

Stoicism Sucks: How Stoicism Undervalues Good Things and Exploits Vulnerable People

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Stoicism Breeds Broic\$

Stoicism has become a plague of bro-y, shallow, self-help-y garbage. Ryan Holiday is its poster child, and the alt-right are some of its enthusiastic consumers.¹ That should be alarming to practitioners. Gone are the days of the classical Stoics. Now are the days of the Broic\$. But lest you think I'm prone to nostalgia here, I should highlight that the good ol' days weren't even that good. They're just old. The three most popular Stoics—Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca—show the failures of Stoicism, perhaps more than anyone. Epictetus, for as much as he says external things don't matter, moralizes about them as good as anyone else.² Marcus Aurelius seemed OK with Christian persecutions and bloody wars, and he damaged Rome by allowing his son Commodus to succeed him. Seneca kept company with Nero, probably engaged in usury, and committed suicide upon political controversy.³ Ethical writers needn't embody perfection. Yet I would hope that the sages of a tradition would be better than that. After all, if they're the *sages*, what hope do *contemporary practitioners* have when the sages failed so miserably?

Stoics, even of the academic and popular variety such as Massimo Pigliucci and William Irvine, wouldn't disagree with me on the disease befalling contemporary Stoicism. However, the implications of the disease and its etiology are more controversial. Some say that the disease is a mere matter of people misunderstanding the core tenets of Stoicism; others trace the illness to bad-faith charlatans manipulating Stoic texts to turn a profit (see Pigliucci, 2019; 2023; Dery, 2022; ironically all paywalled to make Broic\$ a little cash). However, I think these explanations are way too charitable. I think that Stoicism's commodification, bro-ificatin, and dilution are the *direct results* of the philosophy, not mere accidents or improbable contingencies. More than any other ancient philosophical school, Stoicism has internal contradictions, vague distinctions, and questionable practitioners.⁴ And for these reasons, it deserves what's happening to it.

The Theory of Preferred Indifferents Rears Psychopathic Narcissists

Stoic ethics reads as a litany of moral failures, but I only have space to focus on one.⁵ For me, the most telling failure is their definition of the Good. Stoics, explicitly, hold that the only thing that you need to flourish is virtue, and virtue is knowledge.⁶ This tells you all you need to know: virtue and (therefore) a good life exist in your head, as long as you got the right mental stuff kicking about. Stoics are *axiological solipsists*.⁷ Everything outside of the head doesn't matter. Somatic goods (e.g., beauty and health) and external goods (e.g., friendship, love, and political circumstances) don't matter.

Such a sharp division between the mind and everything else leads to an old problem concerning what motivates Stoics to act and how their mindset might affect Stoic values, especially when it seems like they dissociate from the world and its objects.⁸ One conventional reply to this problem is to distinguish between proper *goods* and *preferred indifferents*. This distinction affirms the traditional Stoic value theory: only one thing is good, and that is virtue, which is knowledge. Moreover, the other things that non-Stoic people call goods (e.g., health, wealth, friendship, and favorable political circumstances) are *not* good. Well, not *ethical* goods. These things matter, yes, but in other ways, namely as boons to *natural advantage*. This makes them choiceworthy in their own non-ethical way.⁹

What makes the Stoic position unique is that they have an implicit causal claim here.¹⁰ The non-psychological, non-ethical goods can have zero causal effect on virtue and flourishing. Health, wealth, good reputation, love, and favorable political circumstances can't affect whether Stoics maintain their virtue and flourishing. However, these things can lead to natural advantage. And the recognition of natural advantage is what can motivate Stoics to pursue them. These non-ethical goods are *indifferent* to virtue and flourishing because they make no impact. But they're *preferable* because they help a person enjoy natural advantages. This is why they're called "preferred indifferents." For example, for the Stoics, the idea is that you could be rich or poor and still be virtuous. Wealth makes no difference to goodness. But Stoics would rather be rich than poor, all things considered, because being rich affords natural advantage, even if it doesn't affect virtue (and being poor leads to natural disadvantage).

