider the view of the research arm of the USDA, the Agricultural Research Service (ARS). The ARS divides the fifty states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico into five regions. Of those five, the Plains Area groups the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas with Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. The ARS pushes Kentucky north to join the Great Eight.

Whether Kentucky is in the Midwest or the South is debatable. States are governmental entities that poorly cohere with cultural regions, much less bioregions. Settlement patterns and political history support the logic of including Kentucky in the Midwest since it allied itself with the Union during the Civil War. But Kentucky's heritage of slavery links it with the South.⁵ Later, I will defend regarding the northern tier of Kentucky as marginally Midwestern.

Ambiguity about the bounds of the Midwest lingers, however, in another datum from the U.S. Census Bureau. Consider the concept of the mean center of the U.S. population. This is the point at which an imaginary weightless, rigid, and flat surface representation of the fifty states and the District of Columbia would balance if weights of identical size were placed on it, each weight representing the location of one American. This balance point is the mean center of population. The mean center of the U.S. population in 2020 was projected to be in Wright County, Missouri, within nine miles of Hartville.⁶ Since the Midwest is known as the Heartland,⁷ it is fitting that the town closest to the mean center of the U.S. population is named Hartville.

My defiant Okie chum insists that appealing to government bureaucrats to settle the issue of the location of the Midwest bespeaks naive statism. State borders are merely lines on a map, not ontological divisions. Census data are mere statistics. Map lines, road signs announcing, "You are now entering the State of So and So," and number crunching cannot settle the ontological issue of where the Midwest begins and ends. Motorists search in vain for road signs reading "Welcome to the Midwest." Locating the Midwest challenges not only geographers but also linguists, critics of music and literature, and social ecologists. It is a complex question about bioregions, the history of westward expansion, customs, shared norms of civility, and the prevalence of certain common courtesies. Such courtesies include holding doors for strangers, not cutting in line, and letting blameless motorists merge in front of you. Midwesterners share an accent and a dialect. Midwesterners favor

certain foods and drinks. Clues about whether you're in the Midwest emerge when answering questions like: Is the tea sweet or not? Is the soft drink soda or pop? Is dinner cooked in a skillet or a frypan? Is the side dish grits, cornbread, or corn on the cob? Is dessert apple cobbler, apple crisp, or Apple Brown Betty? Bioregionalists may contend that the Midwest extends from the Ohio River west all the way to the Front Range of the Rockies, and from the Red River of the South north to Canada.

It is not that the seemingly innocent question of the location of the Midwest has no answer. It has several. Some convince more than others. The perimeter of the Midwest may have fuzzy edges, but Midwesterners are not relativists. So, having sketched key dimensions of this issue will allow me later on to adduce people, portraits, and phenomena of Midwestern provenance. A final verdict on Hoosiercentrism can wait. Before showing the relevance of Stoicism to the Midwest, I turn to explain the significance of nature in Stoicism.

What Is Stoicism and Why Was Nature Important to the Ancient Stoics?

Of all ancient Greek philosophies, I argue that the one with an especially intimate relationship with nature is Stoicism. The first premise of my argument is definitional. The earliest Greek Stoics defined happiness as “living in agreement with nature.”⁸ My second premise is that the Stoics conceived of the universe (*cosmos*) as a well-ordered whole. The English word *cosmetics*, the art of beautifully and meticulously arranging what is disordered, derives from the Greek word *cosmos* (world order). The Stoics believed that all events occur in harmony with providence—that is to say, they are willed by the divine. This theological understanding of nature is particularly robust.⁹ Many scientists, environmentalists, and philosophers find it controversial, dubious, or outright misguided.¹⁰ Some contemporary Stoics defend (their interpretations of) Stoic theology.¹¹ Nonetheless, the Stoics' view of nature as providential is tightly interwoven with their physics and ethics.¹²

The Stoics divided philosophy into three branches: physics, ethics, and logic.¹³ They illustrated the relationship between these three branches with several similes. One simile is that if philosophy is like an orchard, then physics is the land and trees, ethics is the fruit, and logic is the surrounding fence. The fence does not directly concern us here.¹⁴ On the other hand, my third premise emphasizes the

significance of the analogy of the orchard's land and trees to Stoic physics and the orchard's fruit to Stoic ethics.

Let's inspect this fruit. Ancient Greek philosophers agreed that the goal of all human effort is an enduring state of well-being or flourishing activity they called *eudaimonia*. The Stoics believed that the purpose of philosophy is to achieve this goal by mastering the art of living. Stoic ethics educate us in this art of living in agreement with nature. Our biological nature involves in part using our sense organs to sustain our bodies. But we also naturally associate with each other. So, our social nature involves building interpersonal relationships, making friends, fostering a family, and creating a community. We recognize the affinity we have with all human beings and seek to live harmoniously with them. Thereby, we establish justice as the foundation of societal good. We also share many affinities with other animals and plants. Indeed, we share some affinities with insects, invertebrates, microbes, minerals, soils, lakes, streams, and seas. So, living in agreement with nature for Stoics includes living in congruence with landforms, watersheds, waterways, bioregions, and the entire biosphere. More on that later.

For a being with reason, living in agreement with nature means most especially living in agreement with reason, the perfection of which the Stoics call virtue. Virtue, they declare, is the only good because it alone is necessary and sufficient for self-fulfillment (*eudaimonia*). Conversely, the only thing that is bad and guarantees misery is the corruption of reason called *vice*. All else they consider neither good nor bad but *indifferent*. "Indifferents" are in themselves neither beneficial nor harmful because they can be used either well (virtuously) or badly (viciously). Most Stoics subdivided indifferents into the "preferred" and the "dispreferred." Preferred indifferents often but not always promote one's well-being. When they do, reason prompts Stoics to select them. Preferred indifferents include life, health, beauty, wealth, strength, and good reputation. The dispreferred indifferents are their opposites. It is often reasonable (virtuous) to avoid them, but occasionally reason dictates selecting them. A person's ethical character is measured not by having or lacking an indifferent, but by whether she makes good use of it or thrives without it. If she does, she is virtuous. Otherwise, she is vicious. Indifferents are like game equipment. A ball is neither good nor bad in itself. What matters is whether a ball player plays with (uses) a ball (one's back and arms, a plow, a plot of land, one's reputation, resources, etc.) well in the ballgame of life. The wise use of tools builds a happy, fulfilling life. The foolish, wicked use of resources makes a life miserable and unfulfilled.

So much for the fruit. How did the Stoics think about the land and trees, that is, physics? For the ancient Greek philosophers, physics (*ta phusika*) is the study of nature (*phusis*). According to Stoic physics, the cosmos is governed by an active principle called by many names: god, Zeus, Providence, Fate, Destiny, and Seminal Reason. This active principle (or agent) transforms matter into four elements: air (cold), water (wet), earth (dry), and fire/aether (hot). These elements combine to form objects. Stoics believe that god can be thought of as either the artificer or the orderliness of the cosmos. Stoics conceive of god not as anthropomorphic, but nonetheless as alive, immortal, rational, perfectly happy (self-fulfilled), and devoid of evil. This divinity provides for the cosmos and everything in it. Nature, Stoics explain, is either that which holds the cosmos together or that which causes terrestrial organisms to grow. Nature is a force moving by itself, producing and preserving in being its offspring in accord with seminal principles. Stoics describe nature as artisanal fire (*pur technikon*) equivalent to fiery or creative breath (*pneuma*). Because *pneuma* pervades the entire cosmos, all its parts are sympathetically interconnected. Stoics reason that this ubiquitous causal interlinkage is so seamless that all events are fated. Fate (*heimarmenē*) is thus an endless chain of causation whereby things exist.

Fate/Seminal Reason/Zeus/god shapes, crafts, and cultivates the universe and all its intricately, artfully interconnected parts. What do Stoics mean by “Seminal Reason”? Perhaps we can think of this active principle as a primitive precursor to our biochemical concepts of DNA and RNA. According to Stoics, Fate manifests itself biologically, we could say, as hot, breathy, creative “logic seeds” (*spermatikos logos*) causing all living things to bloom in characteristic ways homogeneously within their species. Like polynucleotides, we could imagine that these logic seeds stimulate growth, direct development, control homeostasis, regulate metabolism, and maturate all plants and animals.¹⁵ Similarly, Stoic farmers labor to shape, craft, and cultivate their land in imitation of god/Zeus/Fate’s crafting of the cosmos. Stoic farmers plow the rows, plant the seeds of their cereals and fruit trees, tend the fields, and, with the help of sunshine and rain—gifts of Providence from the sky—wait to harvest in good time. As Zeus provides sun, water, and earth for all residents of the cosmos, so Stoic farmers provide crops for their families and communities. Limited by their finite powers and mortality, Stoic farmers strive, as best they can, to emulate almighty, immortal Zeus. In working the land to produce sustenance for their fellows, Stoic farmers labor to be as providential as they can be in their locales. With nature’s help they patiently transform tiny seeds into food.

Their farms are microcosms that both represent and are constituent parts of the living, deathless, well-ordered macrocosm. On a small scale, then, Stoic farmers exemplify Zeus/god/Seminal Reason, the Grand Cosmic Provider of all. Just as Zeus experiences a kind of bliss in tending the cosmos, so too do the farmers who, by farming, imitate the life Zeus enjoys.

Stoics do not conceive of *nature* (*phusis*) as we today usually think of the *universe*. From our contemporary perspective, we might be inclined to view nature as the universe seen through a telescope. Astronomers tell us that the universe is an inconceivably vast, unimaginably cold, infinitely expanding realm of distant galaxies, novae, nebulae, comets, black holes, quasars, dark matter, and dark energy. Such an infinite, black void punctuated by stars, superhot gases, planets with poisonous atmospheres, planets with no atmospheres, moons with volcanoes erupting ice, asteroids, and dust feels utterly sterile and terribly inhospitable. Nothing about this universe is welcoming. Such a boundless, frigid void is horribly hostile. Human beings with holistic understanding want not just a home (*oikos* = *ecos*) to live in, but to be part of the rational arrangement in nature. Stoics conceive of the cosmos not as inert, but as a well-ordered macro-organism of which they themselves are prominent parts. The living body of Nature with a capital N includes planets home to water in all three states, amino acids, habitats, sunshine, warmth, and life.

