

Popular Stoicism in the Face of Social Uncertainty

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Abstract: The article discusses popular Stoicism (a modern, simplified, and often commercialized version of ancient Stoicism), which is offered as an answer to the uncertainty of modernity. The financial, political, climate, and health crises have been detrimental to the sense of agency and control over one's life, leading individuals to seek ways of (subjectively) regaining it. Popular Stoicism can be viewed as an expert system providing individuals with a specific vision of happiness and the good life, in addition to offering practical knowledge on how to define an area of individual agency by negotiating the boundaries between that which is within one's power and that which is not. Reflections begin with a juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary Stoicism, focusing on their different socio-cultural origins, followed by a synthesis of the principles of ancient Stoicism on happiness and the good life and a detailed interpretation of the 'offering' of popular Stoicism in the relevant areas. In the latter context, two chosen Stoic exercises (necessary to achieve happiness and the good life) are discussed—the ability to recognize what things depend/do not depend on us and Stoic emotion work. The practices and techniques recommended as a part of constant work on oneself are also supposed to teach individuals to adapt to their unstable reality. As a result, the popular version of Stoicism perpetuates the mechanisms of the culture of individualism, which holds the individual fully responsible for their life, and the therapeutic and counseling culture (based on one's readiness to constantly self-improve), which is a new form of disciplining in a neoliberal society. Both are important elements of the everyday life and lifestyle of the middle class. This class is interested in self-fulfillment and is the primary target audience of contemporary Stoic handbooks. The consideration is based on fragments of books on popular Stoicism, mainly written by Polish philosophers, subjected to qualitative content analysis.

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According to numerous theorists and researchers, late modernity is characterized, among others, by processes of social acceleration, which evoke the feeling of alienation (see: Rosa 2013; 2020), recurring economic crises affecting local economies and global networks, exacerbating climate changes, and transformations of capitalism that no longer is 'only' increasingly more expansive and competition-oriented but is also becoming a surveillance capitalism (see: Zuboff 2020). My intention here is not to assess the degree to which these diagnoses aptly describe our reality, and I will also refrain from reconstructing arguments in favor of such beliefs or their counter-discourses.

Among many consequences of the aforementioned phenomena, one merits special attention—uncertainty that should be viewed as the instability and unpredictability of the social order,¹ which, in turn, leads to the collapse of ontological security² (Giddens 1990; 1991). The loss of faith in the immutability of the rules of social life has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the currently ongoing war in Ukraine, so much so that it has become a structural element of individual experience (see: Blokker and Vieten 2022:1). As demonstrated by research conducted during the pandemic, the more an individual realizes how everyday life has become unstable, the stronger their need to regain

¹ Uncertainty manifests itself in many aspects of individual life influencing each other, the most noticeable of which include: material (decreased or lost income, and thus the inability to maintain a constant budget), professional (loss of employment or the possibility of workplace closure, reduction of hours worked, precarity), as well as emotional and health-related (mental health disorders in various age groups, increased rates of somatic disorders).

² Ontological security is “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens 1990:66); it relies on people’s ability to give meaning to their lives.

cognitive control (Drozdowski et al. 2020). A consequence of the pandemic—one that is relevant to this analysis—is an opportunity for the entrenchment of dominant therapeutic and counseling discourses. According to Marek Krajewski and Małgorzata Kubacka (2020:72 [trans. RD]), “the pandemic could enforce and legitimize the symbolic power of certain groups (coaches, psychologists, personal trainers, etc.), rendering their knowledge even more vital to attaining the good life.” The idea of the good life mentioned by the authors, together with the related discourses of happiness and high quality of life, determine an individual’s goals and lend direction to their actions. Considering the deepening sense of uncertainty, those ideas also become problematic. When faced with the phenomena described above, living a satisfying and fulfilled life is rendered difficult. As a result, individuals seek solutions that enable them to develop a sense of being able to influence reality and regain control of their lives (which is vital to one’s subjective sense of well-being). One such solution involves ‘testing’ the models of the good life offered by the consumerist culture of capitalism. That is because such situations generate demand for knowledge, the sources of which include the various expert systems (see: Giddens 1990; 1991). Philip Rieff (1966) stated that when normative control weakens, an increase can be observed in the demand for expert advice, and the chief problem for individuals is improving themselves. From this point of view, an example of an expert system appears to be Stoicism, which is becoming increasingly popular³ and has been described by a certain

³ During the pandemic, the popularity of Stoicism has grown in the UK. According to Penguin Random House, print sales of *Meditations* are up 28% for the first quarter of 2020 vs. 2019, while print sales of *Letters from a Stoic* are up 42% for the same period. The sales of *Meditations* have been quietly on the up for the last eight years, around 16,000 copies were sold in 2012, but this increased to more than 100,000 copies in 2019 (Flood 2020).

commentator as a philosophy “built for hard times” (Anderson 2012). The philosopher Jules Evans (2019) said: “Stoicism is popular now because people feel out of control. . . Stoicism says, accept that you cannot control the external world, but that you can find a measure of serenity and happiness and moral meaning by focusing on what *is* in your control, your own beliefs and your own actions.” The recommendations offered by the contemporary version of Stoicism seem to resonate with the uncertainty of modernity, as not only do they offer strategies of regaining a sense of influence and control (it is debatable how illusory these may be) but also present methods of achieving happiness and the good life,⁴ which many individuals—particularly those from the middle class—perceive as directives and manuals. The nominally different frameworks of interpreting individual experiences offered by modern Stoicism are, in my opinion, a socially-relevant topic.

