

COVID-19 AND DEATH: STOIC PHILOSOPHY AS A FORTRESS IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This paper has studied the Stoic philosophy within the context of its being a fortress in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. It observed that one of the leading ethical theories is utilitarianism, which states that moral decisions and actions should be made on the basis of their consequences. Sneezes, cough, fever, shortness of breath, fear of being hospitalized has brought so much anxiety around Covid-19 outbreak that you too may be the next infected person. In balancing risk, you are anticipating likely consequences, which is a very utilitarian thing to do. However, this paper argued that humanity needs to be careful, because the real test of our character is how we behave in tough times. What we can control, as always, is how we respond. What matters is not what other people are doing or have done, but what we do. Ultimately we are all responsible for our behaviours and actions. This paper discovered that Stoicism offers a great kit for moments like this with its teaching on the need to remain calm in the face of chaos, and to put aside irrational thoughts and develop a plan to keep us moving forward. To be able to spread the only positive form of contagion, there is calm, considered response and not a knee jerk reaction. For the purpose of this paper, the hermeneutic and critical methods of inquiry were employed.

Keywords: COVID-19, Human Death, Stoic, Philosophy, Pandemic, Time, Fortress

Introduction

The human brain constantly filters the overwhelming amount of information that could demand our attention, which is helpful in many ways. Sometimes our filters can lead us to important mistakes, though,

especially when assessing risks. No one needs to be told that life has changed within few weeks, world over. The coronavirus has changed a lot about the way we live, how we socialize with each other and even the way we work. Very much invisibly but no less impactful, the virus has changed the level of anxiety many people experience daily. We are experiencing an upending of our lives¹.

The topic of death is always weird even in the best of times, let alone in a time of a pandemic when we are daily reminded that it is our common destiny. Our fear of death is the ultimate fear of missing out on all the events, the people we love, the progress and the struggles of life. We have faced the situation for some time now, missing out but still alive. This leads us to ask some basic questions: *What do we fear we will miss out on at death? And what should we do more or less of while still alive?* The questions about what the risk of death compels the living to do about it are not exactly new. But these questions feel unfamiliar as they rise with such urgency as a matter of life and death.

Stoicism is an ancient tool for remaining calm in adversity. Often dumbed down to refer to having a stiff upper lip, or emotional reserve, Stoicism is actually a deep philosophical framework, useful in providing an ethical scaffold for both everyday life and in hard times². People around the world are feeling rudderless and adrift. There are conflicting information about the pandemic, not necessarily about health though. People losing work, feeling frightened, being isolated at home, worried about their loved ones and wondering about getting basic needs. The responses are as well varied. Some show grace under pressure. Some respond with shock or panic, others seem to be willfully ignoring the situation. It is new to some and some have experienced something of a kind.

Humans are not particularly complicated species. For the most part, we all are trying to make sense of our lives and our fears, our loves, and our joys, and these are not different from the fears, joys and loves of everyone else in the planet. For this Epictetus says: *“The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control. Where then do I look for good and evil? Not to uncontrollable externals, but within myself to the choices that are my own...”* Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.5.4-5.

¹ J. CLIFFE, “Grace Under Pressure: How Coronavirus is Testing the World’s Self-image” in *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 45, 2020, p. 231.

² M. PIGLIUCCI, *How to be a Stoic*, New York: Rider Publishers 2017, p. 45.

COVID-19 is a novel disease, meaning it is subject to no body's expertise as it stands. For sure, parts of the current situation fall within the domains of various experts. Infectious disease epidemiologists can predict its spread. But there is considerably more to this pandemic than predicting its spread³.

To navigate through a period as such, we need a few Stoic-inspired thoughts to take and guide us forward.

Invisible Bullets: Stoicism in a Time of Pandemic

In this second chapter, I wish to express my deep conviction of the value philosophical thinking has in science and in the society. As I have mentioned earlier, philosophers tend to recognize philosophy only as what they were exposed to as philosophy. But we have become so limited in what is been put on the curriculum and what is been acceptable as philosophy in the higher-end journals that the necessary broader historical, global, and methodological scope is often missing.

Have you ever noticed how much you don't notice? The Covid-19 epidemic is not an out-of-the-blue oddity. And so, I will actually want to encourage philosophy in this thesis to get out of its currently still restricted and highly contingent institutionalized self-image. If we discard a pluralism of what philosophy is, can be, and can do, we are not only losing touch with the world, including science and society, we furthermore are actively narrowing down philosophical practice itself. The period of quarantine has opened up a portal for many to do a deep dive into different strands of philosophy. The first few stages of exploring philosophical thought often seems like having to swim across a sea of turbulent waves that calls for strenuous efforts and dissonance, as we reassess our mental frameworks to make sense of our rapidly changing surroundings. And why bother to wade through the troubled waters if we are already on the shores? Or at least consider us to be.

