

## Nuggets and Bright Lines

- Momento Mori
- Amor Fati
- Summum Bonum
- Premeditatio Malorum
- The Obstacle is the Way
- Ego is the enemy
- Sympatheia



## Seven Stoic Pillars

So what is Stoicism exactly? Stoicism is believed to have begun in the third century BC by Zeno of Citium. History suggests that following a shipwreck he came across the writings of Socrates and an Athenian called Crates. These teachings changed his life.

Stoicism's central teachings are based around living a life of virtue in action rather than words and theory. It has a basis on an understanding that we can control our responses but not external events. Core to Stoic philosophy are the teachings that life is short, unpredictable and often brutal. It suggests the best lives are lived through reliance on logic rather than emotion and on learning to control ourselves and our responses.

Below are introductions to seven key aspects of the stoic philosophy. On their own, properly understood they are life changing. Together they form a potent armoury of self reliance.

### **Memento Mori**

Memento Mori reminds us that yes we are finite and we are all going to die. None of us are immortal. Taken in perspective we are tiny flecks in the vast universe that are born and will disappear in a flash. It is a thought tool we can use to create priority, meaning, perspective and relevant urgency. It helps us to treat our time as a gift and not waste it on the trivial.

Death, as we know it, seen in this way doesn't make life pointless but purposeful. *Memento Mori* should urge us on to create, do the best we can, be all we can, love with all our heart, experience all we are able and give everything we can. It's all a gift to us anyway. It is a grand aim to have zero regrets when the inevitable time comes.

### **Amor Fati**

Amor fati could be the ultimate key to a life of peace. It means to simply love your fate, to accept what life throws at you. If it is true that attitude is so vital then this is surely a significant part of that. How many of us can look back, not too far, if at all for some of us, to when we thought as young people, full of enthusiasm, that we could take on the world and do and be anything we wanted? A great attitude if I may say so. How many of us can recall the never ending battle against circumstance when it seemed that nothing happened as it should? Did we spend our time bemoaning and complaining? I can certainly and embarrassingly remember distinctly complaining, for extended periods, often about the same thing and telling the same sob story. People looked on, some walked away and others listened helplessly. Nothing changed except the story got more engrained in my mind, for the next time.

Amor fati changes all that. Loving your fate starts you on the road to a recognition that via this challenge is a better, evolved you, dependant of course on how you traverse the path. It at least keeps us quiet and stops the complaining as we look for the baby step of progress that can be found somewhere in it. Extremely difficult to do in brutal times. Easy to write about. Amor fati.

### **Summum Bonum**

Simply meaning, the highest good. Originally credited to Cicero, the great Roman orator. It sums up beautifully a maxim of living a good life in that it guides us to just do what we consider to be the right thing at all times and let the consequences look after themselves. It allows detachment in its greatest form, allowing your life to be lead by virtue, no matter what. As Marcus Aurelius pronounced, just do the right thing. Not an easy thing to accomplish as a mortal human when our ego and desires are never far away working to create that which makes life easier at the expense of anything. It is likely a never ending battle but one that get's easier as we strengthen our resolve on each and every occasion. Summum bonum, the highest good.

### **Premeditatio Malorum**

Practicing the art of negative visualisation is a strange concept to those thrust into the world of positive thinking. It is a key facet of Stoicism that can allow us to cope better with the outcomes of life. I distinctly recall for many years refusing to consider anything but a wonderful outcome to anything I was involved in. All as a result of the teachings I was guided to, around being positive, controlling your mind and avoiding any negative thought. How I have changed and I suspect many do with experience of life. Murphy's Law, that states if something can go wrong, it probably will, is another way of putting it.

So premeditatio malorum means we ought to consider having a realistic expectation and be prepared for all eventualities, specifically the tragic ones for these are the ones that can derail a person, sometimes for long periods of time. I do not believe there is a perfect answer of course to life's tragedies and losses. Nor do I think we can avoid being brought to our knees by life but having a pre thought out construct to work with has to be a little better than not.

It is a wise person who spends time rehearsing and considering plans and strategies to deal with an array of outcomes. Such an individual will, in all likelihood, be able to deal with these inevitable setbacks and recover that much better.

### **The Obstacle is the Way**

We all bemoan the apparent problems we encounter and secretly wish they were not there, or ask 'why me?' Ryan Holiday, in his book 'The Obstacle Is The Way', implores us to adopt a different stance. He wisely states that the things we encounter, we do so, because they are invited on to our path. Only by negotiating them will we grow and be able to move on. By fighting them, which includes complaining and avoiding, we sign up to remaining painfully where we are. It would be good advice to note that should the problem disappear as we are hoping it will, rest assured another one of a similar nature will reappear for us. Is the lesson for their existence becoming clear?

These obstacles, which we often do not recognise, are there for us. Pain in some form will be part of it, suffering however is a choice. Negotiate and defeat this piece of the jigsaw, in your own way and lo and behold, the next will appear. The difference being that your approach to the obstacle will determine how you exit. The person you exit as will be different to the one you entered as. The next obstacle will be appropriate to where you are and so it goes on.

### **Ego is the enemy**

Ryan's book, 'Ego Is The Enemy', covers in detail many facets of how we get undone and deceived by this thing we call ego. We all have this innate drive for self preservation and achievement. This is without question and denying it is futile. We need, it appears, to constantly look at balancing and checking these drives so that we can live successfully in social harmony. Allowing them to go unchecked is a road to eventual disaster. The effects of our ego manifest in many ways, not all of them by any means obvious. It will sabotage us in subtle ways to get its needs met and is likely a lifetime's work to overcome its tyranny. Recognising its existence in your life is a great start. Someone once told me that egoism is the strangest disease in the world, as it makes everyone sick except the person who has it. That seems pretty near to the mark.

## Sympatheia

"... therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee."

We are all one, fragments of the same whole. What benefits one, benefits all and what diminishes one diminishes all. Such maxims sound great but are hard to comply with in the heat of the day, when decisions and short term gains are at stake. Sympatheia reminds us, as Marcus Aurelius wrote, of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things and how we will be better for remembering this and acting in accordance with it. It is closely linked to the previous pillar, being almost it's polar opposite. A rising tide raises all ships, tells the same story.

In our current age where such issues as climate change and the imbalance of wealth are questions that should force us all to think deeply, this pillar should be a beacon of hope. Living so that a few continue to benefit in the short term leaving many to suffer the consequences of an impoverished planet and opportunities is not the way of sympatheia. There are rarely quick or easy solutions when things need turning round and people have to change. The alternative, however is not worth long consideration. The underlying principle dictates it will be worse for us all.

So there we have what I have termed The Seven Stoic Pillars. The inspiration behind all of this is primarily down to Ryan Holiday and his recommended writings on Stoicism. I personally consider these principles and ideas significant ideals to adopt. They make sense and are simple. You can plan to improve in one of the areas at a time as an idea and integrate them into your life. I am sure they will only have a profoundly positive effect.

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## The Author

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