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Phobias, Terrorism, and Stoic Therapies to Arrest Fear

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Fear abounds so much these days that it has spawned a new theory of *fearism*.<sup>1</sup> Here my examination of fear will situate fear of acts of terrorism within a very wide range of phobias. This comparison will invite a brief account of how Stoics understand and combat fear.

I will begin by cataloguing a dizzying number of phobias and interpreting them from a Stoic perspective. Second, I will report on the leading causes of death both in the United States and in the world. Third, these statistics will be compared to the number of deaths due to acts of terrorism since 2001. This comparison, I will argue, elucidates today's political rhetoric about terrorism. I will conclude by explaining how Stoics like Epictetus appeal to reason to arrest fear and replace it with the healthy, positive mindset *caution*. I aim to show that Stoic intellectual therapies can make our lives less fearful.

### **1. Myriad Phobias**

How many different fears have been named in English? The online phobia list names more than 530.<sup>2</sup> Relatively common disorders include fears of the dark, high places, air travel, open places, enclosed spaces, crowds, crossing bridges, darkness, public speaking, fire, needles, thunder, speed, and foreigners. Rarer objects of fear include bald people, bicycles, children, computers, dirt, heaven, light, long words, new things, old people, paper, string, teenagers, and being at home. Insects, insect stings, ants, bees, cockroaches, lice, mites, moths, spiders, tapeworms, wasps, worms, microbes, parasites, and germs all have named fears. So do bulls, horses, dogs, cats, mice, birds, bats, otters, fish, shellfish, frogs, toads, snakes, and sharks. The

fear of animals is zoophobia. People with paraskavedekatriaphobia fear Friday the thirteenth. There are names for the fears of such activities as opening one's eyes, defecating, bathing, drinking, undressing in front of someone, coitus, crossing the street, going to school, throwing things away, dancing, conversing over dinner, riding in an automobile, being stared at, sitting, walking, being tickled, stooping, stuttering, seeing oneself in a mirror, vomiting, and going to bed. There are named fears of eyes, hands, chins, beards, belly buttons, knees, hair, rectums, and genitals. There are names for the fear of each of the colors yellow, red, purple, black, and white, as well as for the fear of colors generally. There are names for the fear of each of the numbers four, five, eight, thirteen, and 666.

Whether a fear of illness, accidents, injury, fever, heart disease, diabetes, dentists, speed, or pain seems more or less justifiable will vary from person to person. Bad experiences in childhood no doubt have a lot to do with phobias. So do genetic predispositions. But what about fearing fog, ghosts, or being alone? Or fearing clouds, clothing, or nudity? Or the fear of blushing, trees, or clowns? Or the fear of puppets, body odor, or wealth? What of the fear of dolls, growing bald, or the moon? Or the fear of clocks or stars or books? Arachibutyrophobia is the fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth. Could one reasonably justify even moderate worry about these things? To fear beautiful women is to suffer from caliginophobia. The fear of hearing good news is euphobia. Geliophobes fear laughter. Hedonophobes fear feeling pleasure. Ideophobes fear ideas. Pantophobes fear everything. The fear of fear itself is phobophobia.

How common are phobias? “[P]hobias are the most common psychiatric illness among women and the second most common among men. The National Institute of Mental Health suggests that phobias affect approximately 10% of U.S. adults each year. These phobias typically

emerge during childhood or adolescence and continue into adulthood. They also impact twice as many women as they do men.”<sup>3</sup>

There are a number of explanations for why phobias develop, including evolutionary and behavioral theories. Phobias lead to marked fear and symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, and breathlessness. In some cases, these symptoms escalate into a full-blown panic attack.

Which phobias are the most common? The top ten appear to be arachnophobia (spiders and arachnids), ophidiophobia (snakes), acrophobia (heights), aerophobia (flying), cynophobia (dogs), astraphobia (thunder and lightning), trypanophobia (injections), sociophobia (social situations), agoraphobia (open or crowded spaces), and mysophobia (germs or contamination). One source reports that the fear of arachnids affects women four times more than it does men (48 percent of women and twelve percent of men). Another source reports that Arachnophobia affects as many as one in three women and one in four men. So why are so many people terrified of arachnids? While there are an estimated 35,000 different spider species, only about a dozen pose any type of real threat to humans. A common explanation for this and other animal phobias is that arachnids, insects, snakes, and the like once posed a considerable threat to our ancestors who lacked the medical knowledge and technological tools to treat bites from animals and insects. Thus, evolution contributed to predisposition to fear these animals and insects.

