Why Is Silicon Valley So Obsessed With the Virtue of Suffering?

The Stoics and friends continue to be the dominant thought leaders from Google to Apple — and a new entrepreneur lobbying firm has even named itself Cicero.

By Nellie Bowles

The wealthy of Silicon Valley ought to be living their very best lives right now. John Doerr, an early Amazon and Google investor, calls their moment "the greatest legal accumulation of wealth in history."

And yet, the people of Silicon Valley seem determined to make themselves miserable. 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.

So the most helpful clues to understanding Silicon Valley today may come from its favorite ancient philosophy: Stoicism.

An ancient Greek school of thought, Stoicism argued that the only real treasures in life were inner virtues, like self-mastery and courage. The Stoics offered tactics to endure pain and pleasure without complaint.

These virtues are paraded on the website of a new entrepreneurship-focused lobbying firm, the Cicero Institute. The organization started quietly last year, and is intended to advocate for start-up interests.

Its landing page is adorned with a quote from Cicero, a Roman philosopher-statesman who embraced much of Stoicism's ethical systems while remaining skeptical of its metaphysics: "I have always been of the opinion that unpopularity earned by doing what is right is not unpopularity at all but glory."

As stocks rise despite crises, as a new wave of wealth rises in the American West, and promotions and payouts come despite scandals, the old mantra that every start-up is going to save the world now rings hollow. But tenets of Stoicism — which can be interpreted to argue that the world and its current power structure are correctly set as they are — fit right in.

Is this really a thing?

Stoicism has been the preferred viral philosophy "for a moment" for years now — or two decades, by one count. The topic of Stoicism usually comes up in the Valley in terms of the maintenance of the personal life. Start-ups big and small believe their mission is to make the transactions of life frictionless and pleasing. But the executives building those things are convinced that a pleasing, on-demand life will make them soft. So they attempt to bring the pain.

"We're kept in constant comfort," said Kevin Rose, the founder of Digg, in an interview on Daily Stoic, a popular blog for the tech-Stoic community. Mr. Rose said he tries to incorporate practices in his life that "mimic" our ancestors' environments and their daily challenges: "This can be simple things like walking in the rain without a jacket or wearing my sandals in the December snow when I take the dog out in the mornings."

Tim Ferriss, the region's popular life hacker, wrote on his blog that Stoicism is "an ideal 'operating system' for thriving in high-stress environments." Elizabeth Holmes, the founder of the disastrous health diagnostics start-up Theranos and star of a new HBO documentary about its collapse, would often cite "Meditations," by Marcus Aurelius. Rank-and-file tech workers frequently have more than one Stoic text on their bookshelves.

Y Combinator, the start-up incubator, includes "A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy," by William B. Irvine, on its list of books for entrepreneurs to read. Ryan Holiday's life-hacking books on Stoicism are especially popular, and seed the philosophy afresh to newcomers. (Mr. Holiday is one of the authors of "The Daily Stoic," a daily meditation book for the barefoot-running and bowhunting crowd.)

Then there are the founders who may not call themselves Stoics, but who are practicing some of its tenets. They include Jack Dorsey, the C.E.O. of Twitter, who likes to walk five miles to work each day and meditates in silence 10 days each year. He recently discussed "D.I.Y. cold tubs" and "one meal a day" in a podcast taping with Ben Greenfield, who evangelizes about health.

Why are they attracted to Stoicism?

Ada Palmer is a professor of early modern history at the University of Chicago and a novelist. Her books are popular in Silicon Valley, and she often visits for dinners with tech workers.

“It’s very interesting to see their sort of sad lethargy,” Dr. Palmer said. “When you’re 37, rich, retired and unhappy, it’s very perplexing.”
To her, it makes sense that they then turn to Stoicism. She called Stoicism “a wonderful therapy against grief and the blinders of the rat race.”
“So much of Stoicism is about achieving interior tranquillity,” she said.

That works for business leaders. Other schools of thought during Stoicism’s ancient rise had warned that politics and the pursuit of wealth would lead only to stress and risk, Dr. Palmer said, and some encouraged retiring from active life and even renouncing property. But Stoicism did not.
Instead, 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.

“The new popularity of Stoicism among the tech crowd is, in my view, strikingly similar to Stoicism’s popularity among the powerful elites of ancient Rome,” Dr. Palmer said. “As Rome took over, it surged in popularity because it was the one system of ethics that worked well for the rich and powerful.”

Why does it matter?

The Cicero Institute comes at a time of tension in Silicon Valley, from a person with a complicated history there.

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. (The student sued him, he countersued, the suits were withdrawn; Stanford banned him from campus but then reversed that decision.) Mr. Lonsdale became friends with Peter Thiel at Stanford and, like Mr. Thiel, has spoken out against “social justice warriors.”

Public anger about big tech is growing, and political leaders are beginning to take note.

The Cicero Institute promises to fight for the business opportunities of entrepreneurs by focusing on deregulation, with special attention paid to making it easier to build start-ups around prisons, health care and education. Mr. Lonsdale proposes that “private prison contracts tie financial incentives to performance measures,” for instance.

Cicero, for his part, retired, but then re-entered the ancient political arena when he saw rising corruption. He was ultimately killed for it.

Of the institute’s mascot, Dr. Palmer said: “They’ve chosen the one who comes out of inaction when there’s a crisis to try to prevent a coup.”