

Silicon Valley Stoicism

KAI WHITING



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One of the most challenging fans of Stoicism

For me, Silicon Valley adherents are perhaps one of the most challenging fans of Stoicism, precisely because they have a disproportionate amount of power and money. Personally, I think a great number of people get into Stoicism because they think that it is Silicon Valley’s secret sauce. Unfortunately, many such people hack their way into Stoicism not because they want to improve their character, but because they really want to be rich and powerful.

Focusing on wealth as an indifferent

Silicon Valley has a vested interest in focusing on wealth being a Stoic “indifferent” (meaning the Stoics held that it has no bearing on your character) rather than Stoicism’s cosmopolitan values or virtue ethics, which has a lot to say about justice and the avoidance of greed (a Stoic vice)!

While it’s true that the Stoics never said we couldn’t be wealthy, or powerful (the most famous Stoic was the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius after all), they also didn’t say that wealth is something that is ultimately worth pursuing or hoarding, especially if it is to the detriment of your character. Silicon Valley adherents are right to say “we can be wealthy because wealth is indifferent”, however, merely focusing on how to be more resilient for financial gain

or career status is not Stoicism at all.

Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoic philosophy, wrote a utopic vision of society in his *Republic*, which, unfortunately, only exists in fragments. The fact that he called it *Republic* should tell us something important: he wasn’t particularly interested in what made a good Stoic individual. What he really wanted to know was what made a good Stoic community.

This is not some hidden obscure fact you really have to dig for; it’s right there in the title. In short, when we focus on individual pursuit at the expense of community, we’re going completely against Zeno’s concept of Stoicism. In his utopia, there is no private property (oh dear, Silicon Valley!) There is no money (oh dear, Silicon Valley!) Nobody takes more than what they need. There is no need to accumulate beyond the communal level because, basically, it’s a utopic vision of the wise and the wise don’t need to accumulate on an individual level at all. They just literally know what they need at any given moment and they use what they need.

Money has nothing to do with virtue

If you have money, a virtuous act is using it appropriately. Having it or not having it doesn’t have anything to do with virtue at all. In Stoicism, there is no way of correctly arguing you are deserving or undeserving

of any quantity of money or power (or lack thereof). This is because the money in your bank account or the job opportunities you are being offered aren’t completely up to you; they also depend on the thoughts, actions, and attitudes of other people, all of which are ultimately beyond your control. This remains true even if you can claim to have some influence on the outcome, simply because you still cannot effectively make someone’s mind up for them!

Ignoring the cultivation of moral character

In short, the Silicon Valley framing of Stoicism falls short precisely because it emphasises that wealth is an indifferent and almost completely ignores the importance of cultivating a virtuous character. It falls short because it focuses on “Stoic” life hacks for the accumulation of wealth rather than on how one learns not to make moral errors. Again, the ancient Stoics certainly didn’t ignore indifferents but rather used them to indicate how they are always secondary to the one thing worthy of pursuing – the virtuous character, the only thing that will enable you to flourish, regardless of your wealth or social status.

Kai Whiting is a co-author of Being Better: Stoicism for a World Worth Living In. He is a researcher and lecturer in sustainability and Stoicism based at UCLouvain, Belgium. He Tweets @kaiwhiting and is a co-founder of the WalledGarden.com, a place for Stoic community, discussions and debates.