

Escape the comfort cage

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An all-time high standard of living

Today our standard of living is at an all-time high. Most live with more comfort than the kings and queens of past times. We can buy everything we need and don’t need. But is a comfortable life necessarily a good life?

There have been many people who talked about escaping that comfort once in a while and the benefits of doing so. The ancient Stoics explicitly mention some methods like temporary poverty, active (emotional and physical) discomfort, and pleasure avoidance.

Set aside a certain number of days, during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare, with coarse and rough dress, saying to yourself the while: "Is this the condition that I feared?" - Seneca, Epistles 18.5

Why practice discomfort?

The advantages of these practices range from preparing yourself for harder times to improving your confidence to a higher sense of appreciation for your day-to-day life. Moments of discomfort also dramatically increase our awareness and get us out of our autopilot. Take a cold shower and see how intense it is and how seconds can feel like forever.

At this point you might intervene: Aren’t poverty, discomfort, and pleasures all indifferent? Why seek or avoid them?

While they are for themselves indifferent, the Stoics used them as means to become better in striving for virtue.

Wisdom is knowing what action to take

Wisdom is knowing what action to take in a given situation. So, if you practice situations like poverty, you learn valuable information on how to handle it. This experience certainly brought you closer to wisdom then. Learning how to deal with emotional discomfort, like social judgments for example, brings us closer to being courageous. Avoiding pleasures puts us further ahead on the path to self-control. The goal in mind is in any case virtue and therefore a good life in the Stoic sense.

I would like to argue that these tools are not just merely a supplement for aspiring Stoics on the path to virtue, but a necessity for virtue itself. You don’t just need discomfort to acquire virtue, but to be virtuous. Like the red queen in Alice in Wonderland you need to run, just to stay in place. It’s not like once you reached virtue it’s nothing but smooth sailing. There is no possibility for virtue in a comfortable world without any

obstacles or discomforts.

You are a great man; but how do I know it if fortune gives you no opportunity to show your worth? You have entered the Olympic games, but you are the only contestant; (...) I judge you unfortunate because you have never been unfortunate. - Seneca, On Providence 4.2-3

We need to be close to virtue

To live in accordance with our social nature and be an unshakable and ambitious member of our community, we need to be as close to virtue as we possibly can. Take Cato, who walked the streets barefoot and with clothing that was beneath what one would expect from a politician. He knew quite well, when you have the disease to please, you don’t stand for anything. In politics, as in life, you can’t be everybody’s darling. So, he deliberately and regularly exposed himself to ridicule to keep his virtues. And then used them in dealing with people and the senate.

So, take with you how Musonius sums up that thought and have in mind, that this also applies for emotional activity:

For obviously the philosopher's body should be well prepared for physical activity, because often the virtues make use of this as a necessary instrument for the affairs of life. - Musonius Rufus, Lecture 6.4