The portion of this living body of Nature most immediate to us is Earth's biosphere. Earth's biosphere is constituted of countless organisms of myriad sizes driven by biological processes synergistically embedded in the cycle of seasons, the diurnal cycle, the hydrological cycle, and evolution. These biological processes are also disturbed by air, water, and light pollution; soil degradation and erosion; acidification of the oceans; deforestation; desertification; accelerated extinctions of species; loss of biodiversity; and anthropogenic climate change (global weirding).

From the three premises above, I conclude that nature is of special significance in Stoicism. Consequently, it is entirely apt that many botanical examples take root in Stoics' arguments. Before we dig into those arguments, however, some concepts need to be clarified. Three groups of people must be distinguished: Stoic philosophers, stoical non-philosophers, and those merely resembling stoical non-philosophers.

Stoic Philosophers, Stoical Non-philosophers, and Stony Fools

First, there are those philosophers who defended by argument a specific, coherent system of thought. I described features of this system in the previous section. But this philosophical system, Stoicism, has exercised such a deep and lasting impact on Western history and culture that its legacy in English is the adjective *stoical*. To be *stoical* is to be impassive, to have calm, austere fortitude. One need not be a philosopher to have calm, austere fortitude. Consequently, here I will refer to philosophers dedicated to Stoicism as Stoics with a capital “S.” I will refer to people with a calm, austere fortitude who don’t philosophize as stoics with a small “s.” The importance of differentiating stoics from Stoics is illustrated in the case of the (small “s”) stoic farmer.

Consider a short medical journal article titled “The Case of the Stoic Farmer.” The author, a Dr. Gracey, relates the story of an anonymous sixty-seven-year-old farmer from South Dakota. Call him Stan. Stan was visiting his daughter in Chicago when he was hospitalized because he was vomiting blood. Stan had a long history of pulmonary emphysema—a dangerous lung condition characterized by shortness of breath that may lead to impairment of heart action. For a long time, Stan had complained of a chronic cough and difficulty breathing. At the time he was hospitalized he was drowsy and audibly wheezing. Gracey writes: “It was hard to obtain a history. He was stated to have been brought to the hospital because his daughter noted that he was not eating and seemed to have a somewhat ‘more unusual personality than normal.’”¹⁶

After many tests, intense questioning of Stan finally revealed that he had been vomiting frequently every day, a fact he had hidden from his daughter. For three weeks Stan experienced severe nausea and vomiting shortly after eating, but he would make a pretext of eating for his daughter’s sake. After each meal he would go to the bathroom and secretly throw up what little he ate. Nowhere in the body of the article does Gracey label the patient a *stoic*. The good doctor merely emphasizes the importance of extracting a thorough medical history in order to avoid botching the diagnosis and muffing the prescribed course of treatment. “The lack of an important part of the patient’s medical history was brought to light by the unusual initial blood-gas results and led to prodding the patient into revealing the source of the problem.”¹⁷

Gracey considered his patient a “stoic” because he suffered in silence. Despite being unable to keep down a meal for three weeks, Stan resisted getting medical treatment. This “stoic” sufferer was nearly as reticent about disclosing his daily vomiting to a physician. Dr. Gracey regarded this secretly suffering man as a stoic with a small “s.” But from the perspective of capital “S” Stoics, Stan was a fool. Stoics with a capital “S” strive for wisdom. Wisdom calls for emotional self-sufficiency but also honesty and candor. Wisdom does not abide hiding considerable physical suffering from loved ones. To calmly report one’s own seriously unpleasant symptoms to a loved one is not to whine or whimper. Wisdom does not permit clamming up about one’s ailments when being interviewed by health-care providers. If pride or embarrassment led Stan to pretend to eat normally while hiding his chronic vomiting, then he was being vain and silly. To be reticent about his retching was wretchedly foolish because it undermined the reasonable, natural norm of pursuing good health. Stan failed to reason well and act prudently, as capital “S” Stoics strive to do. Thus, to be silent as a stone, stubbornly hiding his illness, is not really stoical at all. Stan only superficially resembles a person of calm, fortitude, and prudence. Therefore, Stan was stubbornly stony, not stoical.

As an intently practical philosophy, Stoicism is a *practicable* way of thinking, desiring, responding to circumstances, and living available to anyone anywhere. Consider, for example, the following tale.¹⁸ Long ago the horse of a Chinese farmer ran off. When his neighbors heard, they sought to comfort him, saying it was very unfortunate. But the farmer withheld judgment and said only, “Perhaps.” The next day the horse returned along with seven wild horses. The neighbors congratulated the farmer for his good fortune to now own eight horses. The farmer replied, “Perhaps.” The next day the farmer’s son tried to tame one of the wild horses but was thrown from its back and broke his leg. The neighbors judged that this was very bad, but the farmer said only, “Perhaps.” The next day state officials came to conscript young men into the army. Since his leg was broken, the farmer’s son was rejected. The neighbors rejoiced, declaring this to be a great thing. Again, the farmer said, “Perhaps.” The moral of the story? Nature unfolds as an inscrutably complex yet intricately integrated process. So, it is impossible to know with certainty whether any particular event, considered in isolation from the whole, is good or bad. You never know what the consequences will be of a putative “misfortune,” nor the consequences of a putative “good fortune.” While his epistemically reckless neighbors rushed to judge these events bad and those

good, the Chinese farmer wisely restrained his judgments. His wisdom resonates with Zen enlightenment and Taoism.¹⁹ For my argument, note that this is the story of a wise farmer. Wise farmers have learned to take what the Earth gives, when it gives, and however it gives, while letting go of what the Earth reclaims, when it does, and however it does. This is not thoughtless passivity. It is mindful adaptability. Many farmers lack it.

Nature's Lessons for Stoic Living

The most reliable and extensive sources of Stoic philosophy derive from the four Roman Stoics Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE),²⁰ Musonius Rufus (c.30–c.100 CE), Epictetus (c.55–c.135 CE), and Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE). In this section I examine their reasons to think that nature instructs us how to live well.

Nature, in broad scope, is investigated by Seneca in his work *Natural Questions*. He studies in detail winds, clouds, rain, hail, snow, rivers, earthquakes, comets, meteors, rainbows, lightning, and thunder.²¹ Probing study of the natural world is of serious intrinsic interest to Seneca, but he also emphasizes the great moral benefits of scientific understanding. He repeats the theme of wonder at the beauty of the world and assures his reader that study of the world of nature will yield knowledge of its divine ordering and of god himself.²²

Seneca criticizes people who exploit the resources of Earth and seek to master it for their own pleasure and greed. The (Stoic) philosopher reveres the natural world and strives to understand it and the deity controlling it.²³ “For god did not make everything for human beings. How small a part of this vast creation is entrusted to us! He who manages all this, who created it, who laid the foundations for it all and surrounded himself with it, and who is the greater and better part of his creation, he eludes our sight and must be perceived by thought.”²⁴ God entrusts the wise to contribute to God’s grand creation precisely by acting rationally. Seneca’s rationalism and naturalism foster his search for divine understanding. His love of nature merges with his dedication to education in the liberal arts. “The mind gains strength solely from liberal studies and from the contemplation of nature.”²⁵ By “liberal” studies Seneca means those suited to a free person, not someone whose mind is enslaved by superstition. Free-thinking, scientific study of nature yields theological wisdom, which liberates our minds from the harmful passions of fear, greed, selfishness, vanity, and anger. These

passions (*pathē* in Greek) are pathological diseases that obliterate sound thinking and good decision-making. These passions wreck our reason, ruin our minds, and rob us of happiness. Science, Seneca says, saves us. “When we have traversed the secrets of nature, when we have examined the divine, our mind must be set free from its ills and constantly strengthened.”²⁶ Seneca doesn’t separate science as a secular inquiry from theology as we today do.

For Seneca, the goal of studying nature is to liberate the mind. He accepts a popular belief in an earlier, simpler, ungroomed, uncorrupted age. He deplors his contemporaries’ descent into vice from their virtuous forebears. Seneca contrasts the liberated mind that looks down from its cosmic vantage point on the narrowness of everyday existence at ground level with the dissolute deviants who look down to their base indulgences, self-absorbed with their depravities and carnal appetites. His investigations into nature aim to elevate us above these vicious habits. “Seneca impels his reader to look upward, to transcend ordinary life at ground level, to reach for cosmic consciousness.”²⁷

Naturally the farmer must look downward to the field that is to be tended. The farmer digs down into the dirt in order to raise crops upward to the sky. The ordinary life of Stoic farmers combines attention to the rain, sun, and storms above with working the soil beneath their feet. But in *Natural Questions*, Seneca contends that the mind of a Stoic can and should rise above all earthly worries, including (non-superstitious) worries about droughts, floods, erosion, freezes, and storms, all of which can damage crops. The mind and gaze of a Stoic can and ought to turn upward to achieve serenity and communion with the divine order of the heavens. In short, Stoic farmers cultivate their fields and minds simultaneously. Good agriculture nourishes good character and a good life. Prudent, level-headed farming is irrigated by worldly wisdom and fertilized by cosmic consciousness.

Seneca similarly links divinity with earthiness in his *Letters on Ethics*. He writes: “God actually comes *into* human beings. For excellence of mind is never devoid of God. Seeds of divinity are scattered in human bodies: if a good gardener takes them in hand, the seedlings resemble their source and grow up equal to the parent plant. But poor cultivation, like sterile or boggy soil, kills the plants and produces only a crop of weeds.”²⁸ Again Seneca likens good gardening to divine cultivation. Improvement of the mind is a divine achievement. When virtues grow in a person’s mind it resembles expert gardening that raises seeds into seedlings into thriving, mature plants. God orchestrates the cosmos so that, as we mature from children into adults, godlike reason blooms in us, enabling us to think and live well.

