Modern Stoicism and the Responsibility for the Global Polis

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Abstract
This article outlines the premises and promises of a modern comeback of Stoicism, particularly the question of reinterpretation of the original doctrine, the contemporary intricacies of the principle of “following nature,” and the foundations that modern Stoicism establishes for global responsibility.

Key words: Stoicism, modern Stoicism, ethics, virtue ethics, political philosophy, cosmopolitanism, responsibility.

There is no doubt today that Stoicism is coming back. The ancient philosophical school established by Zeno and Chrysippus, and immortalized by Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius’ is enjoying its second youth. As Massimo Pigliucci puts it:

The 21st century is seeing yet another revival of virtue ethics in general and of Stoicism in particular. [...] When it comes more specifically to Stoicism, new scholarly works and translations of classics, as well as biographies of prominent Stoiics, keep appearing at a sustained rate. [...] In parallel with the above, Stoicism is, in some sense, returning to its roots as practical philosophy, as the ancient Stoics very clearly meant their system to be primarily of guidance for everyday life, not a theoretical exercise. (Pigliucci, Stoicism)
Just as Pigliucci underscores, what is remarkable about the present boom of interest in Stoicism is that it is not confined to the academia. The enthusiasm for Stoicism is surging among the general public. To this effect testifies the popularity of such books as mentioned Pigliucci’s *How to be a Stoic* (Pigliucci, 2017), *A Guide to The Good Life* by William B. Irvine (Irvine, 2009), *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* by Donald Robertson (Robertson, 2013), or *Sztuka życiową według stoików* by yours truly (Stankiewicz, 2014). These books focus not on the theoretical framework of Stoicism, but on the “philosophy of life” aspect of it. They propound Stoicism as a “life project,” which anyone can set out to pursue in their own life. Such approach dovetails with the original intention of the creators of the school.

This wave of interest in Stoicism is also reflected in and organized by modern technologies and social media in particular. It is not an exaggeration at this point to state that there is a global movement of Stoicism and that the Internet and social media are widely used to advance it. There is the “Modern Stoicism” endeavor, which runs the “Stoicism Today” blog and the annual Stoicon convention, there is the “New Stoa” aka “Stoic Registry” which highlights that it was the first online Stoic community on the Internet (founded in 1996). And there are others. Individual blogs about Stoicism are too plenty to count. Stoicism also has a strong presence in the social media: as of this writing the group “Stoicism Group (Stoic Philosophy)” alone has 36 680 members.

What makes Stoicism so alluring today? On the theoretical level it proposes a neat “third way” between the two dominating ethical paradigms. According to Pigliucci, virtue ethics (and Stoicism as a part of it) constitutes “a viable alternative to the dominant Kantian-deontological and utilitarian-consequentialist approaches” (Pigliucci, *Stoicism*). On the practical level, the boom of interest in Stoicism draws from the perennial fame of Stoicism as a practical and useful tool to combat hardship and adversity. On this account it has been praised a lot, e.g. by Schopenhauer, who claimed that “the highest point to which man can attain by the mere use of his faculty of reason [...] is the ideal represented in the *Stoic sage*” (Schopenhauer, 1966, 86).

The demand for a philosophy of life, particularly for one which makes human prosperity independent from external circumstances and political conditions (just as Stoicism promises) has always been high. It is indeed, one may say, an intrinsic human need. That need is particularly acute in our own turbulent times. Global warming, ISIS, war in Syria, social inequality – the list drags on. Historically, Stoicism has always been seen as a remedy to the hardship of any given time – the same holds for the 21st century. While Stoicism’s approach of clearly distinguishing things within and not within our power may not be the obvious vehicle of leaping progress in attaining the ‘impossible’ (although it can be argued to be a good starting strategy), it
offers a sense of ease of individual’s choices at a time when threats seem to be increasingly beyond our control.