Ophidiophobia (the fear of snakes) is quite common. It is variously attributed to evolutionary causes, cultural influences, and personal experiences. Very few people who fear snakes have ever been bitten by one. “Another theory suggests that the fear of snakes and similar animals might arise from an inherent fear of disease and contamination. Studies have shown that these animals tend to provoke a disgust response, which might explain why snake phobias are so

common yet people tend not to exhibit similar phobias of dangerous animals such as lions or bears.”<sup>4</sup>

Acrophobia (the fear of heights) afflicts more than 6% of people. Aerophobia (the fear of flying) affects between 10% and 40% of U.S. adults despite how exceedingly rare airplane accidents are. Trembling, rapid heartbeat, and feeling disoriented are common symptoms of aerophobia.

Another very common phobia is cynophobia, the irrational and excessive fear of dogs. It is often associated with a specific personal experience, like being bitten by a dog as a child. Such traumatic experiences can produce fear responses that remain into adulthood. Cyanophobes often struggle to walk through an area with a dog.

Astraphobia is the fear of thunder and lightning. Astraphobes are very preoccupied monitoring local and national forecasts. During a storm they may seek shelter in a bathroom, in a closet, or under a bed. In some instances, astraphobes may behave like agoraphobes when their fear of encountering lightning or thunder makes them unable to leave home.

Trypanophobia (the fear of injections) is a condition that can prevent people from getting medical treatment or seeing doctors (iatrophobia). 20% to 30% of adults are estimated to suffer from trypanophobia. Sociophobia (the fear of social situations), also known as Social Anxiety Disorder, often includes fear of being watched (scopophobia) or humiliated in front of others. The most common form of sociophobia is glossophobia (the fear of public speaking).

Agoraphobia is characterized by a fear of being alone in a situation in which escape may be difficult. This type of phobia may include the fear of crowded areas or open spaces. It is typical for agoraphobia to manifest between a person’s late-adolescence and mid-thirties. Two-thirds of agoraphobes are women.

Those who suffer from mysophobia excessively fear germs and dirt. This phobia can drive people to compulsive hand-washing, obsessive cleaning, and avoiding places perceived to be dirty, such as offices, schools, pharmacies, and airplanes. Mysophobes often avoid physical contact with others.

We might be tempted to think that our own phobias are reasonable, whereas the phobias of other people are kind of silly. This temptation to discount the seriousness of phobias that we don't share with others is probably stronger in the case of especially exotic phobias. But we should remember that phobias are serious problems for those afflicted by them. Phobias are debilitating because they ruin our capacity to travel about, engage in activities, and conduct our lives with a feeling of safety.

How did the Stoics conceive of phobias? First, the Stoics distinguished between the immediate involuntary physiological response to the appearance of an unwelcome thing and the voluntary, deliberate cognitive judgment that that unwelcome thing is dangerous and bad. The former the Stoics called *propatheia*, 'pre-emotions' or 'proto-passions.' Examples include being startled and flinching when hearing a sudden loud and unexpected noise. Shivering when sprinkled with cold water, the feeling of disgust when touching something slimy, the feeling of vertigo caused by heights, hair bristling upon hearing bad news, and blushing at obscene language are other examples Seneca gives of pre-emotions. Since these physiological responses happen without our consent, we are not responsible for them, according to the Stoics.

But after these proto-passions occur, it is up to us whether we judge the presence of the unwelcome thing as bad. If we have a few moments to think about it, and then we voluntarily decide that the unwelcome thing is truly bad, then we experience real fear. But the Stoics insist that a real fear response is the result of a mental judgment we make consciously. We control our

power of assent to the proposition, for example, that ‘This slimy thing is truly bad and truly scary.’ If we don’t assent to this proposition, then we won’t be afraid. Thus, the Stoics conceive of fear as the consequence of a voluntary cognitive act, not an involuntary physiological reaction.

The most commonly used therapeutic treatment for phobias is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Phobias can be minimized and even eliminated with CBT. The basic idea of CBT originated with the ancient Stoics. What did the ancient Stoics regard as the most popular and most troubling fear? Unsurprisingly, it is the fear death. Most people today, I suspect, believe that the fear of death—called thanatophobia—is reasonable and justified. To evaluate this belief it is useful to understand the top ten causes of death.

