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Thoreau's *Walden*: Epicureanism or Stoicism?  
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In an article entitled "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, But Not Philosophers," Pierre Hadot argues that Thoreau's *Walden* displays some important similarities to Epicureanism, most notably in the simple life Thoreau cultivated while at Walden. Hadot notes that the Epicureans took pleasure in tending to those desires that are natural and necessary (e.g., hunger and thirst) while disregarding those that are unnecessary (e.g., sexual desires) and unnatural (e.g., avaricious desires). According to Hadot, Thoreau shared their view: "The reason for men's unhappiness, in the eyes of Thoreau, is that they ignore what is necessary and sufficient for life...."<sup>1</sup> Hadot proceeds to cite Thoreau: "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor."<sup>2</sup> Further, Thoreau expresses the Epicurean trait of critiquing the common form of life pursued by one's contemporaries. Modern intellectuals are especially to blame, since they are obsessed with theoretical discourse and neglect the practical problems of life, thereby falling into a sort of degenerate luxury that has little in common with the great sages of eastern and western thought. This leads Thoreau to the famous

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Hadot, "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19:3 (2005): 229.

<sup>2</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: An Annotated Edition*, ed. Walter Harding (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 12.

announcement, "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers."<sup>3</sup> By investing himself primarily in the necessities of life and enjoyment thereof, and by offering a critique of his contemporaries, Thoreau exhibits two of the characteristics one would expect in a follower of Epicurus.

Despite these poignant similarities, Hadot is not prepared to label Thoreau as purely an Epicurean. He claims that important aspects of Thoreau correspond better to a Stoic attitude. Hadot lists four such Stoic components of Thoreau's mode of life: solitude, communion with nature, acceptance of nature, and manual labor. Thoreau's extended sojourn at Walden was a solitary affair, the better part of which he spent living and working alone. As Hadot points out, for the Epicurean "there is no true pleasure if it is not shared with friends...."<sup>4</sup> Nor does the Epicurean identify herself with the "cosmic Whole," as Hadot thinks both the Stoics and Thoreau did. At best, the Epicurean took pleasure in "contemplation of the infinity of worlds," but the Stoic saw himself as an integral part of universal nature. Thoreau also accepted whatever came of nature, even if woodchucks should ravage his beans or heavy rains should destroy his potatoes—the former gives woodchucks nourishment, and rain makes the grass green, both good things.

<sup>5</sup> Whereas the Epicurean might effectively *deal* with these inconveniences of nature, Hadot claims that the Stoic, like Thoreau, honestly internalizes them. Finally, Thoreau makes much of manual labor throughout *Walden*, meticulously chronicling the efforts he exerted in constructing his house, hoeing his bean-field, surveying the frozen pond, etc. Hadot knows of no mention in Epicureanism of manual labor, but the Stoics strongly

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Hadot, "Nowadays," 232.

<sup>5</sup> See Thoreau, 128, 162.

recommended it as essential to the philosophical life. The Stoic Musonius, as Hadot notes, advocated that the teacher instruct his pupils while working in the field, using the examples of labor to enhance the lessons of philosophy. There is a very similar strain in Thoreau, for whom manual labor seems an essential part of a good life.

Hadot claims that one should not be surprised to find both Stoic and Epicurean traits in Thoreau. Goethe spoke of persons whose natures are "half Stoic and half Epicurean," and Goethe himself might be described as such a person.<sup>6</sup> An interesting question to ask is what Thoreau's attitude was toward his own nascent Stoicism and Epicureanism, as he does not speak about it openly in *Walden*. Nor are the theoretical underpinnings of those philosophies much in evidence throughout that text. Broaching the question from the Epicurean side, Hadot writes,

I do not mean... that he [Thoreau] was conscious of the fact that this [living at Walden] was precisely a matter involving an Epicurean mode of life, but I do mean that he found, perhaps spontaneously and unintentionally, perhaps under the influence of certain writings of the Ancients or of the Moderns, what Epicurus and his disciples had practiced and taught.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hadot, "Nowadays," 233.