I think the Stoics pretty much say the quiet part out loud when they offer this divide between goods and preferred indifferents. They're literally saying that friendship, love, beauty, and health can't be good in the proper sense. They can only be *good for a Stoic as something that contributes*

non-ethical advantage. That is, friendship, love, beauty, health, and political circumstances can neither contribute to nor subtract from virtue and flourishing, but they can win some other axiological consolation prize. If you ask a Stoic “Do you value me as a person?” the only consistent reply they can offer is “Yes, but non-ethically and as a contribution to my natural advantage.” Setting aside that well people don’t talk like philosophers, the substance of that sentence should make the problem clear.

Stoics try to weasel their way out of devaluing friendship, love, and just institutions by saying, “But we do care about justice! And friendship too! Haven’t you read *De Amicitia* or *De Finibus*?” But the reply here is, “Sure, I get that you *praise* them. But I want to know whether you think friendship and just institutions are good? Like *really* good?” And Stoics, if they want to be consistent, have to change the topic of conversation to avoid repeating the same unsavory conclusion: no, they’re not really good.

Here it is crucial to emphasize that if a Stoic starts talking about justice, you need to ask them, “In what sense do you mean ‘justice’?” Stoics often try to say that duties exist based on the relationships that people have. For example, if I become a parent or if I am a citizen, then I have duties to uphold relevant to and stemming from those roles.¹¹ But what I want to point out here is this: notice that the Stoics have taken justice and social roles, and they’ve made them into entirely personal concepts shoved back into their heads. Others don’t matter because of who they are or any intrinsic value they hold; others matter only because of the ways a Stoic’s character is reflected in his actions toward others. The concept of justice—which often (correctly) involves the scrutiny of circumstances, institutions, and policies, as well as the serious effects these things have on people—is reduced to a *personal* virtue about how Stoics direct their actions outward. Conversations about institutions and policies, as well as attributing value to other persons solely because they’re *persons*, have to be explained in terms of natural advantage for the Stoic. There is a metaphysical, linguistic, and axiological bait-and-switch going on here. Non-Stoics talk about intrinsic value in others and ethical value in justice and political circumstances. But Stoics redefine the concepts to confine them to their heads.

The bait-and-switch is worth focusing on because it has important implications.¹² First is a concern for everyday people using the system. If most of Stoic ethics relies on such a subtle distinction, how the hell are normal people supposed to suss this out?¹³ But second, and more directly, how can anyone use this system without sounding like a psychopathic narcissist? With no way of acknowledging the ethical and political value of things outside of their heads, Stoics can only relativize other people,

justice, and beauty to things that are *useful to them*. I could imagine a Stoic professor hearing his Stoic student say, “Wow, I’m really in love and it’s so good.” To which he’d reply, “Tisk tisk, Atherton, love’s not *good*. It’s merely *naturally advantageous*.” And such a weird and subtle reminder engrains in someone the habit of disvaluing things that should be cherished in and of themselves.

Stoicism’s Dominance Problem

The problem is that Stoicism’s double-speak and subtlety doom the system. No wonder bros and exploiters weaponize Stoicism.¹⁴ Its most crucial distinctions are barely understood by the experts, and then they don’t really explain much. This semantic and academic flimsiness means that the theoretical veil can shroud almost any end. In philosophy, this normally wouldn’t amount to more than academic obscurantism and vagueness. (Philosophers, including myself, are guilty of this.) But the problem is worse for Stoics. And it’s worse on account of something I’ve never seen discussed at length. Maybe we can call it the *Dominance Problem*. While I think it was a problem for ancient practitioners, I think it especially important for Stoics today. The Dominance Problem points out that Stoicism is in an especially powerful position due to its therapeutic uses, often explicitly mentioned by the philosophers themselves.¹⁵ Strict practitioners aside, most people don’t read Stoicism when life’s going well. Most people reading Stoicism are hurting and looking for comfort and answers. And Stoicism offers them. Stoics regularly interact with and evangelize to vulnerable people, and they appreciate neither the emotional, social, nor political implications of this interaction, much less how their system might influence these people for the worse. Stoics haven’t taken responsibility for their social position; Stoics merely rake in reputation and money (which weren’t supposed to matter in the first place). Consider the training that mental healthcare workers receive before engaging in therapy or cultivating a therapeutic relationship with a client. Broic\$ do none of that.

