

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



EMBRACING MORTALITY: PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION ON DEATH IN THE GUIDANCE OF STOIC PHILOSOPHY

MJSSH
Muallim Journal of
Social Science and Humanities

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33306/mjssh/296>

Abstract

Humanity's greatest fear is the inevitability of death, the ultimate fate that all strive to evade. This collective dread of mortality stems from its perceived malevolence. Across the ages, from religious rituals promising salvation to scientific efforts to delay death, human attempts to confront mortality vary widely. Yet death remains inescapable, a natural consequence of life. While religious doctrines offer comfort through ideas of an afterlife, and science views death as a biological challenge to be postponed. Conversely, philosophy advocates for an intellectual acceptance of death's inevitability. The Stoic Philosophy, in particular, advocate for the joyful acceptance of death as an integral part of life. This philosophical stance fosters a positive perspective on death, encouraging individuals to live life to its fullest potential. Embracing death with joy entails psychological reassurance and preparatory measures for life's inevitable end. This qualitative study explores psychological preparation for death using primary and secondary data sources. Primary sources include the philosophical texts by Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, specifically "Letters to Lucilius," "On the Shortness of Life," and "Meditations." Secondary data is collected from peer-reviewed journals, books, and reports that contextualize these works within modern psychological frameworks. The primary audience includes individuals preparing for death due to age or illness and those grieving loved ones, offering a pathway to peace and understanding through Stoic wisdom. Moreover, this will be a guidance to those who work with the terminally ill people to get psychological resilience. By embracing death, Stoicism encourages both the dying and the bereaved to find psychological reassurance and encourage all to live a meaningful life in the given time frame.

Keywords: Stoic Philosophy, Mortality, Death, Thanatophobia

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Received 3rd June 2024, revised 28th June 2024, accepted 15th July 2024

Introduction

Humanity universally experiences two fundamental events: birth and death. While birth is celebrated, death is often met with apprehension and reluctance (Gire, 2014). The fear associated with death—thanatophobia—is a shared human experience rooted in the realization that death signifies the cessation of cognitive processes, emotions, and sensory perceptions (Menzies & Whittle, 2022). This anticipation of non-existence can lead to anxiety, particularly among individuals facing terminal illness or imminent execution. Despite the reluctance to contemplate death, it is an inevitable experience that all must confront. Religions offer solace through concepts like afterlife and salvation, while science views death as a biological challenge to be delayed, if not overcome, through technological advancements (Harari, 2016, & Rhodes, 2016). Philosophy, meanwhile, urges intellectual acceptance of death's inevitability. Among philosophical traditions, Stoicism, which flourished in ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, advocates for embracing death joyfully as a natural part of life. This study explores the Stoic perspective on death and how it can serve as a guide for psychological preparation in various contexts, including for individuals facing death, healthcare professionals, and those grieving due to loss of loved one. Ultimately it is expected to teach the human society to live a meaningful life in the given, limited time frame.

Literature Review

Humans uniquely possess an awareness of their mortality, although the timing of death remains uncertain, often kept from conscious thought due to its distressing nature. However, this awareness becomes pronounced in individuals facing incurable illnesses, life-threatening injuries, or imminent execution. Death is the one certainty that follows birth, a universal experience despite many individuals' reluctance to confront it. This fear of death is formally known as thanatophobia (Mamauag, 2019, Seale, Sjaak Van Der Geest, 2004, & Copp, 1998). Across religious, philosophical, and scientific domains, death is often feared and seen as undesirable and evil. Religion offers solace through beliefs in the afterlife, karma, and rebirth, which can provide liberation from the fear of mortality (Harari, 2016). Meanwhile, scientific inquiry approaches death as a technical challenge, seeing it as a genetically programmed process with evolutionary purposes (Gaille et al., 2020; Linden, 2022). Early biological theories, such as August Weismann's evolutionary work, laid the foundation for understanding death as an essential event in nature. In medical contexts, death is defined as the irreversible cessation of either heart or brain function, leading to the permanent loss of consciousness and awareness (Fabis & Klimczuk, 2017; Fernandez, Medina, 2021 Kokosalakis, 2020). There is debate in medical circles regarding brain death and whether it constitutes true death, despite its acceptance for organ donation (Schumacher, 2011, Díaz-Cobacho, Molina-Pérez, & Rodríguez-Arias 2023).