In an earlier section we saw how the fenced orchard simile illustrates the three components of Stoic philosophy. Seneca too gleans understanding of philosophical theory from the structure of trees. A subtlety in ethical theory—the distinction between the fundamental elements or basic principles (*decreta*) and the precepts or practical rules (*praecepta*)—he explains thus: “The difference between philosophy’s principles and its precepts is the same as that between the basic elements of something and its branches. The latter depend on the former, which are both their causes and the causes of everything.” Later in the same letter, botany again clarifies the dependency of precepts. “Leaves cannot flourish by themselves; they need to be fixed in a branch from which to draw their sap. In the same way, precepts on their own wither; they need to be fixed in a philosophical system.”²⁹ Without their branches, leaves can neither grow nor thrive. Similarly, practical rules cannot guide action unless they sprout from a strong understanding of fundamental principles. Seneca uses arboreal morphology to impart a lesson in ethics.

Seneca draws five ethical lessons from contemplating nature

1. Beholding the beauty of nature teaches the orderliness of the world, an orderliness that is divine. Thus, study of nature yields theological wisdom.
2. Theological wisdom frees us from pernicious passions like fear, anger, and greed.
3. Admiring the marvels of the starry heavens above pulls our attention away from vain self-indulgence and vices of the flesh.
4. God implants in us the seeds of excellence, which we can cultivate into full-grown virtue, just as proficient gardeners nurture seedlings into thriving adult plants.
5. The structure of trees illustrates the relationship between basic theoretical principles and practical precepts.

Whereas for Seneca gardening serves as a useful analogy for ethical improvement, Musonius Rufus praises farming itself. Farming is an occupation no worse than philosophy, he argues, and it is perhaps even better for a man strong in body. He recommends earning a living from the land, if you own some, and even if you don’t. Many people, he remarks, farm someone else’s land to support their families.³⁰

Because they work with their own hands and are industrious, some earn a very good living this way. The earth repays most beautifully and justly those who care for her, giving back many times what she receives. For someone willing to work, she supplies an abundance of all the things necessary for life and does so in a seemly and shame-free manner.³¹

Musonius declares that sowing, plowing, working vines, harvesting, and threshing are all tasks compatible with freedom and suitable for good people. Hesiod was not ashamed of being a shepherd but was loved by both the gods and muses. So, Musonius infers, only the decadent or soft would dare say that agriculture is unsuitable or shameful for good folk.³²

Musonius implies that shepherding and certain other agricultural chores allow for leisure. He explicitly identifies the main benefit of farming as the abundant leisure for deep thinking and reflecting on the nature of education. This notion of the mind being freed to contemplate higher subjects than what lies at one's feet harmonizes with the goal of cosmic consciousness in Seneca's *Natural Questions*. Musonius seems to believe that many farming chores, as well as shepherding, require little exertion, and so these light tasks consume little time and thereby allow the mind to contemplate the better things and become wiser, the goal of every philosopher.³³

Agrarian life offers many advantages. Musonius judges it better to be nourished from the earth than from some other source. (He also advocates a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet,³⁴ so presumably he rules out food from the sea, livestock, and wild game.) He judges it better to live in the country than the city (as sophists do), where false beliefs about what is good abound³⁵; to be healthy by living outside than to seclude oneself in the shade; to be free and seemly by providing necessities for oneself than to get them from others. Therefore, Musonius concludes, earning a living from farming is noble, blessed, and favored by the gods.³⁶

To the objection that time spent farming prevents one from philosophizing, Musonius replies that students of philosophy benefit less from attending a philosopher's formal lectures in an urban setting than by watching their teacher out in the country work and endure pain rather than ask for a handout. He believes that the philosophy student who works *with* his teacher down on the farm can simultaneously listen to him speak more convincingly about self-control, justice, and courage. Those who want to philosophize properly, he contends, don't need a lot

of words or sophists bloviating and bandying about a big batch of theories. “Those who do farm work can learn the most essential and useful things, especially if they will not be working all the time but can take some breaks.”³⁷ How authentically one walks (hoes, plants, prunes, etc.) one’s talk matters. Musonius defends rugged training and philosophizing in *practice* performed by hardy, outdoorsy philosophers whose activities and habits display the virtues they propound. He steers youths away from soft, slick, decadent, citified, theory-mongering philosophers who don’t do a lick of manual labor.

According to Musonius, progress in philosophy is measured by observed behavior. He affirms that all true lovers of philosophy would benefit from and relish spending as much time as possible in the country eating, drinking, sitting, and sleeping unconcealed, under the watchful eye of a good man.³⁸ Agrarian mentoring is just the ticket. Therefore, Musonius holds that farming fosters the virtues of industriousness, austerity, hardiness, courage, seemliness, freedom, self-reliance, nobility, self-control, and justice. So, whereas for Seneca contemplating nature is a fine cerebral activity productive of virtue, Musonius extols the physicality of working fields and robust, rustic ways of life as excellent means of becoming good.

Musonius’s student Epictetus conceives of nature as theologically imbued. The divine Providence he sees at work in nature probably strikes contemporary sensibilities as unscientific and implausible. Epictetus believes that Zeus/god cares for human beings in many ways. These divine gifts include the rain that sustains trees bearing fruit. He states that when Zeus wants to be Rain-Bringer, or Fruit-Giver, or Father of men and gods, he only attains his goals and earns these epithets by benefiting the common good.³⁹ Zeus’s gifts include not only life itself, but what sustains life, such as the vine and wheat, dried fruits, wine, and olive oil.⁴⁰ The will of Zeus/god is directed only at the global good of the entire world order, which includes the collective welfare of the cosmic community populated by all rational beings, mortal and immortal. For Stoics precipitation is not a phenomenon devoid of intention. Rather, it is beneficial on purpose.

Epictetus observes divine volition pervading biological processes. Moreover, he contends that the divinity watches a person’s every action.⁴¹ He argues for this by appealing to a doctrine of Stoic physics. The idea is that the physical cohesion of the parts of the Whole (the universe) is so seamless that what happens on earth is felt in sympathetic connection (*sumpatheia*) in heaven. The regularity with which plants flower, send out shoots, produce fruit, drop their fruit and leaves, and go

dormant Epictetus attributes to god's commands.⁴² He believes that the waxing and waning of the moon and the seasonal approach and recession of the sun correspond with terrestrial alterations from one opposite (for example, winter's cold, spring's wetness) to the other (for example, summer's heat, autumn's dryness). He thinks that our bodies' biological rhythms and physiological sensitivities to the weather and to the diurnal cycle, and plants' similar sensitivities (for example, phototropism, growing season) are closely bound to the cosmos. So, since both plants and human bodies intimately share the affections of the Whole, Epictetus infers that human souls share the affections of the Whole even more so.⁴³ He argues that (a) the sun can illuminate a huge part of the Whole while leaving dark only the small space that is no larger than what is cast into shadow by the Earth; (b) god causes the sun to revolve, the sun being a small part of god compared with the Whole; therefore, (c) god perceives all things.⁴⁴ Epictetus's theological explanations of natural phenomena will seem antiquated and ignorant to a secular scientist. Yet in describing a tightly knit biological community of organisms (plants, humans) interacting in sympathetic conjunction with the other elements of their environment (mountains, rivers, lakes, sun, moon), Epictetus anticipates the notion of an *ecosystem*. This adumbration of the idea of an ecosystem bespeaks the earthy virtue of ecological wisdom, which can and ought to guide our contemporary philosophical synthesis of ecological science with agriculture. Epictetus's nascent notion of an ecosystem thus advances my thesis that we need to implement agricultural practices that harmonize with nature and support living in agreement with nature.⁴⁵

Moreover, Epictetus's teachings deeply influenced Marcus Aurelius. Like Seneca and Epictetus, Marcus also keenly observed nature.⁴⁶ In his set of private philosophical reflections traditionally called the *Meditations*, Marcus draws a lesson from arboriculture to demonstrate that people ought to stick together and preserve solidarity.

A branch cut away from the branch beside it is simultaneously cut away from the whole tree. So too a human being separated from another is cut loose from the whole community. The branch is cut off by someone else. But people cut themselves off—through hatred, through rejection—and don't realize that they're cutting themselves off from the whole civic enterprise. Except that we also have a gift, given us by Zeus, who founded this community of ours. We can reattach

ourselves and become once more components of the whole. But if the rupture is too often repeated, it makes the severed part hard to reconnect, and to restore. You can see the difference between the branch that's been there since the beginning, remaining on the tree and growing with it, and the one that's been cut off and grafted back. "One trunk, two minds." As the gardeners put it.⁴⁷

Social groups are living wholes of which individual persons are organic interdependent parts. We are myriad cells constituting the single organism of society. This is the Stoic idea of cosmopolitanism. Stoics believe that Zeus established a cosmic community of all rational beings, mortal humans and immortal gods. Rationality transcends differences among racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural groups and binds every thinking being as a citizen (*politēs*) of the world (*cosmos*) together into the same, single, all-encompassing city (*cosmopolis*). As a citizen of this cosmopolis, Marcus is responsible for preserving its unity and promoting its harmony. Unfortunately, people too often behave irresponsibly, disregard their neighbors, and sever the ties binding them together. Strife among us is like branches cutting themselves off from their tree. Marcus believes it fortunate that we all have the power to reattach ourselves to our social groups, heal the rifts we have torn in the social body, and return to the fold. The ability to reestablish solidarity—the healing powers of cooperation and collective civic effort toward a common good—is a vital virtue. To work in concert as a single-minded group for the good of the whole, huge organism of which each person is but a small part is a lesson the adept gardener teaches in practicing her art.

Marcus detects beauty in countless subtle features of nature. Observe the wheat we harvest to make flour we bake into bread. Watch closely fig and olive trees.

