

Stoicism, Race, and The Modern Condition

The virtue of stoicism is an antediluvian concept; yet holds much contemporary application in the 21st century. The struggles of everyday life can frustrate upholding this “control the controllable” mindset that many people desire, but don’t have the previous life experience necessary to strive as a stoic. The practice and belief in stoicism is not easily embodied, as the needs and wants of man have become abundant in the United States. For example, when a person faces grave hardship in education or in the work force, the remedy for this struggle can often be found in quitting. But why do some people quit, and others don’t? What compels one person to identify their struggles and continue suffering for a greater cause, while another person facing equal adversity seeks comfort in quitting their endeavor? There are many factors that play into the development of man as a stoic, the most recent being the popularization of identifying as depressed on social media, limiting the development of stoic characteristics. The critical inquiry I propose is a conversation of socio-economic standings just as much as it is ethics. I seek to evince the reasons for modern man’s belief and utilization of the stoics’ framework.

In his magnum opus, *Mediations*, Marcus Aurelius opines, “If it’s in your control, why do you do it? If it’s in someone else’s, then who are you blaming?... Blame no one. Set people straight if you can. If not, just repair the damage. And suppose you can’t do that either. Then where does blaming people get you? No pointless actions.”¹ In modern day, there is always a plethora of ideas and concepts one can blame for why they met unfortunate outcomes. For contextual reasons, it’s imperative that I acknowledge the time of this publication, 171-175 C.E. (About 1,850 years ago). This is important because many constructs and phenomena that consume the human mind today did not exist then. But regardless of whether ills like racism, or depression were conceptualized, the idea was that no matter what a person faced, they should persevere without complaint. This practice can still be used today; except an influx of exterior factors that make life difficult often halts the development of or doesn’t allow for proper practice

¹ Aurelius, M. (2016). *Marcus Aurelius - Meditations: Translations by Gregory Hays, Adapted for the contemporary reader*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform., p.104

of stoicism. The most effective solution to these factors is perspective and ridding any traces of egocentrism.

In his essay, *America Without the Blacks*, Ralph Ellison says:

for today it is the black American who puts pressure upon the nation to live up to its ideals. It is he who gives creative tension to our struggle for justice and for the elimination of those factors, social and psychological, which make for slums and shaky suburban communities. It is he who insists that we purify the American language by demanding that there be a closer correlation between the meaning of words and reality, between ideal and conduct, our assertions, and our actions. Without the black American, something irrepressibly hopeful and creative would go out of the American spirit, and the nation might well succumb to the moral slobbism that has ever threatened its existence from within.²

This quote by Ralph Ellison embodies the notion that man can utilize perspective for his gain. In context, without the enslavement of Africans and African Americans, black people would not have the generations of oppression and suffering that they derive meaningful existence from. This interpretation jibes with the idea that a black person is obligated to succeed and overcome adversity thrown their way because their family members were once held in bondage. However, Ralph Ellison's essay was written in the 1960's. The Black people he was referring to are the men of some 50 years ago. These men could easily identify their predecessors who were enslaved or suffered from racism. Today, there is a dichotomy to be found amongst black men, as statistically, they are one of the most unsuccessful categories of man. A black man who is educated on the previous struggles of black folks, and or his ancestral origins, can strive as a stoic because no matter what adversity he faces, it is miniscule in comparison to what the generations of slaves, and free black men of the 20th century endured. By contrast, a black person who is not educated on the maliciousness of American history that was weaponized and inflicted

² Ellison, R. (1970) *America Without the Blacks*. Time Magazine. P.5
<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,943970-5,00.html>

upon people of his kind, cannot utilize that knowledge and perspective to persevere during trying times. This concept is not confined to strictly black people though. For this analysis, let X stand for the idea that a person has an exterior factor that provides a reason to persevere without complaint.

One example of X can be found amongst Jewish people. Like black people, when a Jewish person comes to learn about the holocaust or an ancestor who was a victim to Nazi Germany, they can derive an obligation to fight adversity by utilizing this newfound perspective. So, the principle of this claim is that for black and Jewish people, X represents a reason to take on the difficulties life throws at them without quitting or complaining because it's nothing compared to what their forefathers went through. However, X can be found in capacities different from the perspective of ancestral suffering. One of the most common examples of X is when a person has their first child. That parent now has an obligation to persevere and fight through adversity because they have a child to take care of. Most parents can manage without complaint because their parents did it without complaint, or at least without revealing their struggles, financial or familial, to their children. If a person suffers from mental illness or bad health, when those conditions in their life are effectively attenuated, they can now perceive the new problems of life as easier because the conditions they once had are gone. A person who was once blind can endure his problems in a different posture since he now has vision. For example, if this imaginary figure lost his house in a fire, no longer being blind gives him reason to fight this hardship. By utilizing the perspective of suffering obtained by once being blind, he can perceive a house fire as not the end of the world because at least now he can see. On the flip side, a person who has always had vision; or for conventional purposes, does not have an X, when he loses his house to a fire, the only lens he can operate through is victimized. The only idea he can grapple with is that he lost his house to a fire, prompting complaint and suffering.

