

STOICISM: ORIGINS, EVOLUTION, AND RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Stoicism is a Hellenistic philosophy which was founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium around 300 B.C.E. Its focus on reason, self-control, and fortitude provides insightful guidance for negotiating the challenges of modern life. Stoicism has seen a resurgence in modern discourse, especially in disciplines like mindfulness practices, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and resilience training, where its focus on emotional control, logical thinking, and accepting what is out of one's control provides useful strategies for overcoming contemporary obstacles. By examining Stoic principles through critical analysis, this research argues that Stoicism offers a practical framework for the well-being of individuals and society. This research will explore the historical evolution of Stoicism, its core tenets, and its relevance in addressing contemporary societal challenges, including mental health, ethical decision-making, as well as social resilience.

Keywords: Stoicism, Ancient philosophy, Ethics, Hellenistic period.

INTRODUCTION

Ancient philosophies frequently provide valuable insights for negotiating the complexity of human existence in an era characterised by rapid change, widespread fear, and an endless flow of information. A particularly prominent and robust school of thought among the ancient philosophies is Stoicism. Stoicism, which flourished in the Roman Empire, originated in ancient Greece. It offers a thorough framework for moral behaviour, emotional fortitude, and the search for inner peace. Its practical application, which provides resources for people to develop virtue, deal with adversity, challenges, and find purpose in the face of life's unavoidable obstacles, makes it an enduring legacy. This essay seeks to offer a critical analysis of Stoicism by tracing its roots in the Hellenistic era, outlining its important advancements throughout the Roman Imperial era, and evaluating its complex applicability in modern philosophy. This examination will show how Stoicism remains a strong and practical philosophy for psychological well-being, moral decision-making, and personal flourishing in the twenty-first century by examining its fundamental ideas and their historical development.

HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF STOICISM: HELLENISTIC FOUNDATIONS

Stoicism is one of the dominant schools of thought in the Hellenistic period. Stoicism was derived from the Greek words "*stoa poikile*," meaning "a painted porch." *Stoa* means "porch." Zeno and his disciples were said to have taught their ideas from the painted porch at the marketplace. After Alexander the Great's conquests, this era, known as the Hellenistic period, saw the breakdown of the traditional institutions and structures of the city-state institutions and the rise of a new focus on universal individual well-being and universal citizenship. Several

philosophical traditions, which include Epicureanism, Scepticism, and Stoicism, attempted to offer guidance on how to lead a moral life in this era of political unrest and cultural fusion.

Early Stoicism, often referred to as the Old Stoa, was systematically developed by Zeno's successors, most notably Cleanthes (c. 331–232 BCE) and Chrysippus (c. 280–207 BCE).

In particular, Chrysippus was known as the “Second founder” of Stoicism because of his extensive writings and mastery of logic. He is credited with organizing Stoic philosophy into three interrelated fields of ethics, physics and logic.

- **Logic:** For the Stoics, logic was an essential instrument for determining truth and avoiding error, not just an abstract discipline. It included dialectic, grammar, rhetoric, and epistemology (the study of knowledge). Since the Stoics held that rational and clear thinking was necessary for both comprehending the world and leading a moral life, they constructed complex theories of propositions, arguments, and fallacies. Their focus on consent and impressions prepared the way for later conceptions of cognition.
- **Physics:** Stoic physics maintained that matter made up the entire universe, including the soul. It was a type of materialistic monism. They held that the universe was organised and permeated by a logical, active element known as the Logos, or divine reason. The logos, which was identified with God, fate and nature, implied a deterministic nature of the universe in which events occur according to a rational plan. The Stoics believed that since living "according to nature" required coordinating one's will with the universal reason, an understanding of this natural order was essential to Stoic ethics.
- **Ethics:** Eudaimonia, or human flourishing, attained by leading a life of virtue (aretē), was the ultimate goal of Stoic philosophy. The Stoics believed that vice was the only evil and virtue the only good.

