

Chapter 3

How a Stoic Uses YouTube

Stoic philosophy was an invaluable aid to Greeks and Romans, who both lived in a world that was extremely harsh in numerous aspects. However, it is also a philosophy that can be vital today, helping you navigate through the chaos and noise in the world we live in.

What would the original Stoic philosophers think about the internet today? While it is difficult to imagine Seneca walking around with his smartphone or Zeno teaching students over a video call, we see many clues in their teachings that show us what they would think of these technologies.

It is important to remember that Stoics generally take an indifferent attitude to material possessions and wealth,

which they see as not inherently “good” or “bad”. This is not to say that you can’t use them, you just shouldn’t get attached to them. Marcus Aurelius wrote that they should have no bearing on your happiness:

“Remember that very little is needed to make a happy life.”

While somebody like Epictetus, a former slave, had few possessions (he said, “*wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants*”), other Stoics did have material wealth. The Roman Stoic philosopher, Seneca for example, was one of the richest men in Rome. Wealth can be acquired honourably and our internet-enabled devices can be used in a way that’s beneficial to us. Stoics are not anti-technology. Material possessions are allowed as long as we don’t become dependent on them. As Seneca said himself:

“For no one is worthy of god unless he has paid no heed to riches. I am not, mind you, against your possessing them, but I want to ensure that you possess them without tremors; and this you will only achieve in one way, by convincing yourself that you can live a happy life even without them, and by always regarding them as being on the point of vanishing.”

When it comes to the YouTube platform specifically, Stoicism can help to teach us some valuable lessons, whether you are making videos yourself, engaging with others in the comments section or simply watching your favourite “YouTuber”. Many of the teachings can also apply to other related activities such as writing blog posts or articles, social media usage and more.



1. Embrace Change

There was a time when the “like” button didn’t exist. When Facebook introduced it in 2009 it was met with criticism and outrage, with issues such as buying fake likes and privacy tracking concerns. Any technology company needs to evolve or they will die as more adaptable businesses produce software and platforms that replace the current standard.

Some type of like button is now ubiquitous on the web. It is used on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and many other parts of the web. One reason why it has become so popular is because it increases engagement, which benefits the platforms. One click is all that’s needed for a virtual “thumbs-up” - far quicker compared to typing out a comment. The result means far more likes than comments and more overall engagement. If companies did not change their platform, they run the risk of being overtaken by competitors. Therefore change is inevitable.

Instead of fighting against inevitable change, we can choose to live with it and embrace it. By accepting a

changing universe, we can live rationally within it. Epictetus used words to that effect when he said:

“If we try to adapt our mind to the regular sequence of changes and accept the inevitable with good grace, our life will proceed quite smoothly and harmoniously.”

I remember when YouTube announced it was removing the ability to add annotations on videos, instead forcing creators to use end screens and cards. The decision was met with anger from many people. I was not a fan of the decision at first due to the disruption it would cause me and my unfamiliarity with the new features. However, after adapting the look of my videos to work better with the new features, I can now see the obvious benefits. If you watch videos on a smartphone for example, the interactive features are much easier to use than the old annotations. Embrace change and life will be a lot smoother.

Change will never end and there will be a time that YouTube will impose change on us again. Whether it changes how it looks for a viewer or how it works for a creator, if you are anxious about a change, remember what is and isn't in your control. You have gone through change before and will do again. As Marcus Aurelius said:

“Constantly bring to mind all that you yourself have already seen changed.”



2. Focus Your Attention

If you can stop yourself from being sidetracked, the internet can provide you with an education that the Ancient Stoics could only dream of. However, the internet can also be a dangerous environment that provides a constant source of distraction. Education or recreation - it is up to us how we use it.

The reason why we need to exercise extreme caution is because of the sheer number of distractions. The fact that hundreds of hours of content is uploaded to YouTube every minute means the amount of videos we can watch is to all intents and purposes, limitless. Add to this social media's "infinite scroll" functionality and it is easy to see why we need to be careful. The internet is just like the real world in the sense that there are many things vying for our attention. There are many emotions that may be invoked more easily on the internet, such as jealousy, vanity or envy, but it is our job to resist all those temptations that are not beneficial to us. YouTube contains both entertaining and educational videos. If we can resist the distraction of entertainment, a first-class education is available through the platform.

How do we focus our attention? You can start small. Small things produce results as long as they are done consistently. Little improvements lead to huge differences when added together over time. There are many methods and strategies available. What has worked for me has been to move my mobile phone away from my workspace and use a browser addon that blocks time-wasting websites while I am working. For YouTube specifically I use an add-on called *Clean YouTube*, which hides all suggested YouTube videos and other clutter. When implementing

your strategy you will still need to work on your attention and focus. Your attention works like a muscle that withers if you don't use it, but you will not have the added pressure of an algorithm designed to keep you hooked and destroy your focus on the task at hand.

Seneca had some advice for us on reading. However, it is something we can take on board with regard to what we watch online as well:

“Be careful, however, lest this reading of many authors and books of every sort may tend to make you discursive and unsteady. You must linger among a limited number of master-thinkers, and digest their works, if you would derive ideas which shall win firm hold in your mind. Everywhere means nowhere.”