## 2. The Top Ten Causes of Death

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that in the U.S. in 2019, the leading causes of death were, in ranked order, heart disease, cancer, accidents, chronic lower respiratory diseases, stroke, Alzheimer’s disease, diabetes, nephritis (and nephrotic syndrome and nephrosis), influenza and pneumonia, and suicide.<sup>5</sup> Suicides outnumbered motor vehicle deaths,<sup>6</sup> which outnumbered homicides.<sup>7</sup>

Leading causes of death in the U.S. in 2019

Cause of death	Deaths
Heart disease	659,041
Cancer	599,601
Accidents (unintentional injuries)	173,040
Chronic lower respiratory diseases	156,979
Stroke (cerebrovascular diseases)	150,005
Alzheimer’s disease	121,499
Diabetes	87,647
Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome, and nephrosis	51,565
Influenza and pneumonia	49,783
Intentional self-harm (suicide)	47,511
Motor vehicle deaths	36,120
Homicides	19,141

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that in 2012 the top ten causes of death worldwide were ischemic heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lower respiratory infections, lung, trachea, and bronchus cancers, HIV/AIDS, diarrheal diseases, diabetes mellitus, road injuries and car crashes, and hypertensive heart disease.<sup>8</sup>

Top ten causes of death worldwide in 2012 — WHO

Cause of death	Deaths in millions
Ischemic heart disease	7.4
Stroke	6.7
Chronic pulmonary disease	3.1
Lower respiratory infections	3.1
Lung, trachea, and bronchus cancers	1.6
HIV/AIDS	1.5
Diarrheal diseases	1.5
Diabetes mellitus	1.5
Road injuries and car crashes	1.3
Hypertensive heart disease	1.1

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that about 805 million people of the 7.3 billion people in the world, or one in nine, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in the years 2012 to 2014. The vast majority of these hungry people live in developing regions. Approximately 3.1 million children die from hunger yearly.<sup>9</sup> The WHO estimates that there were 627,000 malaria deaths worldwide in 2012, making mosquitos, which also carry the viral infection dengue, the most dangerous animal in the world.<sup>10</sup>

2014 Causes of Death in the U.S.<sup>11</sup>

Causes of death	Rank	Deaths	Percent of total deaths
All causes	--	2,626,418	100.0
Diseases of heart	1	614,348	23.4
Malignant neoplasms	2	591,699	22.5
Chronic lower respiratory diseases	3	147,101	5.6
Accidents (unintentional injuries)	4	136,053	5.2

Cerebrovascular diseases	5	133,103	5.1
Alzheimer's disease	6	93,541	3.6
Diabetes mellitus	7	76,488	2.9
Influenza and pneumonia	8	55,227	2.1
Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome and nephrosis	9	48,146	1.8
Intentional self-harm (suicide)	10	42,773	1.6
Firearms (inside U.S.)	--	33,599	--
Terrorism (inside U.S. and abroad)	--	32	--

In 2014, motor-vehicle traffic-related injuries resulted in 33,736 deaths, accounting for 16.9% of all accidental deaths. Thus, given the statistical facts and brute probabilities, on purely rational grounds, there is far, far greater justification for amaxophobia—the fear of riding in a car—than for fear of a terrorist attack.