Philosophically, death is seen as a natural culmination of life, an immutable law of nature. Contemplation of death is often thought to contribute positively to human welfare. Western philosophy has long explored death, from ancient thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to modern existentialists such as Heidegger and Camus (Fukuda, 2023; Linden, 2022). Socrates viewed death as a dreamless sleep, marking the beginning of the soul's journey to the afterlife. Plato described death as the soul's liberation from the body, while Aristotle characterized it as the dissolution of both body and soul (Izibilli & Eribo, 2009). The overarching consensus in these philosophical theories is that death is intertwined with life, and the recognition of mortality encourages individuals to pursue meaningful lives (Ifeakor, 2022> & Gomez, 2015). Philosophical

perspectives often emphasize that accepting death is a necessary step towards living authentically, without the need to conquer death itself.

In contemporary psychology, the acceptance of death has been framed through various theoretical lenses. Research on the acceptance of death has yielded three distinct theoretical frameworks. The first is termed ‘Escape Acceptance’, which involves embracing death as a means to escape the suffering and hardships encountered in life. The second approach is ‘Approach Acceptance’, characterized by accepting death with the expectation of achieving a better existence beyond the present life. This perspective often hinges on the belief that departed loved ones are destined for happiness in the afterlife. The third framework, ‘Neutral Acceptance’, entails acknowledging death as a natural and inevitable facet of human life (Menzies, & Whittle, 2022).

In general, achieving a state of neutral acceptance towards death is typically feasible under circumstances where death results from old age, other natural causes, or circumstances perceived as meaningful. The tendency to struggle with or resist accepting death is not limited solely to close relationships but also extends to healthcare professionals and caregivers. Research indicates that fluctuations in mood and experiences of fear among these individuals can impede their ability to function effectively in their professional roles, particularly when caring for patients with incurable illnesses (Fernández, Medina, 2021, Jiang, 2019, & Dzierzanowski, Kozłowski, 2019). Consequently, it is imperative to incorporate comprehensive training within medical education programs to equip healthcare professionals with the necessary skills to manage death-related issues sensitively, especially in the context of patients suffering from incurable conditions, while also addressing their emotional responses (Dzierzanowski, Kozłowski, 2019). Individuals' worldviews, personal beliefs, and self-esteem play pivotal roles in facilitating coping and recovery from the loss of loved ones. Similarly, one's capacity to accept death is influenced by these same factors upon learning of their impending demise (Gegieckaite, Kazlauskas, 2020). Among the various philosophical approaches to death, the approach of Stoic philosophy is consistent with neutral acceptance

Research Problem

The psychological fear of death, especially among terminally ill patients, healthcare professionals, and those grieving the loss of loved ones, presents a significant mental health challenge. While much research has been conducted on religious and medical approaches to death, philosophical perspectives, particularly Stoic thought, remain underexplored as a viable framework for coping with death. This research seeks to fill that gap by investigating the application of Stoic philosophy in preparing individuals for death, whether through their own impending mortality or the death of others.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to explore Stoic philosophy as a psychological framework for preparing individuals to accept death. Specifically, its objectives are to:

1. Examine how Stoic principles can help terminally ill individuals come to terms with their mortality.

2. Investigate the application of Stoic philosophy for healthcare professionals and caregivers in managing their emotional responses to death.
3. Explore how Stoic thought can provide comfort and closure to those grieving the loss of loved ones.
4. Evaluate the implications of Stoic philosophy for individuals in everyday life, including its potential role in enhancing life satisfaction through the contemplation of death.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study explores psychological preparation for death using primary and secondary data sources. Primary sources include philosophical texts by Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, such as *Letters to Lucilius*, *On the Shortness of Life*, and *Meditations*. Secondary data is collected from peer-reviewed journals, books, and reports that contextualize these works within modern psychological frameworks. Data collection involved a comprehensive literature review using databases like SCOPUS, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Thematic analysis was employed to identify themes such as coping mechanisms, emotional resilience, and acceptance of mortality. This study's significance lies in its potential to offer Stoic philosophy as a viable psychological tool for those facing death, working in death-related fields, or grieving lost loved ones. By providing a structured approach to the contemplation of mortality, the research aims to enhance the emotional resilience of individuals across various contexts, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on death and mental health.

