



**THE STOIC  
PHILOSOPHER**

## Stoicism & Grief

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### Introduction

The death of someone we love is something we are all likely to experience at some point in our lives, and this came to me at the end of January 2024 when my father died. I experienced a wide range of emotions and feelings after my father's death: shock, disbelief and deep sadness at first, with numbness, confusion, irritability and exhaustion all raising their heads at some point. Now, some eight months later, I'm interested to explore what the Stoics said about grief, and whether they and their worldview can offer us a guide to how we can make our way through the death of a loved one.

According to *Wikipedia* (2024), "Grief is the response to the loss of something deemed important, particularly to the loss of someone or some living thing that has died, to which a bond or affection was formed." I think the philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe opens this definition slightly when he describes the process of grieving as being "...directed at a loss of possibilities, which is something that one comprehends and navigates over time....and that this involves the loss of possibilities for oneself, for others, for us" (*The Philosopher*, 2024).

There are cultural, and very personal aspects which will influence how we each experience grief. I've tried to write this essay from a Stoic point of view, but this will inevitably be biased by my upbringing and experiences as a 53-year-old, British man.

### Why We Grieve

A cursory glance at some modern takes on Stoicism could give us the impression that it is a selfish philosophy – focused on self-development and self-advancement, which advises us to view others and our relationship with them with indifference.

This isn't true. Stoicism holds that it is wholly natural for us to bond with, love and care for those close to us. Indeed our understanding of the connection we have to other humans, and the extension of our care from those close to us to all inhabitants of the universe is an important part of our development and flourishing.

The texts we have refer numerously to our love of family, friends and our fellow humans. In respect of those closest to us, in *Discourses* 1:11, Epictetus (2022) tells us that love for family members is in accord with nature, right and



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good, and Marcus Aurelius (2011) in *Meditations* 6:39 reminds himself to "Adapt yourself to the circumstances in which your lot has cast you; and love these people among whom your lot has fallen, but love them in all sincerity."

In Lecture 14, Musonius Rufus (2020) discusses the bond between a husband and wife when he says:

"Who is so longed for when absent as a husband by his wife, or a wife by her husband? Whose presence would do more to lighten grief or increase joy or remedy misfortune? To whom is everything judged to be common, body, soul and possessions, except man and wife? For these reasons all men consider the love of man and wife to be the highest form of love..."

But, our love and care should not be restricted only to those closest to us. Cicero (2001) reports the Stoic view that parental love is the basis from which human societal connection develops when he says "Now the Stoics consider it important to realize that parents' love for their children arises naturally. From this starting-point we trace the development of all human society" (p. 84). And in Lecture 19, Musonius Rufus (2020) says "...for man evil consists in injustice and cruelty and indifference to a neighbour's trouble, while virtue is brotherly love and goodness and justice and beneficence and concern for the welfare of one's neighbor."

So we can see that our love of family and fellow humans is integral to our social nature. However, unlike a Stoic sage who even though they love deeply, love in a consistently rational and self-sufficient way, our love becomes mingled with excessive attachments and reliance on others, and with irrational desires and expectations. Furthermore, our happiness, hopes and our futures become reliant on our relationship with our loved ones – we can find that our centre of gravity expands from solely within ourselves into the ones we love. And this is where our vulnerability to grief lies - when the other person is lost, we lose our balance and we experience grief.

## **Stoic Views of Grief**

Graver (2007) tells us that the Stoic belief around negative emotions like grief is that it is our assent to an impression that gives rise to an emotion or passion. They believe that we are responsible for our emotions - not in the sense that we can control every emotion in every instance, but in the sense that our emotions are 'ours' because they arise as a result of our reasoning and the impressions we assent to.

Graver (2007) notes that emotions such as grief have a 'hot or vehement quality' to them (p. 66). This vehemency can overwhelm our reasoning allowing the emotions to carry us away. Graver quotes Chrysippus who likens this to running so fast that we cannot stop or change course.

The Stoics believe that for us to experience a passion such as grief at the death of a loved one, we must believe:

- i. That death of our loved one is a bad thing.
- ii. It is an appropriate response for us to grieve.



Referring to the two points above describing how we experience grief, the Stoics think that we make two mistakes:

- i. We have mistakenly assented to the impression that the death of a loved one is a 'bad' thing, having forgotten that in Stoic terms 'bad' things can only relate to our moral character. In reality, according to the Stoics, the death of a loved one is a dis-preferred indifferent and it can never harm our moral character.
- ii. We have formed the belief that grieving (by this I'm thinking of the experiences such as sadness, insomnia and confusion) is an appropriate response to the death of our loved one. We have forgotten that there are other responses available to us, responses that could lead to our flourishing, rather than our distress.