### 3. Terrorism, Guns, and Hurricanes by the Numbers

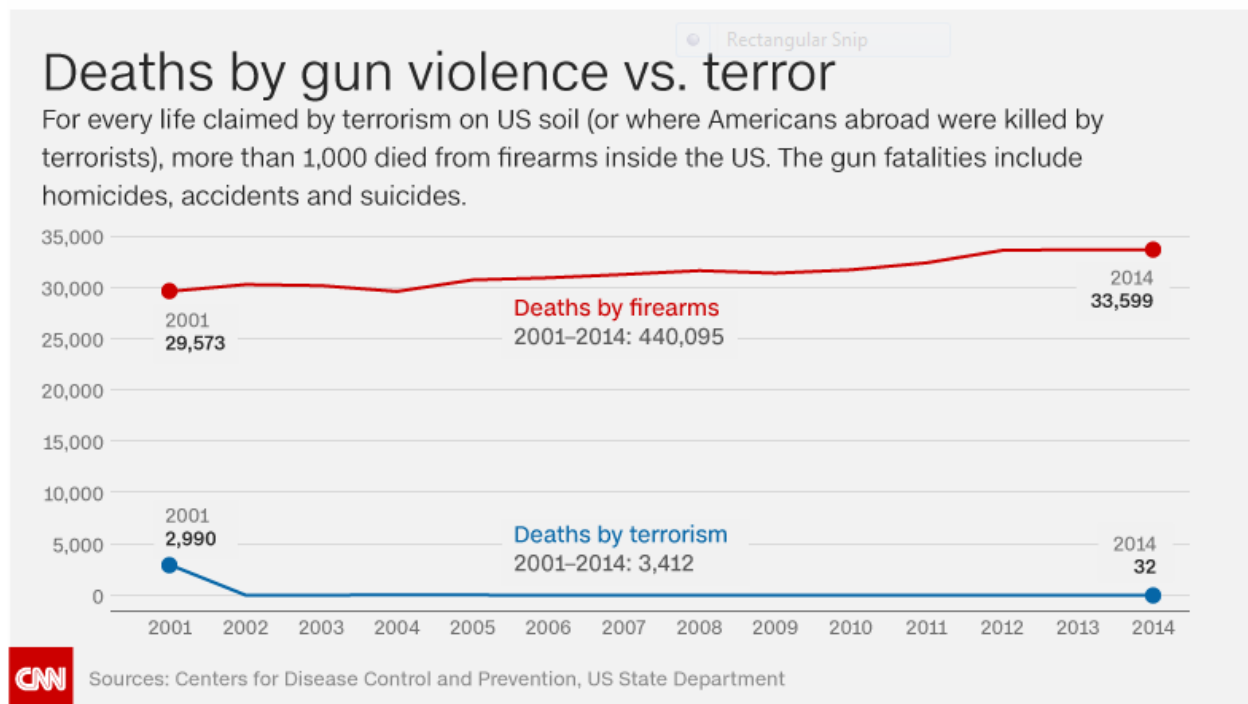
That brings us to terrorism.<sup>12</sup> According to the Centre for Research on Globalization, the number of Americans who died worldwide in terrorist attacks in 2013 was eight, whereas the number who died after being struck by lightning was twenty-nine.<sup>13</sup> This source asserts that the U.S. State Department reports that in 2011 only seventeen U.S. citizens were fatal victims of terrorism worldwide, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, and all other theaters of war. The Canadian Global Research Centre calculates that Americans are more than 35,079 times more likely to die from heart disease, 33,842 times more likely to die from cancer, and 4,706 times more likely to die from excessive use of alcohol than from a terrorist attack.

In an Oct. 3, 2016 article CNN compares the number of Americans killed by acts of terrorism to the number of Americans killed by gun violence. Consider the year 2014. For every single American killed by an act of terror in the United States or abroad in 2014, more than 1,049 were killed by a gun. Now consider the period from 2001 to 2014. Using numbers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CNN found that from 2001 to 2014, 440,095 people died by



firearms on US soil. This data covered all manners of death, including homicide, accident, and suicide.

How does that compare to deaths resulting from acts of terrorism? According to the U.S. State Department, the number of US citizens killed *overseas* as a result of incidents of terrorism from 2001 to 2014 was 369. *Inside* the United States CNN found that, between 2001 and 2014, 3,043 people were killed in domestic acts of terrorism. This brings the total to 3,412.



This graph clearly suggests that widescale measures to reduce firearm violence is a far more urgent goal for saving lives than strategizing about reducing the chances of terrorist attacks. I am in no way minimizing the seriousness of terrorist attacks or the damage they cause, including PTSD, for example.<sup>14</sup> I am simply making an empirical observation about the greater prevalence of violence and death from firearms than deaths resulting from acts of terrorism.

The U.S. State Department Bureau of Counterterrorism compiled statistics displaying terrorism related deaths, injuries, and kidnappings of private U.S. citizens from 2010 through

2015. Over these six years, the average number of deaths related to terrorism is seventeen, with as few as ten in 2012 and as many as 24 in 2014. The number of injuries related to terrorism during this period is also remarkably low and quite steady—averaging 10.33 per year.

Kidnappings related to terrorism are even less common.