In the midst of the journey from awareness to panic and transitioning into human encyclopedias on Covid-19, we all have heard the lines: "*Life as we know it has come to a stand-still*" and "*We may have to define a new normal*". We have laughed at memes, a lot were sent to me from Nigeria; we have anguished over the news. However, the period of the lockdown felt like getting grounded, forced to contemplate and introspect in weird ways over larger global issues like the impending climate crisis among deeply

³ J. COLE, "Coronavirus: Why Changing Human Behaviour is the Best Defence in Tackling the Virus" in *Journal of Humanities*, vol. 9, 2020, p. 52.

personal ones like our coming provincial chapter in August, the need to visit my family and friends and take off the 'trauma' of being positive to Covid-19. During one such random bouts of spiralling into the indefinite future and the uncertain impacts of Covid-19, I remembered my philosophy days in the seminary and was drawn in refreshing my studies on Stoicism. So I decided to use my experience to write this, first as an assignment in the university, which I gave my friend to do a translation in Italian for presentation. He started making fun of me in the house when I tested positive, asking me "to help myself and help others".

A whole lot of people are aware of the outbreak of Covid-19, because it was predicted long ago in epidemiological papers by scientists and movies where also made. It was pondered over and hence didn't come as a reeling shock. But to some of us who are reeling, Stoicism gives a lot of solace at a time like this. Seneca's quote could add some perspective here - "To bear trials with a calm mind robs misfortune of its strength and burden."⁴ We have so many people who, fuelled by the fantasies of social media, believe that each phase of life must be pleasurable, and they are entitled to a lifetime supply of happiness. One of the radical pieces of advice Stoicism gives is the squashing of all hope, for it only lifts you higher and higher. They offer the route of imagining and living through our darkest fears - ones of loneliness, embarrassment and anxiety. They also push us to think about the horrible tangential lines embedded in our future so that probably with each passing effort, we find it a little easier to transition to the present. It helps us assign greater value to the love that surrounds us presently and not take anything for granted. The more we shield ourselves from the harsh, cruel, uncomfortable bits of life, the more unprepared we make ourselves for its inevitability.

The fact the everything will come to an end seems very starkly exhibited in the current times, where a virus is wreaking havoc world over and the days and nights are shrouded in uncertainty. Times of crisis, unprecedented ones for that matter, are often powerful enough to overwhelm us in their embrace. That is why the Stoics welcome hard times for they see them as a trial post which they emerge rejuvenated. Epictetus said: "The greater the difficulty the more the glory in surmounting it. Skillful pilots gain their reputation from storms and tempests."⁵ Times of peril

⁴ Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales Ad Licilium*, London: Penguin Classics, 2004, p. 23.

⁵ R. Dobbin (trans.), *Discourses and Selected Writings: Epictetus*, London: Penguin Classics, 2008, p. 15.

often work as a mirror showing each of us the values, priorities and temperament we hide behind our flesh and bones.

Death: The Cross that takes us Across

By nature, no one likes to think about lying on their death bed. From the anxiety of our health condition to midlife crisis, it appears like thoughts about ageing and death can unleash some level of neurosis. But that is not all. When we examine mortality awareness, the realization that we are all one day going to die and we realize that, although the prospect of death is scary, it can also have positive effects. Death is a constant reminder of the fragility of our life. The Stoics viewed death as a natural succession to life, an event like any other which must occur and cannot be denied.

Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations*, states: *“Death, like birth, is just a natural process, material elements combining, growing, decaying and finally separating and completely dispersing.”* Meditations IV.5

This is basically accepting the unacceptable. The Stoics were good at accepting what life really was. They understood that we are born into this world and will definitely leave it someday. What we do between birth and death (our actions) is what is most important. It is an opportunity to live a virtuous life according to the Stoics. Their definition of virtue is summed up in what we know as the Four Cardinal Virtues of Stoicism, which explains what a virtuous life entails:

- Prudence (Wisdom): The basic practical wisdom that we possess as humans.
- Justice (Morality): Being moral in our actions.
- Temperance (Moderation): Our self-control over our actions.
- Fortitude (Courage): Being courageous to life’s adversities.

The Stoics summarized this further to state that living a virtuous life means living a life worth living. This does not mean the life of debauchery. But living a life of meaning, creating good within the world and impacting those around us. Knowing that there is no need arguing or fighting against the aspects of life which we have no control. Seneca explains in his moral letters to Luilius, that while we all travel different paths throughout our lives, death is the unifying act which reunites us:

“The act of dying is equal in all... Death has no degrees of greater or less; for it has the same limit in all instances, the finishing of life.” Seneca. Letters from a Stoic. Letter LXVI

While death is scary and unknown, it is not yet here with us, and this means we still have today. By keeping this in mind, we have the supreme power and control over our lives, our actions, and the direction we wish to go in. We should be thankful for our existence and of those dear and near to us. At the wake of every day we should realize an opportunity of the day and take action on our lives and walk a path of virtue.