The article analyzes three publications on modern Stoicism written by Polish authors⁵ (constituting the primary data corpus), as well as two translated publications (as additional materials)⁶; the authors

⁴ William B. Irvine, a modern American philosopher and proponent of Stoicism, said this when interviewed in 2020: “I think that the first half of the year has already given us plenty of reasons to believe that this is the philosophy that really makes life more bearable. Since we have no power over how the virus appears and spreads, even if we make sure to follow the rules and regulations, we can only accept everything that is happening around us with a Stoic demeanor and be grateful that we are still alive because we could be gone, that every day spent with our loved ones is an additional reason to be happy” (Irvine 2020a [trans. RD]).

⁵ Mazur, Tomasz. 2014. *O stawianiu się stoikiem. Czy jesteście gotowi na sukces?* [*Becoming a Stoic. Are You Ready for Success?*]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN; Seidler, Paulina F. 2022. *Po prostu spokój. Jak dobrze żyć po stoicku* [*Plain Peace. How to Live in a Stoic Way*]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Zwierciadło; Stankiewicz, Piotr. 2014. *Sztuka życia według stoików* [*The Art of Living according to the Stoics*]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo WAB.

⁶ Sellars, John. 2021. *Lekcje stoicyzmu* [*Lessons in Stoicism*]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca; Irvine, William B. 2020b. *Wyzwanie stoika. Jak dzięki filozofii odnaleźć w sobie siłę, spokój*

of all these publications are philosophers. They reconstruct the premises of Stoicism based on source materials (cited more or less extensively). However, it is not my role to verify the validity of their exegeses and doctrine compliance. Considering the subject matter of the paper, out of the extensive research material, I chose and analyzed only elements of happiness and the good life. The methodology used was qualitative content analysis, the purpose of which was to systematically and reliably determine how these topics are presented in the analyzed publications. The analysis led to the discovery of new categories and aspects of the main subjects: the modern understanding of happiness and the good life, ways of achieving them (self-development practices and exercises), and their implications for individuals in the current socio-cultural context. My analysis begins with a juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary Stoicism, focusing on their different social, political, and cultural origins, followed by a synthesis of the principles of ancient Stoicism on happiness and the good life. In subsequent sections, I provide a detailed interpretation of the ‘offering’ of popular Stoicism in the relevant areas, focusing on its individual (identity-related) and socio-cultural consequences.

Ancient Stoicism and Popular Stoicism—Recognition

Stoicism is a Greek school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium in the 3rd century BCE, developed by Chrysippus of Soli into a comprehensive system that, over the course of five centuries from

i odporność psychiczną [*The Stoic Challenge: A Philosopher’s Guide to Becoming Tougher, Calmer, and More Resilient*]. Cracow: Insignis Media. That is because the books by Polish philosophers are comparable in size and provide an extensive account of Stoic beliefs, whereas translations, due to their smaller size, generally only provide cursory overviews.

its inception, underwent transformations, which reflected the changing socio-cultural environment at the time. “Stoicism arose and became popular in difficult, trying times—the Greek city-state was breaking down, the world no longer felt stable, and change (and chaos) was everywhere. Similarly, for many people today, our world feels out of control in many ways: socially, politically, and environmentally” (Evans 2019). Greek Stoicism was referenced by such Roman thinkers as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius (who represent the late school of Stoicism), who were responsible for propagating its ideas. Stoicism was developed in Hellenic Athens, which means that its tenets were intended for citizens, that is, free, educated people who did not work for a living, but were eligible to decide on public/political matters—these criteria were only met by high-status and wealthy males⁷ (an exception to this was Epictetus, who was a purchased slave). Ancient Stoicism—despite its professed egalitarianism—was thus intended for a narrow group of practitioners who could afford to devote themselves to a *vita contemplativa*, using Stoic exercises and practices to become the ideal sages—men of wisdom and virtue.⁸ The ethical aspect of Stoicism (relevant from the perspective of this consideration and analyzed in detail in the following sections of the article) focused on the highest human good and the main goal of human activity, which was believed to be the pursuit of happiness and virtue, and entailed recommendations on how to live well. The return to Stoicism, which began in the second half of the 20th century, has assumed

⁷ The political community excluded women, slaves, and foreigners; the former were primarily occupied with the private sphere (the home), which, at the time, was separated from the public sphere and matters related to various necessities of life.

⁸ Virtue used to mean something different than it does today. In this case, classical Stoicism can be viewed as more aligned with modern guides, as it approaches virtue as a relatively stable character trait that can be cultivated within ourselves.

various forms (to account for various needs and expectations of individuals, as well as their different development stages), although it does not simply draw upon or reference the original school of thought, as was the case in the Renaissance, for example, but constitutes its ‘reactivation’ as a still-relevant philosophy (see: Mazur 2010; Stefaniuk 2017).

Currently, Stoicism is particularly popular in the West, as evidenced not only by various new research papers circulating in the hermetic world of academia but also by popular culture texts that promote Stoic ideas as offering utility for modern individuals. This version is referred to as Pop Stoicism or popular Stoicism and is defined as “contemporary commercialized Stoicism or, to be more precise, commercialized elements of Stoicism” (Stefaniuk 2017:49).⁹ From this perspective, Stoicism serves as the base for self-help books, self-fulfillment, and self-development guides and coaching publications. The Internet is also rife with dedicated podcasts, blogs, newsletters, and Instagram and Facebook accounts created by both professional and amateur philosophers. “Modern Stoicism has become an industry. And a mega-industry at that. For the consumers seeking wisdom on how to live the good life—and there are a lot of them—there are daily digests of Stoic quotations, books, and websites packed with Stoic wisdom to kick-start your day, podcasts, broadcasts, online crash courses, and more” (Sherman 2021).