We should remember that even Nature's inadvertence has its own charm, its own attractiveness. The way loaves of bread split open on top in the oven; the ridges are just by-products of the baking, and yet pleasing, somehow: they rouse our appetite without our knowing why. Or how ripe figs begin to burst. And olives on the point of falling: the shadow of decay gives them a peculiar beauty. Stalks of wheat bending under their own weight. . . . And other things. If you look at them in isolation there's nothing beautiful about them, and yet by supplementing nature they enrich it and draw us in. And anyone with a feeling

for nature—a deeper sensitivity—will find it all gives pleasure. Even what seems inadvertent. . . . He'll look calmly at the distinct beauty of old age in men, women, and at the loveliness of children. And other things like that will call out to him constantly—things unnoticed by others. Things seen only by those at home with Nature and its works.⁴⁸

A discerning, sensitive feel for Nature characterizes a naturalist. To recognize the beauty and charm of Nature and be pleased by it characterizes a nature lover. To study the regular, intelligible processes of growth and maturation of fruiting plants is to do horticulture. Those with the keen eyes of a gerontologist notice the fine details of each stage of human life, from childhood to adulthood to senectitude, in women and men. Yet only those of a Stoic bent find beauty in all those fine details and calmly embrace aging as good. Stoics study, learn from, love, and embrace Nature. This enables them to be “at home (*oikos* = *ecos*) with Nature and its works,” which is what it is to be *ecologists*.

Marcus learns another lesson from olive trees. Olives on the branch teach us how to live, celebrate nature, and die the right way. “To pass through this brief life as nature demands. To give it up without complaint. Like an olive that ripens and falls. Praising its mother, thanking the tree it grew on.”⁴⁹ Gratitude to Mother Earth for birthing, nursing, and raising us up is the Stoic's response to Nature. Human beings are olives growing on, and inevitably falling from, the tree that is the natural world. The same insight about change comes from patiently observing grapes. “Grapes. Unripe . . . ripened . . . then raisins. Constant transitions. Not the ‘not’ but the ‘not yet.’”⁵⁰

Another ethical lesson comes from hydrology. “Dig deep; the water—goodness—is down there. And as long as you keep digging, it will keep bubbling up.”⁵¹ Persistent effort will succeed in irrigating virtue. This self-confidence is shown when Marcus reminds himself that nothing anyone says or does to him cuts his mind off from clarity, sanity, self-control, or justice. He likens this cognitive purity to being a spring of clear, sweet water that is being cursed by a man who shovels mud or dung into it. The mind of a Stoic is like fresh water that keeps bubbling forth and washing away any pollutants in its stream: “To have that. Not a cistern but a perpetual spring. How? By working to win your freedom. Hour by hour. Through patience, honesty, humility.”⁵² The inexhaustible plenitude of the bubbling spring inspires Marcus's daily regimen of exercising virtues to win

freedom. This is freedom from irritability, deceit, and conceit. Freedom from wickedness comes with cultivating patience, honesty, and humility. Many texts in the *Meditations* liken the never-ending flow of changes in the world to a river.⁵³

Repeated observations of fig trees and mindful reflection on how nature operates teach Stoics wisdom. The wise are never surprised. “Remember that it’s as shameful to be surprised that a fig tree bears figs as it is that the cosmos produces whatever its *crop* is. And a good doctor isn’t surprised when his patients have fevers, or a helmsman when the wind blows against him.”⁵⁴ Sometimes patients get sicker. Sometimes the wind blows in your face. Only fools are surprised by whatever crops up in the cosmos. Foolishness is a vice we cannot afford to indulge.

Another vice is impatience. In the following text Epictetus lectures a student who believes that he has made such great strides in philosophical wisdom that he fancies himself a big deal and rushes to self-congratulate. Hubris has blinded him to a lesson taught by flowering plants.

Keep your philosophy to yourself for a little while. That is the way fruit comes to be. The seed must be buried and lie hidden for a season and grow incrementally to achieve maturity; but if it produces the ear before the jointed stalk, it never reaches maturity, it’s from a garden of Adonis. You too are a kind of plant: you’ve bloomed too soon and the winter will shrivel you. See what the farmers say about the seeds when the summer heat arrives too soon. They worry that the over-eager seeds will sprout up too lushly, and that a single frost will arrest them and lay bare their weakness. You better watch out too, fella. You’ve developed with over-eager cockiness, you’ve jumped up to grab some glory before the time is due. You think you’re somebody, fool among fools. You’ll be chewed up by the frost, or rather, you’ve already been chewed up by the frost down at the root, though your stalk still holds a few blooms so you suppose that you’re still alive and thriving. Allow us, at least, to ripen as nature wants. Why do you expose us to the elements, why force us? We’re not yet ready to withstand the air. Let the root grow, let it next produce its first joint, then the second, then the third. This is how the fruit will naturally force its way out, whether or not I wish it.⁵⁵

Remarkably, Epictetus tries to impart to his impetuous pupil the patience and perseverance of a plant. This is because Epictetus also teaches that god/Nature brought non-rational animals into the world simply to use their sensory stimuli and pursue their bodily desires. Our goal, in contrast, is to live rationally, which includes

understanding our sensory stimuli, contemplating Nature, and being appreciative spectators and interpreters of the works of god/Providential Nature.⁵⁶ Yet in this text Epictetus cautions his hasty, arrogant student to take his time, internalize the good habits of mind he is still learning, rehearse his lessons slowly, deliberately, and often, effectively sinking deep down the roots of his training (*askēsis*). Then, little by little, he can send up each joint of his stalk and grow slowly and steadily, safe from the frost. The student who hurries to bloom too soon should emulate the plant paragon.

It makes sense that trees are especially instructive for the Roman Stoics. The ancient Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE) declared that “the whole of Italy resembles one vast orchard.”⁵⁷ But the life lessons these Stoics draw from nature are by no means limited to plants. Seneca, Musonius, and Epictetus explicate many exemplary traits and behaviors of nonhuman animals.⁵⁸

Given such a wealth of instructive ethical examples taken from the natural world, why is Musonius, for instance, such a big fan of farming? Why does he think farming is at least as good an occupation as philosophy for becoming good? These questions will be answered by investigating the concept of agrarianism.

The Virtues of Roman Agrarians

Agrarianism is a sociopolitical worldview that views rural society as superior to urban society, and the independent farmer as superior to the paid worker. Agrarians believe that farming as a way of life shapes ideal social values and corrects false beliefs about the good life held by urbanites. The agrarian ideal is epitomized by the ancient Roman legend of Cincinnatus.

Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (c.519–c.430 BCE) was a patrician and suffect consul in 460 BCE. According to legend, in 458 BCE a Roman army was besieged by invaders. Cincinnatus, an exiled commander around sixty years old, was working his small farm when he was summoned by the Roman people to rescue the state. Within sixteen days he assembled an army, defeated the invaders, surrendered his power, and returned to the plow. In the Roman tradition, the story of Cincinnatus was a shining example of superlative leadership, civic dedication, austere modesty, and pastoral virtue. His story was so celebrated during the American Revolution that a mural was painted in the U.S. Capitol building to commemorate it and instruct lawmakers and citizens in civic ideals.

A second exemplary agrarian was the senator, orator, and historian Marcus Porcius Cato (Cato the Elder) (234–149 BCE). Born to an ancient plebeian family of farmer-soldiers, he led a distinguished military career and wrote *De Agri Cultura*, a farmer’s notebook, c.160 BCE.⁵⁹ He was revered for his practicality, austerity, and efforts to stem the tide of extravagance and licentiousness. Heralded for his natural sagacity and many civic and political accomplishments, in old age he was often called Cato the Wise.

Cincinnatus and Cato the Elder were stoics with a small “s,” but were no fools, as Stan the patient was. Cato the Elder’s great-grandson, Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis (Cato the Younger), was a declared Stoic philosopher with a capital “S.” The great-grandson emulated his great-grandfather. Cato the Younger was heroized by Seneca for his tenacity, faultless integrity of character, and valiant opposition to the tyranny of Julius Caesar.

Cato the Elder is the main character of Cicero’s dialogue *Cato the Elder on Old Age*. The other two characters of this dialogue, nearly fifty years younger than Cato, are Scipio Aemilianus (185–129 BCE) and Gaius Laelius (c.186–? BCE). Scipio, a prominent patron of Greek and Roman writers and philosophers, had an illustrious military career and was judged by the historian Polybius to be one of the purest and noblest men in history. Laelius, Scipio’s old army buddy, also won military renown. But Laelius, who studied with the capital “S” Stoics Diogenes of Babylon and Panaetius, gained great philosophical learning. Admired for his erudition, equanimity, integrity, justice, and nobility of thought, Laelius earned the title “the Wise.” Thus, whereas Scipio Aemilianus was a small “s” stoic, Laelius the Wise was a capital “S” Stoic.

In Cicero’s dialogue, Scipio and Laelius marvel at Cato’s surpassing wisdom and the fact that old age never burdens him. Cato attributes his wisdom to following nature as the best guide and obeying her as a god. Nature, he avers, is not so careless a playwright as to plan out each act of life’s drama while neglecting the final act. He compares the necessity of the final act to the way orchard fruits and crops of grain ripen over time, gradually shrivel, and get ready to fall. Cato calmly accepts his mortality as a limit nature sets. Laelius and Scipio urge him to pass on to them the principles that allowed him to reach his destination free of worry. In reply, Cato delivers a long panegyric of agriculture. The delights of agriculture he judges best suited to the life of a wise old man. Mother Earth he likens to a bank that reliably returns generous interest on the principal. He praises the soil’s

power to embrace, warm, and transform scattered grains of wheat into gradually rising stalks of sheathed ears in ordered rows. Cato revels in “the inherent force of all those things which are generated from the earth—a force that, from the tiny fig-seed, or grape-stone, or from the smallest seeds of other fruits and plants, can produce such mighty trunks and boughs.” He says the farmer finds joy not only in his cornfields, vineyards, orchard, and garden, but also in his meadows, woodlands, and the bees swarming among an infinite variety of flowers. All the farmer’s tasks yield crops alluring to the eye and delicious in taste. Thus, Cato gives three reasons to think that no life can be happier than that of the farmer. First, the aesthetic charms of every aspect and element of the farm are overt. Second, the duty the farmer performs sustains and benefits all of humanity. Third, the plenty and abundance of the farm in providing everything that tends to nurture humanity engenders worship of the gods, presumably as gratitude for their providential care of human beings. He concludes: “Nothing can be more abounding in usefulness or more attractive in appearance than a well-tilled farm, and to its enjoyment old age not merely offers no obstacle, but even entices and allures.” Nowhere else can an old man bask in cordial sunshine, or shake off winter’s chill beside a cozy fire, or in the summertime cool himself under shady trees by burbling streams. Compared to the joys of agriculture, horses, weapons of war, ball games, swimming contests, foot races, and idle games of chance so popular with city folk fail to attract Cato. He delights in the bounty and beauty of a farm while embracing the limits nature imposes, including mortality.⁶⁰

One commentator remarks on how the untidy habit of the vine “to sprawl is arrested, tamed, pruned and moulded by the loving skill of the vine-dresser—a glowing tribute to man’s *capacity to tame nature* in the interest of civilized living.”⁶¹ Later, I will show that a key concern of the Midwest Stoic in evaluating agricultural methods must always be whether and to what extent *taming* nature harmonizes with living *in agreement* with nature. All farming inevitably disturbs land and water a little or a lot. Thus, determining which practices are sustainable and prudent in the long run requires circumspect judgments grounded in virtues.