<sup>7</sup> Hadot, "Nowadays," 232.

But is Hadot right to treat Thoreau as half Epicurean and half Stoic? Although there are some Epicurean strains in *Walden*, I hope to show that Thoreau tends much more strongly toward Stoicism.

While Hadot cites four Stoic traits in Thoreau, he only cites two Epicurean traits. This by itself is not sufficient evidence that Thoreau's Stoicism is stronger than his Epicureanism—the Epicurean traits might still be more important and pervasive than the Stoic ones—but it does make assessing the Epicurean side less complicated. The second of the two Epicurean characteristics, the penchant to critique one's contemporaries, is the easier to call into question. Hadot refers to this passage in the Epicurean, Lucretius: "Therefore mankind labours always in vain and to no purpose, consuming its days in empty cares, plainly because it does not know the limits of possession and how far it is ever possible for real pleasure to grow...."<sup>8</sup> This criticism is rather harsh, and the Stoics do seem a bit more forgiving of their contemporaries. For example, Marcus Aurelius writes, "Are you angry with the man whose person or whose breath is rank? What will anger profit you? He has a foul mouth, he has foul armpits...." Marcus enjoins the would-be Stoic to not exercise his anger against one who displays unpleasant qualities, and this might be taken as an imperative to refrain from criticism. But immediately after this, Marcus continues, "...there is a necessary connection between the effluvia and its causes. 'Well, but the creature has reason, and can, if he stops to think, understand why he is offensive.' Bless you! and so too have you reason; let reasonable disposition move reasonable disposition; point it out, remind him; for if he hearkens, you will cure him and

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<sup>8</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, ed. Martin Ferguson Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, 1982), 489 (5.1430-33).

anger will be superfluous."<sup>9</sup> Far from forbidding criticism of one's fellows, Marcus actually encourages it. What appears in the first half of the passage as a command to abstain from criticism turns out to be only a recommendation against acting on anger. Marcus suggests that one engage in a rational critique of her offensive contemporary, a critique bereft of negative emotion and informed by a regard for universal reason. In this case at least, Hadot seems to be wrong in suggesting that the Stoics are not prone to social criticism. Epictetus holds a like position. He claims that offering a truthful critique of another is eminently helpful to that other. Wondering how one would respond to such a critique, Epictetus asks, "...if I say that you do understand your own self, how can you possibly bear with me...? [...] And yet what harm have I done you? None at all, unless the mirror also does harm to the ugly man by showing him what he looks like; unless the physician insults the patient..."<sup>10</sup> At least in Epictetus' and Marcus' brand of Stoicism, criticism of one's contemporaries is as much a service as that rendered by the physician. Being a good-natured, honest mirror of the other's faults, the good Stoic suggests ways in which the other might improve himself. This practice, as Marcus suggests, serves the cause of cosmic reason. The goal is not to berate the other in anger, but rather to recommend a way of life that is for the other's own good.

This being the case, Thoreau's inclination to critique his fellow citizens aligns him with Epicureanism no more than with Stoicism. The practice is an important element in both philosophies, and Thoreau's desire not "to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as

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<sup>9</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. A. S. L. Farquharson (Dutton, New York: Everyman's Library, 1965), 30 (5.28).