These are examples of easily identifiable X's, with equally identifiable reasons for why they work. But the critical question at hand is not why one can find reason to practice stoicism in modern times. The answer I seek is why can some people use X the way they do, but others can be under the same circumstances or have the same experience and not utilize perspective by practicing stoicism? I believe the answer to this inquiry is mainstream media and popularization of suffering.

In her study, Susan Meyer draws a direct correlation between technological screen time and rates of depression³. The interpretation of the data wrangled in this study says that there is a direct correlation between amount of screen time used by adolescence and their chance of developing depression. Furthermore, Meyer adds that using social media leads to a lower self-esteem in adolescence teens aged 12-15 which can increase the likelihood of developing depression or other mental health conditions. Depression rates have reached an all-time high in the United States, measuring at 29% in 2023⁴, up 10% from 2015, which is the same time frame that social media has made such tremendous increases in popularity. Applications like Instagram have seen an increase of users from 375 million in 2015, to 1.4 billion in 2023⁵. This is significant because it supports the theory that in the same time frame that social media has become so popular, rates of depression have skyrocketed, allowing me to draw a correlation between these two variables. But what does this have to do with practicing stoicism you might ask?

In the context of why some people can utilize the variable we defined as X, and others enduring similar circumstances cannot, I suggest the effects of social media in increasing the rates of depression. The men that Ralph Ellison referred to in his essay were not exposed to social media. Marcus Aurelius was not exposed to social media when he suggested that stoicism should always be practiced. Depression as a concept did not yet exist when these men brought about their claims. I suggest that depression is the main factors that effects man's ability to be a stoic. Depression is a condition that can inform whether a person will rise to the occasion or proclaim that their task is too difficult and succumb to the satisfaction of quitting. But the effects of social media do not stop there. Social media has effectively popularized the idea of

³ Mayor, S. (2019). Added screen time linked to more depression in adolescents, study finds. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 366, 1. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27177284>

⁴ Witters, D. (2023). U.S Depression Rates Reach New Highs. Gallup, inc. p.1 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/505745/depression-rates-reach-new-highs.aspx>

⁵ Dixon, S. (2023). Number of Instagram users worldwide from 2020 to 2025. Statista, inc. p.1 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183585/instagram-number-of-global-users/>

suffering. It is trendy to share your misfortune and struggles on social media hoping that people with similar shared experience can empathize with you. But in doing so; in finding people who have gone through things similar to you, often you will find yourself accepting that the feelings you feel are justified and there is no reason to make your way out of the victim, people blaming mindset. This comforting reality is a prerogative not held by Marcus Aurelius or many other stoic philosophers. He, like the people of his time through till the early 2000's, were not able to hear the pains of people across the world via social media and determine that their struggles were common. Strikingly, they were not able to determine that their "struggles" were struggles at all, as they perceived hardship as the average trials and tribulations of everyday life.

Furthermore, advances in medicine have made it increasingly difficult to be a stoic in the 21st century. The development of anti-depressant drugs has created an alternate reality for millions of people. In this reality, one cannot function emotionally without the drugs they consume to attenuate their saddening emotions. Along with anti-depressants, is the utilization of talk therapy that has become increasingly popular in the 21st century. But to answer the question of why some people are stoics and some aren't is the result of these factors themselves. Experiencing depression, attending therapy, taking anti-depressant drugs, and the social media popularization of suffering are informative factors that distract one from the principles of stoicism. A person not exposed to these factors will have an easier time practicing stoicism. For example, if a student fails an exam and immediately begins preparation for the next exam, the student is being stoic. Contrarily, if a student fails an exam, and immediately tends to Instagram where he reads about his peers failing grades, or more specifically, finds other people complaining that the teacher did not cover what was on the test, he is likely to blame others for his unfortunate results. In the experience of Marcus Aurelius and Ralph Ellison, amenities like social media, or remedies for depression and mental suffering were not available. The only option was to continue fighting the problems faced without complaint and without quitting. The only option was to be a stoic.

The ancient wisdom of stoicism, while rooted in antiquity, resonates with remarkable relevance in the complexities of the 21st century. The experiences of contemporary life often derail the pursuit of a stoic mindset. The critical examination of why some individuals persists

while others succumb to adversity unveils a multifaceted inquiry touching on socio-economic standings and traumatic experience. The principles espoused by Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations* remain timeless, urging individuals to focus on what is within their control and persevere regardless of external circumstances. Yet, the inundation of modern life's diverse factors that complicate the application of stoicism, necessitates the cultivation of perspective and the eradication of egocentrism.