

Applying Stoicism: The Struggle for Self-Sufficiency

By Travis Hume



Many persons today face an unforgiving journey to become financially independent. For numerous entry-level positions in various fields, obstacles may include a requirement for prior work experience, multiple degrees, or a combination of both. As it is difficult to obtain an entry-level position without prior work experience, more advanced or specialized degrees or inadequate-paying internships become the equalizer. Additional education demands greater financial risks for uncertain returns.

Some may be able to afford more education without taking on debt, largely leaving time and effort as remaining costs. For others, outside financial support or graduating with substantial debt is necessary. Depending on the desired field, the advanced degree will not always be an advantage; the degree may instead place one's chances for consideration on even ground with other applicants. For a significant advantage, familiar obstacles need to be overcome, multiplying the costs accordingly. Some may also possess an edge in the form of social contacts, networks, or favor trading.

Each individual's experience with this cycle will vary depending on many interweaving events. It may well be that the cycle ends as hoped for, and an individual lands the sought-for position. It may end when an individual reaches self-prescribed limits on the time and money

they were willing to risk. An individual may end the cycle at a seemingly appropriate time, yet the position nevertheless seems continuously out of reach. Finally, an individual may choose not to face the cycle at all, deeming the risked investment too great without some guarantee of future stability.

If an individual believes another person (e.g. another applicant or employer) represents a barrier or means to something good, they are more likely to behave in ways that are counter-intuitive to their goal. For example, they may go out of their way to choose words that appear knowledgeable, or change their body language to appear very confident. They may be more likely to embellish their resume, overstate their work experience, or exaggerate personal stories during interviews. If they're offered a position, they must continually work to maintain any intentionally false appearances created from the outset.

The miscellaneous risks of pursuing an advanced degree are commonly not the only considerations in play: Costs of living vary by location, currently held job(s), debts owed elsewhere, supporting dependents, healthcare expenses, and other elements. If one or more of these considerations becomes financially untenable, the effects often cascade. An individual's career goals may be suspended indefinitely as a result, perhaps by months, years, or decades.

Common responses to these developments include resignation, despair, anger, indignation, fear, disgust, anxiety, self-deprecation, among others. As it is common for employers (at least in the United States) to be vague in their reasoning for turning down an applicant, the individual may take it upon themselves to fill in the blanks: "Maybe I just don't have what it takes." "I deserved that way more than whoever got it!" "I gave 110% - it should have been enough." "Those people obviously don't know who they're passing up, and they'll be sorry when they find out."

These resentments are borne from judgments of what is good or evil that have been shaped and reinforced over a lifetime. To many, a career represents something good due to the material benefits thought to accompany them. A sense of ownership is gradually projected onto potential job offers in the act of pursuing it intently. If the position isn't offered, it is accordingly deemed these benefits are "lost." Depending on one's disposition, the emotional response may be turned either inward or outward towards the person(s) and company believed responsible. The career goals of many are repeatedly raised, changed, maintained, or impeded through a complex weave of causes.

The ancient philosophy of Stoicism asserts that these judgments are changeable. Accordingly, our consideration of what is good or evil can be changed. The Stoics suggest that greatly valuing external things is a mistake and a disservice to us, given our capability for reason and choice – a capability unique to our species. Investing value and effort in choices that are consistent with our distinctive nature as social and rational animals is held to be the

only true path to becoming happy; notably, happiness that is independent of the external obstacles interfering with financial self-sufficiency:

“Remove desire for empty fame, the reputation of a philosopher, or to have lived your whole life as a philosopher. The plan of your life opposes it. Discard concern for how others see you and be content to live the remainder of your life without distraction, directed by your nature. You have experienced many wanderings without finding happiness; not in syllogisms, nor wealth, nor reputation, not pleasure, nor anywhere. Where is it then? In doing a man’s business. What to do? Follow your principles that relate to good or bad with the conviction that there is nothing good for man that does not make him just, temperate, manly and free and that there is nothing bad that does not do the contrary. (Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, Bk. VIII. 1)”

Humans need to physically survive as other animals do, but little more is needed beyond the basics: a few meals a day, water, clothing, and shelter. Anything additional is pursued by choice; a choice arguably made on behalf of this basic impulse. The Stoics maintain there is nothing wrong with preferring being full to being hungry, being well-off to destitute, sleeping in a comfortable bed to sleeping on the ground, so on. The moment, however, that we begin depending on the presence of preferential things or fear their absence is the moment we’ve surrendered control of ourselves to the persons that may be manipulating them. In other words, by binding our peace of mind to things outside of our control, we’ve yielded our opportunity to enjoy them for the time they’re present, make peace without regret when they’re absent, and to concentrate on improving our social and rational qualities.

“... Other things are goods by opinion, “advantages,” “preferred” things. Chattels, not parts of ourselves, they lend no man cause to plume himself. Let us use these things, but not boast of them. Few men have been allowed to lay aside prosperity gently, the rest all fall together with their possessions and are weighted down by these very things which once exalted them. Employ limits and frugality since license overthrows its own abundance. That which has no limit has never permitted reason to set limits for it. Many a great power has fallen to luxury and been destroyed, excess has ruined what was won by virtue. Our weapon of defense is our ability to accept what happens to us. ... (Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, Letter 74, 16)”

Striving to act in light of the dichotomy between what is or is not in our control is crucial to the eventual transformation of our day-to-day thought process – a thought process that may otherwise be constantly filled with resentment, anxiety, fear, and hyper-competitiveness with others. The pursuit for fiscal self-sufficiency does not need to come at the cost of our psychological well-being, or considering other persons as means to ends. As it

happens, by doing our best with what we have for the time we have it for the distinct purposes of self-improvement and benefiting others, we are likely to perform in ways that will bring about the fiscal self-sufficiency we prefer. It is not a guarantee, as mentioned, because our exercise of choice alone is fully within our control, but it ceases to be an end goal on the path to becoming practicing Stoics:

“... Your fears are idle and your desires vain. Do not seek good things outside of yourself, but within, or you will not find them. When you think things are going badly remember you are being trained as an example to other men. When you are appointed to such a role it is not for you to consider where or in what company you are or what others say about you, but to spend your efforts obeying the commands of Zeus (Nature).

If you keep these thoughts in mind you will never want for one to comfort and strengthen you. Dishonor does not come from not having enough to eat, but from not having enough right reason to secure you from fear and pain. Once you are free from fear and pain you are free from all earthly tyrannies. Make no display of your office by inflating yourself, but prove yourself by conduct. Be content, though none observe you, to live in true health and happiness. (Epictetus, Discourses, Bk. III, 24)”

Travis Hume *is the creator, administrator, and writer of [Applying Stoicism](#) and its social media accounts. He writes daily on practicable applications of Stoic philosophy for the modern day, based upon first-hand real-world experiences.*