<sup>10</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*, in *Epictetus, Volume One*, trans. W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, 1967), 313 (2.14).

lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up"<sup>11</sup> may as well be a function of his Stoicism as of his Epicureanism. One might try objecting that this particular quote belies a non-Stoicism, since Marcus and Epictetus practice criticism not for the sake of waking their neighbors but rather for the sake of assisting them, but I think the same dynamic is at work in Thoreau. While the clause, "if only to wake my neighbors up," might suggest a pointless and brazen bragging, Thoreau shows elsewhere that he genuinely desires to help those around him. Consider his encounter with the Irishman, John Field, who lives with his family in a leaky shack. Upon meeting him, Thoreau discovers that Field and his son work hard for a neighboring farmer, from whom they unsuspectingly receive less than fair compensation. Thoreau suggests a way they might trade their impoverished servitude for liberty, namely by adopting the simple life that Thoreau himself has chosen. By sacrificing the luxuries of life, Thoreau argues, one discovers that they were not worth the drudgeries of hard labor anyway. Because he did not understand this, Field still "rated it as a gain in coming to America, that here you could get tea, and coffee, and meat every day. But the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these."<sup>12</sup> Why did Thoreau try to help Field and his family in this way? Was he merely bragging about his own freedom, or did he perhaps earnestly desire the liberation of human beings not himself? The latter would seem more likely, because Thoreau "purposely talked to him [Field] as if he were a philosopher, or desired

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<sup>11</sup> Thoreau, 81.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 200.

to be one. I should be glad if all the meadows on the earth were left in a wild state, if that were the consequence of men's beginning to redeem themselves."<sup>13</sup>

Initially, one might ask whether Thoreau's expectations of his fellow citizens are too demanding, or otherwise inappropriate, in a liberal democracy. After all, who is Thoreau to tell Field or anyone else how they ought to conduct their private lives? But as we can see in the just-quoted passage, Thoreau did not talk down to Field but rather treated him as an equal, or at least as one who was capable of becoming his equal. According to the values typical of a liberal democracy, the state ought not to compel citizens to pursue any particular form of (private) life, but that of course does not mean that all ways of life are equally valuable. We might look at Thoreau as a citizen-philosopher who engages Field as another citizen-philosopher, offering a view about what constitutes the good life and attempting to defend that view with reasons. There is nothing in the way of compulsion here, so Thoreau's actions do not appear inappropriate for a democratic society. As a rational being, Field is free to accept or reject Thoreau's arguments. In short, we should not confuse respect for liberal democracy with endorsement of a relativistic or subjectivist view of what constitutes a worthwhile life. Indeed, regardless of whether one thinks that Thoreau's reasons are good ones, his approach fits well with the practices of both the Stoics and the Epicureans, who provided arguments in defense of views that they took to be true.<sup>14</sup> Finally, we should recall that Thoreau seeks self-improvement for the sake of forging a better life. In his view, it is to Field's own benefit to abandon his current way of life and adopt one of simplicity, but

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

that task could only be undertaken by Field himself. What Thoreau is urging, through a kind of argument, is that Field take up the work of self-improvement.

Further, his interaction with Field indicates that, for Thoreau, living simply and convincing others to do likewise is a matter of philosophy, not just a chance pastime. The first point shows that Thoreau employs criticism of his fellows in order to help them, just like Epictetus and Marcus. The second shows that Thoreau considered this an important part of being a philosopher, the implication being that Thoreau treats himself as a philosopher. Hence, Thoreau's engagement of his contemporaries is at least sometimes carried out in the Stoic spirit, and this characteristic cannot be used as evidence for siding him with the Epicureans. Of course, neither does it establish that Thoreau was purely a Stoic, since the Epicureans admittedly practiced social criticism as well. I do hope to show that Thoreau is much closer to Stoicism than its alternative, but first I must consider whether Thoreau exhibits the second trait of Epicureanism, namely the simplification of life for the sake of greater pleasure.