In Poland, translations are available of books by such philosophers as William B. Irvine and John Sellars, as well as the non-philosophers Ward Farnsworth

⁹ The author states: “when we mention ‘pop-Stoicism’ or the simplistic modern form of ‘commercialized Stoicism,’ it is necessary to distinguish it from the Stoicism of ancient philosophers, that is, from the ‘proper’ or ‘original’ Stoicism, which has long been the subject of serious academic research and discussion” (Stefaniuk 2017:50).

(a lawyer), Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman (a writer and a publisher). Also published are papers and books by Polish academic philosophers claiming to apply the principles of Stoicism in their everyday lives. The most recognizable being Tomasz Mazur and Piotr Stankiewicz. These authors share their experiences not only with readers of traditional book publications and course participants but also with users of new media, in which they are active in a multitude of ways—they operate websites, record podcasts, write blog posts, and appear on various shows. Piotr Stankiewicz describes himself as a teacher of reformed Stoicism, while Tomasz Mazur refers to himself as a philosophical development trainer who promotes “philosophical self-development,” which, among other activities, involves seminars and workshops. Another philosopher is Marcin Fabjański, the founder of the Apennine School of Living Philosophy, established in Italy and drawing upon the “teachings of the Stoics, Epicureans, Buddhists, and Taoists, as well as modern and contemporary philosophers.” The above initiatives, apart from those aimed at popularization, are purely commercial in nature and constitute—more or less intentionally—a part of the counseling culture (this is exemplified by the terminology used, e.g., “philosophical development trainer”).

In addition, blogs and podcasts are established by individuals who are not trained philosophers, but who—in their perception—practice Stoicism, forming a community of people who share a similar system of beliefs and attitudes towards reality. Such blogs either focus fully on various elements of Stoicism (its history, principles, or practices) or combine Stoic themes with other ideas that are considered useful in attaining the good life, for example, mindfulness, minimalism, et cetera. Other blogs and podcasts illustrate its pragmatic, selective

applications to particular aspects of reality, for example, business ventures, improving interpersonal relationships, achieving fulfillment in romantic relationships, and seeking tranquility via Stoic meditation (such cases are akin to applying mindfulness to achieve a particular goal, e.g., to reduce stress [see the works of Jon Kabat-Zinn]).

Classical Stoic Happiness and the Good Life

Happiness is a recurring goal of individuals, which is why it is necessary to begin by recapitulating the views held by classical Stoics regarding happiness and the related understanding of nature, before referring to the broader conceptual constructs of the ‘good life’ and ‘quality of life,’ as well as the popularized versions of these two phenomena.

The belief that happiness is an important goal of human life and that the purpose of philosophy is to enable its attainment, was not only espoused by the Stoics. This aspect is present in nearly all ancient schools of philosophy (Epicureanism, the Cyrenaics), although the Stoics differed greatly in their approach to the issue. That is because the Stoics believed that happiness, if contingent upon external factors, was uncertain and that to ensure a constant level of happiness, it was necessary to either gain independence from these factors or overcome them. The other solution (control over the world) was seen as impossible, which is why the only way of becoming independent was to ‘develop’ self-control. The pursuit of happiness entails a degree of self-denial—“to achieve everything, one must deny oneself everything” (Tatarkiewicz 2002:132 [trans. RD]). A person who subscribes to this view thus pursues only internal goods, which are only within their power, making them certain. Internal goods

are a virtue, viewed as the sum of wisdom, independence, and happiness. “In viewing virtue as the sole condition for happiness, [the Stoics] practically equated it with happiness, considering it to be the highest good or even the only true good” (Tatarkiewicz 2002:132 [trans. RD]).

Thus, the road to happiness does not involve changes to the external world, but changes to one’s views—erroneous individual beliefs and judgments—on reality. “Everything depends on opinion; ambition, luxury, greed, hark back to opinion. It is according to opinion that we suffer” (Seneca 2017:78.13 [trans. RD]). The belief that views can be modified stems from the division into that which is and is not within the power of the individual. Happiness is within the power of the individual—a positive or a negative mood originates from our will, and thus the source of suffering is not external but a result of our internal attitudes. As stated by Epictetus (1961:455 [trans. RD]), “Of things that exist, some are in our power and some are not in our power. Those that are in our power are conception, choice, desire, aversion, and in a word, those things that are our own doing. Those that are not under our control are the body, property or possessions,¹⁰ reputation, positions of authority, and in a word, such things that are not our own doing.” Things in our power are all spiritual states, including happiness and unhappiness, while things beyond our control are prestige, money, and health—“as only that is within our power

which is fully and unconditionally in our power” (Epictetus 1961:457 [trans. RD]). A consequence of these beliefs is the view that an individual is capable of making oneself happy (Stankiewicz 2014:67–68), which necessitates self-development by various techniques and practices.

Regarding the other aspect, adapting to nature, which is reasonable and harmonious, is part of achieving individual perfection. Living in accordance with human nature was synonymous with living in accordance with nature in general—it was an expression of virtue. The Stoics equated a virtuous life with living in alignment with nature. A virtuous existence was free and aligned with reason, as that was the nature of man, not passions. Virtue was thus wisdom, knowledge, and reason (Tatarkiewicz 2002). To summarize, according to the classical version of Stoicism, a happy person understands reality (the order of things) and accepts everything that happens to them. The suffering they experience should not cause them to lose balance or cloud their understanding of the order of things—that which is within the laws of nature cannot be viewed as misfortune. To live the good (i.e., happy) life, one must also be able to distinguish between good and evil—human ignorance in that regard causes individuals to perform evil acts, whose consequences are not only an unhappy life but also the ruination of their character.