These are mistakes a Stoic sage would never make. Quoting Cicero, Graver (2007, p. 93) notes that a sage may experience a 'bite or small contraction' at the death of a loved one, and in *On the Constancy of the Wise Person*, Seneca (2014, p. 159) tells us that a wise person would be struck by the loss of friends and children, however they would not be overcome and would never experience grief in the way that we do.

I believe that the sage experiences the loss of a loved one differently to us because:

- They understand that like all things in the universe, human beings undergo constant change, and that one of these changes is their death. Far from being a surprise or something to fight against, the sage knows that our deaths are simply a natural and unchangeable fact of life.
- They understand that our ability to reason is the only thing we can truly call our own, and in Stoic terms, the only bad thing we can experience is to use our ability to reason poorly. The death of a loved one does not remove our ability to reason wisely and is therefore not bad.
- And they understand that we are intimately connected with the universe in which we live. It would make no sense for the universe to cause itself harm and as such, they understand that human death is not harmful or bad. Our death, and the return of the elements from which we're composed to the universe allows the universe to develop and refresh itself. As Marcus Aurelius (2011) notes in *Meditations* 12:21 "For it is the nature of all things to change, alter and perish, so that others may arise in their turn."

This makes sense to me. The sage whose nature is fully in line with the universe and who fully understands the universe does not grieve – the understanding and clarity they have, and their harmony with the universe lets them love a person fully while that person is alive, and then accept the death of the person when that time comes. We, on the other hand, experience grief because we do not have either the sage's understanding, or their consistency in the application of reason. At some level we doubt the veracity of the claim that 'nothing bad has happened to us or our loved one'.

Seneca (2014, p. 12) has a more moderate view, he believes that feeling the loss of a loved one is a natural response, and that to do otherwise would be alien to our human nature. In his *Consolation to Marcia* he notes:



“Grieving for one’s relatives is natural. Who can disagree, as long as it is done in moderation? For when we are merely separated from our dear ones, never mind when we lose them, there is an unavoidable stab of pain, and a contraction even in the most resolute minds.”

He cautions however that we should grieve naturally and not exaggerate either the intensity or duration of our grief to meet the expectation of other people or society. He writes:

“Tears fall even when we try to suppress them, and shedding them is a relief to the mind. What is it then? Let’s allow them to fall, but not summon them up. Let what flows be what emotion forces from us, not what is required to imitate others” (Seneca, 2015, p.393).

## How Can We Approach Our Grief

We’ve seen the Stoic position and how the sage would be free from grief, but what can we do on those days when we are blind-sided and our grief and it bludgeons its way through our better-reasoning? On those days when we struggle to convince ourselves that our loved one’s death could have been anything other than a bad thing – how can the Stoic worldview help us straighten our thinking and restore our rationality?

## Thinking & Talking About Death

I think there is a case for courage, reflection, openness and education here. In the UK, we rarely talk about our deaths, or the deaths of our loved ones before they happen. The subject seems awkward - it’s easier to avoid the conversation and maintain the illusion that we are all immortal. It sometimes feels as though we’re afraid to acknowledge the fact we will die for fear of hastening its arrival.

It seems to me that our fears and uncertainty about death play into and enlarge our grief. Seneca (2015, p. 274) picks up on some of the reasons we fear our own death in *Letter* 82:15:

“There is in us an innate love of self, an innate wish to survive and preserve ourselves and an innate horror of disintegration, because it seems to deprive us of many goods and to remove us from the surroundings we are used to. Death is made alien to us also by the fact that we know this world already but we do not know what the world towards which we are headed is like, and we have a horror of the unknown.”

Seneca reminds us that we have all been told ‘scurrilous’ tales and stories about death, and he encourages us to be courageous and straightforward in dispelling them – we will never lose our fear of death until we do this.

Epictetus (2022, p. 140) does similar when he reminds us that our fear of death arises from our ignorance and incomprehension of it. He likens our fear to a child’s fear of a frightening mask when he says “What is death? A bogey mask. Turn it around and you’ll see it for what it is. Look! Now it can’t bite!”.