Thoreau certainly did seek to simplify his wants and needs while at Walden, but simplicity of life is a characteristic of both Epicurean and Stoic modes of living, not to mention numerous other philosophical and religious lifestyles. By itself, this fact provides no evidence either for or against Thoreau's being an Epicurean. The crucial issue is the motive behind this simplification—might it be described as either Stoic or Epicurean? Was Thoreau's move to Walden a matter of duty or a matter of pleasure, a regard for natural law or a regard for expediency, a desire to be in accord with universal nature or a desire to nourish only those pleasures that can be effectively secured in this



capricious world? In each of the preceding pairs, the former is the Stoic motivation and the latter is the Epicurean one. Each of these motives is grounded in a particular theoretical discourse, which was important for both schools. In Stoicism, the metaphysical principles of cosmic reason and universal nature provide the foundations for a natural law ethics to which the good Stoic dutifully adheres. The atomistic physics of Epicureanism, on the other hand, suggests no such principle, and the hedonistic ethics that results is more a matter of dealing with the haphazard world than of obeying metaphysical dictates. Nonetheless, the theoretical doctrines of Epicureanism are no less important than those of Stoicism, because the ethical system of each depends on those doctrines. While Stoicism has a positive metaphysics that *enjoins* a certain kind of ethical practice, Epicureanism has a physics that encourages one to adopt a certain kind of ethical practice as an insurance policy against the world that is ruled by that physics. Since the Epicurean does not recognize a universal nature already infused with reason, she of course sees no cause for recognizing Stoic ethics. Since for her the world is a chaotic space of cascading atoms, the best one can do is cultivate her basic (e.g., natural and necessary) needs and learn to take as much pleasure in them as possible. Hence, Epicurean ethics is more a matter of expediency than of duty, because there is no natural law to which one might be dutiful. The Stoic, of course, would find Epicurean ethics wanting, because it fails to recognize the metaphysical realities that she thinks ought to inform any system of ethics, both in its theoretical composition and its practical employment.

The question to ask is which of these theoretical discourses best describes the practical ethics of Thoreau. This is difficult to answer, because Thoreau is not very open about his philosophical commitments in terms of metaphysics, physics, and ethics—or perhaps he is not very concerned with such matters. At any rate, the matter is different in the case of his contemporary transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his essay, "The Over-soul," Emerson writes, "The soul circumscribes all things... it abolishes time and space" and "the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all."<sup>15</sup> Emerson's commitment to a universal soul that pervades all nature is analogous to the Stoic's commitment to a cosmic reason that informs all nature. In this regard at least, it is easy to say that Emerson has little in common with Epicureanism. If Thoreau has a similar metaphysics that would entail a Stoic-like ethics, he does not display it so overtly, and finding intimations of it in *Walden* is a difficult task.

This being the case, one might try instead to infer Thoreau's theoretical commitments from his practical ethics. One might carefully catalogue Thoreau's ethical practices (or "spiritual exercises," in Hadot's parlance) and attempt to gauge whether they tend more to an Epicurean or Stoic type. But this approach is even more hopeless than searching for overt references to metaphysics, since Stoic and Epicurean practices are often identical. As Hadot correctly notes, "The same spiritual exercises can, in fact, be justified by extremely diverse philosophical discourses."<sup>16</sup> This is why Seneca can quote Epicurus with approval throughout his letters to Lucilius: "The thought for today is one

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<sup>15</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-soul," *Essays: First Series*, in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 239, 241.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1995), 211.

which I discovered in Epicurus; for I am wont to cross over even into the enemy's camp.... He says: 'Contented poverty is an honourable estate.' Indeed, if it be contented, it is not poverty at all."<sup>17</sup> Although Seneca considers Epicureanism an "enemy" (*aliena*) of Stoicism, he recognizes the worth of Epicurus' practical advice, so much so that he is willing to borrow it for the sake of instructing his young student. Seneca continues this practice of citing Epicurus throughout many of his epistles to Lucilius. The point is that Epicurus and Seneca both esteem the virtue of voluntary poverty, but each reaches this estimation by a very different route.<sup>18</sup> For Epicurus, one enjoys a most satisfying and secure pleasure in attending only to one's necessary needs, such as nourishment and shelter. He recommends poverty for the sake of cultivating a pleasure that is not easily taken away by external forces. Seneca, on the other hand, advises poverty for the sake of negating craving: "It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, who is poor (*qui plus cupit, pauper est*)."<sup>19</sup> One should guard against *cupido* or craving not because it ultimately brings more pain than pleasure, but because it distracts one from a proper regard for cosmic reason, the metaphysical principle with which one should be in accord. Thoreau's spiritual exercises at Walden—building his own dwelling, living in simple conditions, adhering to a largely vegetarian diet, growing his own food, abstaining from coffee and the like, communing with nature, etc.—do suggest a life of voluntary poverty, but by themselves they indicate a Stoic form of life no more than an Epicurean. Did Thoreau live a simple life and enjoy nature for the sake of pleasure, or did he do so