Cicero declares that “there is no kind of gainful employment that is better, more fruitful, more pleasant, and more worthy of a free man than agriculture.”⁶² He praises agrarian life as the teacher of parsimony, industry, and justice.⁶³ Thus Cato the Elder, Cicero, and the Stoic Musonius Rufus all extol agrarian virtues, which include self-sufficiency, diligence, hardiness, parsimony, perseverance,

equanimity, modesty, justice, and civic responsibility. Farmers promote the common good by producing food for everyone. Recall the lesson from Marcus about what we can learn from arboriculture. Agrarian virtues animate a philosophical perspective and way of life I dub Midwest Stoicism.

From Roman Stoic Agrarianism to Midwest Stoicism

A farmer's fields, orchard, vineyard, garden, and woodlands are like an artist's canvas, easel, pigments, pastels, and oils. A farmer's hoe, plow, rake, fork, scythe, bolo, spade, axe, and mattock resemble an artist's brushes, knife, and sponge. Born near the tiny town of Anamosa in Jones County, Iowa, the artist Grant Wood (1891–1942) grew up in Cedar Rapids. He studied at the Handicraft Guild in Minneapolis and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In the 1920s in Europe, he studied impressionism and post-impressionism, and gained a strong appreciation for the realism of Jan van Eyck. Wood became the leading proponent of the American movement of Regionalism in the arts, advancing figurative painting of rural Midwestern themes. His childhood country school is depicted on the 2004 Iowa State Quarter. He is buried at Riverside Cemetery in Anamosa. The Figge Art Museum in Davenport displays some of Wood's personal effects and works of art. No artist is more quintessentially Midwestern.

Wood's most emblematic work, *American Gothic*, remains one of art history's biggest icons. "Featuring a stoic portrait of a farmer and his daughter, this painting offers a fascinating glimpse into life in the rural United States."⁶⁴ The house in the portrait was built in a Gothic Revival style called Carpenter Gothic. The characteristically "rural" appearance of this abode inspired Wood to imagine "American Gothic people with their faces stretched out long to go with this American Gothic house."⁶⁵ For his models, Wood chose his younger sister, Nan Wood Graham, and his dentist, Dr. Byron McKeeby.

Wood dressed the figures in clothing typical of a farming family. Wood Graham, for example, wears a colonial print apron and has a cameo pendant pinned to her high-collar, while McKeeby wears overalls and carries a pitchfork. He also opted to give the figures stoic expressions—a choice that many Iowans misinterpreted as an attempt to portray them as "pinched, grim-faced, puritanical Bible-thumpers."

Wood, however, stressed his appreciation for his home state and stated that this was not the case.⁶⁶

Iowa farmers are not joyless religious zealots. They just look like small “s” stoics. The faces of *American Gothic* are those of Midwest stoic agrarians.⁶⁷ How closely do these expressions resemble those of Dr. Gracey’s stony farmer? The evidence furnished by Wood and Gracey indicates that small “s” stoics are common in the Midwest. Do these folks who *look* stoical *think* like big “S” Stoics?

Recall from the opening section the Great Eight Midwestern states. Four are contiguous with Kentucky. Given its geography and history, the northern tier of Kentucky along the Ohio River can be regarded as at least fuzzily Midwestern. This area includes Henry County, home of the acclaimed farmer, author, cultural critic, and environmental activist Wendell Berry. Berry quotes from the fourth of Virgil’s *Georgics* to tap into the ancient Roman stoic agrarian theme of the small farmer leading an abundant life on a discarded scrap of land.

I saw a man,
An old Cilician, who occupied
An acre or two of land that no one wanted,
A patch not worth the plowing, unrewarding
For flocks, unfit for vineyards; he however
By planting here and there among the scrub
Cabbages or white lilies and verbena
And flimsy poppies, fancied himself a king
In wealth, and coming home late in the evening
Loaded his board with unbought delicacies.⁶⁸

Berry tracks the folk tradition of this old squatter from ancient Rome to today. He neither has nor needs much land. His land is often marginal. He always associates frugality with abundance. Through this agrarian lens, Berry appraises the value of a small scrap of land by reference to having no land at all. Agrarians know that to be landless is to be existentially lost. Consequently, the old subsistence farmer in Virgil’s poem is both wise and happy to accept “an acre or two of land that no one wanted.” “If you have no land you have nothing: no food, no shelter, no warmth, no freedom, no life.”⁶⁹ Berry emphasizes that respect for limits is essential to agrarianism.

Agrarian farmers see, accept, and live within their limits. They understand and agree to the proposition that there is “this much and no more.” Everything that happens on an agrarian farm is determined or conditioned by the understanding that there is only so much land, so much water in the cistern, so much hay in the barn, so much corn in the crib, so much firewood in the shed, so much food in the cellar or freezer, so much strength in the back and arms—and no more. This is the understanding that induces thrift, family coherence, neighborliness, local economies. Within accepted limits, these virtues become necessities. The agrarian sense of abundance comes from the experienced possibility of frugality and renewal within limits.⁷⁰

Berry’s agrarians accept and abide by limits just as Cato the Wise accepts that he is playing out the final act of his mortal life, a limit set by nature. Cato beams about the bounty and beauty of his farm as Berry invokes Virgil’s old Cilician fancying himself a king feasting on cabbages. The thrift, frugality, and neighborliness of Berry’s agrarians reflect Cicero’s lessons in parsimony, industry, and justice learned from farming.

Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius also honor limits. Seneca shows how reverence of nature requires respecting limits. Admiring the beauty of nature reveals the world’s orderliness and pulls us away from fear, anger, greed, petty indulgences, and carnal vices. Consciousness of the vast grandeur of the cosmos shrinks our self-absorbed worries to vanishing points. Like Berry, Musonius sees the virtue of freedom realized by farming. Musonius believes the benefits of farming include abundant leisure for contemplation, living outdoors in the country, and procuring one’s own necessities. Farming fosters the virtues of industriousness, seemliness, justice, and courage. But for Musonius the acceptance of limits is particularly salient in the agrarian virtues of austerity, self-reliance, and self-control. Constant vigilance about the limits of our powers, about what is and is not up to us, is fundamental to Epictetus’s teaching. The agrarian sense of abundance grown from the lived possibility of frugality and renewal within limits described by Berry resonates strongly with Epictetus’s insistence that by teaching us perseverance, patience, and wisdom, nature empowers us to improve ourselves, thereby granting us abundant opportunity to flourish. Marcus Aurelius believes that from organic bodies we can learn social cohesion and mutual cooperation—what Berry calls neighborliness. Like Seneca, Marcus too summons sensitivity for the beauty of nature. But the lesson of limitation he

so often rehearses is that nature teaches us that transience and change are certain. To judge this certainty as good fosters feeling and being at home with nature and its works. Marcus reminds himself that observing nature teaches us patience, how to see the big picture, comprehend the enormity of time, and so never be surprised or upset. Indeed, all the Roman Stoics emphasize the limit of mortality. No philosophers take limits more seriously than Stoics.

Along with the ecological limits Berry describes, biology imposes others: not only mortality, but fragilities like susceptibility to disease, vulnerability to injury, and senescent decrepitude. Stoics directly and habitually confront all these limits. You're worried, anxious, afraid? Is it about something that is up to you to control? If not, don't sweat it. Don't waste your time or effort wanting to change what isn't yours to change. What you're able to do is limited. Each day you need water, food, and rest. You're mortal. Just like all other people, animals, and plants now alive, your death is certain. Just like all those people, animals, and plants that came before you, they turned to dust and are gone. You only have so many days and no more. You only have so much energy and no more. You only have so much time to complete your tasks and no more. Stop dragging your feet. If you want to become a better person, you must get to it *now*. No more delays. No more excuses. Welcome what you're given as a temporary gift. Make the best of what you've got right now—*that* is up to you. If you want to be happy, be wise. To cherish what you have is wise. To let go, without complaint, of what was only loaned to you is wise. Frugality and renewal within limits resonate in Midwest Stoicism.

Now, a worry could be raised about how specific Stoic agrarianism is to the Midwest. Does Berry's agrarian ideal apply to farming in any region of the United States, whether New England, the South, California, or the Pacific Northwest?

First, in various ways the history of each region subtly colors its cultural tendencies and norms. The slavery upon which Southern plantations of the nineteenth century operated, for instance, leaves a deep and lasting stain of social and ecological injustice in the South. This history of racial injustice in the states of the Confederacy does not extend to agrarians in the Union who fought for abolition. One might also suggest that the suffering and hardship of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s forged a stoic endurance and resoluteness of agrarians across the Midwest. Few Midwest agrarians lease their fields for oil and natural gas extraction compared to agrarians in Oklahoma and Texas.⁷¹

Second, the filter of cultural expectations can obscure the gauging of (agrarian) values, virtues, and vices. It may be tougher for Midwesterners to

detect the virtues of courtesy, patience, generosity, modesty, and friendliness in East Coasters than in fellow Midwesterners. A stereotypical Californian, on the other hand, may strike a Midwesterner as too self-entitled, too self-absorbed, too fragile to handle harsh weather, and too fond of automobiles. So, perhaps what varies from region to region is more the styles in which certain virtues are expressed rather than their actual distribution. Uncouth behaviors of members of one region may be off-putting to those of another without necessarily being reliably objective measures of vice.

