

How to increase the quality of our lives



Our predecessors nailed it

Stoicism is a perennial philosophy. One problem with perennial philosophies is that sometimes they require us to dive into an analysis which may seem fruitless today because it had been all sorted out thousands of years ago. Our predecessors nailed it and we have nothing to add. And yet, we need to mull it over again and again – that’s how important some principles are.

Our life isn’t short, we make it so

The problem of the – alleged! – brevity of human life is a perfect example. 2,000 years ago Seneca said that our life isn’t short by itself, but we ourselves make it short. Another quote by him is that life is long enough if we know how to use it well. This is truly one of these pearls of wisdom that are hard to comment upon because they have it all.

It’s the quality of life that counts

In modern parlance we speak sometimes of the “quality vs. quantity” problem, i.e., the quality of life contrasted with the duration of it. Needless to say, what counts is not the number of days of our lives, but how we live them, how we utilize them and to what end. All sorts of dramatic paradoxes are possible here. Twenty years of a life well spent may be more imposing than a hundred years of idling

mediocrity. History is abundant with examples of that.

Quality is measured by virtues we practice

We must be careful though when we use the word “quality” in this context. “Quality of life” is usually understood today in terms of well-being, comfort and possible enjoyment of one’s life. These metrics sound off to the Stoic ears.

Quality of Stoic life is measured by virtues that are practiced, values that are upheld, and vices that are combatted. If our life scores high on these three, it is a good life even if we don’t live to a ripe age.

After all, the length of our life is a purely mathematical fact, it is basically a number of days between our birth and passing. Moreover, it is beyond our control – a mere virus can cut it short. Like all other things that are out of our control, it is not good or bad intrinsically. It is only how we use them that can be categorized as “good” or “bad”. If we employ our time in a proper, Stoic manner, the brevity of our life will be irrelevant.

Wasting our lives

The tricky part is that when we think of all this, we inevitably come to the painful conclusion that we have

uselessly wasted tons and tons of our time so far. Seneca urges us to use our time wisely but *we* haven’t used it wisely, we have misused so much of it. This is quite a self-defeating thought. It may lead to losing even more time needlessly. Our mind reacts in quite a bizarre way: we have lost so much time, we are so deeply in the red that nothing we do can change the overall account. So, why even try? Our Stoic motivation drops.

The twist – of course – is that this is exactly what we need to avoid. The whole idea of not wasting our time any more is that we need to do it in spite of the fact that the hitherto balance looks discouraging. It will always look that way. It happens to everyone.

Seneca was a Stoic not because he hadn’t wasted time meaninglessly. He was a Stoic because he managed to try to waste no more despite the fact that he had wasted so much. That’s the only difference between these who make moral progress and those who don’t. Not paying attention to how much time we lost already is the only way to lose no more.



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