DOES HAPPINESS WRITE BLANK PAGES?

ON STOICISM AND ARTISTIC CREATIVITY

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Series in Philosophy
VERNON PRESS

www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street,
Suite 1200, Wilmington,
Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Philosophy

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018959960

ISBN: 978-1-62273-446-7

Cover design by Vernon Press.

to Olga

The root of all human creativity lies in pursuit of unhappiness[1].

Slavoj Žižek

[For those] whose work is of the spirit [...] it would be the loss of losses to be deprived of their subtle irritability and be awarded in its place a hard Stoic hedgehog skin[2].

Friedrich Nietzsche

[...] the structure of Stoicism: intimate and full of sophisticate contradictions[3].

Henryk Elzenberg

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Foreword

The arrival of this book is good news. It tackles an annoying but persistent criticism of the Stoic account of emotion, tranquility, and happiness – namely that there is a conflict between stoic ideals and necessary ingredients of high-level artistic creativity. There is no such conflict, as the author carefully shows. Moreover, in the process of making that case, a similar concern emerges with the human desire for happiness itself – namely that there is a conflict between aiming for it and one's chances of getting it. There again, the Stoic conception of those things is illuminating.

The author is well-placed to open up both of these discussions in a challenging and productive way. He is a poet as well as a philosopher; a public intellectual as well as a private one; and a practical Stoic as well as a theoretical one. Moreover, it is refreshing to have these discussions pursued by a genuinely cosmopolitan author whose concerns are shaped not only by his European roots, deep appreciation of the ancient Stoic texts, and contemporary philosophical discussion of them, but by his wide reading on the subjects involved.

One further comment in advance may be useful. It seems to me that in its most general sense, the problem addressed in this book is about whether or not there is some kind of damaging, dangerous, or even tragic relationship between the quest for happiness and the quest to make great art. But worries about this have a long, troubling history. The root idea seems to be that there might be some sort of self-defeating internal relation between happiness and great art, such that each sort of quest is not only self-defeating (in the way that seeking happiness – or seeking to write the Great American Novel – seems to be self-defeating) but also defeats the other one of the pair. After all, seeking to write the Great American novel usually leads to despair, not happiness. And seeking happiness, often as not, leads to artistic failure as well. Is this a genuine problem or just a confused pseudo-problem raised by people who should know better? How do we get clear about that?

Addressing the problem when it is raised against the Stoic conception of happiness is particularly promising. For Stoics, there is only one good, and that is neither happiness nor great art. It is rather Virtue, which is the rarely achieved perfection of practical wisdom in pursuit of active and effective rational agency in its attempt to integrate and coordinate the whole range of human virtues while subordinating the vices. Achieving Stoic Virtue is a necessary and sufficient condition, the Stoics maintained, for the achievement of happiness. Of course one rarely achieves it. But as long as one is making progress toward it, one can remain intensely motivated to continue making progress. There need not be anything tragic or self-defeating about that whether it involves the attempt to make great art or not. Instead, we go on – perhaps after having some effective Stoic therapy. But never mind. The philosophical problem seems to have been effectively dealt with – and not only for Stoicism.

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October 20, 2018

Introduction

Stoicism, happiness, and tormented artists

The aim of this book is to examine whether Stoicism and artistic creativity contradict or conflate. I will juxtapose the Stoic and artistic ideals of life and I will try to verify whether they can be pursued simultaneously or not. In simpler terms, I will ask if it is possible for a follower of Stoic ethics to also be an artist.

The title of the book is based on a passage from Henry de Montherlant's *Don Juan*. Don Juan declares there that "happiness writes in white ink on white pages."[4] I adopt this phrase as a tagline for the commonplace intuition that a content life cannot produce meaningful work of art. This very notion is reflected in the figure of a "tormented artist," or "cursed poet," which is a cultural motif that shackles the highest creative capacities to suffering. According to this view, the unavoidable trade-off for the creative gift is the incapability of coming to peaceful terms with oneself and with the world. Thus, if one prefers pursuit of happiness over creative pursuits, then one's creativity will wither away. This is what Montherlant's Don Juan says: if someone is happy, she cannot be a creative artist. And the other way around: whoever wishes to create true art must be inherently unable to be happy.

