

Beyond ambition: Getting off the treadmill of desire

Downside to ambition

In one of his many memorable phrases, Seneca says that success is often won at the cost of life (Seneca, *On the Shortness of life*). By this he means that people work so hard in pursuit of success that they have no time left over for themselves, no time left over to do the things that really matter.

Beware ambition, Seneca warns.

What is success?

Reflecting on this, we might first want to stop and ask what we think counts as success. Is it more material wealth? The Stoics, of course, deny that this is either inherently valuable or essential in order to enjoy a good life. More and more money will not make us happier once we have fulfilled our basic needs.

What else might success be? The approval and admiration of others? Again, from a Stoic perspective that won't contribute to our happiness. Indeed, attaching great importance to what others think about us has the potential to become quite damaging: our sense of whether we succeed or fail will depend on what other people think, which is out of our control, and we may unconsciously start to live our lives according to other people's standards of what counts as success, rather than our own.

These are perhaps the most common ways in which success is usually understood: material wealth and the approval of others—in other words, fame and fortune. This is certainly what Seneca was warning against. But what other ways might we think about success?

A life well lived

For Seneca, a life well lived involves spending time doing worthwhile activities, preferably self-sufficient ones in which we can enjoy

autonomy and freedom. What he has in mind are intellectual pursuits. Unsurprisingly, he's thinking of philosophy, but also science, history, and literature. A satisfying, successful life will include the leisure time that these pursuits require. Time is far more valuable than money, Seneca insists.

Success and virtue

A broader Stoic view would think of success differently again, as virtuous activity (and Seneca thinks that his intellectual pursuits ultimately contribute to this higher goal). A successful life, on this view, doesn't involve the pursuit of anything external at all. It doesn't depend on one more promotion or another pay rise or an online approval rating. For if one thinks that these things matter, the question soon becomes "how much is enough?" Just one more? Just one more after that? If the point at which one stops is ultimately arbitrary, then why not stop with what you've already got? The alternative is to remain stuck forever on the treadmill of desire (a notion often associated with Buddhism, but see Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1.174-5). Instead we ought to think of a successful human life as one comprised of activities pursued virtuously, whatever those activities might be, with the stress on acting well rather than any external rewards.

Escaping the treadmill

Stoic advice, then, is to be wary of the pursuit of success as it is usually understood. For Seneca, that next step up the ladder always comes at too high a price, while for Epictetus there's no good reason to be climbing the ladder in the first place. Only by escaping the treadmill of worldly success can we give ourselves the time and mental space to think about what might really add value to our lives. So, beware ambition.



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