What about other causes of death? Consider hurricanes. *The New York Times* reported on September 1, 2017 that Hurricane Harvey had caused 1,833 deaths. Harvey was far more lethal than all the terrorist attacks worldwide combined over 2016 and 2017. Hurricane Irma was the most powerful hurricane ever recorded in the open Atlantic Ocean. Irma killed between 70 and 80 people in the Caribbean and the southeastern U.S. The death toll in Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria is disputed. Estimates range from 45 to more than 450.<sup>15</sup> Hurricane Katrina was responsible for 1,836 fatalities in 2005.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the direct and indirect deaths due to hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria in 2017 exceed the 2,996 lives lost in the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.<sup>17</sup>

Politicians are notorious for manipulating voters by using rhetoric that plays on their fears. Media sources routinely report bombings and mass shootings while pundits debate whether each attack is an act of terrorism or not. But the most common causes of death receive very little notice by major media outlets. Easy-to-find statistics correct such a distorted accounting of the relative risks of fatality in North America.

#### **4. Replacing Fear with Caution**

Are Stoics free of all phobias? Interestingly, the great Stoic teacher Epictetus was not. He suffered from thalassophobia, fear of the sea.

Whenever I go to sea, as soon as I gaze down into the depths or look at the waters around me and see no land, I am beside myself, and imagine that if I am wrecked I

must swallow all that sea; nor does it once occur to me that three pints are enough.<sup>18</sup>  
(*Discourses* 2.16.22)

He also imagines an earthquake causing the entire city to crash down on him, but then pauses to calmly reflect that one little stone would be enough to knock his brains out (*Disc.* 2.16.23). What causes emotional alarm is not the sea or the earthquake but one's judgment that one will be permanently separated from one's companions, familiar places, and social relations coupled with the false judgment that such separation is evil. To the contrary, Epictetus argues that it does not matter whether one dies by accident, by human agency, or even by being frightened by a mouse. The same thing, death, results from all these many causes, so he reasons that no cause of death is scarier than any other.

Where is the hardship when something that was born is destroyed? The instrument of destruction is either a sword, or a wheel, or the sea, or a tile, or a tyrant. And what does it matter to you by what way you descend to Hades? All roads are equal. But, if you want to hear the truth, the one that a tyrant sends you along is shorter. No tyrant ever took six months to cut someone's throat, but a fatal fever often lasts a year. All these things are meaningless noise and the boasting of empty names. (*Disc.* 2.6.17-19)

'All roads to death are equal' means that they are all equally indifferent because they all lead to the very same destination. The phrase 'descent to Hades' is simply Epictetus' concession to a popular religious phrase for dying. Stoics reject the possibility of an afterlife.<sup>19</sup> Epictetus defuses the threatening sounding names — decapitation by a sword, being broken on a wheel, etc. — by recasting them as inarticulate noise, mere static hiss from the mouths of non-Stoics who don't understand death. They boast about the horrors of various gruesome executions a tyrant could command, but this is vacuous clamor. All paths to death lead to the same destination, so every manner of death is equally indifferent to a Stoic.

Epictetus thinks that Socrates was wise to call death and all such things that non-Stoics foolishly fear 'bugbears' (*mormolukeia*).

For just as masks seem fearsome and terrible to children because of their inexperience, we are affected in a similar manner by events for much the same reason as children are affected by bugbears. For what is a child? Ignorance. What is a child? Lack of instruction. For where a child has knowledge, he is no worse off than we are. What is death? A bugbear. Turn it around and see what it is. See, it does not bite. (*Disc.* 2.1.15-17)

Stoics have examined death and understand it, and so they fear it no more than adults who have examined Halloween monster masks and see that there is nothing scary behind them.

Death, Stoics believe, is not what motivates shameful deeds. Rather, the *fear* of death drives us to abandon our duties, betray our comrades, and act as cowards in order to save our hides. Epictetus says: “It is not death or pain that is to be feared, but the fear of pain or death” (*Disc.* 2.1.13). In effect, he recommends that we adopt a savvy phobophobia: “If, instead of death or exile, we feared fear itself, we would practice avoiding those things that appear to us to be evil” (*Disc.* 2.16.19). So, Epictetus insists that our confidence should be directed toward death, whereas our caution should focus on the false judgment that death is fearful (*Disc.* 2.1.13-14).

Death cannot rob us of our moral integrity, but fear can when, out of fear, we disgrace ourselves. Epictetus asks his students...

