

Marcus Aurelius Reading

Introduction to the Reading

The Emperor Antoninus Pius was Marcus Aurelius' uncle and guardian. Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE) succeeded Antoninus as emperor in 161. He had been adopted by Antoninus and married Antoninus' daughter. While emperor he faced many difficulties including natural disasters, outbreaks of disease, and wars. He was said to have composed his *Meditations* during quiet periods on his military campaigns. He embraced Stoic philosophy, which emphasized learning how to endure difficult situations by understanding what is truly most important in life. The wise Stoic understands the limitations of mortality, and understands how to control his emotions and spend time on things that matter. However, Stoics did not tend to ask hard questions about big structures of society and power.

This document contains a few selections from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and a recent article about modern interest in Marcus Aurelius and his Stoic ideas. This particular article from *Wired* includes an unusually sharp critique, voiced by Emily Wilson of the University of Pennsylvania, of the limitations of Stoic thought for building a more just society. As you read, think about what Prof. Wilson thinks about why Stoicism might be especially attractive now in the tech world.

1. Selections from Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (Trans. C.R. Haines)

[*The Stoic wise man must be prepared to face people that he does not like*]

Book 2. 1. Say to yourself at daybreak: I shall come across the busy-body, the thankless, the overbearing, the treacherous, the envious, the unneighbourly. All this has befallen them because they know not good from evil. But I, because I have comprehended the nature of the Good that it is beautiful, and the nature of Evil that it is ugly, and the nature of the wrong-doer himself that it is akin to me, not as partaker of the same blood and seed but of intelligence and a morsel of the Divine, can neither be injured by any of them—for no one can involve me in what is debasing—nor can I be angry with my relative and hate him. For we have come into being for co-operation, as have the feet, the hands, the eyelids, the rows of upper and lower teeth. Therefore to thwart one another is against Nature; and we do thwart one another by showing resentment and aversion.

2. This that I am, whatever it be, is mere flesh and a little breath and the ruling Reason. Away with your books! Be no longer drawn aside by them: it is not allowed. But as one already dying disdain the flesh: it is nothing but gore and bones and a network compact of nerves and veins and arteries. Look at the breath too, what sort of thing it is; air: and not even that always the same, but every minute belched forth and again gulped down. Then, thirdly, there is the ruling Reason. Think about it this way: you are an old man; let this be a thrall no longer, no more a puppet pulled aside by every selfish impulse; nor let it grumble any longer at what is allotted to it in the present or dread it in the future.

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12. How quickly all things vanish away, in the Universe their actual bodies, and the remembrance of them in Eternity, and of what character are all objects of sense, and particularly those that entice us with pleasure or terrify us with pain or are acclaimed by vanity—how worthless and despicable and unclean and ephemeral and dead!—this is for our faculty of intelligence to apprehend; as also what they really are whose conceptions and whose voices award renown; what it is to die, and that if a man look at death in itself, and with the analysis of reason strip it of its phantom terrors, no longer will he conceive it to be aught but a function of Nature,—but if a man be frightened by a function of Nature, he is childish; and this is not only Nature’s function but her welfare;—and how man is in touch with God and with what part of himself, and in what disposition of this portion of the man.

[death comes for everyone]

Book 3. 3. Hippocrates, after healing many a sick man, fell sick himself and died. Many a death have Chaldaean prophets foretold, and then their own fate has overtaken them also. Alexander, Pompeius and Gaius Caesar times without number utterly destroyed whole cities, and cut to pieces many myriads of horse and foot on the field of battle, yet the day came when they too departed this life. Heraclitus, after endless speculations on the destruction of the world by fire, came to be filled internally with water, and died smeared with cowdung. And lice caused the death of Democritus, and other vermin of Socrates.

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Book 6 13. As in the case of meat and similar edible things the thought strikes us, this is the dead body of a fish, this of a fowl or pig; and again that this Falernian wine is merely the juice of a bunch of grapes, and this purple-edged robe is nothing but sheep’s wool steeped in the blood of a shell-fish; or, of sexual intercourse, that it is merely internal rubbing and the spasmodic excretion of mucus—such, I say, as are these impressions that get to grips with the actual things and enter into the heart of them, so as to see them as they really are, thus should it be your life through, and where things look to be especially convincing, laying them quite bare, behold their paltriness and strip off their conventional prestige. For conceit is a past master in fallacies and, when you flatter yourself most that you are engaged in worthy tasks, then you are most of all deluded by it.

6.15 What then is to be prized? The clapping of hands? No. Then not the clapping of tongues either. For the acclamations of the multitude are but a clapping of tongues. So overboard goes that poor thing Fame also. What is left to be prized? I think this: to limit our action or inaction to the needs of our own constitution, a goal that all occupations and arts set before themselves. For the aim of every art is that the thing constituted should be adapted to the work for which it has been constituted. It is so with the vine-dresser who looks after the vines, the colt-trainer, and the keeper of the kennel. And this is the end which the care of children and the methods of teaching have in view. There then is the thing to be prized!