Results and Discussion: Stoic Perspective as Psychological Preparation for Death

This section delves into the application of the philosophical teachings of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius as a means of addressing the complexities surrounding death. It further explores how these Stoic principles can be meaningfully integrated into contemporary discourse to alleviate the psychological burdens associated with mortality. The subsequent sections will provide an in-depth analysis of how these philosophical concepts can be adapted and utilized to achieve the central objectives of this research. Some points are cross cuttings and may be used for achieving more than one objective.

Seneca's Perspective

First, when Examining how Stoic principles can help terminally ill individuals come to terms with their mortality Seneca posits that death is an inherent and inevitable aspect of life. He emphasizes the importance of preparing oneself not only to live virtuously but also to face death with the same readiness. Death represents life's ultimate conclusion, underscoring the significance of ensuring that all phases of life are conducted well. A person who has cultivated a virtuous existence can depart peacefully, free from regrets, and gratefully acknowledging life's blessings without ambiguity in their final moments. Seneca argues that those unprepared for death are fundamentally unprepared for life itself. He asserts that all human endeavors ultimately lead to the same endpoint—death—and thus, fear of this inevitability is irrational (Seneca, *Letters*, 30). Seneca's insights on death, a central source of human anxiety and preoccupation, provide a clear and actionable perspective on confronting this existential reality.

The Latin phrase '*memento mori*', meaning 'remember the inevitable mortality of men', serves as a method for leading a morally upright life by making optimal use of the limited time available to oneself and one's companions. This practice of mindfulness affords individuals the opportunity to discern and prioritize what truly matters in their lives. Seneca underscores the importance of safeguarding the welfare of those we share our lives with—living harmoniously and fully with our friends and loved ones while they are present. This includes actively working to ensure their well-being and happiness (Seneca, *Letters*, 63). Death, an unavoidable aspect of the natural life cycle, should be accepted as a certainty. Therefore, it becomes imperative to recognize the value of the time we are granted and to endeavor to live it meaningfully. Seneca emphasizes that living a life of virtue imbues one's existence with purpose and significance, aiding in transcending the fear of death (Seneca, *Letters*, 82).

Seneca suggests living each day with a sense of gratitude, treating it as if it were one's last. He proposes a self-assessment method to evaluate the quality of one's life by asking, "If today were the last day of my life, would I do what I am about to do today?" (Seneca, *Letters*, 26). Seneca presents this approach as a technique for promoting personal well-being. The most profound of all fears is the fear of death, but Seneca contends that by utilizing each day as if it were the last, one can confront death with clarity and contentment (Seneca, *Letters*, 61). Seneca's reflections emphasize that achieving true happiness renders life fulfilling, irrespective of its duration. The pursuit of a lengthy life does not inherently lead to happiness once true contentment is attained (Seneca, *Letters*, 70, 77). Therefore, the character and quality of one's life are paramount (Seneca, *Letters*, 93). This emphasis on the value of virtue in life encourages terminally ill individuals to focus on the quality of their remaining time, providing a pathway to finding peace with mortality.

Secondly, when investigating the application of Stoic philosophy for healthcare professionals and caregivers in managing their emotional responses to death it is evidenced that healthcare professionals and caregivers facing the daily realities of death, Stoic principles provide a valuable framework for managing emotional responses. Seneca teaches that death is not a punitive measure but a universal consequence of existence, shared by all (Seneca, *Letters*, 24). This perspective can help caregivers detach from personal grief and approach their role with greater emotional resilience. Seneca's advice to cultivate the practice of living each day with gratitude—treating it as if it were one's last—can be especially helpful for caregivers who witness suffering and death regularly (Seneca, *Letters*, 26). This approach allows caregivers to remain present in their work, emphasizing the importance of helping those in need with a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Seneca also highlights the futility of excessive worry about what is beyond our control, such as the ultimate fate of patients. He asserts that the regulation of relationships or outcomes is beyond our control, suggesting that caregivers focus on providing comfort and support in the present moment rather than being consumed by fear of loss or outcome of their service (Seneca, *Letters*, 24).