What of agrarianism in the South? Is Wendell Berry, a Kentuckian, a dubious choice as a proponent of Midwestern Stoic agrarian values? I do not claim that the Stoic agrarianism that resonates with elements of Berry's philosophy takes root exclusively in the Midwest. Rather, I opine that Stoic agrarian virtues are in high relief in the Midwest while admittedly cropping up in other locales in North America and beyond.

Today very few Americans and very few Midwesterners are farmers. The majority of those involved in agriculture belong to Big Ag—the huge corporations that control the nation's (and increasingly the world's) land, seeds, plants, food, and farm machinery. These workers are not landed because they are either precariously employed farmhands with no claim to the land they work, or they are agribusiness employees, or they are corporate shareholders with no real connection to the land. The very few who are independent farmers rely heavily on farm subsidies and agribusiness contracts. Consequently, the millions of Midwesterners living in cities, suburbs, and rural towns conquered by the profit-ravenous, labor-exploiting, and ruthlessly environment-damaging behemoth of Big Ag cannot plausibly be said to embody Stoic agrarianism. That is precisely why it is urgent for Midwesterners, indeed all Americans, to transform their lives. I will return to this point in the final section of this chapter.

What of Stoic theology? Must Midwest Stoics believe in divine Providence? For a post-Darwinian, belief in evolution instead of divine Providence does not preclude the belief that the universe is vastly larger and grander than we are, that all of its parts interconnect, and that we can and should exercise our intellects to live in harmony with this huge cosmic whole of which we are tiny parts. A Midwest Stoic need not agree with Epictetus's belief that the Stoics' Zeus commands plants to flower and drop their fruits in order to affirm the idea of an ecosystem, admire nature's beauty, and glean from nature lessons in frugality, self-control, and modesty.

One could object that farmers hold no monopoly on such virtues. According to agrarianism, farming is better than other occupations. Why? Compare being a salesperson, commodity trader, or proprietor of a brothel. Couldn't trading commodities and services as "preferred indifferents" in a free market count as admirable in capitalism? The brothel, one could argue, provides sexual services to cater to a demand for erotic "preferred indifferents." The profitability of the brothel could result largely from the proprietor's virtues of industriousness, frugality, and entrepreneurial resourcefulness.

A problem with this argument is that any occupation motivated by vice is objectionable. Is the motive for buyers and sellers greed? Does the monetization of sexual desire feed the greed of pimps and sex workers while fueling the lust of their clients? To work a job motivated by greed, lust, envy, fear, or anger is to suffer from vice. Stoics regard greed, fear, anger, and similar passions as violent, pathological disturbances of sick minds. The farmer who mistreats his employees, exploits and abuses animals, cheats on his taxes, pollutes water and air, bribes officials, and is driven by greed is just as reprehensible as the brothel owner afflicted by the same vices. So it's true that agrarians have no monopoly on the specified agrarian virtues. But Midwest Stoic agrarians who are virtuous are *ipso facto* superior to those who aren't.⁷²

Sometimes vices are disguised as virtues. As Judith Lee rightly observes, some regard the Midwest not as the Heartland of virtues but rather as a Hinterland populated by rubes and suburbanites, a backwater so inhospitable that its native-born artists and intellectuals flee to the coasts. Nonetheless, Lee believes that "Americans associate the pastoralism of farm life with cultural wholesomeness and thereby identify the Midwest as 'genuine America,' 'the keeper of the nation's values.'"⁷³ By identifying the Midwest as "genuine America," Lee expresses the perspective of what I will term a Midwest Stoic *agrarianist*. As we have seen in the Roman agrarians, appreciation of nature's limits, beauty, and bounty, and the virtues of parsimony, assiduity, and justice, are in fact transnational, cosmopolitan values that Midwest Stoic *agrarians* embrace (see the later discussion for the distinction between *agrarianists* and *agrarians*).

Midwest Stoic Agrarianism and Environmental Virtue Ethics

I have been arguing that Midwest Stoicism can enable us to effectively cope with and ameliorate today's environmental problems. Midwest Stoicism calls for us to live in agreement with nature, which means especially living in agreement with reason, the perfection of which is virtue. Applying the matrix of virtues animating Midwest Stoicism to ethical reflection on contemporary agriculture and the environment yields the following thesis. Possessed of the virtues of ecological wisdom, frugality, simplicity, modesty, self-control, patience, perseverance, courage, assiduity, cooperation, justice, appreciation of beauty, and respect of limits discussed above, Midwest Stoic agrarians (MSAs) embrace as sustainable those agricultural practices that harmonize with nature by living sustainably within the limits inherent to ecosystems. Conversely, MSAs oppose agricultural practices manifesting vices of selfishness, arrogance, vanity, greed, self-indulgence, laziness, wastefulness, injustice, cruelty, or exploitation. Agricultural practices contrary to nature undermine human flourishing and characterize grave ecological folly. Consequently, these vicious practices must end.

Environmental abuses inflicted on the Midwest have left deep, wide, and lasting scars. The outlook of experts is bleak.

Often well-intentioned exploitation of midwestern bounty has left a dismal ecological legacy. Human population surges erased some animals and many more plants from the landscape. Rapacious logging altered environmental balance. The plow literally destroyed the prairies. The wind and water erosion that followed stripped away centuries of topsoil. Fertilizers and mining byproducts and industrial waste polluted waterways and poisoned the land. Dams and powerplants diminished the quality of water and air. Today midwestern states battle against histories of offense and neglect.⁷⁴

The ethical imperative of halting this devastating spiral of ecological folly has never been more urgent.

The ramifications of today's ecological challenges facing Midwestern farming communities, consumers, and citizens are ethical, economic, and political. Today less than 2 percent of Midwesterners are still farmers. "The work ethic that

trademarked the American agrarian lifestyle has been replaced by agrotechnology.⁷⁵ Consider corn. The vast majority grown in the Midwest is not sweet corn eaten by people but is either feed corn for livestock, converted into ethanol, or transformed into high fructose corn syrup.⁷⁶ The dominance of this monoculture spawned the slogan “Corn is King.” If so, King Corn is a cruel tyrant, because “abundant, cheap midwestern corn makes the cheap, supersized soft-drinks and hamburgers that have expanded waistlines wherever the American diet prevails.”⁷⁷ In a bizarre circle, fossil fuels are made into fertilizer to grow corn to make fuel for cars and trucks. “Chemical fertilizers get triply blamed: in addition to polluting waterways, they contribute to global warming and energy dependence, through their reliance on oil.”⁷⁸ Throughout the Midwest a cohort of multinational agribusinesses (Big Ag) dictates what is grown (King Corn), how it is grown (using petrochemical fertilizers, GMOs, pesticides, herbicides), and the costly externalities produced (pollutants).

The political power of Big Ag is immense. Big Ag demands and receives huge, perpetual, ballooning federal subsidies from taxpayers. Moreover, Big Ag is guilty of gagging whistleblowers, horrific abuse of animals, and rampant environmental contamination.⁷⁹ These ecological harms are externalized by the meat and dairy industrial complexes. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) subject their workers to harsh working conditions with poor protections. The hegemony of Big Ag has driven small, independent farms to near extinction. The relentless, crushing economic pressures on small farms directly increases psychological stress on farming families (recall the illness of South Dakota farmer Stan in an earlier section), which in turn causes higher rates of suicide among farmers.⁸⁰ Former President Trump’s tariffs made matters worse, driving up bankruptcies and suicides among farmers.⁸¹

The detriments of the cattle industry are old news,⁸² though poultry and hog CAFOs and processing facilities are in many ways even worse for the animals, the workers, and the environment.

Nitrogen and phosphorus in runoff from dairy farms and associated feedlots augment the growth of algae in ponds and boost nitrate levels in drinking water. Such runoff poses health risks to local populations. In Milwaukee in 1993, drinking water contaminated with cryptosporidium from livestock manure killed sixty-nine people and more than 400,000 had to be treated for various symptoms.⁸³

Industrial agrobusinesses are to blame for mercury accumulation making fish in Midwestern lakes unsafe to eat. That the meat and dairy industrial complexes endanger public health is endemic to their business design. Profits are enormous because the manure and toxic pollutants generated by privately owned CAFOs become externalities the public is forced to pay for. CAFOs pump feces, urine, antibiotics, and a range of poisons into giant holding lagoons. These lagoons release their pollutants into groundwater, streams, and rivers. No CAFOs are required to treat any of the toxic rivers of animal waste they discharge. CAFOs also emit staggering quantities of carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gases, polluting the air and worsening anthropogenic global climate change.⁸⁴ The environmental harms of Big Ag include dependence on fossil fuels; soil erosion; freshwater depletion; intensive use of pesticides, herbicides, and petrochemical fertilizers; loss of biodiversity; greenhouse gas emissions; air pollution; water pollution; and zoonotic diseases. Though not originating in the Midwest, the latest zoonotic disease spawned by the meat industry is COVID-19.⁸⁵

The effects of anthropogenic climate change are felt throughout the Midwest. Storms, flooding, and drought grow in severity and frequency. The prevalence of pests, disease, and competition from non-native species increases. The rate of warming in the Midwest has markedly accelerated over the past few decades. “Projected changes in precipitation, coupled with rising extreme temperatures before mid-century, will reduce Midwest agricultural productivity to levels of the 1980s without major technological advances.”⁸⁶ Global weirding, destructive weather events, and loss of property inflate insurance claims, which in turn ratchet up insurance premiums for those who can still afford insurance.⁸⁷ The U.S. Global Change Research Program reports:

In the absence of more significant global mitigation efforts, climate change is projected to impose substantial damages on the U.S. economy, human health, and the environment. Under scenarios with high emissions and limited or no adaptation, annual losses in some sectors are estimated to grow to hundreds of billions of dollars by the end of the century. It is very likely that some physical and ecological impacts will be irreversible for thousands of years, while others will be permanent.⁸⁸

How can Stoicism address these daunting challenges? I have argued that Stoics are naturalists—really, ecologists—who idealize the virtues of self-sufficiency,

diligence, hardiness, perseverance, equanimity, simplicity, modesty, civic responsibility, cooperation, and solidarity. Stoic agrarians admire the diligence and solidarity of bees working for the common good of their hive.⁸⁹ In antiquity “the social life of the bee caused it to be a symbol of ideal political structure and its industriousness was constantly praised.”⁹⁰ MSAs embody these virtues.