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[Still, a Stoic should not cut himself off from society entirely]

8.34 You have seen a hand cut off or a foot, or a head severed from the body, and lying at some distance from the rest of the body. Just so does the man treat himself, ... who does not care what may happen and cuts himself from mankind or acts unsocially.

9.28 Presently the earth will cover us all. It too will eventually be changed, and the resulting product will go on from change to change, and so for ever and ever. When a man thinks of these successive waves of change and transformation, and their rapidity, he will hold every mortal thing in scorn.

9.30 Take a bird's-eye view of the world, its endless gatherings and endless ceremonials, voyagings manifold in storm and calm, and the vicissitudes of things coming into being, participating in being, ceasing to be. Reflect too on the life lived long ago by other men, and the life that shall be lived after you, and is now being lived in barbarous countries; and how many have never even heard of your name, and how many will very soon forget it, and how many who now perhaps praise you, will very soon blame you, and that neither memory nor fame nor anything else whatever is worth thinking about.

Wired Article

By Rowland Manthorpe (26 Oct. 2017)

URL for the article: <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/susan-fowler-uber-sexism-stoicism>

All that's good and bad about Silicon Valley's Stoicism fad

Over 2,000 years after it rose to prominence, Stoicism is unexpectedly popular in Silicon Valley. Could tech's overlords have found a philosophy bigger than themselves?

With one viral blog post, Susan Fowler began the torrent of revelations that exposed the immature, sexist culture of Silicon Valley, starting the process that led the downfall of her former boss, Uber CEO Travis Kalanick. She was afraid, yet she persisted. When she wondered whether she should keep quiet, she found strength in an ancient Greek and Roman philosophy dedicated to modesty and self-sufficiency.

“The Stoics were really what changed me,” she told *The New York Times* this week, in her first interview since the incident. “Because their whole thing was about, ‘You don’t have control over a lot of the things that determine your life, so all you can do is focus on becoming the best person that you can be.’”

Fowler is not alone. Over 2,000 years after it rose to prominence, Stoicism is finding unexpected popularity in twenty-first century Silicon Valley. Preacher-in-chief is startup guru Tim Ferriss, who calls it “an ideal operating system for thriving in high-stress environments.” Other fans include Digg co-founder Kevin Rose, who practices the Stoic arts of self-denial (cold showers; going without a coat in winter) and daily surrender: “I try to surrender to the earth as everything unfolds around me, not judging it, but accepting things as they are.”

In the febrile atmosphere of northern California, self help fads flare up with exhausting regularity. One day it's consciousness hacking; the next microdosing or blood transfusion. But

whereas most of these trends serve to sustain technologically-fuelled fantasies of mastery, Stoicism disdains such striving. Its central tenet is simple: learn to be satisfied with what you've got. At a time when tech is desperately need of ethical guidance, could this ancient wisdom supply the answer?

Formulated during the outpouring of philosophy that followed the death of Socrates in 399 BCE, ancient Stoicism was “a medical art for the soul” that advocated “living in accordance with nature.” Since human nature was above all rational, according to the early Stoics, the only way to achieve “a good flow of life” was to focus on the things that could be objectively shown to lead to happiness. It was a short list, since it contained nothing that was not directly under our personal control: not money, nor reputation, nor even bodily health. Only our own judgements and actions truly mattered; everything else was ultimately irrelevant. “Choose not to be harmed – and you won't feel harmed,” wrote Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius in his *Stoic Meditations*. “Don't feel harmed – and you haven't been.”

Stoics ancient and modern have put this principle to the test. Roman sage Epictetus grew up a slave, crippled by a leg injury, possibly sustained at the hands of his abusive master – many centuries later, US fighter pilot James Stockdale used Epictetus's writings to endure seven years of torture and imprisonment during the Vietnam War.

Fowler, who calls Epictetus “my guide to living a good, intellectually rich life,” found succour in the same teachings when she was considering publishing her memo. She knew what had happened to other whistleblowers, in particular women who'd tried to draw attention to harassment. She dreaded being defined by this one act.

She found the strength to carry on, she says, by “stepping back, just being in my little Stoicism Susan bubble”. Here, she was able to reconcile her sense of integrity with the backlash she feared would follow. As she puts it on her blog: “Epictetus offers freedom to every one of us: determine for yourself, he says, what is yours and what is beyond your control, and then work and care only for the things that are yours, and you will always be free. What is ours? Our minds, our thoughts, our actions, our intellectual pursuits. If we cultivate those things, nobody can ever take away our freedom.”

