How to Die: An Ancient Guide to the End of Life

(Seneca and James S. Romm)

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How to Die, compiled from various writings of the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca by the excellent James Romm, assembles Seneca's thoughts on death. Seneca died during the reign of the emperor Nero, in A.D. 65, having been "encouraged" by him to commit suicide. The reason for the compiling and publication of this book, presumably, is to educate moderns about how to die. It also offers an interesting view into the philosophy of the late pagan Classical world, already dying itself, although Seneca didn't know it. This book can doubtless educate moderns, but for us, different than our predecessors, it is either valuable or dangerous, or both, depending on who is reading it and with what aim.

Stoicism is one of those philosophies, like Buddhism or Taoism, that shallow moderns like to mention favorably in passing, usually with an implicit criticism of backward religions like Christianity. Often such mentions are combined with a reference to the *Meditations* of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (died A.D. 180), who had a brief efflorescence in the public consciousness a few years ago when he was lucky enough to be depicted in the blockbuster movie *Gladiator*. As with all philosophical systems before the modern era, a great many very smart people gave much thought to the philosophy, and while I know little about it, I know that Stoic thought is complex and far-reaching, and had substantial interaction with early Christian thinkers (including Saint Paul, in Acts 17). This book, to be sure, does not purport to explain Stoicism, only the thought of one philosopher on one topic, over several decades of his life.

Seneca, though he lived to nearly seventy years old, had multiple reasons to focus on death other than mere philosophy. He suffered from recurrent aggressive asthma, which regularly threatened to suffocate him, and he also appears to have suffered from tuberculosis. Having his breath potentially snuffed out at any time doubtless kept death near the front of his mind. Moreover, he lived and was politically active during the reigns of Caligula and Nero, where the life of any prominent man was not secure, and he was far from the only man forced to commit

suicide in that era. Thus, it is not surprising that he recurred to the topic over the decades.

His instructions are really of two types. Both sets of instructions fall under Seneca's epigraph for the book, well chosen by Romm, "He lives badly who does not know how to die well." The first explains how one should think about dying. This is valuable, to some, at least. Although the modern tendency is to ignore death, and perhaps that's always been the tendency of humanity, some choose to want to focus their minds, and Seneca offers a reasonable set of thoughts to them. The second type of instruction explains how one should actually go about dying, physically. Seneca is indifferent to the method, but for him the key is that, wherever possible, each person should choose for himself when and how to die. Dying well, then, to Seneca, consisted of the right mental frame with which to approach death, but also the choice when to die, which strongly indicated suicide for any person not granted a quick and unexpected death. This creates a problem for us moderns, because, taken from its pagan, elite context, and applied to the mass of individuals in today's society, especially as a rationale for structuring society's laws, this second instruction has baleful effects.

As to how one should think about dying, Romm pulls Seneca's own thoughts from his various writings. He groups Seneca's thoughts into five subsets: "Prepare Yourself"; "Have No Fear"; "Have No Regrets"; "Set Yourself Free"; and "Become a Part of the Whole." While there is some variability in the message, and even contradictions (though none fatal—ba dum!), he offers mostly repetitions of a few basic philosophical points. One is that death is no different than what we had experienced before birth—i.e., nothing, and if we did not fear that, why should we fear death? His argument isn't very convincing, because it ignores two basic points, both springing from that life gives us the ability to consider the future. The facile one was expressed by Isaac Asimov: "Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It's the transition that's troublesome." The deeper point was expressed by Hamlet: "To sleep, perchance to dream—aye, there's the rub." Seneca mostly says death is merely nothingness; sometimes he says we are dissolved in the universe and thereby live on; a few times he seems to endorse belief in a desirable, Christian-type afterlife (i.e., not in the traditional Hades—by this point, Greek and Roman philosophers had abandoned that framework). But I think few of those reading his

writings or receiving his letters would have been much comforted by his core idea, that we are going back into the dark from whence we came. More compelling, by far, is the story the Venerable Bede tells of how Edwin, king of Northumbria, was convinced to convert from paganism by a counsellor who analogized the life of man to a sparrow, flying from cold darkness to cold darkness, but passing for a moment through the light, warmth and merriment of the mead hall. "Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing, therefore, this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed." Seneca, perhaps aware that his argument isn't very compelling, tries to buttress it with even weaker arguments, like "If death holds any torment, then that torment must also have existed before we came forth into the light." Maybe, but not necessarily, is the obvious answer, and so with his other arguments as well.