After likening death to other natural processes and the stages of life we go through, Marcus Aurelius (2011) talks about reflecting on death and hints at how our feelings about it may change as our perspective adjusts “So what’s appropriate for a man who has thought things through isn’t treating death as something to be dismissed or ignored or despised, but waiting for it on the understanding that it’s a natural process” (*Meditations* 9:3).

We can live well by having the wisdom and courage to reflect on our mortality and that of our loved ones, and to discuss this sensitively and openly with them. Some Stoics refer to this reflection on death as *memento mori*. If we have this courage, we and those we love can explore our wishes and our fears around our deaths, and we can plan around the deaths of our loved ones so we know what they want and can honour their wishes in death. Maybe to some small extent, this reflection and openness will lighten the grief we feel at their loss.

### **Remembering to Live**

Knowing that our loved ones are mortal and that our time with them is both limited, and of an unknown duration can help us appreciate our relationship with them more deeply. We have a single, time limited opportunity for our relationship to flourish and if we don’t work towards this now – the chance will be lost forever.

As Seneca (2014, p. 15) says in his *Consolation to Marcia* “So we must love all our relatives...in the knowledge that we have received no promise that their lives will be endless, indeed no promise that they will be long.” He goes on “So seize the pleasures afforded by your children, let your children enjoy you in turn, and extract all the joy you can without delay: no promise has been made about the coming night; I have granted you too long an extension – no promise has been made about the next hour.”

### **Remembering that Death Is Not a Bad Thing**

From a Stoic viewpoint, the claim that death is not harmful can be viewed in two ways. First, the Stoics hold that the only true harm we suffer is moral harm, and this comes about when we don’t use our faculty of understanding and choice well. It’s clear that although the death of someone we love may be painful, it cannot harm our faculty of choice.

The second is viewed from the point of humans being an intimately connected part of the universe. To the Stoics, the universe tends towards existing in the best way it can. If we accept this, we can accept that it would make no sense for the universe to harm us or our loved ones, for to do so it would be harming itself.

### **Our Return to the Universe**

I agree with David Fideler’s sentiments in his book *Breakfast with Seneca* (Fideler, 2022) and I find the idea that our loved ones are on loan to us from the universe comforting.

The idea is that we are all part of a living and changing universe. For a time, we and our loved ones are brought into being by a universe that gives us what we need and supports us through our lives,



and then, when the time comes, we die and return to that very universe. When we die, the stuff that once was 'us', is not lost but is returned to the universe and used again to make something else.

Marcus Aurelius (2011) talks about this in *Meditations* 7:23 – it is a passage I thought about at the time of my father's death and it gave me comfort. As much as highlighting that death is not a terrible thing, the passage gives the idea that after their death, our loved ones remain with us in the universe, albeit in a transformed way:

“From the substance of the whole, as if from wax, universal nature moulds first a little horse, and then, melting it down again, uses its material to make a little tree, and then a human being, and then something else again; and each of these has existed for only a very short time. But it is nothing terrible for a casket to be broken up, any more than it was for it to be put together.”

### **Keeping An Eye Towards Reason & Gratitude**

In his *Consolation to Helvia*, Seneca (2014, p. 67) advises Helvia to seek solace for grief in reason, he writes:

“It is...better to defeat our sorrow than to cheat it; for grief that has been beguiled and distracted by pleasures or preoccupations rises again, and from its very rest it gathers force to rage once more. But the grief that submits to reason is quelled permanently.”

I think that navigating through the grieving process is helped by reflection, understanding and reason. Help comes from understanding our true nature as humans and the part we play in the universe, but also from understanding that how we think about death and grieving shapes the way this manifests itself in our lives.

We can have the wisdom and courage to look at the nature of life head-on and to understand that we, and the people we love will die. We can also have the courage to speak to our loved ones about death. Increasing our familiarity and willingness to look at death may soften our grief when it comes. We are not looking to suppress our emotions here, but to transform our thinking. As Reydam-Schils (2005) says “The point is not to minimize and do away with human affection ... but to render us aware of human frailty and enable us to cope with mortality.”

If we choose to, we can adopt the Stoic view that our deaths are not a bad thing, and from the perspective that our deaths return our substance to the universe which it then uses to refresh and sustain itself, our deaths can be seen to support those we leave behind. Looked at this way, rather than feeling only sorrow for my father's death, I can see his death as an inevitability while feeling gratitude for the gift of his life – gratitude that we shared time together here, that my father cared for me, and in turn as he got older, I was able to do the same for him. Make no mistake here that months after his death, my gratitude is still often accompanied by a gentle melancholy, but I am grateful all the same.





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