



**THE STOIC  
PHILOSOPHER**

## Skateboarding and Stoicism

**Pete Ellison**

### Preface

What has skateboarding got to do with Stoicism? On the face of it, perhaps not that much, if anything at all. Depending on your experience of skateboarding and skateboarders, you may view it as something that annoying, loud, disrespectful teenagers do in the middle of your local town, or as one of the most fulfilling and beautiful artforms mankind has created. As a skateboarder, my view is definitely the latter.

Skateboarding, as it exists today, was born in the late 1940's or early 50's as a result of surfers in California needing something to do when the waves were flat. Although the wheel had already been invented before the time of Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Seneca, the chances they imagined such a thing as a skateboard, let alone stepped on one, has to be close to zero. So what would they have to say on the connections between Stoicism and skateboarding? These connections are what I intend to explore and uncover in the following essay.

### Skateboarding and Me

I started skateboarding when I was ten years old, some 38 years ago. These days I have more responsibilities and less time to skate but over the years skateboarding has had a profound effect on how I view the world, and has taught me many things about myself and others.

### Stoicism and Skateboarding

Would the Stoics see skateboarding as a worthwhile pursuit? Indeed, did the Stoics place much value on pastimes, period? Marcus Aurelius was known to have interests such as hunting, wrestling and boxing. Physical activities, especially those which involve developing skills and provide an outlet for stress and passions, contribute to our health and wellbeing and are part of a balanced life. This is in line with a Stoic practice.

Skateboarding is difficult. The simple act of standing on a skateboard, and pushing yourself forward takes practice to be able to do confidently. For some people mastering this is enough, and really is the simple essence of skateboarding.



Pete Ellison works as a senior manager at a London based product design company. He commutes to work on a motorbike, giving him lots of time to listen to podcasts. It was through one of these podcasts that he became aware of Stoicism in 2022, and decided to investigate further. He became aware of the College of Stoic Philosophers through Chris Fisher's 'Stoicism on Fire' podcast and enrolled on the SES program. He is about to begin the final part of the MAP program. Alongside his Stoic practice he spends time raising his family, skateboarding, and enjoying live music.



Moving beyond this into the realm of learning tricks and riding different types of terrain involves more pain, risk of injury, frustration, failure, and learning from mistakes in order to progress. It involves a battle with your own abilities, your fears, your desire for control (over the board and your body). Often, the pay off, in the form of successfully making a trick, lasts only a few seconds. In many ways this is a parallel with life itself, particularly when approached with a Stoic attitude. Progression doesn't come easy and we are required to dedicate ourselves and remain composed in the face of repeated failure. What matters is that we can progress, through hard work, learning, and resolve.

### **Success and Failure**

Marcus Aurelius said, *"The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way"* (Aurelius, 2003, p.60).

The 'action' in skateboarding is staying on your board, having successfully 'made' a single or sequence of tricks. The chances of completing a series of tricks in a row is arguably harder than making a single trick. The 'impediment' is failing to do the trick, which often means losing control of and contact with your board. In tune with what Marcus says, this impediment is actually a necessary and vital part of skateboarding. If you could just do all of the tricks, without putting in any effort, what sense of achievement would that bring? 'Failing' is part of the journey of skateboarding, in fact it is skateboarding just as much as 'succeeding' is. Skateboarding is not purely about success, it's about pushing yourself to improve, by working through what stands in the way.

*"And if anything laborious, or pleasant or glorious or inglorious be presented to you, remember that now is the contest, now are the Olympic games, and they cannot be deferred; and that it depends on one defeat and one giving way that progress is either lost or maintained"* (Epictetus, 2017, p.32).

What often stands in the way of being able to make a trick is incorrect foot placement, balance, and position of your body. The process of learning how to make a trick involves adjustments to these things. We make adjustments each time we try and when we get the right combination we succeed. This, I believe, is a good approach to life and the practice of Stoicism itself. In order to progress in our endeavours to be virtuous, courageous, just, and moderate, we must learn by our failures and make small adjustments to how we approach situations, people, and challenges, in order to improve.

There are successes in skateboarding, but overall you don't win at, beat, or complete skateboarding. Much like the notion of the prokopton in Stoicism, where we are said to be making progress along the Stoic path. We don't become sages, we are prokoptons forever. In skateboarding we aim to continually make progress, again seeing things more as a journey than a destination.

### **Control, Pain, and Injury**

*"Of things some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are opinion, movement toward a thing, desire, aversion (turning from a thing; and in a word, whatever are your own acts: not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices (magisterial power), and in a word, whatever are not our own acts"* (Epictetus, 2017, p.32)



Someone who is good at skateboarding is often described as having ‘good board control’. As a skateboard is an inanimate object, it is possible to have a high degree of control over it, as your abilities develop and improve. However, there are various factors in the act of skateboarding that we don’t have control over, and dealing with these in a Stoic way can be a benefit to the overall experience of skateboarding, and support progression.