Stoicism is an ideal preparation for adversity, because, for Stoics, life as brief, unpredictable and frequently painful. “Begin the morning by saying to yourself, I shall meet with the busy-body, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial,” sighed Marcus Aurelius in his journal. He meant it literally: regular “negative visualisation”, including imagining the death of loved ones, was a key weapon in the Stoic psychological arsenal. (Ferriss recommends it as a business strategy: “before you define your goals, define your fears”.)

As well as envisaging calamities, Stoics also go out of their way to prepare for them, toughening themselves by going without food and warmth – “rehearsing the worst case scenario,” as Ferriss puts it. If something bad wasn't happening already, then it undoubtedly would be soon. Everything, said the Stoic statesman Seneca, even life itself, was merely “on loan” from fickle Fortune.

In order to see things as they were, Stoics maintained a certain detachment from their emotions. “Anger,” wrote Seneca, “is brief insanity”; even grief was considered “an irrational contraction of the soul.” It may seem cold, but this view of emotions as judgements was one of the key influences on modern cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). With events such as Stoic Week, which polls participants’ wellbeing before and after (up 16 per cent on average in 2014) to find evidence of psychological impact, some modern Stoics seek to imitate the success of CBT [cognitive behavior therapy]– but also to restore the wider ethical message discarded in the passage to scientific respectability. Thus, people taking part are taught a form of “Stoic mindfulness,” which involves paying deep attention to the ethical dimension of everything they do. “Stoicism transcends most modern self-help and therapy by offering the view that much of our emotional suffering is caused by false values, such as egotism, materialism or hedonism,” says Donald Robertson, the therapist who developed the technique.

Robertson worked with Ferriss on an audiobook of Seneca’s Letters. Yet when Stoicism is translated into the language of thrusting startups, the ethics appear to go missing. Ferriss, who’s about page on his website lists, in the third person, his many achievements (“Tim’s Twitter account was selected by Mashable as one of ‘5 Must-Follow Twitter Accounts for Entrepreneurs’”), and who claims to have cut his work down to four hours a week by outsourcing his tasks to India, doesn’t exactly seem free of egotism, materialism and hedonism. The companies he advises and invests in – including Facebook, Twitter and Uber – are as ruthless and ambitious as any of their predecessors.

If this disappointing outcome sounds familiar, that's because it is. A few years ago, everyone in the Valley was into mindfulness meditation. Googlers and VCs inhaled the breath of compassion and serenity – before heading straight back to work to carry on crushing it. A thousand-year-old Buddhist tradition was turned into a life hack: a shortcut to fame, fortune and extra followers on Twitter.

The tension between right behaviour and worldly success is as old as philosophy itself. Yet as Emily Wilson, associate professor of Classics at the University of Pennsylvania, observes, Stoicism's insistence on individual powerlessness lends itself to such reinterpretations. Wilson is author of a biography of Seneca, who, infamously, covered up the Emperor Nero’s murder of his mother, Agrippina, by claiming that she’d killed herself after failing to seize power.

“Maybe Stoicism invites such abuses,” Wilson says. “One can see Seneca’s Stoic insistence that the real Empire exists in the mind – the real slavery is slavery to the passions – as tools that enabled him to deny the real corruptions involved in the real Empire, with real slavery.” Some things should just be changed. By cultivating resilience and accepting the situation as it is, we risk complicity in systemic disgrace.

To her endless credit, Fowler resisted the temptation to suppress her outrage at the behaviour she witnessed at Uber. Her Stoicism proved deeper and more moral than conventional self-improvement. Yet this raises a different puzzle. At a time when digital tools make it possible to access the world’s information, send objects across the world and summon a car in minutes, why do their creators prefer to think of themselves as unable to change anything but their own minds?

Sexism, obviously, is one explanation. In her *New York Times* interview, Fowler offered another: “I think, right now especially, with Trump in the White House, who knows what’s going on with North Korea? Then we have natural disasters happening. It just feels like you’re being tossed around on the ocean and there’s nothing.” The sentence ends there, but the meaning is surely, “Nothing we can do about it”.

It’s easy to see why Fowler might feel that way – in chaotic times, who doesn’t feel like flotsam on the waves? And although she mentions politics and the environment, after the bureaucratic nightmare of Uber, she no doubt understands the way technology plays into that sensation. Her case helped bring to light the way Silicon Valley firms force their employees to sign away their right to access the public court system, requiring instead that they bring complaints to internal arbitration, a process which obliges them to remain completely silent, even about the existence of a tribunal. In the same way, even as digital platforms increase users’ individual capacity, they hide and distance the source of decisions, exchanging autonomy and accountability for phoney transparency. The technique is different, but the chilling effect is the same.

Observing the “parallels between our society and the Roman Empire,” Wilson notes: “Maybe in a society where individuals feel increasingly disempowered in social and political ways, Stoicism becomes increasingly attractive.” Fowler bypassed gatekeepers and took power into her own hands. That she does not stand for the dream of the democratized web tells you everything you need to know about tech and power in 2017.