Everything else was viewed as adiaphora, or indifferent, with no inherent moral value, including riches, reputation, health, suffering, and poverty. Some indifferents were "preferred"; for instance, health is preferred over illness, but virtue should never be sacrificed in the name of pursuing them. This emphasis on internal moral excellence, regardless of external conditions, formed the foundation of Stoic ethical practice. The four cardinal virtues—temperance, justice, courage, and wisdom—were viewed as interrelated aspects of this one good. By highlighting the connections between logic, physics, and ethics and proposing virtue as the highest human good that may be attained via reason and harmony with the natural order, the Old Stoa laid the foundational ideas that would characterise Stoicism.

STOICISM'S EVOLUTION: THE ROMAN IMPERIAL PERIOD

Stoicism's emphasis changed when it moved from the Greek-speaking world to the Roman Empire, focusing more on practical ethics and the application of philosophical ideas to everyday life rather than on theoretical physics and logic. Some of the most significant and extensively read Stoic thinkers came from this era, which is sometimes called the New Stoa or Roman Stoicism.

- **Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BCE – 65 CE):** Seneca was a well-known statesman, playwright, and advisor to Emperor Nero. His works are distinguished for their profound psychological insights and elegant prose. He provides helpful guidance on how to deal with wrath, grief, fear, and the pursuit of virtue in his *Letters from a Stoic*

(*Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*) and essays like *On the Shortness of Life* and *On Tranquility of Mind*. His life, which was characterised by great wealth, political influence, and forced suicide, offers a complex testament to the difficulties of upholding Stoic ideals in a corrupt society.

- **Epictetus (c. 50–135 CE):** Epictetus, born a slave in Hierapolis (now Turkey), eventually gained his freedom and became a revered Stoic teacher in Rome. His teachings, preserved by his student Arrian in the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion* are practical and direct guides on his ideas. Central to Epictetus' thoughts is the dichotomy of control; distinguishing between what we can control, such as our opinions, impulses, desires, aversions and things that are not within our power, such as body, possessions, reputation, and external events. He maintained that the only way to truly achieve freedom and happiness, in other words, the only way we can truly be free and happy, is to accept everything else with composure and concentrate only on the things we can control, such as our opinions and responses. His ideas are a powerful call to moral autonomy and radical self-sufficiency.
- **Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE):** The last of the Five Good Emperors of Rome, Marcus Aurelius is arguably the most prominent Stoic. In his *Meditations*, a collection of personal reflections and philosophical exercises written for his own guidance, he offers a unique view into the thoughts of a Stoic ruler. His writings revealed a man who, in the face of the tremendous demands of running an empire, commanding armies, and suffering personal grief, is always trying to live according to Stoic principles. Marcus's meditations focused on duty, humility, the transient nature of existence, the interdependence of all things, and the significance of preserving inner serenity in the face of external chaos. His writings are a powerful example of how stoicism may be applied in real-world settings at the highest levels of authority.

Stoicism was transformed by the Roman Stoics from an academic system to a very personalised and useful manual for daily life. They concentrated on honing the moral precepts so that everyone, regardless of their status, could understand and apply them to their daily challenges. The emphasis on character development and emotional fortitude makes Stoicism made it a timeless philosophy. Marcus believed that all humans have the same status; they are citizens of the world and none is superior to the other. No culture is above or sophisticated than the other. All humans are fellow citizens of the world; this idea is known as cosmopolitanism, meaning citizens of the cosmos (Robertson 2022). Marcus opines that anger or hatred should be avoided towards anyone, and this includes one's enemies (Robertson 2022).

CORE PRINCIPLES OF STOICISM

Although Stoicism evolved over centuries, there are certain core principles that remained consistent. These core principles are the bedrock of its philosophical system. They offer a coherent approach to life, emphasising reason, virtue, and harmony with nature.