Popular Stoic Happiness and the Good Life

The authors of popular Stoicism publications recommend it to those who are looking for balance, happiness, and quality of life (Irvine 2020b) or want to remain calm, make wise decisions, find the meaning of life and a sense of happiness (Se-

¹⁰ “Both ownership and wealth are independent of the individual as they can easily be lost. Control over material items is thus illusory and cannot be maintained. External things are independent, but one’s relationship with them is under one’s control. All these impermanent, inconsequential things are not indispensable to happiness, and lack thereof cannot be a source of unhappiness; in this sense, they are neutral. The Stoics strove to convince people to make them neutral in another sense as well—so that they caused neither desire nor disgust. A wise man ignores them, which is why he is truly independent” (Tatarkiewicz 2002:133 [trans. RD]).

idler 2022), thus searching a guide to the art of the good life (Stankiewicz 2014). Such texts do not address Stoicism as a philosophy applying to the entire human life (unlike ancient Stoicism), but as a set of techniques and exercises that define what one should strive for and how to achieve it concerning a given area or fragment of social reality; hence, the term “fragmentary stoicism”¹¹ (Mazur 2010:239). References to Greek Stoicism are few and are outnumbered by Roman writers—Epictetus, Seneca the Younger, and Marcus Aurelius.

According to Piotr Stankiewicz’s interpretation, happiness and the good life are “the goals of the Stoic philosophy and its *raison d’être*. To live a Stoic life is to be merry, to live well and happily. Stoic happiness is the fullest, most perfect, and lasting; it is characterized by independence, self-determination, and agency” (Stankiewicz 2014:490 [trans. RD]). Another aspect is pointed out by John Sellars (2021:26), who states that “when we begin to rule over our judgments, we will gain full control over our lives. We will decide what is important to us, what we want, and how to proceed. Our happiness will be under our control. We have control over everything really important to our well-being.” From this point of view, popular Stoicism serves many functions relevant to the contemporary socio-cultural landscape.

First, popular Stoicism—provided that certain conditions are met—is supposed to provide the individual with not only happiness (narrow sense, see: Czapiński 2004a) but also a high quality of life (broad sense). These discourses currently play

¹¹ According to Tomasz Mazur, the main contemporary forms of Stoicism include historical, academic, professional, religious, political, and supportive (in the psychological sense) Stoicism (see: Mazur 2010).

a dominant role in shaping how individuals pursue the meaning of life and are also a restrictive criterion for assessing if these pursuits are properly designed. In the aforementioned publications, happiness¹² and the good life appear together as a construct presented as if it were self-evident, for example, according to Stankiewicz (2014), the happiness the Stoic seeks is *eudaimonia*—the good life or well-being. This approach is akin to that of ancient philosophy in which *eudaimonia* was a combination of well-being, happiness, and flourishing. In books on popular Stoicism, the term “well-being”¹³ is accompanied (though more rarely) by the term “quality of life,” which is also not explained. The authors of the analyzed publications use the terms “happiness,” “quality of life,”¹⁴ “well-being,” and “the good

¹² The most popular concept of happiness defines it as a “[lasting and complete] satisfaction with one’s life as a whole” (Tarkiewicz 1966:1; 1962). From this point of view, happiness is understood as “a typically long-term psychological condition—not the acute emotion of feeling happy, but rather whatever it concerns us when we talk of someone’s being happy these days” (Hayborn 2003:306). Hayborn distinguishes psychological happiness from a philosophical one. In the latter case, it is conceived differently as “a kind of well-being or flourishing that in the ancient Greek of Aristotle and Plato went by the name of *eudaimonia*” (Hayborn 2003:306). Happiness may also be considered in a broader sense—close to the notion of well-being.

¹³ There are multiple conceptions of well-being, for example, Ed Diener (1984) defines subjective well-being as a combination of positive emotions and the degree to which one appreciates and is satisfied with one’s life. Carol Ryff (1989) proposes an alternative idea of psychological well-being that is measured with six constructs related to self-actualization: autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others. Psychological well-being is a core feature of mental health, including two dimensions (see: Czapiński 2004b): hedonistic or affective (mood, the balance of emotional experience, feeling of satisfaction) and eudaimonic or spiritual (fulfillment, value of life, cardinal virtues, long-term goals, and one’s needs).

Philosophers differentiate between well-being and the good life; well-being refers to what an individual experiences physically and mentally together with the interpretation of these experiences, while the good life is understood more broadly as the fulfillment of external conditions independent of states of consciousness (Lazari-Radek 2021:114-115).

¹⁴ The quality of life, in turn, is perceived as multidimensional, encompassing emotional, physical, material, and social

life” interchangeably, even though modern philosophical, psychological, and sociological literature draws distinctions between them. These terms are not synonymous, even though their semantic scopes overlap to a large degree. However, due to the limited scope of this paper, the differences between them cannot be discussed in detail here.