Will you, then, realize that this epitome of all human evils, and of meanness, and of cowardice is not death, but rather the fear of death? Against this, then, discipline yourself, toward this let all your reasonings, your exercises, your readings tend, and you will know that only in this way are human beings liberated. (*Disc.* 3.26.38-39)

Stoics believe that all phobias result from habitually making irrational judgments. Those who fear death fail to fully understand and accept the fact that all living things are mortal. For Stoics, death is nothing tragic, nothing shameful, and so nothing evil (*Disc.* 4.1.42). Death is not dreadful, according to Stoics. Dying shamefully is dreadful. Epictetus thinks that removing the fear of death not only removes the greatest obstacle to a happy life but also simultaneously undermines all lesser fears.

Someone may object that since Stoics think we should try to become totally fearless, this impossible project will lead us to become utterly reckless. This objection is misplaced. Stoics actually advise that the proper mental disposition to maintain when facing dangerous circumstances is *caution*. The Greek word is *eulabeia*. Stoics advise us always to look before leaping. We ought to be circumspect, consider our options, deliberately weigh them, and then finally act with care. This thoughtful wariness involves no worry, anxiety, or fear. So, Stoic fearlessness is about exercising due caution, not being reckless. Moreover, it doesn't matter whether total fearlessness is psychologically impossible. Our goal can be to make progress becoming less fearful over time. This goal is attainable.

I conclude that Stoic thinking about fear can help us in at least three ways. First, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy, both inspired by Stoic exercises, empower us to rid ourselves of specific phobias.<sup>20</sup> Second, knowing some facts about likely causes of death serves to protect us from alarmists whose political rhetoric wildly distorts the dangers of harm from acts of terrorism. Third, knowing some facts about the diseases that are the leading causes of death may inspire us to healthier eating habits, drinking plenty of water, daily exercise, not using tobacco or vaping, not drinking alcohol to excess, managing stress effectively, and getting quality sleep daily.<sup>21</sup> Such knowledge could also move us to work to aid those vulnerable to premature death due to poverty. Stoicism both dispels fallacious appeals to fears about terrorism and sweeps away the phobias that block us from living happily.

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<sup>2</sup> Fredd Culbertson, “The Phobia List,” accessed May 31, 2017, <http://www.phobialist.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Kendra Cherry, medically reviewed by Steven Gans, MD, “Ten of the Most Common Phobias,” updated January 20, 2020, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.verywell.com/most-common-phobias-4136563>.

<sup>4</sup> Cherry, “Common Phobias.” The ensuing discussion of acrophobia, aerophobia, cynophobia, astraphobia, trypanophobia, sociophobia, agoraphobia, and mysophobia derives from this same source.

<sup>5</sup> “Leading Causes of Death,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, last reviewed March 1, 2021, accessed April 21, 2021, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> “Motor vehicle fatality rate in U.S. by year,” Wikipedia.com, last edited April 19, 2021, accessed April 21, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_motor\\_vehicle\\_deaths\\_in\\_U.S.\\_by\\_year](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_motor_vehicle_deaths_in_U.S._by_year).

<sup>7</sup> “Assault or Homicide,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, last reviewed March 1, 2021, accessed April 21, 2021, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/homicide.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> “The Top 10 Causes of Death,” World Health Organization, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs310/en/>.

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<sup>10</sup> See “Dengue and Severe Dengue,” World Health Organization, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs117/en/>.

<sup>11</sup> National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 65, No. 5, June 30, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> See Cynthia Combs, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> “The Terrorism Statistics Every American Needs to Hear,” Global Research Centre, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-terrorism-statistics-every-american-needs-to-hear/5382818>.

<sup>14</sup> See Raymond Flannery, *Coping with Anxiety in an Age of Terrorism* (New York: American Mental Health Foundation, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Eliza Barclay and Alexia Fernández Campbell, “Everything that’s been reported about deaths in Puerto Rico is at odds with the official count,” *Vox*, October 11, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/10/11/16424356/puerto-rico-official-hurricane-maria-death-toll>.

<sup>16</sup> “Hurricane Katrina,” Wikipedia.org, accessed October 11, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane\\_Katrina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina).

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<sup>18</sup> All translation of Epictetus are mine.

<sup>19</sup> See *Disc.* 2.5.12-13 and 4.7.27; 2.9.1-2, 3.1.25-26, 4.1.104; 4.1.105-110; 1.27.7-9; 2.6.11-14; 3.24.94; 3.13.14-15.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Donald Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> During a pandemic, exercising caution includes heeding the advice of public health experts and epidemiologists, wearing the kind of mask they recommend and wearing it the right way, physical distancing, avoiding crowds, handwashing, and getting vaccinated.