Third, exploring how Stoic thought can provide comfort and closure to those grieving the loss of loved ones. It becomes clear that Seneca's perspectives on loss offer guidance for those grieving the passing of loved ones. He acknowledges the sorrow associated with such losses but advises against excessive grief. Instead, he advocates for gratitude, recognizing that although the deceased are physically absent, their memories endure and provide solace. Seneca stresses the importance of cherishing past joys rather than dwelling on future pleasures that are no longer attainable (Seneca, *Letters*, 99). He also emphasizes the futility of concerns about the deceased missing out on future opportunities, reminding us that death is a universal journey. When faced

with loss, Seneca suggests we feel empathy for those who have gone before us and recognize our shared human experience (Seneca, *Letters*, 99). This shared journey of life and death can foster a sense of closure and connection with the deceased, even after they are gone. Seneca also suggests allowing time for mourning as a necessary part of the healing process. Mourning is portrayed not as a weakness but as a form of therapeutic relief for the soul (Seneca, *Letters*, 99). This approach to grief supports the idea of remembering the departed through thoughtful reflection and constructive actions rather than being overwhelmed by sorrow.

Finally, we evaluating the implications of Stoic philosophy for individuals in everyday life, including its potential role in enhancing life satisfaction through the contemplation of death. Seneca's teachings on death extend beyond coping with loss or facing terminal illness; they also offer valuable insights for individuals in everyday life. The practice of *memento mori*—contemplating death—serves as a tool for living a morally upright and meaningful life (Seneca, *Letters*, 63). By reminding individuals of their mortality, Stoic philosophy encourages them to prioritize what truly matters and to live each day with purpose and gratitude. Seneca suggests that living with the awareness of death enhances life satisfaction, as it pushes individuals to make the most of their limited time (Seneca, *Letters*, 26). This mindset fosters a more focused and intentional approach to life, where each action is weighed against the possibility of it being one's last. This practice not only mitigates the fear of death but also promotes a richer and more fulfilling life experience.

Seneca emphasizes the importance of quality over quantity in life. He asserts that achieving true happiness and virtue is more significant than merely extending one's lifespan (Seneca, *Letters*, 70, 77). A life lived with purpose and integrity, regardless of its length, holds greater value (Seneca, *Letters*, 93). This perspective invites individuals to shift their focus from accumulating years to cultivating meaningful experiences. Seneca's insights into the nature of life and death also suggest that every day is a step closer to the ultimate conclusion. While many people perceive death as a distant event, Seneca reminds us that life inexorably progresses toward it with each passing day (Seneca, *Letters*, 24). This awareness encourages individuals to live fully in the present, appreciating the fleeting nature of existence and making the most of their time. In addition to the above the following points re-iterate individuals to live a full life with the acknowledgement of universal fate;

- Death is not a punitive measure but a universal consequence of existence, indiscriminately provided to all individuals. It is illogical for one to harbor distress or apprehension towards an eventuality that is equitably shared. This universal equality is an inherent necessity, thus rendering the acceptance of death as a normal facet of life imperative and devoid of complaint.
- The apprehension regarding the welfare of one's relations following death is a common concern associated with mortality. Yet, upon contemplation of future events, it becomes apparent that the regulation of relationships is beyond one's control. Instead, individuals can acknowledge the opportunity to live according to their capabilities. Indeed, even within one's lifetime, it is impossible to guarantee the well-being of loved ones entirely. Therefore, the wisest course of action is to fulfill life's responsibilities during one's existence. Conversely, worrying about the potential suffering of one's relations post-mortem contradicts rationality.

- Another point of contention is the uncertainty surrounding one's fate after death. If the soul ceases to exist, there is no subsequent experience or suffering. Alternatively, if the soul endures, there exists the prospect of a renewed existence. Regardless of the outcome, the consequences are innocuous (Letters: 24). Death signifies a state of non-being or void, analogous to the state preceding birth (Letters: 54). Consequently, there is no cause for concern in this matter.