Second, its goal is to attain happiness, which is specifically defined as autonomy, self-determination, decision-making, and a sense of control. These traits merit attention as they can be understood to mean something different than the aforementioned sense of perspective and acceptance of reality, which are typical for the classical version of Stoicism. These attributes can be viewed as the expected and preferred attitudes within the consumerist culture of capitalism, valued positively by those who have internalized these functional patterns. In actuality, these are socially-constructed mechanisms of adapting to the requirements of that culture. Self-determination, commonly associated with viewing oneself as a project or enterprise that must be managed, is key in that respect (Pop Stoics view classical philosophers as the masters of self-management—more on that in a later section). Autonomy, the subjective sense of self-direction and agency, is related to control that is located in the individual. Agency refers to the need to be flexible, able to adapt (constantly improve) to shifting conditions and the ‘necessity’ of making choices and actively steering one’s life. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello identify a new formula of capitalist culture (from the 1980s onward) that manifests itself in discourse via communication patterns containing expert recommendations on how to harmonize modern entrepreneurship

well-being. It can refer both to the individual experience of life and to the living conditions in which people find themselves. Hence, quality of life is highly subjective (Rokicka 2013).

with the actions of individuals with particular character traits (example terms include “activity,” “project,” “adaptation,” “flexibility,” and “creativity”). Outside of discourse, methods of forming desirable individual behaviors exist, which are specific to contemporary capitalism (the demand for displaying initiative, forcing project-oriented thinking, expecting risk-taking behaviors, and assuming responsibility). That means promoting managerial behaviors not only in one’s professional life but in one’s private life as well (see: Stachowiak 2014).

Third, it is possible to interpret popular Stoicism in a way that emphasizes its negative effects on individuals. Similar to other visions of the good life, they rely on a paradoxical intertwining of happiness with the expectation structure. As noted by Eva Illouz (2012:16 [trans. RD]), the reason we are unhappy is that “we are offered lifestyles that appear within our reach, as well as the belief that, if we strive hard enough, we can achieve our dream life.” By placing these expectations within the “I,” an individual is not only able to but is also obligated to work harder on themselves, which contributes to blaming oneself for any shortcomings, imperfections, and weakness. According to Illouz (2012:16), failure to attain the good life is a problem that affects everyone, regardless of class. Its cause lies in a manufactured cultural fantasy according to which anything can be achieved on one’s own.

Work on Oneself—Stoic Training and Exercises

In addition to believing that the goal of individual pursuits is happiness, the Stoics also identified ways of attaining it. Their method comprises deliberate (conscious) hard work on oneself, which involves certain techniques and exercises and requires inter-

nal discipline, mobilization, and self-reflection (Mazur 2014:111; Seidler 2022). These techniques arise from the fundamental Stoic belief that well-being, mood, and feelings are contingent on one's cognitive attitude, on which individuals have influence and are thus able to change it. "The Stoics believe in the tremendous power of man. That we can motivate ourselves, control our emotions, and guide our inner life, that we have enormous influence on ourselves. This philosophy cultivates in us a belief that we can change ourselves and our thinking so that we can live a good, happy life, find our way out of any situation, and face even the greatest challenges. [Stoicism] is an art of life that requires changing how we view the world, think about ourselves and the world, changing our habits. It is a kind of internal transformation or conversion" (Seidler 2022:16-17 [trans. RD]). The transformation of the individual's dispositions is usually a two-stage process, each with a different way of perceiving the self (building an identity) and attitude towards reality. The first stage is the "time before," and the second is the "time after" discovering and practicing Pop Stoicism. A transition between these two modalities is possible thanks to popular Stoicism assuming the role of an expert system. This expert opinion delineates the areas where work must be performed on oneself—one's desires, actions, and thoughts (base elements), as well as how that work is organized—internal mobilization; ceaseless, strenuous effort; hard work; discipline and self-reflection that are supposed to bring the individual closer to happiness. This statement serves to illustrate the therapy discourse characterized by exposing the "internal life" of the individual and the increasing role of institutional and informal counseling. As observed by Małgorzata Jacyno (2007:148 [trans. RD]), "the modern man has an inside that he can choose, shape, model, mold, change, educate, and manage," and

this process follows a plan of action and design for what is being managed. According to Michel Foucault (2018), the discourse developed by the therapy culture is a new form of disciplining and managing a neoliberal society. In the processes leading to the emergence of the modern form of the "I," he identified the importance of the discourse originating particularly from psychology (psy-disciplines). The language of psychology that penetrates various areas of life is a new form of exercising ideological power as it creates conditions in which individuals feel responsible for themselves in the name of freedom. This way, modern knowledge imposes the cost of management on individuals, and diminished political control is replaced by self-control.

The situation presented here matches how the counseling and therapeutic culture operates,¹⁵ which can be conventionally divided into three stages: illness/dysfunction, diagnosis (via the application of measures indicated in an expert opinion), and healing (see: Jacyno 2007; Illouz 2010). In this context, normalization occurs via self-knowledge (auto-therapy) produced by referring to an expert knowledge system—popular Stoicism and popular psychology (a trivialized version of academic psychology) that function as the institutional support of neoliberal-

¹⁵ In the opinion of Eva Illouz (2010), the therapeutic discourse is well-adapted to how modern humans experience socio-cultural reality. It provides instructions on how to conduct oneself when faced with uncertainty or in situations where individuals may struggle for control, is characterized by a great degree of institutionalization, enjoys the praise and support of the social elite, and its messaging is popularized via various social networks. That causes individuals to believe in its effectiveness, leading them to combine the offering of the culture of counseling and therapy with their lives and experiences with the help of a special 'emotional language,' which is a tool of introspection and understanding oneself, determining avenues for personal development, and presenting oneself to others. In return, the discourse generates certain emotional practices and specifies how internal and macrostructural problems should be perceived, defining their hierarchy and shaping attitudes towards them.

ism. Its purpose is to transform those who are “ill” into healthy individuals or restore them to a social-functional state. These ideologies influence what is perceived as a “normal” subject and treat society as a set of individuals responsible for themselves, including their health.