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<sup>17</sup> Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Volume One*, trans. Richard Gummere (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, 1917), 9.

<sup>18</sup> For a helpful discussion of Thoreau's relationship to ancient ideas of virtue, see Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

for the sake of some metaphysical or spiritual principle? Difficult as it may be, the only way to determine Thoreau's theoretical commitments is to attend to what few comments he makes on the matter.

The most obvious place in *Walden* to start looking for this is the chapter entitled "Higher Laws." Here Thoreau writes, "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men...." This would seem to belie a tendency toward Stoicism rather than Epicureanism, but Thoreau immediately continues, "...and another [instinct] toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both."<sup>20</sup> While the first instinct can be deemed generically Stoic in its reverencing of the spiritual life, the second instinct can be deemed generically Epicurean in its reverencing of natural human needs and desires. The problem, of course, is that Thoreau claims to reverence both equally: "I love the wild not less than the good."<sup>21</sup> This seems to support Hadot's thesis that Thoreau is half Stoic and half Epicurean. However, the remainder of the chapter belies Thoreau's claim, showing that he actually reverences the good more than the wild. The Epicurean, though one might say he devotes himself solely to the natural and primitive, recognizes no higher law that governs this endeavor. Since the spiritual exercises engaged in by Stoic and Epicurean are often indistinguishable from each other, their difference must often be sought in the philosophy used to justify their practices. If I can demonstrate that Thoreau treated the wild instinct as subordinate to higher law, then I will have succeeded in showing that Thoreau's theoretical discourse has more in common with the Stoics than with the Epicureans.

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<sup>20</sup> Thoreau, 205.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

In the same chapter, Thoreau declares, "Our whole life is startlingly moral."<sup>22</sup> This declaration is preceded by a minute discussion of eating and cooking, which are highly practical affairs. Thoreau argues for a light, largely vegetarian diet. Serving as his own "butcher and scullion and cook,"<sup>23</sup> one becomes acquainted with the uncleanness of meat. Thoreau predicts that humans will eventually stop eating animals for the same reason that "savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized."<sup>24</sup> This eventual course will result if one "listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true...." Such suggestions may lead to hardship and inconvenience (i.e., not pleasure), but they also lead to "a life in conformity to higher principles."<sup>25</sup> By always engaging in practical activity with a regard for these higher principles, one has her reward in a "more elastic, more starry, more immortal" life, and these "gains and values" are actually "the highest reality."<sup>26</sup> Thoreau advocates a temperate vegetarian diet not for the sake of increased and secure pleasure, but rather because doing so provides a link to a higher and truer reality. Conforming to this reality is its own reward, whether or not pleasure is attendant.

Later in the chapter, Thoreau seems to further retreat from his opening claim that he "reverences" the spiritual and primitive instincts equally. Speaking of the "animal in us," Thoreau writes, "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established. Perhaps there is none but has cause for shame

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

on account of the inferior and brutish nature to which he is allied."<sup>27</sup> Contrary to the chapter's opening declaration, Thoreau here preferences the divine over the animal, the spiritual instinct over the primitive instinct. As he says, "Nature is hard to overcome, but she must be overcome."<sup>28</sup> To be fair, Thoreau does not advocate a complete rejection or repression of the animal, but he does suggest that it be controlled by one's divine element and its energy be used to fuel one's higher strivings. Otherwise, "[o]ur very life is our disgrace."<sup>29</sup> These are not the words one would expect from an Epicurean. Rather than pursuing an intelligent reordering of his needs and desires with the aim of securing pleasure, Thoreau wants to minimize his desires and funnel their energy into the task of conforming to higher laws.

