

Focus on resilience

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Stoicism, a philosophy of resilience

The Stoics never wrote of resilience as such, but they could have. It seems to me that the purpose of their philosophy is precisely that: to build resilience. Why? Because as human beings, we never cease to face events that are unplanned and unwanted, that we can't do much about, but that nevertheless can potentially profoundly disturb us.

This has always been the case and the COVID-19 pandemic is just another one of those reminders that what we need to worry about is not what we cannot control, but what we can control. And what we can control is the way we decide to look at the world. This is not easy to do.

Depression of a positive person

I consider myself a positive and determined person, living in favorable conditions. I'm lucky enough to have a loving family and a great job. Yet I recently found myself quite depressed by the atmosphere of fear and apprehension of economic and social collapse, the threat to democratic systems across the world, and all the news about the difficulties and the violence of the world we live in now.

French philosopher Alain once said that pessimism is a question of mood, optimism a question of will. This

resonated with the Stoic attitude: I can decide to let myself drift into pessimism or cultivate an optimistic state of mind, sincerely believing in the optimum - that things will get better in the future than they are now.

Cultivating optimism

Cultivating this state of mind is definitely within my control. Not just by convincing myself that I should be blindly optimistic, but by trying to give meaning to what I am going through. Meaning is a source of joy. As Austrian psychiatrist, neurologist, and modern Stoic Viktor Frankl wrote, « There are three main avenues on which one arrives at meaning in life. The first is by creating a work or by doing a deed.

Finding meaning in love

The second is by experiencing something or encountering someone; in other words, meaning can be found not only in work but also in love.

The last freedom

More important, however, is the third avenue to meaning in life: even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by doing so change himself.

Everything can be taken from a man but the

freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.

This is precisely what Stoicism is about: considering that our freedom lies in the way in which we decide to look at the world. But Frankl adds that meaning is also about how we relate to the world (nature, others...) and what we create, the usefulness of what we do. And Alain adds that this change of attitude needs to be guided by a positive force, for pessimism is not where we will find freedom, meaning or joy. I found these elements empowering.

Searching for meaning

Maybe this is what resilience is about. More than the ability to rebound - and come back to an initial point or state, as its Latin etymology suggests - resilience could be about accepting a given situation and never ceasing to search for meaning. When resignation is the attitude of the pessimist, acceptance is the attitude of the optimist. The stakes of this choice are nothing less than preserving our humanity.



Flora Bernard co-founded the Paris-based philosophy agency, Thae, in 2013. Flora now works to help organizations give meaning to what they do.