

BRONSE NM filosofi 2018/19 Matis Brøndbo, Ås vgs

Stoicism in the Modern World

1. **“Take away then aversion from all things which are not in our power, and transfer it to the things contrary to nature which are in our power. (...) If you desire anything which is not in our power, you must be unfortunate..”**

Epictetus (ca AD 55-135), *The Manual: ch.2. Essential Works of Stoicism*. Ed. Moses Hadas. New York: Bantam books, 1965, p. 86.

The quote that you have just read describes and argues for an essential element of the philosophical viewpoint known as stoicism. Specifically, it recommends to the reader that they should stop wishing for things that cannot be achieved and focus their energy elsewhere. Stated simply, we should all try to be happy about the conditions we are living under. This viewpoint was popular during ancient times and is commonly associated with the Romans of the Roman Empire. In that world, which was very different from our modern world, death and suffering were much more common parts of the average person's life. This was true regardless of whether they were a citizen, a soldier, a slave or a politician. In this essay, I will look at the rationale behind and the use of this philosophy in ancient times and attempt to find out whether it is still useful in our modern world. I will also provide examples of criticism against stoicism where this is relevant and discuss this critique.

The philosophical rationale behind stoicism is very sophisticated and logical. Let us say a person has an imperfect life. Their life does not need to be bad, just not entirely perfect. Most likely, there are some ways this person can improve their life, and some conditions they cannot realistically change. Let us also assume this person has a finite amount of energy they could spend solving their problems. With this thought experiment, it quickly becomes apparent that the person would be wise to spend their energy on changing the conditions that are changeable. Anything else would be wasteful; why save up money to buy the Empire State Building when you could save money for something you could actually afford, like an apartment? Stoicism also wants a person to keep their expectations in life low. This is so that they can more easily be happy with what they end up with in life. The argument is that it is better to be pleasantly surprised when things turn out better than expected, than to be let down when events do not transpire in the desired manner.

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Are we, however, absolutely certain that having unrealistic desires does not have any positive effects at all? Daydreamers will point out that imagining realities in which life is more exciting, meaningful or in other ways better than their real life, can be a great source of pleasure. Working towards an unrealistic goal can also provide positive emotion and a sense of meaning to a person's life, if they can sense that they are approaching their aim. This is commonly accepted as fact in psychology today. So, if a goal is unattainable, but still possible to approach in some small way, aiming at it can provide positive emotion. The stoic would probably answer by saying that such positive emotion would be based on falsehoods. If you cannot achieve your goal, you are lying to yourself if you are celebrating taking some steps toward the goal. If you are trying to create a revolution and overthrow the rich people in a stable society where revolution is extremely unlikely, handing out flyers on the street will move you closer to the goal. But, since the goal is practically unattainable, the enjoyment you get out of moving towards the goal is based on *falsely* thinking you are moving closer to the goal. Some people will say this disqualifies this counter-argument, while some may think positive emotion based on a lie is still positive emotion, and therefore intrinsically good.

There were many reasons why stoicism was popular in the ancient world. As stated, living conditions were unbelievably harsh compared to the one we are used to in the 21st century. People needed a way to justify their own existence to themselves. Why be alive, when life is primarily suffering? As the period lacked an officially recognized belief in an afterlife, and beliefs like hedonism were unable to provide a lasting sense of meaning, people needed some other way to be motivated. In some sense, Christianity would come to, among other things, provide exactly the same benefits and motivation to people as stoicism once had done. In addition to this, stoicism was a useful way to make slaves and the lower classes accept their living conditions. Ancient Rome had an intricate class system, with great wealth inequality. By attempting to make the people on the bottom "accept" their position instead of revolting, society could become more stable. Many would say this is another function Christianity would serve when it came to be the dominant religion.

It is exactly because Christianity and stoicism provide many of the same benefits, that stoicism could possibly be useful in the modern world. With Christianity having declined somewhat during the last centuries, other belief systems and organizations should attempt to provide society with some of the benefits that the religion once provided. Even though we admittedly experience *less* suffering today than we did two thousand years ago, most people would likely agree that we have more than enough of it. It is still possible to hold the belief

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that life is primarily suffering in the modern world. The main argument for why we may need stoicism today, is therefore that the rationale behind it is still valid, and that the need for it is opening with the emergence of atheism. It is obviously not necessary for everyone in society to convert to stoicism, but it could be useful to those that find themselves unable to believe in an afterlife.