The Stoic's ethics is one of enjoinder and duty, the Epicurean's one of expediency and shrewdness. As the "Higher Laws" chapter makes clear, Thoreau's theoretical discourse has little in common with that of the Epicurean—his seems much closer to the Stoic's discourse. Thoreau accepts neither the physics nor the ethics of the Epicureans. His universe is not one of cascading atoms but rather one ruled by spiritual laws. His ethical goal is not pleasure but communion with a higher principle, his metaphysics recognizing an extra-natural principle and his ethics being built thereon. Although Thoreau does not speak explicitly of universal nature or cosmic reason, his ethico-metaphysical framework is very similar to that of the Stoics. For both Thoreau and the Stoic, a higher principle supervenes on the natural world, and any proper ethics must be grounded in this principle. Although Thoreau is less explicit than the Stoic in

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 214.

naming or describing this principle, it serves much the same function as cosmic reason, infusing the universe with meaning and providing an ethical structure within which to live and act.

The foregoing should be sufficient to show that Thoreau is not very close to Epicureanism. Whether or not it is correct to call him a pure Stoic, Thoreau was not the "half Stoic and half Epicurean" that Hadot suggests, as his similarities to the latter are negligible. The two Epicurean traits that Hadot ascribes to Thoreau, an inclination to criticize one's contemporaries and a simplification of one's life for the sake of pleasure, are misleading. As for the first, we have seen that the Stoics were also willing to criticize others, and so this is not a uniquely Epicurean trait. As for the second, we have seen that Thoreau's simplification of his life was done for the sake of conforming to a Stoic-like higher principle, not for the sake of acquiring pleasure. But how far does Thoreau tend to Stoicism? Are there important differences between his way of life and that recommended by the Stoics?

Hadot is largely correct in detecting at least four Stoic-like traits—solitude, communion with nature, acceptance of nature, and manual labor—in *Walden*. The "Solitude" chapter nicely celebrates the first two of these. "I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself," Thoreau writes. "Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath."<sup>30</sup> The "sympathy" with which Thoreau experiences nature is made possible by solitude: "I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself."<sup>31</sup> Having access to one's own private

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 127.

world encourages a communion with the whole of which one is a part. Like the Stoic who communes with cosmic reason, Thoreau sought to "sympathize" with nature via solitary means. One thinks of Marcus Aurelius, whom Hadot references in this regard: "Always remember the following: what the nature of the Whole is... and that no man can hinder your saying and doing at all times what is in accordance with that Nature whereof you are a part."<sup>32</sup> For Marcus, communing with nature is a purely individual enterprise. One must herself "remember" the nature of the whole, and she can remain in accord with it regardless of the actions of others. Like Marcus, Thoreau advocated a solitary accordance with nature. This communion is realized and maintained by a private regard for higher laws.

The second two traits, acceptance of nature and manual labor, are perhaps best illustrated in the "Bean-Field" chapter. As discussed above, Thoreau accepted the fact that his beans "grow for woodchucks partly," consoling himself with the thought that the "true husbandman will cease from anxiety."<sup>33</sup> This strategy of dealing with the caprice of fortune recalls many passages in Stoic literature, but Epictetus' concise comment is perhaps most pertinent: "Do not seek to have everything that happens happen as you wish, but wish for everything to happen as it actually does happen, and your life will be serene."<sup>34</sup> One who tries to make nature conform to his desires will be frequently

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<sup>32</sup> Marcus, 7 (2.9).

<sup>33</sup> Thoreau, 162.