The key question about modern Stoicism is whether Stoicism pursued in the 21st century can be a word-for-word copy of ancient Stoicism or does it require reinterpretation? The aim of this paper is to offer a brief venture into this realm in order to consider whether such reinterpretations are needed and offer an open-ended illustration of some of the aspects of Stoicism which might merit – and have already merited – such new discussion.

It must be emphasized though that there is no agreement on this among the Stoic scholars, authors and activists. Some donot see the necessity for reinterpretation at all, those who see it donot agree on the extent to which it is necessary, and there is virtually no agreement as towhich particular reinterpretation should prevail. This discrepancy is neither worrisome, nor anything new to the Stoic tradition. Stoicism, since its dawn, has always been an open school avoiding straight dogmas and encouraging various interpretations. As the famous passages goes, “Cleanthes and his pupil Chrysippus could not agree in defining the act of walking” (Seneca, 1917-1972, 113.23).

In this pluralistic Stoic world of conflicting interpretations though, the majority assents to a view that some reinterpretation, or at least a debate about the modern specificity of the Stoic principles is required. It needs to be pursued if (i) Stoicism is to prove a practical and useful philosophy of life in the 21st century; and if (ii) the Stoic theoretical framework is to be a meaningful input to the present-day ethical discussions.

What would such reinterpretation of Stoicism involve? Taken verbatim, existing ancient Stoic writings will certainly prove obsolete and inapplicable to contemporary experience. The persistence of the Stoic theme in the Western thought, and its resurgence now, prove its inspirational potential, but going beyond superficial references to Stoic stand in face of adversities requires addressing some serious questions at the ancient doctrine. Lawrence Becker laid foundations for this approach in the opening passages of his landmark book A New Stoicism, by suggesting Stoicism could face up to the challenges of the philosophy and science as they grew since its conception:

It is interesting to try to imagine what might have happened if stoicism had had a continuous twenty-three-hundred-year history; if stoics had had to confront Bacon and Descartes, Newton and Locke, Hobbes and Bentham, Hume and Kant, Darwin and Marx, and the vicissitudes of ethics in the twentieth century. It is reasonable to suppose that stoics would have found a way to reject teleological physics and biology when scientific consensus did; that they would have found ways to hold their own against the attacks on naturalism launched in the modern era. And it is
reasonable to suppose that the sheer variety of self-identified stoics over the centuries would have prevented, as it did in antiquity, the view that a stoic life is typically a bleak one (Becker, 1998, 6).

In this landscape of reinterpretation one particularly important problem is “nature.” “Nature,” the principle of “following nature,” and the ideathat, in the words of Marcus Aurelius, “nothing harmful is in accordance with nature” (Marcus Aurelius, 2006, 2.17) were cornerstones of the Stoic system.

Yet, there are serious doubts as to whether “nature” can constitute a valid and reliable source for ethics in the 21st century. A number of reasons for that could be explored. Most evidently, due to the pressure from scientific discourses the teleological view of nature has come to be seen today as more irrational or even mystical than the original Stoics conceived it. The arrival and establishment of a Darwinian world view further diminished the possibilities for modern faith in teleology. Therefore, while the phrase (and concept) of “accordance with nature” must have seemed quite self-evident for Marcus (and other ancient Stoics), this self-evidence has faded out over the centuries, i.e. in the 21st century it is anything but clear what “nature” and “accordance with nature” mean. If anything, “nature” today is much more malleable than it was in the world of the ancient Stoics. This means not only that it has never been less clear what “accordance with nature” should mean as an ethical guideline, but also that the idea of “following nature” may be (and has already been) distorted for clearly unethical purposes.