As skateboarders we have little control over the likely occurrence of pain and injury, which the Stoics would see as dispreferred indifferents. Both must be accepted as part of the learning process and anticipated. Marcus Aurelius said of pain:

*“...don’t try to resist the sensation. The sensation is natural. But don’t let the mind start in with judgments, calling it ‘good’ or ‘bad’”* (Aurelius, 2003, p.62).

As difficult as this is when, for example, your skateboard hits you hard in the shin, or your head meets the concrete, it is important to step back from physical pain and not add a judgment about it being “bad”. It is what it is, and the moment you stepped on that skateboard or attempted something especially risky, you put yourself in harm’s way. Often when you take your mind off the pain and cease to focus on the physical sensation, it reduces. The occurrence of pain itself, may not be in our control, but how we deal with it is.

*“Death, exile, pain loom over you: is this the first time you have realized it? You were born for this! Whatever can happen, let’s think about as something that will happen”* (Seneca, 2015, p.88).

*Premeditatio malorum* is the idea that things could go wrong or be taken away from us at any moment. The idea is to use this form of negative visualization to prepare yourself for the worst outcome so if it does happen you aren’t taken by surprise and are in a better position to deal with things. This is something that can be useful in skateboarding.

In addition to injury, there is a long list of things that can prevent you from going skateboarding when you plan to, most of which are outside of your control. I live in England, and as most skateboarding is done outdoors my plans to go skateboarding are often ruled out at the last minute or cut short by rain. The Stoic attitude to this would be to accept that the weather is out of our control and we should avoid making judgements about plans having to change.

The reserve clause is a Stoic idea related to the dichotomy of control. It acknowledges that our efforts to bring about a desired outcome do have an influence but there is also an element of fate which is outside of our control. Put simply, when we are trying to accomplish something or making plans, we must always add the reserve clause ‘...*fate permitting*’. Marcus Aurelius used an analogy of an archer to demonstrate the reserve clause, an analogy that is very applicable to skateboarding. An archer can use the best equipment and practice daily but once the arrow leaves the bow it is propelled into uncertainty. It is within the archers power to give the arrow the best chance of hitting the target but they must accept that whether the arrow hits the target or not is in the hands of fate.

Another ‘enemy’ of skaters is the small stone. These tiny rocks can seemingly appear from nowhere, jam your wheel, and send you flying to your face in a nano-second. No matter how much time you spend sweeping the skatepark or street spot, you do not have full control over when you will cross



paths with one. If you are taken down by one, take a deep breath and repeat to yourself '*amor fati*' (love thy fate), or as Epictetus put it:

*"Seek not that the things which happen should happen as you wish; but wish the things which happen to be as they are, and you will have a tranquil flow of life"* (Epictetus, 2017, p.5).

Of course, this doesn't mean that we can't try, try and try again to learn, progress, and accomplish our goals but when things don't go as we planned, it serves us well to remember to accept the outcome, whatever it may be.

This also touches on the idea of Providence. If we, as the ancient Stoics did, subscribe to the idea of a conscious and providential cosmos, then we must accept that sometimes we may fall, experience pain, and suffer injury as a consequence of skateboarding.

*"True worth is eager for danger and thinks rather of its goal than of what it may have to suffer, since even what it will have to suffer is a part of its glory"* Seneca, On Providence, iv. 4-6.

Seneca believed that adversity was a way to sharpen our virtues, in relation to skateboarding it can help us develop our courage (one of the four main Stoic virtues), alongside other virtues such as perseverance and self-control.

### **Anger, Frustration, and Wisdom**

*"To shrug it all off and wipe it clean — every annoyance and distraction — and reach utter stillness. Child's play"* (Aurelius, 2003, p.54).

There are lots of scenarios that could cause you to succumb to anger when skateboarding, some of which are mentioned above. Seneca wrote a whole book on Anger entitled '*De Ira*', and the Stoics generally concerned themselves with anger.

*"The greatest remedy for anger is delay"* Seneca, On Anger, Book 2, Chapter 29.

*"How much more damage anger and grief do than the things that cause them"* (Aurelius, 2003, p.153).

Proto-passions are precursors to full blown emotions (such as anger), and were seen by the Stoics as natural and inevitable. The key is to not go along with these initial feelings and give conscious assent to the impression that things are as bad as they may seem. In Stoic terms this is our Prohairesis, which is the choice involved in giving or withholding assent to impressions. When you've been trying a trick for hours and are in full concentration mode it is difficult to delay your emotion or reflect on the impression you may be assenting to and resist anger, but that is the key to remaining calm and controlled.