The exercises are related to the term “technologies of the self,” coined by Michel Foucault, who analyzed how knowledge is organized concerning the self (examples include “caring for oneself,” “taking care of oneself,” and “looking after oneself”) by describing it within the context of selected ancient and early Christian philosophical schools. Currently, technologies of the self are not so regulated philosophically or religiously as they are capitalistically (see: Rydlewski 2020).¹⁶ According to Foucault (2000:249 [trans. RD]), they “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” The components listed by Foucault—means (dispositions), operations (training), and transformation (goal)—can be found in the analyzed texts. In this context, Pop Stoicism is an

¹⁶ An example of this is coaching, which is a quasi-therapeutic practice aimed at adapting an individual to the neoliberal, flexible model of labor, about which the individual feels alienated and thus unhappy. Happiness and success, whether in one’s private life or career, are always within reach, it can be achieved (bought) if one works on oneself—spends time on self-realization, and remains sufficiently committed. This “training strategy, which sets specific goals and ways of achieving them, is a disciplining practice that produces a subject who pursues values promoted by the neoliberal ideology, an important part of which is constantly expanding consumerism, hyper-individualism, and a culture of narcissism and attention-seeking. It does not question the patterns themselves, instead teaching how to follow them; this is functional insofar as the subject undergoing adaptation feels truly happy” (Rydlewski 2020:128 [trans. RD]).

instrument of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral transformations, the goal of which is not only to change the individual but also their value systems and, consequently, their lifestyle. By employing “modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes” (Foucault 2000:249 [trans. RD]), individuals influence themselves, constituting self-controlling elements of the social order that reproduce the logic of functioning of late-stage capitalism. Thus, popular Stoicism offers a new type of social competencies, which can be acquired via a set of practices, although one which has been processed and with the market as an intermediary.

Effective “self-management” was of key importance in this context—managing that which is within the power of the individual (their beliefs, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, etc.). A contemporary popularizer of Stoicism describes it thus: “Stoics are happy because they know how to live well, they have the right attitude towards themselves, others, and the world. To put it in managerial terms: Stoics are people who have mastered the art of managing their souls, minds, and bodies, which is why they can deal with any issue with calm in their hearts” (Stankiewicz 2014:494 [trans. RD]). It is no coincidence that Pop Stoicism makes references to the science of management—its terminology is used by the culture of capitalism to define individual lives and delineate their obligations based on a culturally-defined ideal. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) remark that the modern culture of entrepreneurship offers opportunities for personal development, rewards those who are active and creative, promotes flexibility, and gives opportunities for innovative projects. A new spirit of capitalism “sanctions ways of keeping people on the straight and narrow—individuals are supposed

to develop their inner potential and communicate effectively to master that which is desired, and not that which constitutes their material surroundings” (Stachowiak 2014:20 [trans. RD]). Managing oneself and one’s emotions is also common for the type of pragmatic counseling promoted by popular psychology. While it does use therapeutic practices employed by professional psychologists, it does so in ways that lead to the privatization of mental health problems (Rydlewski 2020). As a consequence of this, individuals focus on privatized survival strategies, withdraw into their worlds, devote themselves to ‘spiritual’ and physical perfection, introduce various regimens into their lives, and become alienated from the outside world (see also Lasch 1979).

The Dichotomy of Control

The Stoics recommend several such practices indispensable to being able to work on oneself (see: Hadot 2003¹⁷). The most popular of which include examination of conscience or introspection to ascertain one’s condition and situation and planning actions (see: Seneca 2017); mentally separating that which is and is not within one’s power, and focusing on that which is under one’s control; a fixed daily schedule based on discipline and regularity, including spiritual exercises (e.g., morning and evening meditations, see: Fabjański 2020); adopting

¹⁷ Pierre Hadot describes several types of “spiritual exercises,” including the more well-known morning and evening meditations, in which an individual looks ahead at the day to come or reflects on the day that has passed and considers how the individual either will or did follow Stoic teachings and pursue a sage-like path. He also discusses *premeditatio malorum*, in which an individual can imagine misfortunes that could befall and think about how one will meet them with strength and grace, as they are “indifferent,” are not up to us, and are, therefore, not evil. Hadot goes on to briefly mention “active” Stoic exercises, including self-mastery, the accomplishment of duties, and indifference to indifferent things (Hadot 2003:45).

a cosmic perspective (concerning space and time); skepticism—self-detachment combined with trust in oneself and one’s abilities (Mazur 2014); “taming” the situation (see: Fabjański 2021); voluntarily experiencing discomfort and visualizing potential troubles (*premeditatio malorum*) as a way of counteracting the negative emotions resulting from adversity (Irvine 2009; 2020b); building the inner citadel (see: Hadot 2004; Paczkowski 2017). I focus on division into that which is and is not within the power of the individual and the emotion work in Stoicism.

