

Silicon Valley style Stoicism

Nellie Bowles, [over at the New York Times](#), has written what amounts to be yet another harsh criticism of Stoicism. This time taking inspiration from the creation of something called “the Cicero Institute,” which is attracting Silicon Valley types by promising the usual cocktail of “life hacks” to become rich and famous. Bowles is half right, and I think it’s important to distinguish between the part she does get right and the one she gets distinctly wrong.

The article begins by pointing out two facts that Bowles sees as contradictory: on the one hand, Silicon Valley is grateful for what early Amazon and Google investor John Doerr calls (apparently without embarrassment or irony) “the greatest legal accumulation of wealth in history.” On the other hand, an increasing number of people in high position in the Valley subject themselves to unpleasant situations — on purpose. As Bowles explains: “They sit in painful, silent meditations for weeks on end. They starve for days — on purpose. Cold morning showers are a bragging right. Notoriety is a badge of honor.”

There is, of course, no contradiction at all between the two facts in question. Seneca was one of the richest men in the Roman empire, and yet he occasionally fasted and went around underdressed for the weather. The emperor Marcus Aurelius sometimes slept on a plank or willingly gave up the amenities of life at court. There is nothing wrong — and indeed, there is something good — about rich and powerful people reminding themselves that they should appreciate what they have and risk taking for granted. Mild self-deprivation exercises (which I do myself regularly, though I’m neither a billionaire nor an emperor) are one way to do that.

As for “notoriety being a badge of honor,” that’s already not at all Stoic. True, Stoics don’t give import to other people’s opinions (unless they can learn from them), but taking pride in one’s reputation — of whatever kind — is most definitely not a Stoic value. Marcus couldn’t be more clear about that:

“Perhaps the desire of the thing called fame torments you. See how soon everything is forgotten, and look at the chaos of infinite time on each side of the present, and the emptiness of applause, and the fickleness and lack of judgment in those who pretend to give praise, and the narrowness of its domain, and be quiet at last.”
(Meditations IV.3)

Another good indicator that Silicon Valley isn’t really into [Stoicism \(the philosophy\)](#), but rather seeks a set of tools they can use as “life hacks,” is Tim Ferris’ quote from Bowles’ article: “Stoicism is an ideal ‘operating system’ for thriving in high-stress environments.” No, it isn’t. Stoicism is a philosophy of life, analogous to Buddhism or Christianity, aiming at making us into better people, more useful to the human cosmopolis. And by “useful” I don’t mean racking billions while designing smart phones, social networks, or search engines, I mean in the sense of nudging society toward justice and fairness — kind of the opposite of what Silicon Valley does, albeit as a byproduct of what they are really after (fame and money).

Which brings me to Bowles' greatest blunder. She claims that Stoic philosophy "can be interpreted to argue that the world and its current power structure are correctly set as they are. ... Stoics believed that everything in the universe is already perfect and that things that seem bad or unjust are secretly good underneath. The philosophy is handy if you already believe that the rich are meant to be rich and the poor meant to be poor."

There is a kernel of truth in the above, but also sufficient ignorance to make it completely misleading. To begin with, yes, the ancient Stoics believed in some sort of providence. But nothing like the Christian variety. They thought that the universe is a living organism, of which we are bits and pieces. The cosmos does what it does for its own benefit, and we may not understand why certain things happen to us because we don't share the cosmic perspective. One way to explain the concept is to think that we are like the neurons making up my brain (which, of course, give me the ability to reason, [what the Stoics call Logos](#)). I go about my business in life with no concern for said cells. An individual cell — if it had consciousness — may not like the fact that it's soon going to die to be replaced by a new one, but hey, it's about me, not the individual cells.