This is a warning to not spread yourself too thinly. Remove any channels you are subscribed to that are of low-quality and simply distracting. Spend the time you would have spent watching them by instead focusing on a select few creators who can provide immense value. You will benefit far more from spending extra time with what Seneca calls “master-thinkers” and deep-diving into their work.



3. Commenting and Trolls

Without cues from facial expressions, body language or prior context, sarcasm and irony can get lost when reading or posting online. This often leads to misunderstandings, arguments and abuse. The old adage “*if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all*” often goes out the window online, with comment sections exploding and mobs of people baying for virtual blood. When you add media companies who rely on “clicks” amplifying negativity and hatred in order to increase their revenue, what is left is an environment that does not encourage the Stoic idea of being mindful and respectful of others.

How should you deal with negative comments? Epictetus has some words for us about the subject of gossiping in his short manual known as *The Enchiridion*. In it, he states:

“Let silence be your goal for the most part; say only what is necessary, and be brief about it. On the rare occasions when you’re called upon to speak, then speak, but never about banalities... Above all don’t gossip about people, praising, blaming or comparing them.”

In other words, ignore the negativity where possible and certainly don’t instigate it yourself.

When it comes to trolling online, it may be stating the obvious to say that trolling is not virtuous behaviour and therefore any Stoic should avoid partaking in it. This is

because in Stoicism the goal in life is to lead a life of virtue, which includes acting with kindness, fairness and honour towards others.

When dealing with negative comments aimed towards yourself, remember that a lot of mental energy could be freed up and spent on those things that we can control, if we stopped worrying about things we can't control. What is out of our control includes:

- What has happened in the past eg. what others like, dislike or comment on
- What could happen in the future eg. what others may like, dislike or comment on

The comment section, if it becomes toxic, has turned into a modern day gladiatorial contest. Even if you don't take part and like many other people you are "just here for the comments", you watch insults fly as people tear each other metaphorically limb from limb.

Seneca was not a fan of gladiatorial contests for precisely this reason. It wasn't the fighting in the arena he was specifically critical of, it was the effect on the crowd:

"There is nothing so ruinous to good character as to idle away one's time at some spectacle. Vices have a way of creeping in because of the feeling of pleasure that it brings. Why do you think that I say that I personally return from shows greedier, more ambitious and more given to luxury, and I might add, with thoughts of greater cruelty and less humanity, simply because I have been among humans?"



4. Balance

The internet can be very addictive. On one side of the coin, there is an ever increasing amount of online information and knowledge to learn from, on the other there is an endless amount of mindless entertainment and social media opinions to numb your brain.

YouTube poses the exact same problems for us as the internet does in general. Hundreds of hours of video are added to YouTube every minute, but how much value does watching it provide for you? It is dependent on the quality of the video, of course. However, even with beneficial content there needs to be a limit to how much we should watch.

Moderation is needed, otherwise you run the risk of addiction. If moderation is not possible, perhaps abstention

is a better option. Putting yourself in YouTube exile for a certain period of time is not necessarily a bad thing. As Musonius Rufus, the Stoic teacher of Epictetus, once said:

“Exile, after all, never deprived anyone from learning what one needs to do and from acting accordingly.”

Musonius continued by saying that exile can actually be advantageous. It turned Diogenes “*from an ordinary person to a philosopher*” by forcing him to practice his virtue in Greece. When Dion the Syracusan was thrown out of his homeland by a tyrant, Dionysius, he raised so much money in exile that he created a mercenary army. Dion returned to invade and the tyrant was overthrown.

Are you watching YouTube videos to escape from what you should be really doing? Taking a break from YouTube may allow you to re-evaluate how you use it. This in turn will allow you to return and use it in a far more beneficial manner, prioritising educational content over entertainment, for example.



5. Don't Just Sit On The Sidelines

You can spend all the time in the world on YouTube; watching, listening and being inspired. A better idea would be to take your inspiration and put it to use. Take action. Get out there and you will inspire other people rather than being inspired. What you do can help others on their own

journey. Take what you see on YouTube and **be an example** rather than just watching examples.

In the first century, many people didn't value their lives and wasted their time. Seneca says as much when he wrote:

“It’s not at all that we have too short a time to live, but that we squander a great deal of it.”

Today, just as in the times of the Romans, many people waste their lives. So, whilst YouTube is an incredible source for education and inspiration, do not fall into the trap of watching the same sort of videos over and over again and not taking any action. Often, one video is enough to explain a concept and the other five videos we've watched on the same subject were wasting time that we could have spent putting our knowledge to use. This is something I have been guilty of many times in the past and I'm constantly working to improve on it. Time is the ultimate zero-sum game. If you do more of one thing it means you do less of another. We don't know exactly how long we have on this earth, so don't waste your time and spend more of it than necessary on things that don't matter. Time can't be brought back once you've wasted it. As Marcus Aurelius said:

“It is essential for you to remember that the attention you give to any action should be in due proportion to its worth, for then you won’t tire and give up, if you aren’t busying yourself with lesser things beyond what should be allowed.”

Pick your battles. Master your time. Get things done.