The distinction between that which is within one’s power and that which is beyond it, although appears unconvincing from a modern perspective, is viewed by Stoics as distinct, unambiguous, and complete. The Stoics rejected degrees; things do not depend on us to a larger or smaller degree, they can only be contingent upon us in their entirety or be completely independent of us. Things that are independent of us include the body, health, wealth, status, and reputation, which are currently viewed differently—as dependent “goods” and “one’s achievements.” These are listed as the main objects of concern via which individuals self-identify in the consumerist culture of capitalism. They form the basis for a hierarchy of consumerist and materialist values, although certain axiological reorientations do occur here to reflect the distinction between happiness and welfare (see, e.g., Zawadzka 2014). As Paulina Seidler (2022:35) mentioned, distinguishing between that which is within the power of the individual and that which is not changes how reality is perceived, which, in turn, affects one’s mood and sense of happiness, and when followed consistently, also increases self-confidence. According to Piotr Stankiewicz (2014:91 [trans. RD]), the tenet of not striving for external things stems from “avoiding the woe that is a lack of fulfillment” and is thus a form of preventing negative feelings,

particularly disappointment and a sense of failure. From this perspective, a better—according to the Stoics—stance is to abandon certain goals (that potentially lead to suffering) rather than risk not achieving them.

Even though external things are outside of the power of individuals, their relationship with them is not and may (and should) be modified. When analyzing this tenet concerning materialist and consumerist values, the conclusions that follow contradict the actual state of affairs. According to the Stoics, control over wealth and finances is illusory as material goods are beyond the control of individuals (they can be lost, decrease in value due to inflation, etc.). One may strive to acquire and keep them (these actions are within the power of the individual), but it is not possible to have complete control over what happens to them as this is determined by external factors (e.g., economic crises, political instability). In line with the absoluteness requirement (as the defining criterion), the individual lacks this control. The approach recommended by the Stoics thus focuses not on achieving wealth and social status but on becoming independent of them; disconnecting happiness from external factors, including wealth, is in line with psychological research results on what influences well-being. Although material wealth no longer correlates with happiness after a certain point, Piotr Stankiewicz's (2014:77) statement that happiness and the good life are possible regardless of income is unfounded and unrealistic. While it may suit an ancient sage, contemporary individuals, such as those suffering from precarity, may find it less applicable.

Stoic Emotion Work

One of the elements of working on oneself—necessary for an internal transformation—is working

on one's emotions. This approach to emotions does not involve (contrary to popular belief) achieving a "Stoic demeanor," understood to mean insensitivity, firmness, and indifference, and neither does it recommend suppressing, denying, disregarding, or rejecting emotions (especially the negative ones), and the same applies to succumbing to or escalating them. The goal is to develop the ability to acknowledge emotions—to identify and analyze them (think about what causes them) and then react appropriately (learn how to effectively redirect them). Using Arlie Hochschild's (1979; 2003) words, one must transform how they are felt and expressed; from this perspective, various levels of emotion work exist—surface or deep acting. One of the authors describes that as follows: "we choose how we feel, we acquiesce to emotions, decide how we will experience them. We are capable of effectively making ourselves happy...The Stoics, by placing the sense of meaning within ourselves (within that which is in our power), demonstrate the power present in humanity, they give us a sense of agency and hope, while also presenting us with a difficult challenge. They task us with 'inventing ourselves,' giving life meaning by finding value in it, by setting and achieving new goals...This requires a great deal of mindfulness and self-reflection" (Seidler 2022:232-234 [trans. RD]). What emerges here is an image of the individual who acts in a socio-cultural vacuum, who self-referentially places the sense of meaning and significance within oneself. This individually-designed work of creating oneself is only made possible with the help of instructions provided by various systems of knowledge.

Emotions are related to the opinions, assessments, and judgments that we formulate with regard to reality, others, and ourselves. As these are states that we can change, it is also possible to alter our

emotional responses to what happens to us (if and to what degree we allow our emotions to take control). Emotional flexibility concerning interpreting everyday challenges helps in viewing instances of adversity as tests of character (remaining calm in the face of serious issues), endurance, and creativity in overcoming difficulties. Lowering emotional involvement also helps to find rational and effective solutions to problems, which, in effect, contributes to an increased sense of trust in oneself. If a situation is assessed as good, beneficial, and appropriate, positive emotions are felt, and if a situation is categorized as negative, unfavorable, or inappropriate, negative emotions are experienced (Mazur 2013). Therefore, one should strive to limit negative emotions in favor of positive emotions, which translate into an elevated sense of the quality of life.

As remarked by Eva Illouz, the individual is established and institutionalized in modernity by such means as psychological knowledge related to individuals. This knowledge is applied, more or less intentionally, as part of the language of self-description of individuals and their ways of formulating their goals. In addition, the transformation of the “I” also involves commodity flow networks. In a capitalist culture, psychological knowledge is used to develop and offer services that sell emotional transformations. In a way, emotions are thus manufactured with the use of knowledge and market institutions. “Psychology acts as an intermediary between knowledge, institutions, the market, and the ‘I’; it is one of how culture mediates between the ‘I’ and commodities” (Illouz 2012:13 [trans. RD]). Psychology manifests in individuals turning towards themselves in a bid to explain why their lives are not what they want them to be, without including social or political institutions in their deliberations. It lends an ontological nature to emotions and

personalities, causing individuals to perceive and develop themselves and others as fixed bundles of properties and features awaiting discovery. A new form of subjectivity is thus constructed, one which has more control over oneself, and is also more focused on one’s emotions. This view aligns with neoliberal thinking, which appoints the individual as the only person responsible for their fulfillment, thus making them fully responsible for their life, successful or not. Moreover, this self-determination consists in “managing” experiences and one’s mood, that is, controlling emotions, which “apart from the negative requirements (proscriptions) also entails positive requirements—certain emotions and attitudes are valued highly, and the individual is required to express and experience them to a certain extent” (Dembek 2012:44 [trans. RD]).