Critics of Midwest Stoic agrarianism challenge this claim. They deny that Midwesterners are moderate, thoughtful, persistent, or modest. To them, we are hinterlanders, bumpkins. To these critics, “Midwestern moderation and thoughtfulness become blandness and timidity; their persistence, pig-headedness; their modesty, banality.”⁹¹ Stoics would reply that recognizing the limits of one’s knowledge, as Socrates did, should prompt a person to be modest. Stalwart preservation of integrity of character is not pig-headedness. Thoughtfulness is indispensable for gaining wisdom. Given the disastrous threats we face, ecological wisdom demands bold action rather than the least shred of timid complacency.

Midwest Stoic agrarianism readily lends itself to a *practical* environmental virtue ethics.⁹² The practice of farming in the right way is just one part of living virtuously, sustainably, and well within an ecosystem. Living well within an ecosystem means that all of us, farmers and nonfarmers, must live a certain way. Everybody has their role to play. This cosmopolitan idea is stressed by the ancient Stoics. Seneca emphasizes that living well begins with studying nature, learning from it, and not just acknowledging its beauty but holding that beauty in awe. Musonius Rufus stresses that farming teaches industriousness, hardiness, seemliness, self-reliance, self-control (indeed vegetarianism), courage, and freedom. Epictetus imparts the lesson that nature teaches us patience, fearlessness, and perseverance, as well as our connectedness to all of nature. When properly nourished by nature in mind and body, we gain the power to flourish, according to Epictetus. Marcus Aurelius emphasizes that nature teaches us our interdependence and embeddedness in the cosmic scheme. His ethic of cosmopolitanism underscores the urgent need to cooperate and to build and preserve social solidarity if we are to do our parts and live well. Marcus’s recognition that we utterly depend on Mother Earth, that we belong to Earth and not vice versa, is fundamental to MSA. The Roman agrarians also contributed to the holistic environmental virtue ethics articulated in MSA. The rigors of farming taught Cincinnatus civic dedication and selfless leadership. Cato the Elder learned from agriculture the wisdom of embracing the limits nature imposes while delighting in a farm’s beauty and bounty. Cicero concurs, noting that the agrarian life instills parsimony, industry, and justice. These many virtues of the

ancient Roman agrarians were inherited by Grant Wood's friends and neighbors. The sturdy, stoical handsomeness of Midwestern agrarians is memorialized in his *American Gothic*. Wendell Berry honors this ancient tradition of agrarianism for understanding and accepting the inescapable limits that induce thrift, family coherence, and neighborliness. Midwest Stoicism can in fact be considered the philosophy explicitly about how to thrive amidst inescapable limits.

Thus construed, MSA provides considerable conceptual tools for responding to the serious environmental and sociopolitical challenges facing Midwesterners. For example, the Midwest Stoic virtues of simplicity, frugality, and temperance call for sustainably grown, locally sourced grains, vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, and seeds for human beings to eat. According to MSA there is no wisdom in cycling countless tons of GMO feed corn through millions of miserable ungulates, hogs, and hens crowded into CAFOs when human beings can eat plants directly. The fact that whenever temperatures rise above freezing motorists traveling through the rural Midwest are often assaulted by the godawful stench of thousands of confined bovines signals that CAFOs emblemize a food system grievously contrary to nature. The ethics of Midwest Stoic agrarians diagnose the vices endemic to Big Ag. These include greed, wastefulness, secrecy, deception, exploitation, violence, environmental injustice, and marketing gustatory decadence to unwitting Midwesterners.

Which practical steps address this vicious system of food production and the diseases stemming from both the production and consumption of factory-farmed meat and dairy products? A first, obvious step is a more rapid, more widescale shift to locally sourced, plant-based foods. This shift cannot take place only in the Midwest. It must be widescale. This requires a broad, indeed global, perspective. Stoicism provides exactly this cosmopolitan outlook. The meat and dairy industrial complexes are far too wasteful of inputs (fossil fuels, topsoil, clean water, feed corn, etc.), far too destructive of ecosystems, and far too polluting of water and air. Big Ag belches out far too much and far too many greenhouse gases, destabilizes ecosystems, and recklessly endangers human health to reap staggering profits. These are big problems that must be grasped from a big-picture, cosmopolitan perspective.

Must Midwesterners be or become landed to enact Midwest Stoic agrarianism? No. Most Americans will never own more than one third of an acre. But a citizen need never become landed to cultivate Midwest Stoic agrarian virtues in selecting and obtaining food. Everyone must eat. So, everyone should strive to

eat responsibly. Nearly everyone buys food. So, everyone who buys food should strive to buy responsibly.⁹³

A second obvious remedy is environmental activism. Here MSA recalls Cato the Younger, who opposed the tyranny of Julius Caesar. Today Midwesterners can draw inspiration from the capital “S” Stoicism of Cato the Younger to oppose the tyrannies of corrupt politicians, extreme economic inequality, science deniers, Big Ag, and systems of environmental injustice, racism, sexism, and bigotry. We ought to mobilize to promote measures to make voting easier and to safeguard free and fair elections. We ought to oppose unjust practices like gerrymandering. We can work to persuade others of the wisdom of abolishing the Electoral College and remaking the deplorably undemocratic body known as the U.S. Senate. It’s patently unfair that a voter in Wyoming wields far greater clout than a voter in California or New York. Each adult citizen of the United States, the District of Columbia, and the adult residents of its Territories deserve to have the same equally weighted vote for representatives in Congress and federal elections. Egalitarian justice demands it. We must work harder to make our democracy better, that is, more democratic.

But isn’t agrarianism elitist? It views rural society as superior to urban society and the independent farmer as superior to the paid worker. Here I redefine this as the belief of *agrarianists*. Presumably agrarianists are gleeful that each Wyoming farmer-voter exercises greater voting power than one urbanite in New York City plus a second in Los Angeles plus a third in Chicago added together.⁹⁴ Stoic *agrarians*, in contrast to agrarianists, subscribe to the (less contentious?) belief that farming as a way of life can teach healthier social values and can correct false beliefs about the good life (held by non-Stoics). One false belief is that higher consumption of energy and resources at the cost of environmental degradation makes one’s life better. Another is that owning things makes one’s life better than making things. A third false belief is that quick gratification beats slow progress. One doesn’t have to be an urbanite to succumb to consumerism, hedonism, and insidious forms of competition. But crowded (and yet lonely) urban living can often fuel selfishness and aggressive behavior more than living in a smaller, more closely knit community. So, Stoic agrarians champion real egalitarianism among all citizens. Urbanites who attain ecological wisdom (including parsimony, industriousness, simplicity, patience, thrift, temperance, fairness, living within limits, sustainability, familial coherence, and neighborliness) can live in agreement with and admire nature just as much as rural Stoic folks with the same virtues.

A third measure for Stoic agrarians is reproductive restraint for the most consumptive. Americans make up 4 percent of the global population but consume a quarter of the natural resources and a third of the planet's energy. Each generation hands down to the next this pernicious lifestyle of excessive consumerism. Sustainability applied to family planning calls for less procreating and more adopting. Consequently, the habit of greedily gobbling material goods makes having fewer children an urgent responsibility for the affluent in developed countries. Our generation owes it to future generations.⁹⁵ Stoic agrarians, fortified by an environmental virtue ethic that champions sustainability, food sovereignty, and grassroots organization to tackle the greatest collective-action problem humanity has ever seen,⁹⁶ offers a hopeful vision. Learning to live agreeably with nature is imperative if we are to make the best of the Anthropocene. Americans must lead, not follow, in this global challenge. We must all pull together like busy little bees to save this, our common, and only, hive.⁹⁷

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NOTES

1. This disambiguation corrects a common confusion about being a Stoic in contrast to being stoical.
2. See J. W. Slade and J. Y. Lee, eds., *The Midwest: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), xxi. Judith Yaross Lee writes: "The region's identity crisis also owes something to disagreement over exactly what areas constitute it. In fact, the region lacked an agreed-upon name until after the Civil War, perhaps in a rejection of the conflict's north-south orientation as westward expansion reached the Pacific coast."
3. Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, xxi.
4. The editors of *The Midwest: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures* judge all and only the Great Eight states to constitute the Midwest.

5. Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, xxi.
6. US Census Bureau, *Position of the Geographic Center of Area, Mean and Median Centers of Population: 2020*, *Census.gov*.
7. Originally so designated by historian Walter Havighurst; Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, xxi.
8. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 394–398.
9. William O. Stephens, “Stoic Naturalism, Rationalism, and Ecology,” *Environmental Ethics* 16, no. 3 (1994): 275–286.
10. Contemporary Stoics in this camp include the late Lawrence Becker, Massimo Pigliucci, and Piotr Stankiewicz.
11. Nigel Glassborow, Kai Whiting, and Leonidas Konstantakos are examples.
12. Ancient Stoics understood “physics” to be the study of nature (*phusis*), including all physical reality, including what we today would regard as both ontology and theology.
13. “Logic” for the ancient Stoics was the study of *logos*, which included principles of reasoning and argument, which we today would call logic, but also rhetoric, the study of parts of speech, and the philosophy of language, including the ontology of propositions.
14. The following accounts of Stoic ethics and physics borrow from my “The Stoics and their Philosophical System,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Kelly Arenson (New York: Routledge, 2020).
15. How, exactly, should we imagine the logic seeds doing these things, according to the Stoics? To be clear, the Stoics offered nothing approaching a granular causal explanation of these processes. We contemporaries would want such a granular explanation articulated in our current scientific terms in biochemistry, genetics, etc. The ancient Stoics had no such nomenclature. So, here I merely try to flesh out, in an admittedly speculative way, the Stoic theory in conceptual terms familiar to us.
16. Douglas R. Gracey, “The Case of the Stoic Farmer,” *Heart & Lung* 2 (1973): 744–746.
17. Gracey, “The Case,” 745.
18. Though attributed to Alan Watts, this fable may be much older.
19. Yu Liu, “The Complexities of a Stoic Breakthrough: Matteo Ricci’s *Ersbivw Yan* (Twenty-five Paragraphs),” *Journal of World History* 24 (2013): 823–847; Antonia Macaro, *More Than Happiness: Buddhist and Stoic Wisdom for a Sceptical Age* (London: Icon Books, 2018). Stoicism and Daoism are compared in Jiyuan Yu, “Living with Nature: Stoicism and Daoism,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 25 (2008): 1–19.
20. Also known as Seneca the philosopher or Seneca the Younger, to distinguish him from his less illustrious father the rhetorician.