Marcus Aurelius' Perspective

First, examining how Stoic principles can help terminally ill individuals come to terms with their mortality. Marcus Aurelius emphasizes the importance of fully acknowledging mortality as an inevitable facet of existence, while concurrently fostering purpose and embracing the present moment, as fundamental to a fulfilling life. He asserts that everything in the world undergoes change, eventual decay, and cessation. Human bodies disintegrate into atoms, while the soul merges into eternity. Nonetheless, Marcus Aurelius does not subscribe to the notion that this reality renders existence meaningless. He advocates for the avoidance of futile pursuits, urging individuals to approach life with a sense of profound responsibility by discarding distracting ideologies and urge for cultivating wisdom (Meditations: II.7). Marcus Aurelius underscores that contemplating death is integral to leading a virtuous life. This concept becomes clearer when dispelling common superstitions surrounding death. The wise acknowledge death as a natural phenomenon and an unavoidable aspect of existence (Meditations: II.12). Marcus Aurelius views death with admiration, as it liberates individuals from insatiable desires, emotional turmoil, pervasive anxieties, cravings for excess, and the duplicity that leads to suffering (Meditations: VI.28). He proposes a method wherein contemplating departure from the world involves reflecting on dispensable attachments and unnecessary associations (Meditations: IX.3). By accepting death as a natural process, individuals facing terminal illness can embrace their mortality with grace, aligning their actions, words, and thoughts with the awareness that life is fleeting. This reflection empowers them to embody Stoic virtues such as wisdom, courage, justice, and self-control, and to approach their final days with peace and acceptance.

Second, Investigating the application of Stoic philosophy for healthcare professionals and caregivers in managing their emotional responses to death Marcus Aurelius highlights that the contemplation of mortality extends beyond death alone, acknowledging that cognitive decline or loss of clarity can precede physical death. Healthcare professionals and caregivers can apply Stoic philosophy by recognizing the impermanence of life and using this awareness to guide their actions and attitudes toward those in their care. This recognition underscores the importance of utilizing the present effectively and undertaking meaningful endeavors promptly (Meditations: III.1). Contemplating mortality can ensure the rationality and acceptability of one's actions. Marcus Aurelius advises pausing during activities to consider whether the prospect of imminent death would hinder their continuation. This introspective questioning empowers healthcare professionals to assess the significance and purpose of their caregiving efforts. By embracing the Stoic mindset, they can manage their emotional responses to death with greater clarity and focus, allowing them to provide care with compassion while maintaining emotional resilience. Aurelius's teachings encourage them to confront death not as a distressing event but as a natural part of life, enabling them to support others while remaining emotionally grounded.

Third, when exploring how Stoic thought can provide comfort and closure to those grieving the loss of loved ones Marcus Aurelius posits that death, like other natural processes, is an inherent

aspect of existence provided by nature. Understanding and responding appropriately to death involves neither casual indifference nor sorrowful apprehension but rather an acceptance akin to embracing a natural occurrence. He analogizes waiting for death to awaiting the birth of a child from a mother's womb or the departure of the soul from the body (Meditations: IX.3). This perspective suggests a method of approaching death once its inevitability is comprehended. Aurelius draws a parallel between the ripening and falling of fruit from a tree, which enriches the soil and supports the tree that bore and nurtured it. Similarly, humans should express gratitude for the blessings received during their time in this world. In their final days, there is no better pursuit than to appreciate the richness of life (Meditations: IV.48). For those grieving the loss of loved ones, Stoic thought provides a framework to find solace in the natural order of life and death. By reflecting on death as a transition rather than an end, individuals can experience comfort and closure. Aurelius's teachings encourage the bereaved to embrace gratitude for the shared time and memories, allowing them to process their grief with acceptance and purpose.

Finally, we evaluate the implications of Stoic philosophy for individuals in everyday life, including its potential role in enhancing life satisfaction through the contemplation of death. Marcus Aurelius suggests that the brevity of life underscores the importance of embodying divine qualities, displaying kindness toward fellow human beings, and striving to maximize one's potential within the given span of existence (Meditations: VI.49, VIII.2). He draws a parallel between life and playing a role in a theatrical production, where the duration of the performance is irrelevant compared to the quality of the role played (Meditations: XII.36). By contemplating mortality, individuals are prompted to assess the significance of their pursuits and live in accordance with moral principles. Aurelius urges people to align with fundamental virtues such as wisdom, courage, justice, and self-control. This reflection on death invites individuals to transcend fear, leading lives of purpose and integrity that contribute meaningfully to society. The contemplation of death, therefore, enhances life satisfaction by fostering a deeper appreciation for life's transient beauty and the enduring legacy of virtuous living. Aurelius encourages individuals to live fully in the present, pursue self-improvement, and express gratitude for the blessings of life, ultimately unlocking the potential for profound personal growth.