Stoicism advises practitioners not to talk to outsiders (Epictetus, 2022, *Handbook*, chs. 33, 46). Stoicism recommends distancing yourself from conventional displays of emotion (Epictetus, 2022, *Handbook*, ch. 16; Seneca, 2015, “Letter 116”). Stoicism calls the goods that most people esteem not-really-good. Stoics alter the vocabulary that practitioners use, and they repeat thought-terminating clichés, such as “It is what it is.” This insulation, abstraction, and specialized vocabulary—all sold to vulnerable people where the sage or seller is at a psychological power advantage—feel gross. And most Stoic writers haven’t yet come to terms with this fact. I hope it is unintentional (but probably isn’t in cases of

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overtly profit-driven Broic\$), but Stoicism becomes a cult in the same way that MLMs and CrossFit do. And it thrives on the same tactics. It prays upon the vulnerable, who are attracted to its gorgeous prose that reveals its systematic answers and insider mentality. And before you know it, the vulnerable are talking like certified assholes, sanctimonious jerks with emotional repertoires less complex than toddlers (for more on moralistic jerks, see Schwitzgebel, 2019, pp. 10-13).

Put another way, Stoicism spends a lot of time talking about how it makes its practitioners invincible, and maybe even invulnerable, to the vicissitudes of fortune. Stoicism makes you strong. Or it should. And, admittedly, in a crisis, I wouldn't mind having Stoics by my side. I even buy copies of *Meditations* for friends and new acquaintances. However, as a recovering bro, and maybe even Broic in some ways, I have to be blunt: Stoicism's vision of strength is one that someone could create only if he lacked a lust for life, an appreciation for human companionship, and an awareness that emotions, vulnerabilities, and fortune might be parts of what makes us human and what contributes to our identities. The things that Stoics devalue are rightly seen by non-Stoics as choiceworthy in themselves. I question any kind of strength that's so easily eroded by emotion and life experiences that many *good* people *choose* and *cherish*, not merely endure or tolerate. If Stoics are really so strong, why do they use that strength to shut out emotions? Why do they use that strength to undercut the ways circumstances shape us, not in incidental ways, but in ways essential to who we are? If they're so strong, what are they afraid of in forming loving relationships with others where you can be vulnerable or be irrational or express things in a "I need to get this off my chest" way or in a "I don't know if this will work out, but I want to give it a go" way? Why not feel the ecstasy of new love and the grief of loss, the frenzy of creation and the disappointment of failure?

Stoicism might work as a way to cope with hard circumstances. But Stoicism isn't in the business of selling coping. Stoicism sells flourishing. And by exclusively binding virtue, flourishing, knowledge, and all-in-your-head goods so tightly together, I think Stoics make an elegant and alluring theory, but one that is ultimately a sham.¹⁶ I've loved the Stoics, and I cherish them in a literary way. But as a philosophical school, it's difficult for me to see anything other than a tradition of using academic tricks to conceal the fact that Stoics denigrate what makes life worth living and what makes justice worth struggling for. And among its most popular practitioners, I can't help but see people who consistently exploit the vulnerable to make money or feed their egos. Plainly, Stoicism sucks.