<sup>34</sup> Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, in *Epictetus, Volume Two*, trans. W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, 1967), 491 (8). Admittedly, this sentiment could be shared by an Epicurean, who might advance it on the basis that modifying one's desires so as to be satisfied with one's lot is likely to increase pleasure and decrease pain. But coupled with the rest of either Epictetus or Thoreau, the sentiment is seen to be driven by a respect for higher laws or cosmic reason. This is another example of a single "spiritual exercise" being justifiable by various philosophical stories.



disappointed, whereas one who conforms his desires to nature will have no cause for anxiety. Thoreau adopts the latter course, relinquishing some of his beans to the woodchucks. By practicing this "true husbandry," Thoreau closely approximates the advice of Epictetus and hence achieves a degree of serenity. As for the fourth and final Stoic trait, there is plenty of emphasis put on manual labor throughout *Walden*, but it is especially evident in the same chapter. Thoreau minutely describes hoeing the bean-field, and he compares it to cultivating the link between nature and civilization: "Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field."<sup>35</sup> The field has metaphorical consequences for oneself and one's community. Just as the bean-field may be well or poorly cultivated, so oneself and one's community may be well or poorly tended. Compare this to the example of Musonius, whom Hadot cites. As discussed above, Musonius recommended that the philosopher use the examples of physical labor to supplement and clarify the lessons of philosophy. Thoreau has done much the same, treating the bean-field as illustrative of the cultivation needed in human life.

Granting these similarities, there is still a significant point on which Thoreau and the Stoics diverge. Hadot is quite right that a single "spiritual exercise" can be justified by many different philosophical discourses. This being the case, it is difficult to identify Thoreau with Stoicism based on his way of life alone. The Stoics may have accepted and communed with nature, practiced manual labor, and recommended solitude, but did they

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<sup>35</sup>Thoreau, 154.

do so for the same reason that Thoreau did? It is true that the theoretical discourse Thoreau used to justify his "spiritual exercises" is closer to that of the Stoics than that of the Epicureans, but it nonetheless remains very different from Stoicism. The difference consists both in the nature of that discourse and in the emphasis laid on it. For the Stoics, the theoretical justification of their practical ethics is paramount, and so one finds numerous references to cosmic reason and universal nature throughout their writings. In *Walden*, on the contrary, that discourse seems secondary and less important. Excepting the "Higher Laws" chapter, the book betrays only a few references to "higher principles" or a "higher reality." Of course, it might be argued that although Thoreau does not emphasize the theoretical underpinnings of his ethical practices, those underpinnings are nonetheless present and very similar to those of the Stoics. I want to close by arguing against this suggestion.

Simply put, the Stoic appeals to the rational, Thoreau to the spiritual and moral. The prominence of reason in Stoicism is extreme. It is treated as the ruling principle of the universe itself, permeating and informing the whole of nature. For example, Marcus recommends that one "look to nothing else, even for a little while, except to reason."<sup>36</sup> More to the point, Cicero writes, "And yet, we ought to infer from the very cleverness of man that there is some intelligence [in the universe as a whole], indeed one which is more acute and divine. For where did man 'snatch' his own intelligence from...?" Cicero continues, noting that "nothing at all is superior to or more beautiful than the cosmos.... And if nothing is better than reason and wisdom, it is necessary that these be present in

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<sup>36</sup> Marcus, 1 (1.8).

