



Career advice from emperors and slaves

AS HE STOOD WATCHING HIS SUPPOSEDLY fireproof factory go up in flames along with much of his life's work, Thomas Edison reportedly turned his son and said, "Go get your mother and all her friends. They'll never see a fire like this again."

Calculating, stiff upper lip, seeing beauty where others might see only despair – the very definition of the word "stoic." Right? Well, maybe. When any good word passes into popular usage, there's opportunity for nuance to get lost. If 2,300 years of history has taught us anything about the enduring philosophy of Stoicism, it is that it's easy to get it wrong.

Stoicism dates back to the third century B.C., but it found its greatest influence during the decline of the Roman empire, around the

A 2,300-year-old philosophy is making a comeback, finding popularity among Silicon Valley and sports teams. Brunswick's **EDWARD STEPHENS** reports

first century A.D., when it became the guiding philosophy of emperors and statesmen.

Any attempt to succinctly define or describe Stoicism tends to be met with opposition – even Stoics themselves don't always agree on what it means to be called an adherent – but broadly speaking, Stoics look to answer, "How do you live a virtuous, good life?" According to Ryan Holiday, a bestselling author and high-profile consultant to coaches, celebrities, and Silicon Valley leaders, a crucial component of the Stoic response is: "You don't control the world around you, you only control your response to that world."

This sounds simple. But the implications are immense and time-consuming – taking inventory of all that can be controlled, while remaining mindful of all that can't, and then taking action, to change things that can be changed, and enduring those that can't.

Far from being an obsolete and outdated guide to living, Holiday wrote in 2016 that "nothing could be more necessary for our times than a good dose of Stoic philosophy."

Increasingly, people seem to agree with him, and the ancient philosophy is making something of a comeback. Big banks, tech companies, and even the US military are paying speakers to come in and teach Stoic precepts and practices. Olympic athletes and Super Bowl-winning coaches are publicly lauding Stoicism's benefits. A host of popular books have been published on the subject and people around the world travel to events to learn how to apply the philosophy to their life – two of the most popular are “Stoic week” and “Stoicon.” Today, you can join a group on LinkedIn called “The Stoic Professional” and multiple Stoic communities on Facebook, the largest of which boasts more than 21,000 members.

Three Stoic thinkers and writers, all of whom lived and wrote roughly 2,000 years ago, remain the best-known and most-quoted: Epictetus, a Greek slave turned philosopher; Seneca, a Roman statesman; and Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor. Many are attracted to not just what these men wrote, but also to how they wrote it. Consider a quote from each:

Seneca the Younger: “Complaining away about one’s sufferings after they are over is something I think should be banned. Even if all this is true, it is history. What’s the good of dragging up sufferings which are over, of being unhappy now just because you were then?”

Epictetus: “All philosophy lies in two words: sustain and abstain.”

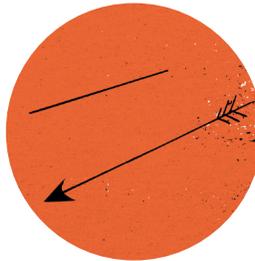
Marcus Aurelius: “Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one.”

The Stoics are blunt – at times comically so – and endlessly quotable, replete with aphorisms that leave little room for doubt or excuses. In his masterwork, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell summarized Stoicism as a philosophy whose “gospel was one of endurance, rather than hope.”

This partly helps explain its newfound popularity. Stoicism was created during tough times – after the collapse of Alexander the Great’s empire – and it came to prominence amid a period of almost nonstop warfare, when events beyond their control were shaping people’s lives.

Justified or not, such fear and pessimism seems widespread today. And as growing numbers, particularly in the US, no longer look to religion for guidance, Massimo Pigliucci, a professor of philosophy and author of *How to Be a Stoic*,

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believes that more people are embracing alternative secular philosophies, including Stoicism.

There’s also a growing frustration at what many feel is an overly optimistic and out-of-touch self-help industry. Mark Manson’s *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F**** and Svend Brinkmann’s *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze* are two popular titles that embody this anti-self-help sentiment. Manson’s profanity-laced book, according to its Amazon description, “cuts through the crap to show us how to stop trying to be ‘positive’ all the time.” Holiday writes of Stoicism along similar terms: “For those of us who live our lives in the real world, there is one branch of philosophy created just for us: Stoicism.”

And of course technology, social media especially, has made it easier than ever before for a global audience to encounter Stoicism. Tim Ferriss and Ryan Holiday, two key figures leading the philosophy’s resurgence, have proven especially adept at using digital tools to disseminate an ancient philosophy.

Ferriss is the author of two No. 1 New York Times bestselling books – *The 4 Hour Workweek* and *The 4 Hour Body* – and an angel investor or adviser to companies such as Uber, Shopify, and Evernote. His podcast is one of the most popular in existence, with his episodes having been downloaded more than 150 million times. When Ferriss talks, a lot of people, especially in Silicon Valley, listen.