Marcus Aurelius wrote on the idea of Aequanimitas, or equanimity, the notion of composure, mental calmness, self possession, and poise under pressure. This is certainly applicable to skating, particularly when frustration and anger start to bubble up when things aren't going right.



*“When you start to lose your temper, remember: There’s nothing manly about rage. It’s courtesy and kindness that define a human being - and a man. That’s who possesses strength and nerves and guts, not the angry whiners. To react like that brings you closer to impassivity - and so to strength”* (Aurelius, 2003, p.54).

### **Community & Oikeiôsis**

*“The world is a living being - one nature, one soul. Keep that in mind. And how everything feeds into that single experience, moves with a single motion. And how everything helps produce everything else. Spun and woven together”* (Aurelius, 2003, p.46).

This quote refers to the cultivation of a worldview that leads to a sense of compassion, through the creation of a sense of connection with our fellow human beings. It helps us realize that we are part of a larger entity and compels us to act in ways that benefit those beyond ourselves.

Skateboarding can be done on your own, which can be very satisfying, but there has always been a strong sense of community, either in the form of a local scene or more widely as a sense of belonging to the same community as other like-minded skateboarders the world over. Skateboarders who travel tend to help each other out with places to stay, advice on the good spots to skate, insight into local culture and geography. Skateboarding can bring people of all ages, genders, ethnicities and nationalities together through a common interest. Connections can be made that ‘transcend’ skateboarding, and there is a feeling of support and encouragement of each other. As skateboarding isn’t a competitive sport in the traditional sense (although competitions do exist) it is common for skaters to offer encouragement to each other when trying new tricks or putting a run together.

This aspect of skateboarding relates to Hierocles ‘Circle of Concern’, which illustrates a dynamic relationship between ourselves (at the center), family, friends, humanity, and at the outer circle; animals and Mother Earth. It is groups such as the skateboarding community that help people realize these connections we have with others, whether they are in our local community or much further afield. There are various skateboarding focussed charities run by skateboarders that focus on using skateboarding to benefit underprivileged and vulnerable children around the world. Skate After School is a skateboarder run project that offers after school skateboard programs and mentorship opportunities for underfunded schools and families. Skateistan (a non-profit organization that uses skateboarding and education to empower children) run global programs in Afghanistan, Cambodia, and South Africa to over 2,500 children, 50% of whom are female, aged 5-17. The confidence and learning that can be gained through skateboarding can be invaluable to those in less privileged positions.

There are numerous examples of local projects where skateboarders work together to build local skateparks to benefit the community.

*“We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural”* (Aurelius, 2003, p.17).



## **A Good Flow**

There are many different types of skating (ramp, street, skatepark, freestyle, handrail) all of which require the development of a sense of flow. This flow is similar to the 'good flow of life' (eudaimonia) Zeno spoke of. If we develop the skills we need to flow on a skateboard and are in harmony with ourselves and our surroundings, rather than in opposition to it, we can achieve a good flow.

*“Concentrate every minute like a Roman – like a man – on doing what’s in front of you with precise and genuine seriousness, tenderly, willingly, with justice. And on freeing yourself from all other distractions. Yes, you can – if you do everything as if it were the last thing you were doing in your life, and stop being aimless, stop letting your emotions override what your mind tells you...”*  
(Aurelius, 2003, p.18).

The Stoics believed that it was essential to live in the present moment, that miniscule space between the past and the future. To live in the moment is to embrace all that is around us and pour ourselves into it, to not allow external stimuli to affect our inner peace. It really isn't possible to skateboard without living in the moment, when you are trying a difficult trick or flowing around a skatepark, there is an intense but relaxed need to be present and aware of everything around you. A good flow (of skateboarding and life) comes, from putting yourself in that moment, focussed on what you planned to do next, but changing those plans and improvising if external factors require you to change course. Flow.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between skateboarding and the teaching of the traditional Stoics is somewhat symbiotic. There are some aspects of skateboarding that require us to, perhaps unwittingly, align with Stoic principles, such as living in the present moment and being tenacious when confronted with failure. To continue to skateboard and to make progress these two attributes are necessary, if they aren't chances are you will give up and try something else. There are also many other aspects of Stoicism, outlined in my essay, that are not essential to being a skateboarder, or the act of skateboarding, but are present in the wider culture or at the individual level (such as community).

On the flipside many Stoic principles can be learned and applied to achieve a more productive, and fulfilling experience as a skateboarder. They can help us keep our cool when things aren't going how we'd like them to, and help us understand ourselves a little better in order to find our individual path through progression.

Stoicism is often thought of as a philosophy that is applied to our lives in a wide sense; our relationships, outlook, work, loss, experiences with others, etc. The bigger more 'existential' parts of being a person you could say. Can it be applied to something like skateboarding? Of course it can. It can be applied, and ultimately very useful to such pastimes and seemingly minor aspects of our lives, which are a part of who we are and how we live.



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