In light of these reservations modern Stoics may be led to seek a fresh interpretation for “nature.” Various options are available here. “Following nature” might be interpreted as “following reason”, or as “following facts.” Lawrence Becker espouses the latter:

Following nature means following the facts. It means getting the facts about the physical and social world we inhabit, and the facts about our situation in it - our own powers, relationships, limitations, possibilities, motives, intentions, and endeavors - before we deliberate about normative matters. It means facing those facts - accepting them for exactly what they are, no more and no less - before we draw normative conclusions from them. It means doing ethics from the facts - constructing normative propositions a posteriori (Becker, 1998, 43).

Becker’s positivist notion of nature as facts is very compelling. Carefully treading a posteriori of what to our best knowledge at a given time is facts is a fantastic reformulation of the classic Stoic doctrine. The only charge that can perhaps be laid against this approach is that it deprives the Stoic argument ad naturam of its grander impact as projecting a certain notion of essence. And there is an aspiration to adhere to a certain essence of the cosmos implied in the
ancient understanding of what it means to follow nature. Another line of reasoning on the subject then, one that is not necessarily contradictory to Becker’s, but which produces a different type of rhetoric, is that “following nature” in general should be translated into following our very own human nature. In other words, the modern problems with faith in orderliness and predetermination of the cosmic nature should shift our attention from the universal scale to our own exclusively human domain. “Following nature” would thus mean commitment to actualizing our individual potential in conformity with human nature, as opposed to the particular natures of other non-human animals.

This line of reasoning in turn opens us to a major problem of course: what is human nature? What pattern of thought and way of conduct is consistent with it? The debate of what “human nature” entails is indeed a huge one – it has to deal with all the innumerable human capacities and liabilities, universalities and particulars alike. The matter is perennial: more than complex and unclear.

One such aspect of human nature that merits a contemporary discussion is human sociality. It may even seem tempting to hinge human nature as a Stoic directive on sociality. It can after all be argued that regardless of the specific features ascribed to human nature, one can still safely assert that human nature is social. Certainly, “homo est animal sociale” is not a novelty in philosophy and it is indeed not novel in Stoicism. The concept that human nature is social has always been a part of the Stoic doctrine. The Stoics asserted that multiple times and in multiple ways. In the words of Marcus Aurelius:

Rational beings are here to serve each other (Marcus Aurelius, 2006, 7.55).

We are born above all for the sake of each other (Marcus Aurelius, 2006, 8.56).

For a rational nature the right path is to [...] direct its impulses solely to social action (Marcus Aurelius, 2006, 8.7).

How does this play out in modern Stoicism? The reasoning I propose is as follows. The previously mentioned reasons to doubt the ethical validity of nature hold. Yet, the commonality of human nature, or, to put it in more psycho-evolutionary terms, the realization that Homo sapiens is a gregarious species can transcend these doubts. The focus on our shared social nature may serve both as a sound reinterpretation of what “nature” means in modern Stoicism and as a grounding for global responsibility. Moreover, it is a response to a view of Stoicism as inviting egotism, a focus on individual things within our power and not within it,
translating solely to individual do’s and don’ts. Accepting sociality as an undeniable part of human nature, that cannot be removed from human experience without a deep interference into what it means to be human, is what opens up Stoicism to others and forces it to acknowledge the necessity to explore the communitarian aspect of life in one way or another. The line of reasoning I am laying out here takes up on Stoicism’s contemporary appeal as a matrix for individual ethical decisions and opinions based on distinguishing what is and not what is not within our power, but it invites current Stoicism aficionados to explore the doctrine’s further consequences within the contemporary ethical realm.

Stoicism, if read this way, may serve as a good reminder about the need for universal, human solidarity. Naturally, this is in line with the original premises of the ancient Stoics who were the proponents of cosmopolitanism (arguably for the first time in the course of history of Western thought), i.e. a view that the only existing (strong version), or the most interesting (weak version) identity of a human being is their citizenship in the global polis of humankind. The metaphysical grounding for this was that all humans share the same participation in the divine-Logos (which the ancient Stoics conceptualized as a cosmic principle of fire, including a cyclical full destruction and rebirth) and that this participation dwarfs all other possible and specific traits a human being can have. It matters that humans take part in the divine-Logos, thus it does not matter that humans differ in the contingences of birth, skin color, wealth, ethnicity and gender.