21. In antiquity, ordinary folks often regarded these phenomena as threatening signs of divine displeasure, a view of divinity rejected by Stoics.
22. Seneca, *Natural Questions*, trans. H. M. Hine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 13.
23. Seneca, *Natural Questions*, 14.
24. Seneca, *Natural Questions*, vii 30.3, 133–134.
25. Seneca, *Natural Questions*, vi 32.1, 112.
26. Seneca, *Natural Questions*, ii 59.2, 191.
27. Gareth D. Williams, *The Cosmic Viewpoint: A Study of Seneca's Natural Questions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9, 11.
28. Seneca, *Letters on Ethics*, trans. M. Graver and A. A. Long (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), *Letter* 73.15, 228.
29. Seneca, *Letters on Ethics*, *Letter* 95.12, 369; *Letter* 95.59, 378.
30. Musonius Rufus, *Lectures and Sayings*, ed. William Irvine, trans. C. King (self-pub., CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010), *Lecture* 11. All quotations from Musonius are from this source. Musonius Rufus, *Lecture* 11.1.
31. Musonius Rufus, *Lecture* 11.2, 51.
32. Musonius Rufus, *Lecture* 11.2.
33. Musonius Rufus, *Lecture* 11.3.
34. Musonius Rufus, *Lecture* 18a and 18b. See William O. Stephens, “Stoicism and Food,” in *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*, ed. D. M. Kaplan (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018).
35. This belief is a key tenet of agrarianism.
36. Musonius Rufus, *Lecture* 11.4.
37. Musonius Rufus, *Lecture* 11.5, 52.
38. Musonius Rufus, *Lecture* 11.6.
39. Epictetus, *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), *Disc.* 1.19.12; cf. 1.22.16.
40. Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.4.30–32; *Disc.* 2.23.5.
41. Epictetus, *Disc.* 2.8.12–18; 1.14.12; 1.14.6; 1.30.1; 2.14.11.
42. Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.14.1–3.
43. Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.14.4–5.
44. Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.14.10.
45. We can and perhaps should reject the particular Stoic view that all that happens in nature is for the best. Yet we can and should accept a Stoic-like claim that living harmoniously within an ecosystem is good for us. If we accepted this, we would adopt a different set of agricultural practices. As part of adopting these agricultural practices,

we would have to adopt a different set of behaviors as virtues. These virtues would not be identical to Stoic virtues, but they would resemble them in certain important ways.

Our focus would not be to indulge our own pleasures but to fit well into the ecosystem.

46. Hereafter I refer to Marcus Aurelius Antoninus by his praenomen alone because it is the only name he bore throughout his entire life.
47. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. G. Hays (New York: Modern Library, 2003), *Med.* xi.8, 149–150. All quotations from Marcus are from this source.
48. Marcus, *Meditations* iii.2, 27–28.
49. Marcus, *Meditations* iv.48, 48.
50. Marcus, *Meditations* xi.35, 157.
51. Marcus, *Meditations* vii.59, 95.
52. Marcus, *Meditations* viii.51, 112.
53. Marcus, *Meditations* ii.17, iv.43, v.23, vi.15. See William O. Stephens, *Marcus Aurelius: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2012), 101–109.
54. Marcus, *Meditations* viii.15, 104; translation modified, emphasis added.
55. Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.8.36–40, my translation. Gardens of Adonis were domestic gardens dedicated to Adonis akin to greenhouses. To accelerate their growth, seeds were planted in porous clay pots or sponges where they rapidly and lushly sprouted but then also rapidly withered.
56. Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.6.12–22.
57. Marcus Terentius Varro, *De Re Rustica* i.2.6, quoted in K. D. White, *Roman Farming* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 22.
58. See William O. Stephens, “Epictetus on Beastly Vices and Animal Virtues,” in *Epictetus: His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance*, ed. D. R. Gordon and D. B. Suits (Rochester, NY: RIT Press, 2014), 207–239.
59. Following the example of the ancient Greek poet Hesiod’s didactic poem *Works and Days* c.700 BCE.
60. Cicero, *De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*, trans. W. A. Falconer (London: William Heinemann, 1946), 4, 5, 6, 52, 56, 57–58, 63–65.
61. White, *Roman Farming*, 38–39; emphasis added.
62. Cicero, *On Duties*, trans. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), *De Off.* 1.151, 58–59.
63. Cicero, *Pro Roscio Amerino*, 75.
64. Kelly Richman-Abdou, “How a ‘Very Paintable’ House Inspired ‘American Gothic,’ a Modernist Masterpiece,” *My Modern Met*, September 29, 2019, <https://mymodernmet.com/grant-wood-american-gothic/>, using “stoic” here to mean small “s” stoic.

65. Richman-Abdou, "How a 'Very Paintable' House Inspired."
66. Richman-Abdou, "How a 'Very Paintable' House Inspired."
67. Note that Wood chose McKeeby to model Iowan agrarianism even though he was a dentist, not a farmer. This invites the possibility that Midwest (Stoic) agrarianism is a mindset, a Weltanschauung, a way of being and living in nature that need not exclude those who do not farm.
68. Wendell Berry, "The Agrarian Standard," in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2003), 28, quoting Virgil, *The Georgics*, trans. L. P. Wilkinson (Penguin Books, 1982), 128.
69. Berry, "The Agrarian Standard," 29.
70. Berry, "The Agrarian Standard," 29–30.
71. And most of them are in Kansas, a Fringe Four state.
72. Similarly, an office worker or brothel owner who practices agrarian virtues by, for example, gardening on weekends and being a responsible shopper and consumer of food, would be ipso facto superior to a farmer who lacks agrarian virtues.
73. Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, xvii.
74. Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, 113.
75. Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, 82.
76. Jonathan Foley, "It's Time to Rethink America's Corn System," *Scientific American*, March 5, 2013.
77. Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, xxviii–xxix.
78. Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, xxix.
79. Ted Genoways, "Gagged by Big Ag," *Mother Jones* (July/August 2013), <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2013/06/ag-gag-laws-mowmar-farms/>.
80. Rebecca Hillel, Olivia Kraus, and Sally Spencer-Thomas, "Stoicism, Stress and Suicide among Farmers," *Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.sallyspencerthomas.com/dr-sally-speaks-blog/2017/10/3/stoicism-stress-and-suicide-among-farmers>. According to the ancient Stoics, suicide under specific, extreme circumstances could be justified for the sage, but never for the rest of us. A Stoic sage is free of all disturbing passions and immune to stress, including stress suffered by today's Midwest farmers. Midwest Stoicism offers a viable therapy for farmers wrestling with suicidal thoughts.
81. Chuck Jones, "Amid Trump Tariffs Farm Bankruptcies and Suicides Rise," *Forbes*, August 30, 2019.
82. Jeremy Rifkin, *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture* (New York: Plume, 1993).
83. Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, 114.

84. Jonathan S. Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2009).
85. Michael Dent, "COVID-19: The Latest Zoonotic Disease Stemming from the Meat Industry," *IDTechEx*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.idtechex.com/en/research-article/covid-19-the-latest-zoonotic-disease-stemming-from-the-meat-industry/20612>.
86. The U.S. Global Change Research Program, *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment*, vol. 2, chap. 21, 2018, <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/21/>. See also Union of Concerned Scientists, "Global Warming in the Midwest," updated June 19, 2019, <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/global-warming-midwest>.
87. Charlene Arseneault, "How Climate Change Is Increasing Your Insurance Rates," *Insure.com*, September 4, 2019, <https://www.insure.com/home-insurance/climate-change-home-insurance-rates>.
88. USGCRP, *Impacts, Risks*, <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/21/>.
89. Cato in Cicero's *De Senectute* and Marcus Aurelius in the *Meditations* are two examples. For the latter, see Stephens, *Marcus Aurelius*, 95–97.
90. Kenneth F. Kitchell Jr., *Animals in the Ancient World from A to Z* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 16.
91. Slade and Lee, *The Midwest*, xviii.
92. For examples of accounts of environmental virtue ethics, see Louke van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of Ecological Virtue Ethics* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000); Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro, eds., *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Robert Hull, "All about Eve: A Report on Environmental Virtue Ethics Today," *Ethics & the Environment* 10 (Spring 2005): 89–110; Ronald Sandler, *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Brian Treanor, *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014).
93. Many peoples indigenous to what is now called the Midwest did not engage in the sorts of farming practices praised by the ancient Stoics. These Amerinds' activities involved hunting, gathering, and land management practices like prairie burns. But history cannot be reversed. Given today's agricultural realities, perhaps Midwest Stoic agrarianism is inextricably linked to the settler colonial ideal of the past. Going forward, though, new sustainable practices and smarter uses of technology are needed and so desirable to Stoic agrarians.
94. See William Petrocelli, "Voters in Wyoming Have 3.6 Times the Voting Power That I Have. It's Time to End the Electoral College," *Huffpost*, updated November 11, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/its-time-to-end-the-electoral-college_b_12891764.

- Petrocelli writes: “To put it another way, the three electors in Wyoming represent an average of 187,923 residents each. The 55 electors in California represent an average of 677,355 each, and that’s a disparity of 3.6 to 1.”
95. See Sarah Conly, *One Child: Do We Have a Right to More?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
 96. That is, anthropogenic climate change. See Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle to Stop Climate Change Failed—and What It Means for Our Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
 97. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 224–284.

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