Notes

¹ See: Zuckerberg (2018, ch. 2). Or just search “Stoic” on Instagram. The results will be a flood of anime characters, AI-generated images of Greco-Roman soldiers, and cryptic sayings that read as thought-terminating clichés for bros refusing to feel emotions or ignoring systemic injustices. I’m far from the first to discuss the weird appropriations of classics by bros and scammers. See also: Zuckerberg (2016); Murti (2020); Love (2021); Poser (2021); and Thomson (2023). [Or, published a few days after I delivered this speech on November 10, 2023, see Duncombe (2023), which lambasts shallow Stoicism. See also: Harbour (2023), which is an interview with Mary Beard, renowned expert on ancient Rome, where she points out that Roman history can act as an enabling space for macho male fantasies. In September, there was also a meme on TikTok where women would ask their husbands or boyfriends how often they thought of the Roman Empire, to which the responses were almost every day, if not multiple times a day.] I take this essay as explaining why the perversion is happening to Stoicism specifically, as an inevitability and not a coincidence. This is due to Stoicism’s odd way of defining ethical goodness.

² Epictetus isn’t as prudish as, say, Musonius Rufus. (See, for example, Musonius, 2011, *Lecture 12*.) But he does moralize often. Consider Chapter 33 in his (2022) *Handbook*, where he decries laughter, sex, and many pleasures. Or in *Discourses*, he says many perplexing things about physical appearances, as when he prefers death to shaving his own beard (1.2), or when he has a lot to say about cleanliness and decorum (4.11).

³ For details on Marcus, see Keresztes (1968). For a defense of Seneca’s wealth, see Motto (1966).

⁴ I see Stoicism as weak Cynicism and disengaged Aristotelianism. Cynics are more disciplined than Stoics, more politically engaged, and openly confrontational with power. Aristotelians can largely agree with Stoics on discipline, but they acknowledge the need to reform political systems, and they are overtly social (rather than solipsistic). I wish I had space to defend these claims here.

⁵ Item one in the litany: Stoics get emotions wrong, as when Seneca recommended losing all grief and anger, even in the face of tragedy or injustice (see 2015, “Letter 63”; 2010, *On Anger*). Not feeling negative emotions less, but never feeling them. (See Sherman, 2005, especially chs. 4, 6, and 7. For a mild defense of Stoic emotions but one that raises new problems, see Aikin, 2013.)

Item two: Stoics are hypocrites. Seneca talked a lot about how money and power didn’t matter, but he had decadent tastes, and he killed himself instead of offering any meaningful resistance to Roman corruption. This might not matter if Seneca wasn’t one of the most-cited Stoics. (For quick biographies and histories of the Roman Stoics, see Zuckerberg, 2018, pp. 53-9. For a more detailed history and summary, see: Aikin and Stephens, 2023, pt. 1.)

Item three: Stoic ethics relies on a deterministic (and maybe fatalistic) view of the universe, which I think most people today wouldn’t share. Even if academics

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can find ways to wriggle out of these worries, most people won't be willing to take on such views, and this deeply impacts the viability of Stoic philosophy. (Aikin and Stephens, 2023, pp. 266-274 call this "The System Problem." Their discussion also covers philosophers who disagree with me.)

There are more problems, but I'm trying to minimize taking cheap shots in footnotes. I'm listing these things to differentiate them from my problems, which stem from looking at their definition of the Good and the way it impacts their moral psychology. I think my problem is importantly different, especially because it doesn't seem to be a problem at first. But the more that you press on it, the more the tender bruise on the Stoic fruit seems to indicate an underlying rot. The distinction between goods and preferred indifferents seems harmless, but it's insidious.

⁶ In my opinion, the definition of the Good as virtue, the definition of virtue as knowledge, and the causal isolation of virtue, knowledge, and the Good from externals constitute the essence of Stoicism. These positions are held by ancient Stoics (e.g., Epictetus, 2022, *Handbook*, ch. 1; Cicero, 2001, *On Moral Ends*, ch. 3), and contemporary scholars who study Stoicism hold them as characteristic (see Annas, 1993, ch. 5; Gill, 2022, ch. 3; Vogt, 2017, p. 185; Brennan, 2005, chs. 4 and 8). Additionally, contemporary Stoics seem to affirm these things (e.g., Becker, 1988, p. 138; Pigliucci, 2017, ch. 3; Irvine, 2009, ch. 5), but it is unclear because they sometimes gloss over theoretical problems (esp. writers such as Irvine and Pigliucci in their popular books).