***We also need to utilize our most valuable resource.** We know the time we have in this world is limited and that is our most valuable resource. With each passing day, we lose another breath, and inch closer to death. I remember my secondary school principal Mr Chike King, who always reminded us the “everyday draws you closer to the grave.” However, it does not mean our lives are meaningless. On the contrary, we could view this point with excitement and understand that because our life is not infinite, because there *is* an expiration date, it provides meaning to our existence and our actions.

***We should understand that it is all natural.** The obvious fact of death brings our lives into a complete picture. We actually understand that we will one day meet this fate, but are unsure of when that day will be. So in order to properly live, we must learn to accept death as a natural process of life. The Stoics viewed death as natural, a return to Nature. It is the value-judgments we place on death which makes it terrible as it is. That is why Marcus Aurelius reminds us:

“Think not disdainfully of death, but look on it with favor; for even death is one of the things that Nature wills.” Meditations IX.3

Covid-19 and Death: Sustaining the Source

The unique nature of Covid-19 is that the virus is, while all too real, invisible to the naked eye and all pervasive. It has formed itself into the structure of reality: a disease everywhere and nowhere, imprecisely known and, as yet, untreatable. And most of us have the feeling of having been wallowing in the virus. Beneath this trembling of fear lies a deeper anxiety, the anxiety of our mortality, our being pulled toward death. And this is what we might try to seize hold of, as a condition of our freedom.

Our fear of death normally comes as a result of how we love life, sometimes a little too much, and often we just look at the preferred side of life. Meaning, we hold onto a fantasized life, seeing it with colors brighter than it actually has. We specifically insist on seeing life in its complete form without death, its inalienable flip side. This does not mean

we do not think death will come someday, but that it will not happen today, tomorrow, next month, next year, and so on. This biased, selective and incomplete image of life gradually builds in us a strong wish, hope, or even belief in a life with no death associated with it, at least in the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, reality contradicts this belief. This makes it natural for us, as long as we succumb to those inner fragilities, to have this fear of death, to not want to think of it or see it as something that will rip life apart⁶.

Let us ask basic questions at this point: why we are scared. Why we are on the edge, unable to concentrate. Why we can't focus. Why our minds flit and float around from one update to the next. We follow the news, because we feel we should. And then we wish we hadn't, because it is terrifying and sad.

One important thing is that we must learn to accept the fact that we live and die. We do not know when it will come. We do not know how. But a guarantee is that it will one day come for us all. It is scary and depressing at times. But by accepting our fate, we can embrace it and lean harder into the present moment. Instead of worrying about what is on social media, we can embrace our ability to read, grow and create the lives we want. We can cherish the times we have with family and friends. As it stands, we are all on borrowed time. But in that time, we can pursue a life of virtue rather than of empty and fleeting dopamine hits. As Seneca reminds Lucilius:

"Imagine this is your last day of life; or if not the next to last." Seneca, Letters from a Stoic. Letter XV

Memento Mori. As a reminder of the inevitable death which we all eventually meet, the ancient Romans would have a slave whose sole responsibility was to walk alongside a military leader to whisper to their ear, *memento mori* (roughly it means 'remember you must die').

In this light Marcus Aurelius reminded himself of the ephemeral nature of life, writing:

"You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do and say and think." Meditations II.11

⁶ S. LUPER, *The Cambridge Companion to Life and Death*, London: Cambridge University Press 2014, p. 325.

At least, we must remember that there is no escape route from this truth: we will die. But we should not run from it, instead, lean on it, embrace this fragile life, live a life you are proud of. Time is finite. Virtue is not. You have today. You still have time to live a virtuous life, to make impact you want to make, to bring joy into this world.

"...look to the immensity of time behind thee, and to the time which is before thee, another boundless space. In this infinity then what is the difference between him who lives three days and him who lives three generations?" Marcus Aurelius. Meditations. IV.53

Conclusion

"Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what is left and live it properly." Marcus Aurelius. Meditations VII.56

Billions of people in the world are restricted from a lot of places; religious and social activities and even economic activities to ward off an unseen viral enemy, wearing a mask is not only a health decision. For many, it is also a way of gaining control in a situation when there is virtually none. Facing the question of control, according to modern Stoics, is the key to coping well with the constraints of pandemic living. This explains why they believe the ancient practices of Stoicism are newly relevant in this modern-day crisis.

Massimo Pigliucci, an author and professor of philosophy at City College of New York and a practicing Stoic, said *"you don't really need a catastrophe in order to use Stoicism. It actually prepares you for the notion that in life you will encounter challenges and that you will be doing better in those challenges if you are, in fact, prepared."*

As we live in this period, when illness and isolation are baring the frailty of human bodies and testing the composure of human minds, the words and experience of ancient Stoics appear to hold lessons directly relevant to our lives under pandemic. They knew all about crisis: they lived through wars, exile and for sure, episodes of infectious disease, as well as the loss of loved ones.

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