

IN PRAISE OF UNCERTAINTY

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by Mariana Alessandri

# Relentless uncertainty



took for granted that the day brings with it a litany of ills, ranging from the inconvenient to the torturous. A good pessimist acknowledges life's imminent pain and its relentless uncertainty.

Stoics from Zeno of Citium (circa 300 BCE) to Marcus Aurelius (circa 170 CE) were certain of one thing: humans suffer and die. They did not avert their gaze from this fact – ever. And they came up with a whole philosophy to deal with it. If you believe that the worm of death gnaws at your core but – and here's the snag – you don't know when it will make a hole big enough to crawl through, then you'll need to do some planning. Prepare to be surprised, Stoics say, and you'll not be surprised. Prepare for uncertainty, same idea. But their particular brand of preparation made them Stoics and not Existentialists.

No matter what people say about pandemic doomscrolling or the abundance of negativity in the news, a good pessimist is still hard to find. One who, like the Roman Stoic Seneca, would tell you that life is, at bottom, a storm; one who, like the Greek Stoic Epictetus, was hyper-aware of death and highly invested in keeping it at the topmost of our minds; one who, like the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius,

The Stoics' plan for certain death at an uncertain time, as well as for how to face our ever-growing wave of suffering, was to divide the world into two categories: what is in my control and what is out of my control. The Stoics ceded loads more control to the universe than our "there's-an-app-for-that" society does, including what profession we'll hold, how healthy and beautiful we'll be, and who will honour and esteem us. But they simultaneously won for us plebeians an unbelievable amount of inner control. For everything we can't control in the external world, they found something to subjugate in our psychic lives. Epictetus, for example, would hold that you don't get to decide whether you become a TV news anchor – that will depend on your level of God-given beauty, your voice, aptitude, and luck, all of which are out



of your direct control (if it's not 100% in our control, he puts it out of our control). In the end, becoming a TV news anchor will depend in large part on whether or not you get disfigured in a car crash on your way to your audition. Don't put your hopes in becoming a TV news anchor, then, or even the bulk of your striving. Even if you win the position, it can be taken away from you tomorrow. But what you do get to decide is whether to become a good human being. Instead of calling any outer event 'good', believe the only good is moral good, and work hard to become it. Virtues are, for the Stoics, 100% in our control. Thus, they gain for us a new certainty in addition to death: moral progress. TV news anchor or not, we can form ourselves into patient souls, generous and temperate. The external world is (definitely) rife with car crashes, but the internal world is (potentially) abloom with virtues. The Stoics were smart pessimists: they had a good answer to life's misery, and

it continues to make a whole lot of people feel better in times as uncertain as these. Since 2012, the Stoic revival has gotten traction in the US, UK, and Australia. So many of us want to hear that we're in control.

The 19th and 20th century Existentialists came up with a different, equally pessimistic, response to the certainty the Ancients alighted on. Like the Stoics, they saw suffering everywhere and wanted to help. Like prophets, they proclaimed that the end of the world is nigh, that we need to wake up today because tomorrow may never come, and that opting out is copping out. In 1843, Søren Kierkegaard dared us to look straight into the face of doom and not blink. He put us humans at the edge of a great abyss, looking down and getting wobbly. He described anxiety as "the dizziness of freedom," and said we are overwhelmed – and excited – by the idea that anything is possible. We intuit that, in addition to a sack of money appearing on our doorstep,

'anything is possible' also means we can ruin ourselves. Almost a hundred years later, Martin Heidegger said that the fundamental human condition was "being-towards-death": the unshakeable reality of our lives is that we die. But instead of living as though we're dying, he noticed that we spend most of our time in "flight", distracting ourselves with Very Important Things. We also cling to otherwise stories about how we control the inner landscape of our minds. Fifteen years after that, Jean-Paul Sartre likened the human condition to feeling nauseated, thanks to a worm he called "nothingness" that lies curled up in our core. Even before we make a decision, Sartre said, we know that by choosing A we will not choose B-Z. Entire books and movies have been dedicated to the what-ifs of life: what if I had chosen M, or C, or U? We have more freedom than we want, Sartre believed, so we retaliate by tying ourselves to spouses, jobs, kids, roles, email. The tethers stop the spinning for

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a time, but eventually we start resenting our strings.

On the Existentialist story, the average human being is a coward, who, upon whiffing the end of life in the air, changes direction. We flee from the macabre right toward the mundane, and we dream of a world without turbulence. Sure, the pandemic had us living in full colour for a stretch, but the sooner we get back to black-and-white – low alert instead of high – the better. Rational humans don't choose to soak in suffering, loneliness, alienation, anxiety, and disappointment. We want something to cool our mind, take the edge off, help us regain our footing. Few Existentialists remain, especially compared to Stoics, and it's no coincidence. After all, how many of us today could agree with Miguel de Unamuno that it is better to exist in hell than to not exist?

Which story looks better (which is not to say truer): the Stoic one, in which

what we do in the face of a certain storm at an uncertain time is to batten down the hatches, or the Existentialist story, in which we stumble around, perpetually uncertain but persistently unwilling to tell ourselves lies about battening down mythical hatches? Both schools see humans scampering about like so many white rabbits looking at their watches, and neither is particularly resonant with any bright-sided world. Stoicism asks us to picture the ills awaiting us, and Existentialism urges us to turn toward our anxiety. The difference between them is not a matter of pain tolerance but of uncertainty tolerance, and which philosophy you choose may come down to your feelings about control. Seneca was nauseated once, too. But he jumped out of his boat and risked his life swimming to dry land. The Stoic might ask: what kind of lunatic wants to live on choppy waters? To which the Existentialist might reply: what other waters does life offer? ▣



*“Well, it’s not a problem for me to say both where you were and how fast you were going, Mr Heisenberg.”*