⁷ Thank you to Noah Greenstein for this term.

⁸ Aikin and Stephens (2023, pp. 248-55) call this "The Inaction Problem." But my problem is broader.

⁹ When philosophers start to say that things are "good" but in nonethical or nonmoral ways, I think they start to divorce themselves from everyday experience and are in danger of deception via equivocation. Especially in ethical conversations, which is the subject of most Stoic conversations relevant here.

¹⁰ For a deeper exploration of the causal claim, see: Trujillo, forthcoming. If Stoics acknowledge that non-psychological goods affect virtue and flourishing, they collapse their position into other schools. Aristotelians acknowledge that somatic and external goods contribute to flourishing (or detract from flourishing in cases of extreme deprivation). See Nussbaum (2001, pt. III). And Cynics acknowledge that external goods (especially wealth and power) erode virtue and flourishing. See Trujillo (2022). Stoicism's signature is seeing somatic and external goods as indifferent to virtue and flourishing, neither a boon (Aristotelian) nor a bane (Cynic).

¹¹ See Epictetus (2022, *Handbook*, ch. 30). I'm not convinced that Stoics can consistently say that we should uphold roles. But I'll grant it for the sake of argument.

¹² I wonder whether Stoics really believe their own drivel here. Do they think providing a consolation prize to love and beauty and friendship makes things all better? I don't understand the insistence on their narrow conception of the Good. I'll admit, though, that some of the Stoic fabrications are great. For example,

Cicero's *De Amicitia/On Friendship* is one of the most gorgeous writings about friendship.

¹³ This problem is related to what Aikin and Stephens explain in various versions of their "Progressor Paradox." On the one hand, Stoic students/progressors/practitioners (who, by definition, have yet to reach sagehood) need to understand Stoicism enough to understand when they're making progress and why they should choose Stoicism over alternative theories. But, because they're not sages, it's tough to see how they can make all the intellectual and practical distinctions required to understand what to do or how to do it (2023, pp. 143-5). This problem is, of course, ancient. For example, Lucian of Samosata raises similar concerns when trying to convince a Stoic student to give up Stoicism in his work "Hermetimus, or on Philosophical Schools" (2005, p. 88ff). (I owe my Twitch viewers for the Lucian reference.)

¹⁴ Aikin and Stephens call this "The Weaponization Problem" (2023, pp. 284-92).

¹⁵ Marcus calls philosophy a salve (*Meditations*, 5.9), and Seneca sees philosophy as a direct cure to human ills, which Stoics have an obligation to help with ("Letter 48", 7-8). Albert Ellis, who created Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, was inspired by ancient Stoicism (thanks go to Thomas Tilton for helping me understand this history). And there are many Stoics today who adopt the "Philosophy as a Way of Life" moniker to emphasize the practical effects that philosophy can have on becoming and living better. Stoicism is increasingly marketed as a life-changing philosophy, complete with official advocacy organizations such as Modern Stoicism and the Aurelius Foundation, as well as conventions such as Stoicon.

¹⁶ First, I'd like to thank Scott Aikin, one of the smartest and most socially oriented philosophers I know. He invited me to this panel, knowing full well that I was going to dump on one of his favorite philosophical schools. I'd also like to thank Alyssa Lowery for discussing these ideas over text messages. I owe much to my Ancient Philosophy students at UTEP, especially Fatima Banuelos who challenged the notion of Stoic strength and Alisa Sierra who drew similarities between preferred indifferents and narcissism. Lastly, I'd like to thank philosophers in the Q&A of this talk. I left their concerns unaddressed here to preserve the content of the presentation. But Emily McGill pressed me on Stoic cosmopolitanism offering a theory of equal value of persons, Jasmine Wallace raised a concern that Broic\$ might not be politically vulnerable, Jerry Green offered that a logocentric universe might be a better essence of Stoicism than my portrayal, Laura Mueller emphasized that Pigliucci and Irvine are qualitatively different than MBA Broic\$, and Scott Aikin raised too many great objections for a simple note.

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