Which is why Seneca reminded us that what is truly good or bad isn't what happens to us, but how we handle it:

"People make a mistake, my dear Lucilius, if they hold that anything good, or evil either, is bestowed upon us by Fortune; it is simply the raw material of Goods and Ills that she gives to us —

the sources of things which, in our keeping, will develop into good or ill.” (Letters XCVIII.2)

What about the “[Stoicism] is handy if you already believe that the rich are meant to be rich and the poor meant to be poor” bit? Inexplicably, but like a number of others before her, Bowles completely discounts the fact that Stoicism has never been a philosophy exclusively cultivated by the rich and powerful. On the contrary. Zeno of Citium, the founder, was a merchant who had recently lost his cargo in a shipwreck and was looking for a new life; Cleanthes, the second head of the Stoa, was a former pugilist who had to work at night carrying water for a gardener in order to be able to pay for his studies; and of course Epictetus — the most famous Stoic of the late imperial period — was a former slave. Oh, and several members of the famous “[Stoic opposition](#)” actually lost their life or were sent into exile when they stood up against the tyranny of Nero, Vespasian, and Domitian. They did it because one of [the four Stoic cardinal virtues](#) is that of justice, and another one is courage (to act justly). But hey, let’s not have a few inconvenient facts get in the way of a tight and neat narrative!

Bowles goes on by quoting Ada Palmer, a professor of early modern history (not, strangely, *ancient* history, let alone philosophy) at the University of Chicago as saying that “So much of Stoicism is about achieving interior tranquillity ... As Rome took over, it surged in popularity because it was the one system of ethics that worked well for the rich and powerful.”

I have already addressed Palmer’s second point, about the rich and powerful. But also, no, interior tranquillity was not a goal of Stoicism, it was a byproduct. True, Epictetus promises his students that:

“If you have the right idea about what really belongs to you and what does not, you will never be subject to force or hindrance, you will never blame or criticize anyone, and everything you do will be done willingly.” (Enchiridion I.3)

But “what really belongs to you and what does not” has nothing to do with money, power, or all the other stuff Silicon Valley types are after. It has to do with knowledge of what is and is not under our control, and with understanding that a eudaimonic life, that is, a life worth living, is one of service to humanity at large — regardless of one’s social status:

“Labor not as one who is wretched, nor yet as one who would be pitied or admired; but direct your will to one thing only: to act or not to act as social reason requires.” (Meditations IX.12)

I’m guessing that not laboring as one who is wretched or would be pitied or admired isn’t exactly at the top of the list over at the Valley, nor is it to act as social reason requires. (Of course, this is an empirical question, and I could be wrong here.)

Which finally leads me to the infamous Cicero Institute that has apparently triggered Bowles’ article in the first place. Said Institute —

named, let's keep it in mind, not after a Stoic philosopher — turns out to be an entrepreneurship-focused lobbying firm.

Bowles paints a rather unflattering picture of both the Institute and its leader: “Joe Lonsdale, who founded the institute along with his wife, Taylor, is also a founder of Palantir, the data analytics firm long mired in controversy for its work supporting surveillance and predictive policing. In 2015 The New York Times Magazine reported on his relationship with an undergraduate mentee, who accused him of sexual abuse. He denied the charges. ... Mr. Lonsdale became friends with Peter Thiel at Stanford and, like Mr. Thiel, has spoken out against ‘social justice warriors.’”

Right. None of which is even close to Stoicism, the philosophy. It should by now be obvious that the goal of Stoics isn't to get rich. There is nothing wrong with entrepreneurship per se, which like everything can be done virtuously, or not. It depends on the moral agent. And it sounds like Mr. Lonsdale isn't going down the path of virtue, given his (alleged) propensity for sexual abuse, his disdain for people who argue for social justice (whether they do it reasonably or not it's an entirely different matter), and the fact that he makes money out of anti-social, as opposed to pro-social, technology.

So whatever the Cicero Institute is, its underlying principles are not Stoic (or Ciceronian, for that matter), and Bowles, as a journalist, does a disservice to her readership by mixing the two things up. As my Neapolitan grandmother Clara used to say, just because chocolate and excrement have similar colors, one shouldn't confuse them with each other. Wise words to live by.

