

Applying Stoicism: Stoicism in Retail

By Travis Hume



All contemporary occupations can serve as a vehicle for self-improvement, and may be unique in the challenges and opportunities each provide. Among these, some roles involve selling products to others, convincing others of the “value” of those products, and entail regular evaluations by metrics bound to product sales. I aim to describe how those that practice the philosophy of Stoicism might approach these occupations. The demands of a retail position can seem prohibitive, even antithetical, to progress as a practicing Stoic; they are training themselves not to depend their peace of mind on external factors, nor place undue value on external things.

To elaborate, practicing Stoics train themselves to take nothing for granted, aiming to view Virtue alone as the sole good in life, and Vice as the sole evil. According to Stoic philosophy, fellow humans are meant to be seen as brothers and sisters, not by blood, but by the shared property of reason: the chief, defining quality of human beings. Stoics hold that the materials of daily life, external things, have no rightful bearing on one’s quality of life; that choices in light of those things are the only true resources to progress towards the ultimate goal: *Eudaimonia*, or self-

actualization. This mentality is carried into conventional occupations; the Stoic aims to use the occupation as material for practice, and as a vehicle to guide others directly (when and where appropriate) and indirectly (through leading by example), circumstances permitting; keeping in mind the clause that each individual is ultimately responsible for self-direction.

In light of these tenets, practicing Stoics should be continually mindful throughout their roles of the following: 1) The occupation in and of itself, including all conventional pros and cons, should always be thought of as instructional material to refine one's Virtues and subdue Vices. 2) Fulfilling the duties and expectations of the career can be appropriately thought of as "playing a game," wherein we should do our best to do well for the purposes of self-improvement and being an exemplar, but not to depend our peace of mind on the results. 3) "Breaking up the game," (i.e. refusing a directive) is appropriate if a directive is received that will likely lead the Stoic to knowingly commit an unjust action.

The "world of retail" is one of many arenas in the modern world that the practicing Stoic is likely to find themselves in; one that affords them ample opportunity to achieve their philosophical goals. These goals include the dispelling of appearances of external things, assessing the judgments of others and themselves concerning those things, and refining Stoic principles on a moment-to-minute basis. The retail environment demands a great need for careful, sustained, philosophical self-care and self-management. This is due to daily management pressures to conventionally succeed, and regular exposure to behaviors commonly associated with a products and services atmosphere.

An individual in a customer-facing, customer-service, retail position in an active business may be exposed to very different treatment and challenges on a moment-to-moment basis. A sales associate is commonly expected to balance operational and sales demands with customer needs and service, the success of which is often affected by staffing levels and available tools. If the leadership of the retail organization changes priorities, the initiatives that follow may inadvertently drive these factors to compete with one another to the detriment of its workforce and its customers.

The initiatives may direct the associate to compete against the very metrics they are personally evaluated by on behalf of marginally improving the metrics of the company as a whole. An associate in such a position must then operate under the awareness that they may receive blame regardless of their personal performance due

to forces outside their control. It may prompt the associate, their peers, immediate management, or above to manipulate or obfuscate in their work for the sake of results, or even the mere appearance of results. This manner of retail environment often results in very high turnover rate, as an associate no longer contends only with meeting metrics and fulfilling consumer demands, but also daily sentiments of fear, incoherence, and instability attributed to the organization.

The Stoic will find themselves uniquely positioned by their philosophy to resist the morale losses that often accompany a long-term situation like this, as illustrated by Seneca:

“Fortune has no jurisdiction over character. Let him regulate his character so that he may in peace bring to perfection that spirit within him which feels neither loss nor gain and retains the same attitude no matter how things fall out. Such a spirit rises superior to wealth and is unimpaired by loss (Seneca, Bk.IV, Ep.XXXVI).”

If the Stoic determines that they are better able to serve through their philosophy elsewhere, or can no longer reasonably serve in a position without compromising themselves, they will seek appropriate employment elsewhere. Until such a time however, there is much to learn from being in such a position for the practicing Stoic.

As the only good and evil for a Stoic may be drawn from their handling of circumstances, they will at minimum find solace in having done all that may be reasonably done with the situation at hand in a philosophically consistent manner. Likewise, a Stoic will not permit themselves to be unduly influenced or behave in a philosophically inconsistent manner for the sake of external results, for an improved reputation within their company, or for fiscal benefits:

“Never value anything as profitable to yourself which will compel you to break your promise, to lose your self respect, to hate a man, to suspect, to curse, to act the hypocrite, or to desire what will not bear the light of day. He who prefers his own intelligence and daemon and its perfection acts no tragic part, nor groans, nor needs solitude or much company, ... (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Bk.III, 7)”

In place of compromising their own values, a Stoic will likely seek to convince those imposing the inappropriate expectations of their errors, or seek out alternative,

appropriate, conventional methods to address the same; if such efforts fail, the Stoic will likely consider resignation.