On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that Stoicism does not prescribe any particular job, trade or profession for their adherents. Quite the contrary: there is a wide diversity of particular ways of life that a Stoic can follow, as long as her actions remain conformable to the Stoic principles of conduct. As Becker puts it:

It is important here, however, to quash the thought that the good life [i.e. stoic life – P.S.] we have in mind is in some disappointing way uniform; that it is, for example, always going to turn out to be a contemplative life suspiciously like a philosopher’s. Not so. The stoics of antiquity were as diverse as plebeians and aristocrats, rhetoricians and physicians, career soldiers and career poets, apolitical logicians and political advisers, slaves and emperors. And while modernity has narrowed that range (and postmodernity, for all its flash and fury, has done nothing to reverse the trend), such narrowing is a local phenomenon. In principle, the diversity of possible stoic lives - and the lives of stoic sages - is very great (Becker, 1998, 21).

This “diversity of possible stoic lives” may sound normatively void (Stoicism does not compel its followers into any specific course of action), but it may also be read as an escape from
the escape from responsibility (every individual needs to make autonomous decision and take responsibility for their course of action).

This begs another question: is this latitude for choice indefinite? Where is the boundary? And here is the point. The limitations for this latitude, the boundary condition which narrows the Stoic paths to choose from is constituted by the commitment to the community, here understood not as any kind of locality, but as a social world. The boundary of *polis* is the boundary of the stoic world.

In other words, care and commitment for the interest of *polis* might be interpreted as the criterion for what is and what is not agreeable with Stoicism. Stoicism allows a plethora of specific ways, “rhetoricians and physicians, career soldiers and career poets, apolitical logicians and political advisers, slaves and emperors,” (Becker, 1998, 21) but it prohibits the ways which are not beneficial to the interest of *polis*. This produces a concrete criterion to discriminate stoic behavior from nonstoic, and it constitutes Stoicism as a ground for responsibility for the global *polis*.

The presented line of argument strengthens the position of Stoicism as not only an inspirational philosophy for strengthening the individual, not only as a system of preparation for inevitable hardships of life, not only as a coherent framework for establishing one’s particular values and goals, but also as an umbrella philosophy for human solidarity.

What is the possible weakness of this reasoning?

The main weak spot consists in that it rests on the assumption that the particular trait of being social is categorically different from all other traits characterizing human nature. Human beings possess all sorts of attributes: we are capable of language, we are not able to run faster than 30 mph, we are social, bipedal etc. In the reasoning presented above the attribute “social” stands out—it belongs to a different order of discourse than others. In a bit stronger version, the attribute “social” does not merely stand out but is different in essence. Our ability (or lack thereof) to run at a certain speed, the color of our skin, and the language we speak are basically contingencies, while the attribute “social” is posited as the hard, deep “ontological” reality of human nature.

This criticism might be further developed, possibly using the psycho-evolutionary approach in which all traits of human nature—all those mentioned skin colors, pedalisms and velocities—are on a par with each other, since they are all equally products of Darwinian evolution. On this take, the social aspect of human nature is just like any other and there is no reason for it to be treated differently.

On the other hand, there is solid ground to claim that the trait “social” holds a distinguished position among the available characteristics that can be attributed to human
nature. That distinguished position is in accord with many traditions of philosophical thought. To say the least, the very existence of certain branches of knowledge testifies to it: there is sociology, there is social philosophy, and there is political science, while there is no distinct discipline of philosophy to study human bipedalism, or the fact that no one runs faster than 30 mph.

A closer study of this problem merits another study. As usually happens in philosophy, the definite solution may be impossible to fetch. And yet, the very possibility of stating this problem as presented above allows Stoicism to constitute a meaningful footing for the responsibility for global polis.
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