And one topic Ferriss returns to often is philosophy – which Ferriss calls “an operating system for making better decisions in your life.” Eschewing inaccessible, theoretical conversations, Ferriss instead “life-hacks” philosophy, distilling key insights, putting it in plain, modern language, and translating it into concrete steps that listeners can put into practice at home and in the office. “What Stoicism helps you to develop is a value system that allows you to take calculated risks, which I think is very effective for entrepreneurs,” Ferriss said in one of his podcasts.

He also practices what he preaches – in his talk at the 2017 TED Conference in Vancouver, Ferriss credited Stoicism with saving his life, helping him overcome a period of his life when he was contemplating suicide.

Ferriss has used his platform to help raise the profile of another prominent voice in Stoicism today: Ryan Holiday. Ferriss interviewed Holiday on his podcast in 2009, and has published two of Holiday’s works on Stoicism in audiobook format.

Holiday is an accomplished communicator in his own right. Once the head of marketing for American Apparel – a position he held when he was 22 years old – Holiday now writes and consults full time, and his messages have drawn praise from a medley of unlikely sources, from the hip-hop musician L.L. Cool J to the actor and former US governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Holiday, like Ferriss, has delivered a TED talk on Stoicism. One of Holiday's main arguments sounded more suited to Zen Buddhism than the popular idea of what it means to be Stoic: controlling your emotions allows you to see “every obstacle is an opportunity.”

Ferriss and Holiday have, in some ways, helped solve the “image problems” that often deter people from philosophy – that it's boring, outdated, and largely concerned with semantic, impractical arguments. Instead, they reframed Stoicism as a tool for personal and professional success. In Holiday's words, “It's not some systematic discussion of why or how the world exists. It is a series of reminders, tips and aids for living a good life.”

But some, including Pigliucci, caution of oversimplifying the philosophy in an effort to make it accessible to a large audience. Stoicism is a complex, fully fleshed-out philosophy, he says, one not designed to fit on a bumper sticker or in a tweet. Context and nuance matter immensely – without them, Stoicism can come across as little more than a caricature that plays into many of its negative stereotypes.

Though it's experiencing a resurgence, “Stoicism has never really gone away,” says Pigliucci. It influenced a range of leading thinkers throughout history – from Michel de Montaigne to René Descartes – and famous leaders. A copy of Seneca's letters was supposedly found next to US President Thomas Jefferson's nightstand after he died; Nelson Mandela received a smuggled-in copy of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* while he was imprisoned on Robben Island; according to author Martha C. Nussbaum, reading Aurelius helped Mandela emerge a stronger and more forgiving leader.

Donald Robertson, an author and consultant, told *Forbes* why he believes leaders have long been drawn to the philosophy: “Anyone in a leadership role must come to terms quickly with the paradox of their position: that leaders must wield power but that often so much that happens lies outside of their control.”

Stoicism even reached the bright lights of Hollywood. Pigliucci says that Gene Roddenberry,



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SENECA THE YOUNGER

the creator of the “Star Trek” franchise, modeled the emotionless, hyper-rational character of Spock on Stoicism – the only problem, according to Pigliucci, is that Roddenberry's understanding of Stoicism was “deeply flawed.”

For all of its influence, Stoicism also has its detractors. Friedrich Nietzsche called the Stoics “extraordinary stage-players and self-deluders.” David Hume wrote that Stoicism seemed to be “founded on this erroneous maxim, that what a man can perform sometimes, and in some dispositions, he can perform always, and in every disposition.” Criticism continues today. In an article on Quartz last year, Sandy Grant, a philosopher at the University of Cambridge, wrote, “Stoics are mired in their resignation to live in the world as it is, rather than imagining the way it could be.” Skye Cleary, a philosophy lecturer at Columbia University and Barnard College, says Stoicism, “can be used as an excuse to do nothing.”

Pigliucci, who responded directly to Grant's Quartz article, says these sorts of critiques are based on “misunderstandings of Stoicism.” He argues Stoicism is “not about having an attitude of resignation, but of endurance – and that's a big difference.” Stoicism does not seek to suppress emotions, but to examine and transform them.

It may seem absurd that successful professionals and highly paid celebrities find solace in a philosophy that was created to help people brave a world where the average life expectancy was less than 30 years. The nature of the problems we face today are vastly different, but the mental tools required to endure and overcome them aren't – the world has changed a lot, but our brains haven't.

Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and philosopher, composed his Stoic reflections – which have been collected and published under the title of *Meditations* – while he was trying to hold a warring, crumbling empire together. These reflections were notes to himself, little reminders, never meant to be published.

In one reminder, Aurelius dashes off a brief list of what it will take to succeed at his demanding job. He begins: “Love work. Turn a deaf ear to slander. Be considerate in correcting others...” Practices which all of us would do well to bring to the workplace.

Aurelius ended the list with typical Stoic softness: “Be thorough in thought. Have an open mind. Do your duty without grumbling.”

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