Virtue as the only good

The idea of virtue is a central concept in Stoic thought. For the Stoics, the only good thing is virtue, and the only evil is vice. All other things, such as health, wealth, poverty, pleasure, pain and so on, are considered amoral. In other words, they hold no moral value. The Stoics referred to the amoral things as “adiaphora”, that is ‘indifferents.’ Some indifferents are preferred, but they have no moral worth. For instance, health is preferred over ill-health. The indifferent should, however, never be sought after or avoided if doing so will compromise one's morality.

In other words, a good person can be content even in the worst situations since their happiness is based only on their internal moral status and not on external factors.

The Stoics identified four traditional principles which they derived from Plato's thought. They, however, interpreted these principles differently.

- **Wisdom (Sophia):** The capacity to distinguish between good and bad as well as indifferent. It includes prudential behaviour, sound judgment, and sound decision-making.
- **Courage (Andreia):** Not only physical courage but also moral strength, perseverance in the face of hardship, and the determination to do the right thing even when it is challenging or unpopular.
- **Justice (Dikaiosyne):** Fairness, kindness, and treating people equally are the components of justice. It encompasses one's obligations to all of humanity, embodying the Stoic notion of cosmopolitanism.
- **Temperance (Soprosyne):** Control, restraint, and self-discipline over one's inclinations and cravings. It entails leading a balanced life free from excess.

These virtues together reflect a single state of moral excellence that leads to a consistent and logical method of living; one cannot have one without having the others.

The Control dichotomy

Epictetus is credited with defining the dichotomy of control. According to this doctrine, certain things are within our control and other things are outside our control. In other words, we can control some things but not others. This principle is the most popular and practical principle of the Stoics. Things that are within our power and control include: opinions, judgments, desires, aversions, and actions. These are internal to us and therefore within our control. Things that are outside our control include: our body, reputation, possessions, behaviour of others and external occurrences such as the weather, illness and death.

According to the Stoics, much of human suffering arises from the attempts to control things that are beyond our power. A way out to achieve freedom, calmness and invulnerability is for us to concentrate our attention solely on what we can control; our reactions and decisions. This idea emphasizes personal accountability while promoting acceptance of external realities.

Living in Harmony with Nature (Logos)

In Stoicism, nature has a dual meaning: the universal nature (the rational order of the cosmos, the Logos or divine reason) and human nature (our capacity for reason). Living according to nature means living in accordance with reason within oneself and as it exists in the universe. This implies:

- **Rationality:** Using reason to understand the world, make sound judgements and guide one's actions.
- **Acceptance of fate:** acknowledging that the universe follows a deterministic, rational plan and allowing things to happen naturally. This is an active alignment of one's will with nature's will rather than a passive resignation.
- **Harmony:** This is living in harmony with the natural inclinations of human beings, such as sociality, rationality and the pursuit of virtue. This idea underpins Stoic physics and ethics. It holds that a virtuous life is one which is consistent with the inherent rationality and order of the universe.

Apatheia and Eudaimonia

Although Apatheia is often misunderstood as apathy or emotional suppression, it does not, however, mean that all emotions are suppressed. Instead, it refers to freedom from irrational and disturbing feelings such as excessive fear, grief, anger or desires. These pathē result from incorrect assessments of what is right or wrong. One can eradicate the illogical emotions that lead to sorrow by rectifying these assessments. For example, realising that riches are an indifferent rather than a good. The Stoics made a distinction between pathē and "good feelings" (eupatheiai), which are sensible emotions that result from sound judgments. Examples of these feelings include joy, caution, and wishing.

The ultimate goal for the Stoics is "Eudamonia" or "flourishing." Eudamonia is attained through a constant and consistent practice of virtue and cultivation of apatheia, which leads to a sense of inner calm and contentment that is dependent on external events or circumstances. It is the state in which a rational human being is fully alive and operating at their best.

Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is the belief that all people are members of a single, universal community. The Stoics were among the first Philosophers to express a strong sense of cosmopolitanism. Their idea of cosmopolitanism comes from their doctrine that the universal logos permeates all humans, making them rational and connected. For instance, Marcus Aurelius, a prominent Stoic, reflected on his dual in Rome, his home city and in the "city of the universe." This idea promotes kindness, fairness, and a sense of justice to all of humanity, regardless of race or nationality. Cosmopolitanism laid the groundwork for universal human rights and a global ethical perspective. Cicero argues that, "since reason exists in man and God, the first common possession of man and God is reason. And since right reason is the law, we must believe that men have law also in common. Further, those who share the law must also share justice, and those who share these are to be regarded as members of the same universal commonwealth" (Stupf 1971).

Premeditatio Malorum

Premeditatio malorum, or the premeditation of evils, is a practical exercise that is essential to Stoic thought and practice. This is a deliberate thinking about possible future tragedies such as death, illness, poverty, loss, and public shame. It is not to cause anxiety, but to mentally get ready for them. By visualising these unfortunate events, one can develop an attitude of gratitude to reduce their shock value if they eventually materialise. This exercise aids in internalising the duality of control, reaffirming that one's response is the only thing that matters and that other events are irrelevant. It cultivates resilience and makes one less susceptible to fear.

OBJECTIONS TO STOICISM

Despite its enduring appeal, Stoicism has attracted several criticisms. One of the most common criticisms of Stoic thought borders on the perceived idea of emotion. The Stoic ideal of apatheia, which is sometimes misunderstood as apathy, is criticised for promoting an unhealthy disengagement from normal human emotions such as joy, grief, and rage. The Stoic philosophy of indifference seems unnatural to human beings. For instance, it seems unreasonable to tell a person who is bereaved of a loved one to act with indifference to the situation is ridiculous and can even be termed as immoral. To show how humane humans are, they must show emotions and sensitivity to events around them. In the courtroom, for instance, some criminals are said to have shown no emotion or remorse for crimes committed, which makes them appear even more dangerous to the human community. In *The Therapy of Desire*, Martha Nussbaum argues

that "radical extirpation of the passions" results in a reduced human experience and instead calls for a nuanced interaction with emotions rather than their total elimination (Nussbaum, 1994).

Another challenge with Stoicism is the idea that we should accept things that are outside or beyond our control. Some critics contend that if our primary concern is to focus on internal virtues while letting go of things that seem to be beyond our control, this can lead to passive resignation with regard to societal injustices. Critics argue that this kind of thinking can discourage people from making efforts to advocate for the oppressed and change oppressive regimes. Although Stoics like Seneca did provide guidance on public service, others have argued that the focus on personal inner peace could jeopardise collective efforts to improve society (Nussbaum, 1994).

Another problem with Stoic philosophy has to do with human freedom and moral responsibility. The Stoics argue that human nature is fixed by God according to some already determined plan. If the above is true, we may infer two things: on the one hand, it means that humans are unable to choose their actions. If humans are unable to choose their actions, then we cannot talk of moral responsibility. In other words, we cannot hold people accountable for their actions, nor can we talk of improving or developing one's character. On the other hand, if individuals cannot choose their actions but can only choose how they react to them, this means humans are free and not free at the same time. (Uduigwomen, 2006). Then, the challenge that arises borders on how one can choose one action and not the other. If we can choose how we react, we should be able to make other choices too. And if God rules over everything, it should include our attitudes as well. In other words, if events that happen to us are already determined, our reactions to them should be determined as well.

CONCLUSION

The Stoic thought continues to have an enduring influence in contemporary philosophical discourse, especially in the sub-discipline of ethics. In spite of its criticisms, the Stoic philosophy of indifference can help one to face life's unpredictable challenges. Unchecked emotional reaction to unpalatable situations has resulted in fatalities such as suicide, murder and mental disorder. In contemporary philosophy, Stoicism continues to generate discussions and debates.

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