

# FREEDOM IN A WORLD OF FORTUNE'S ARROWS

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## Freedom and Stoicism

How can Stoic philosophy help us understand what it means to be free? It's a question that has preoccupied Stoics both ancient and modern.

Here, I'd like to share a few thoughts based on Roman Stoic and politician Seneca.

*Liberty [also translated as "freedom" elsewhere] is the prize. This is the reward of toil. You ask what is liberty? To be enslaved to no object, no necessity, no chances, to reduce fortune to a level field. The day I realize I have more power than she, she will have no more power. - Seneca, Moral Letters, 51.*

For as long as we are alive, we are subject to whatever luck — sometimes depicted as the Roman goddess Fortuna — doles out. But as Seneca signals, the Stoic person's mission is to defeat fortune's power over us by re-aligning our goals.

Seneca's passage focuses on the same predicament that preoccupied Shakespeare's Hamlet:

*The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.*

(Hamlet's proposed solution to confronting fortune, suicide, is a distinctly dispreferred option.) This situation of being at fortune's mercy is

just as true today as it was in Seneca's or Shakespeare's time.

Sure, we have better medicine and medical care now — but we are still coping with a pandemic that is killing hundreds of thousands of people. Yes, we have better technologies and communications — but we also have ways for violent extremists to contact each other and plan to take over our democratic process online (if temporarily). We have, overall, made progress in human rights — but still, autocratic governments use a range of heavy-handed methods to crack down on their citizens.

## We live in an imperfect world

So we would all do well to recognize that when we wake up each morning, we are living in an imperfect and often difficult world, and we have no idea what the day holds. In the early hours of Jan. 6, for example, few could have predicted that a Washington D.C. mob would riot at the US Capitol building, attack and easily overpower the police there, and send Congress members into hiding. Bending the name of "freedom" to their own twisted definition, this mob's violence resulted in 5 deaths.

## Taking a deeper look at freedom

As Stoics, too, we need to take a deeper look at what we mean by freedom. For the ancients, a key benefit of practicing Stoicism was to achieve the freedom that comes from wanting the right things — the things that are in our power (our choices, our actions), and the things that strengthen our character. By focusing on our choices and character, we may begin to feel untouchable by fortune, finding a sense of inner calm rooted in practicing the Stoic virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance.

This interpretation of freedom necessitates placing far less emphasis on the externals that surround us, a challenge to consider as we strive for jobs, wealth, recognition, influence, etc. Seneca would likely have said it's fine to pursue these things, as long as we keep in mind our what really matters as we do so. In the end, we owe it to ourselves to cultivate the quest for inner freedom to the best of our ability, as each day brings its own arrows.

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