In stable conditions, a Stoic's consistent aims for self-improvement, leadership by example, and concern for the well-being of others are likely to bring about the same kinds of external results that typically accompany "high-performers" in retail spaces. These external results may include greater notoriety with their customer base and company, higher compensation (e.g. commission, bonuses, or raises), among other conventional advantages. These too represent challenges of a different kind, and demand equal philosophical vigilance on part of the Stoic: the benefits may go as quickly as they arrive, introduced and influenced as they are by any number of factors and forces.

While Stoicism does not prohibit enjoying these conventional benefits for the time they are present, the philosophy warns against a creeping dependence on them; a dependence that will very quickly lend itself to vices if not carefully managed. Whereas the discomforts, inconveniences, and obstacles that often accompany a retail position are often highly visible by their association with mental pangs, the benefits represent an opposite but equal, seemingly silent, pervasive, and beguiling danger:

"Do not be carried along by the appearance of things, give help to all according to your ability and their fitness, and if you have sustained loss in things that are indifferent do not imagine this to be damage. Fortune is assigned to a man by himself, it consists of a good disposition of the soul, good emotions, good actions (Marcus Aurelius, Bk.V, 36)."

The discomforts of a retail position may result in passions (errors in judgment) conducive to anger, resentment, and indignation, while the benefits of the position may result in envy, jealousy, greed, and the like. The Stoic must always be watchful for both kinds of passions:

"You must learn to seek progress in your desires and aversions so that you will get what you want and avoid what you don't want. ... Never place your efforts in one place and hope for progress in another. You must learn that if you crave or shun things that are not in your control you can be neither faithful nor free, but must end by being subordinated to others who are able to procure or prevent those things. The man who practices his principles daily in everything he does is making progress (Epictetus, Discourses, Bk.I, Ch.4)."

Depending on the nature of the retail environment, such as a customer solutions role, one may also expect to regularly face an angry, frustrated, contentious, or curt consumer base. This experience will entail behaving calmly and professionally under this treatment while resolving the concerns; some positions may require an associate to go beyond this, and upsell in addition. In all, a person working these roles will likely face myriad internal and external pressures on a moment-to-moment basis. Even in the best case scenarios (e.g. adequate compensation, tools, staffing), one is still likely to be subject to common projections associated with the company and its services.

While in such an atmosphere, the Stoic seeks to continually, deliberately maintain presence of mind. In Stoic philosophy, the choices of every person are driven by what they hold to be good or evil, and none alive behave in any other way than what seems appropriate to them. Presuming that the Stoic associate properly sustains careful attention over their own thoughts, they will factor in this awareness ahead of their every spoken word or action. Likely, they will inwardly state to themselves a form of the following: “This person is behaving in the way that appears right to them; they may raise their voice, rebuke me, and possibly insult me, but this is because they see me as a means, impediment, or obstacle. I understood the likelihood that I would be approached in this way in this line of work, and so this situation is not surprising. I must speak to them as one human being to another. They are a friend to me, even if it doesn’t appear to them this is the case.”

Expressed differently, in the words of Marcus Aurelius:

“Be like the promontory against which waves break. Am I unhappy because this happened - not a bit, rather happy am I though this has happened because I continue free from pain, neither crushed in the present nor fearing the future. Such a thing could have happened to any man, but not every man could have continued free. There is no misfortune, only the course of nature and our adaptation. What event can prevent you from being just, magnanimous, temperate, prudent, secure against opinions and falsehood? Remember when vexed that to bear misfortune nobly is good fortune (Marcus Aurelius, Bk.IV, 49).”

This thought process renders ill treatment by others powerless.

A Stoic will find no shortage of opportunities to refine or make considerable gains in their practice in a retail environment. A service role serves well as material for

this effort, as there is no shortage of changing conditions. Conventional gains and losses likewise come and go, providing material for the Stoic's internal constancy. To be unyielding towards fortune and misfortune, to fundamentally care for others regardless of the circumstances, and to utilize each situation as material for practice applies everywhere.

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