that which we have granted to be the best."<sup>37</sup> As the cosmos is obviously perfect, it must itself possess the quality of "divine" reason, since otherwise it would not be perfect. As we have seen, Stoic ethics consists in conforming to nature and reason, both of which are universal. The matter is different with Thoreau. It is difficult to characterize his "higher principles," because he does not do so himself—perhaps this is properly so. At any rate, they do not appear to have much in common with the Stoic's "higher principle" of reason, because, as we have seen, Thoreau says that one who "listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true..." will lead "a life in conformity to higher principles."<sup>38</sup> As we have also seen, Thoreau claims, "Our whole life is startlingly moral" and that "[n]ature is hard to overcome, but she must be overcome."<sup>39</sup> These three claims, integral parts of Thoreau's philosophical discourse, irreconcilably clash with Stoic philosophical discourse. Thoreau here stresses individual genius, the radically moral character of life, and the overcoming of nature. First, the Stoic does not suggest personal genius as a means of conforming with "higher principles." She prefers a more rational approach, claiming that human intelligence can come to see that the ruling principle of the universe is reason and that it ought to be conformed to. The passage from Cicero is an example of this, since it provides a sort of argument that the universe possesses divine reason. Second, the Stoic would not exactly claim that life is startlingly moral, at least not primarily. She might instead say that life, as part of the cosmos, is startlingly subject to nature, which is infused with reason. A moral life does consist in living according to

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<sup>37</sup> *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, ed. and trans. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 104, 105. The brackets are those of the translators.

<sup>38</sup> Thoreau, 211.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 213, 215.

nature (i.e., rationally), but Thoreau seems to see the moral element as being more important than the rational element. For Thoreau, life seems to be permeated with the moral in the same way that nature for the Stoic is permeated with reason. Third, the Stoic does not claim that "nature must be overcome"—on the contrary, it must be conformed to. Thoreau's "higher reality" is not nature, because he suggests leaving nature behind with the animal. His philosophical discourse is not very clear, but he accords primary place to one's genius, to the moral, and to the overcoming of nature. The Stoic emphasizes reason and accordance with nature. Thoreau and the Stoic agree in wanting to be in accord with "higher principles," but the similarity stops there. Whatever Thoreau's "higher reality" might be, it is not the cosmic reason of Stoicism.

Finally, I should also note that Thoreau does not align with the Stoics on the emotions. As Rick Anthony Furtak argues, while Thoreau is in agreement with the Stoic idea that we should liberate ourselves from attachment to external objects, he does not agree with the Stoics' claim that we should also liberate ourselves from emotional attachments altogether.<sup>40</sup> Throughout *Walden*, emotion plays an important role, and one finds it even in Thoreau's communion with nature and his acceptance of nature. Accordingly, even in those cases in which Thoreau exhibits Stoic traits, he often does so in ways that diverge from an orthodox Stoicism. Furtak suggests that, for this reason, Thoreau is a kind of neo-Stoic. Perhaps that is the best classification, but the most important point here is that Thoreau differs radically from the ancient Stoics on the value of the emotions.

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<sup>40</sup> Rick Anthony Furtak. "Thoreau's Emotional Stoicism." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 17 (2003): 122–132.

I have argued against Hadot that Thoreau does not display Epicurean and Stoic traits in roughly equal proportion. Of the two schools, he is much closer to the latter. However, the similarities between Thoreau and the Stoic are either practical or generic. In terms of ethical practices, Thoreau exhibits many of the qualities found in the Stoic school. However, the theoretical discourse used to justify those practices is different in each case. Except for a generic resemblance in which both Thoreau and the Stoics display a regard for "higher principles," there is little similarity in their philosophical discourses. The Stoic stresses conforming to nature, which itself is infused with cosmic reason. Thoreau stresses obeying one's own genius and overcoming nature. The Stoic's "higher reality" is the reason of the cosmos, whereas Thoreau's "higher reality," although far from clear, is apparently something else. These are not trivial differences. If one is to say that Thoreau is a Stoic, it is not in a very profound sense. However, Thoreau shares with both the Stoics and the Epicureans an interest in what Hadot calls "spiritual exercises" or philosophy as a way of life, and Hadot deserves credit for bringing this to attention. He stresses that similar "spiritual exercises" can be justified by diverse philosophical discourses, and perhaps this is not problematic for someone who, like Thoreau, is more interested in the exercises than in the discourse. Although Thoreau's school of thought is significantly different from Epicureanism and Stoicism, all three agree on the importance of pursuing practical measures to help cultivate what they perceive to be worthwhile lives.

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