Conclusions

In the analyzed publications, Stoicism is referred to as a project that corresponds with the process of self-management. This illustrates that individual lives and biographies are perceived as (self-reflexive) projects,¹⁸ which have nearly become a contemporary form of cultural codes—“recipes” or “formulae” for life, a kind of “cipher” that separates those who can wield them from those who are not famil-

¹⁸ Barbara Skarga (2009:121 [trans. RD]) notes that a project, to avoid being a copy of a cultural code (given and self-evident) or a fantasy, requires collective labor—convincing others that it is feasible. This requires social competency—a project “not only sketches, draws, and plans something but also proclaims, evokes emotions, and very often resorts to demagoguery.” Projects are created especially when hopes are aroused, when the horizon of imagination is not limited to that which can be experienced, and in extreme cases, when the world begins to crumble, break, and collapse. Projects are impermanent and they often capitalize on desires or imprecise and unarticulated dreams, and their role is to potentially lead to change and development. “A project is a product of social imagination, but one which has not been fossilized in the form of rules, obligations, and prohibitions, that is, various codes, but one which has become a medium for ideas” (Skarga 2009:120 [trans. RD]).

iar with a given behavioral pattern (Rapior 2017:25). Implementing a project requires defining its subsequent stages and completing them one after another (consistently) until one achieves their goal, that is, happiness and the good life. Various resources are necessary for this purpose—in this case, Pop Stoicism, which William Irvine refers to “as a tool that, although requires sharpening, not only is useful but can also have a very positive impact on the lives of modern people” (Irvine 2020b:21). Stoicism posits that happiness can be achieved by anyone, from which follows that effective “self-management” is also available to anyone. Although it is assumed that we all are equally able to consciously work on ourselves, it is debatable whether everyone is indeed capable of doing so.¹⁹ Individualism as a value, subjectivity, and sense of agency was unknown to the ancients. Similarly, Athenian democracy was based on exclusion, whereas modern-day Western democracies are, on principle, inclusive. The goal of moral development in classical Stoicism was not happiness, but *eudaimonia* (the full meaning of this term is difficult to explicate). Today, happiness is a subjective feeling (often a euphoric experience), while for the ancients, *eudaimonia* was close to being objectively measurable (it could be achieved despite physical or mental suffering). Stoic life advice interprets happiness in a more modern way, as an experience or a type of “self-actualization.” The culture of individualism disciplines and oppresses in that it requires self-control and self-actualization, the defining characteristics of the lifestyle of the new middle class.

¹⁹ William Irvine proves that not everyone has a temperament compatible with Stoic techniques, and would instead benefit more from Epicureanism or Cynicism. Stoicism may thus be universally compatible due to its rationalism, but may not appeal to everyone. Martha Nussbaum believes that Stoicism (in its basic sense) is an indispensable element of modern global citizenship and should be promoted as the best philosophy of life (Mazur 2010).

The nature of the popular Stoic project is practical, selective, and, at times, eclectic. Noticeable is the interweaving of traditional Stoic practices with Eastern religious elements (e.g., Buddhism)²⁰ or mindfulness,²¹ which leads to the diffusion of ideas, and thus the loss of their originality and detachment from the context in which they emerged and first operated. For the proponents of Stoic practices, the most important aspect appears to be their utility—the use of these concepts as a set of hints and tools for achieving the overarching goal, which is the idea of the good and happy life. What emerges here is applying selected Stoic principles and exercises to a specific aspect of life or individual needs and expectations, which aligns with the processes of personalization and customization of consumer goods as part of capitalist culture. What is striking is that nearly all analyzed publications emphasize the pragmatic and functional applications of Stoic ideas to achieving a narrowly-defined goal, for example, mental hygiene, stress reduction (Irvine 2020b:81), emotional intelligence, and psychological resilience (Seidler 2022:17). As Nancy Sherman notes: “Stoicism is not so much a philosophy as a collection of life hacks for overcoming anxiety, meditations for curbing anger, exercises for finding stillness and calm through discourse that chastens a mind: ‘The pain isn’t due to the thing itself...but to your estimate of it.’ In this mindset, the impact of the outer world can fade away as the inner self becomes a sanctuary. The focus narrows to that self—me, isolated from the social structures that support me or bring me down” (Sherman 2021).

²⁰ It may be valid to claim that Stoicism is the Western method of achieving the state experienced by Buddhist monks. For a comparison of similarities between Stoicism and Buddhism, see: Stankiewicz 2012.

²¹ Mindfulness has a special status in Stoicism—it is the essential spiritual attitude manifested by constant vigilance, presence of mind, and self-awareness (Hadot 2003).

The market provides the tools and means necessary to transform the identity, as well as comprehensive projects that can be implemented by those looking for meaning and happiness in life to achieve a particular effect. That is aimed at individuals who expect to attain the good life and a high quality of it. Ideas of different provenance are used for that purpose and diverse sources of inspiration are sought in oriental religious, spiritual and philosophical systems. One such source is Stoicism, which assumes the form of Pop Stoicism when adapted to modern conditions. Popular Stoicism primarily focuses on proper conduct and the meaning of the good life, which is why it is primarily psychological and not philosophical in nature. The belief that well-being is contingent

upon that which we can control—judgments and actions, as well as upon detaching oneself from that which cannot be controlled (other people, their opinions, events), is important from the perspective of individuals in postmodern societies characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. If one of the measures of postmodern uncertainty is the loss of material security due to economic crises and the unpredictability of international relations, the belief that happiness is independent of external material factors—prestige or wealth—seems attractive. That, of course, is an illusion—such expectations are not completely eliminated, but simply reformulated to provide a greater subjective sense of agency and control.

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