Unfortunately, one of the main criticisms of stoicism may also still be valid. I touched onto the fact that stoicism can help keep people in line by making them accept awful living conditions. This is criticized because it can be a tool in the toolbox of a tyrant or an oppressing overclass. The idea is that they can trick people into believing that changeable conditions are unchangeable, making the population passive. Maybe the premise that some conditions are unchangeable is fundamentally untrue? Are we not told that all things are possible through hard work and determination? Then, there are no conditions you should just “accept”. Personally, I think that stoicism holds up to this criticism. This is because if stoicism is used to make people believe they should accept conditions that they *can* in fact change, then I do not think the belief is used correctly. A stoic should carefully determine which conditions they can in fact change and which conditions they cannot, and act according to what they have found out. If one still argues this is one of the effects that stoicism *has*, even if it is not the intention of the belief, then I agree that the belief perhaps could use some modification. We could modify it to make sure it includes the emphasis on the need for people to make very careful assertions about the nature of their conditions before they decide whether to attempt to change them. I would say that this is an essential part of a practical stoic’s lifestyle, and that it must be stressed in any description of the stoic viewpoint.

Some people may also criticise stoicism for seeming pessimistic. In some sense this is true, as having low expectations is often an important part of the worldview of a stoic. As I stated earlier, this provides the benefit of never being let down, but only being positively surprised. However, it may still sound dreadful to many people to have to wake up and assume that the day is going to go horribly. Though this is true, isn’t this analysis missing the second part of the picture? Instead of thinking “This day will be terrible”, I think a stoic would wake up and think “This day will be terrible, but I will be fine.” When this last part is added, I think stoicism sounds nearly optimistic. You are, under stoicism, supposed to see the positive sides of every situation, making stoicism partly optimistic in nature. Optimism, may alternatively, be criticized for being too naïve. For these reasons, people often want to avoid being called both an optimist or a pessimist, often preferring to call themselves “realists”. Regardless, if

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stoicism is both optimistic and pessimistic, shouldn't we then criticize it for the same reasons that we criticize optimism and pessimism?

I would say we should not, as I believe stoicism is a middle ground between optimism and pessimism, that combines the best aspects of both worldviews. Let us say the view you have on the world makes no difference on how you act. It only makes you perceive the situations differently. Isn't optimism then better than pessimism, because of the positive emotion it provides, since it no longer causes a person to act naïvely? Scientifically, we know that those who call themselves optimists are more satisfied with life. They also statistically make more money, are healthier and live longer than their pessimistic counterparts. Of course, some of this correlation probably stems from the fact that people who make money and are healthy *become* optimists are a result of their good lives. It may still, however, be safe to assume that the effects go both ways, in a positive feedback loop. By reducing stress, the person becomes healthier, and by increasing energy they become able to work more, for example. You could say that stoicism combines this positive aspect of optimism with the positive aspect of pessimism, which is to expect the worst to avoid being let down. I think that by doing this, stoicism provides the best of both worlds for its advocates.

In this essay I have described the logic behind the ancient worldview known as stoicism. I have talked about some possible reasons for why it was so successful in the ancient world, and what purpose it served. I have then argued that it may still have its place in the modern world, as Christianity is on decline and because the world still has a decent amount of suffering in it. I have looked at one reason for why you might disagree that we should not desire the unachievable. I have also explained why I believe stoicism would be used incorrectly if it was used to hold parts of society down, but also agreed that certain aspects of the belief could be clarified more to make sure this does not happen. I have then talked about why I believe stoicism elegantly combines the positive sides of optimism and pessimism, which is something that is not often pointed out. Through this analysis, I conclude that stoicism may still be valid in the modern world, acting as a good replacement for those who do not believe in the afterlife. Even though there still exists some valid criticism, there aren't much reason for why the philosophy can't be applied as well today as it was in ancient Rome. I find it valuable to be able to accept necessary or unavoidable suffering and would therefore like to see some sort of revival of stoicism. Lastly, I would like to urge any person who is having a bad day to reflect on the well-known proverb that sums up the stoic line of thought nicely; namely that "this, too, shall pass".