A second point Seneca makes is that, in essence, fear is degrading, so stop it. This seems somewhat in opposition to his first point—if fear is supposed to disappear because there is no reason to fear, adding on that it's degrading seems unnecessary, though certainly true in the abstract. My guess is that this is part of a larger Stoic framework, but I don't know enough to be sure. A third point is that the length of life doesn't matter, something Seneca addresses in a letter to a grieving mother, with his argument being, basically, that we're all negligible anyway, so what's wrong with being a little more negligible? I'm pretty sure a grieving mother didn't think much of this advice, unless she persuaded himself that Seneca knew better than her, a common failing of intelligent people in their relationship with self-proclaimed philosophers, though the ages. A variation on this argument, more compelling, that Seneca also makes is that mere life extension in the old is pointless in and of itself. (Seneca does suggest, though, that sticking around for others, such as his beloved and much younger wife, is a decent reason not to kill oneself.) As long as a person lives "until attaining wisdom," he should be content (though this contradicts Seneca's other point somewhat, that we're all negligible). And Seneca's fourth point is, in essence, that death is coming for you and for me, and we can't avoid it, so we might as well not get too worked up about it. (My guess is this latter point, about not getting too worked up, probably encapsulates the Cliff's Notes version of Stoicism

as a whole.) That said, suicide is logical and often desirable; it can avoid a more painful death; or it will "set you free," from unpleasantness like slavery or torture, or simply from a decline, especially one where you can no longer take action because you are too weak.

Many people reading this book today would find resonance in Seneca's strong endorsement of each person determining for himself how and when he should die. This is, of course, a very pagan attitude, and the antithesis of the morals of the West since Christianity began to dictate private and public morality, thereby hugely improving the moral tone of society and eliminating as an acceptable option formerly unexceptional things like infanticide, abortion, and sex slavery. While the Christian (and Jewish) belief in the inherent, God-given and God-mandated sanctity of life, with the tagline "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away," is internally coherent, so is the pagan approach to suicide, and Seneca lays it out well. The people with whom the pagan approach resonates today, though, are not Stoics, much less Cato the Younger (who committed suicide by stabbing himself in the gut, and then tearing out his intestines when his friends sewed him up). Instead, they are the fashionable and not-very-deep thinkers who push "assisted suicide," "legal euthanasia," or whatever buzzword it's going by nowadays.

This is the natural consequence of the devaluation of human life that has taken place over the past fifty years, with baneful instances in many areas (not to mention the various horrors of earlier in the twentieth century). On the surface, though, suicide has more appeal and fewer obvious drawbacks than, say, demands for legalized abortion or, the same thing, infanticide. After all, if you insist on killing yourself, there is no argument you're killing someone else (unless you pick a poor method), and if you take care of your obligations, no good argument that you are directly physically harming others. Stripped of the Christian framework, the ability to kill oneself in the face of a terminal illness or other perceived overwhelming need seems entirely logical, completely in keeping with the advice of Seneca, and both brave and not degrading. And since stripping the Christian framework is what those who rule in the West are today all about, criminalizing suicide, or assisting in a suicide, seems illogical.

But, as with most age-old moral rules that have been demolished in our time of glory, there is more of practical value in moral rules than

meets the eye. It used to be a commonplace, which seems to have been forgotten, that suicide, and its assistance, is not criminalized to prevent suicide (though it does express a salutary moral opinion), but rather to prevent pressure from being brought to bear on those for whom their suicide would be convenient for others. This problem, though always known, is infinitely worse in the modern world, when most old people live much longer, and have more money tied up in themselves, and moreover often are in a condition, physical or psychological, where they are susceptible to arguments that their "quality of life" is low. Compounded with the ever-increasing cost of medical care, and the government's tendency to dictate choices using cost-benefit analysis, the inevitable consequence of legalizing suicide is that suicide will be encouraged and will expand inexorably as expectation, then demand, from the old and sick, and be imposed involuntarily even on children. These are not guesses; all these things that can be seen in Europe already, though as with all such horrors, their existence is kept largely out of sight by a complicit press. Industrialized coerced suicide of the weak is a far cry from educated Roman elites committing suicide; it has much more in common with the cries of a little boy doused with Zyklon B, "Mama, it's so dark! But Mama, I've been good! I've been good!"

And that's not to mention that there is every argument to be made that when Christianity loses its power, to which legalizing suicide will contribute (part of why it is pushed by the enemies of Christianity), so will all the moral commands of Christianity, of which we have forgotten their origin. That said, more thinking about death does have a lot to recommend it. Modern people have not forgotten death, but they do their best never to think about it. We all know people who won't even get life insurance to protect their families, because it makes them think about their own deaths. And when the time comes to die, most end up in a hospital having nasty things done to them so they can live a few more hours, or a few more days. Seneca would say that this is no way to live, and he would be right. Delete the endorsement of suicide and the bleak metaphysics, and Seneca would agree that when it's time to go, it's time to go, and whatever your metaphysics, to see the other side. Ignoring it, or painfully and slowly eroding your body with needles and tonics, isn't going to change that. And it is, indeed, a disgrace to spend your life in fear.

Thus, those tech types obsessed with life extension, whether by improved medical science or by supposedly imminent radical changes such as the Singularity, degrade themselves, for they are merely masking their overwhelming fear by promising themselves eternal life without the need for death. Oh, they cover it up with fine words about "curing death" and the supposed moral imperative to extend our lives, but there is no such imperative, and death will never be cured. Once you accept that, and if you can think accurately and cogently about suicide, this book is worth reading. And you can mention it instead of the *Meditations* at cocktail parties, thus putting yourself ahead of other pseudo-Stoics, in the estimation of your fellow party-goers.