Thus, the above perspectives of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius offer profound insights into psychological preparation for death, both for individuals facing their mortality and those caring for the terminally ill or grieving the loss of loved ones. By embracing the natural inevitability of death, Stoicism alleviates the existential fears that burden human life, guiding individuals to live virtuously and purposefully. Seneca and Marcus Aurelius stress the importance of mindfulness in daily life, advocating for a deep appreciation of the present moment and the cultivation of wisdom, courage, and self-control. The Stoic approach emphasizes the value of life not in its length but in its quality, providing a framework for finding peace, purpose, and fulfillment amid life's ultimate transitions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In total the Stoic perspective on death is distinct, and unique because it sees understanding death as a chance to lead a fulfilling life without reliance on belief in an afterlife. While a very long lifespan or immortality might seem appealing to individuals, The Stoics argue it would be detrimental to society as a whole. Issues like overpopulation, social security concerns, resource scarcity, poverty, famine, pension problems, and prolonged waiting periods for future generations

to benefit would arise. Ultimately, an extended life would also be harmful to individuals. Therefore, accepting death after a full life is encouraged and should be embraced with joy. Stoic philosophy outlines guidelines for this joyful acceptance, which entails embracing the natural order of the universe with gratitude for the opportunity to have lived thus far. During the time between birth and death, humans are urged to undertake tasks that contribute to the happiness and well-being of both present and future generations. Moreover, Stoic perspective on mortality, as elucidated by Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, offers profound insights into how individuals can confront the inevitability of death with grace, purpose, and resilience. Their teachings emphasize several important principles that resonate deeply with the human experience:

- **Acceptance and Preparation:** Seneca emphasizes the importance of preparing oneself not only to live virtuously but also to face death with readiness and acceptance. By cultivating a life of virtue and purpose, individuals can confront mortality with clarity and contentment, free from regrets.
- **Living with Gratitude:** Both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius advocate for living each day with gratitude and intention, fostering positive relationships and contributing positively to the world. By appreciating life's transient beauty and blessings, individuals can confront mortality with a sense of fulfillment.
- **Quality of Life Over Duration:** Seneca underscores the significance of the quality of life over its duration. He challenges the notion that mere longevity equates to happiness, emphasizing the importance of meaningful endeavors and relationships.
- **Alignment with Nature:** Marcus Aurelius encourages aligning with nature and the natural order of existence. By understanding death as a part of the universal cycle, individuals can approach mortality with reasoned acceptance and harmony.
- **Virtue and Integrity:** Both philosophers emphasize the enduring virtues of wisdom, courage, justice, and self-control. By embodying these virtues in life, individuals can transcend the fear of death and lead lives of purpose and integrity.
- **Gratitude for Life's Blessings:** Seneca and Marcus Aurelius urge individuals to express gratitude for life's blessings and to find solace in memories when confronting mortality. By embracing the present moment and appreciating life's transient beauty, individuals can confront death with resilience and gratitude.

Death, according to Stoicism, should not be seen as the opposite of life but rather as a fundamental part of life—the ultimate event. Being aware of the certainty of death provides an opportunity to live life with purpose and to make wise decisions. Embracing death as a natural occurrence is referred to as the Gnana view or philosophical view. In contrast, religions and science often oppose this perspective. Religions typically emphasize an afterlife, framing death as a transition to a better existence beyond this world, which can be seen as a denial of death. Meanwhile, science seeks ways to prolong life through advanced research, also reflecting a reluctance to accept death. Stoics argue that both religious and scientific approaches, which emphasize the denial or avoidance of death, are not sensible or wise. By adopting these timeless teachings, individuals can confront death not with fear, but with acceptance, gratitude, and a deep appreciation for life's meaning and purpose. The Stoic perspective offers valuable insights into how we can navigate the human journey with grace and resilience, ultimately leading to a life well-lived and a peaceful acceptance of life's inevitable conclusion.

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