But the inability to be happy sounds preposterous to a Stoic ear. The goal of Stoic philosophy is to teach its adherents how to be happy under any conditions, including dire misfortunes and extremes of physical adversity[5]. Is then creativity a greater challenge to Stoicism than being on the rack?

This book sets out to examine this paradox. Stoicism and artistic creativity represent pinnacles of human spirit, and it's amazing that their position in respect to one another has hitherto received stunningly scarce attention. The ambition of this book is to fill the gap. Yet, before we get to it, there are certain issues which require clarification.

Stoic happiness and happiness in general

One of the basic facts about Stoicism is that it was never meant to be a purely theoretical school. It has always been a therapeutic endeavor too. "The philosopher's school [...] is a surgery,"[6] as Epictetus put it. "Everyone must discover," Foucault remarks in *The Care of the Self*, "that he needs to receive medication and assistance."[7] This "medication and assistance" is – in this case – nothing else than Stoic philosophy itself. In this vein, we may say that the goal of the Stoic philosophy is to attain happiness. Indeed, to their adherents, the Stoic philosophers promise nothing short of a divine bliss. They promise the Marcus Aurelius' "waveless bay"[8] and Epictetus' "time without perturbations and free from every thing."[9] "A wise man," as Seneca puts it, "is one who full of joy, lives as happy in his condition, as the gods can do in theirs, ever cheerful, placid and unshaken."[10]

We need to remember though, that there are other, non-stoical types of happiness. Happiness is a broad notion and the Stoic account of it – is just one of many. Yet, this book is a book on Stoicism, and it focuses on whether the *Stoic* way of happiness can be agreed with artistic creativity. I make no claim to an overall treatise on creativity and happiness in general. It would be just too broad a topic, requiring not just another book but a shelf full of books.

Why Stoicism?

> [Marcus Aurelius' work is] a veritable eternal gospel, which will never grow old, for it affirms no dogma [...] The book of the *Thoughts* [i.e., *Meditations*] remains young yet in life and truth. [...]
> No revolution, no advance, no discovery can change it[11].
>
> Ernest Renan

There is, I assume, no need to explain at length why Stoicism is worth discussion and critical evaluation. "Stoicism," as William Davidson wrote, "may be confidently affirmed to have perennial value."[12] It has been widely recognized and respected, and its ideal of ethical life has been a hub of Western morality for the past 23 centuries. Importantly, the Stoic influence is not confined to the realm of philosophy. As Jacqueline Lagreé said, "Stoicism ceases to be a true philosophy and becomes instead an ethical and then legal *attitude*."[13] In the words of Bernard Russell: "[The Stoic ideal of egalitarianism] could not be consistently realized in [antiquity], but it influenced legislation, particularly in improving the status of women and slaves. […] And when at last, in the seventeenth

century, the opportunity came to combat despotism effectually, the Stoic doctrines of natural law and natural equality [...] acquired a practical force."[14] Today ideas akin to Stoicism can be found in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy[15], not to mention other popular methods of soul-healing, such as, e.g., coaching. Even the most elusive and most enduring human device, the language itself, testifies to the persistent presence of Stoicism. While no one ever speaks of being "Fichtean" about something and no one talks of living a "Leibnizian" life, the words "stoic" and "stoical" are indelible parts of common parlance. As Robert Arrington put it, "when people today speak of 'being philosophical' about some issue or series of events, the attitude or frame of mind they refer to is precisely the one recommended by the Stoics."[16]

Eminence of Stoicism has been acknowledged by many authors and philosophers. Schopenhauer 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."[17] Wilhelm Windelband proclaimed that Stoicism is "one of the most powerful and pregnant creations in the history of the conceptions of human life."[18] MacIntyre declared that "Stoicism remains one of the permanent moral possibilities within the cultures of the West."[19] Hume asserted that "the ancient schools, particularly that of Zeno, produced examples of virtue and constancy which seem astonishing to present times."[20] Montesquieu affirmed that "there has never been one [sect of philosophy] whose principles were more worthy of men."[21] In Dilthey's judgment, Stoicism has had "the strongest and most lasting influence that any philosophical ethic had been able to achieve."[22] Even Emmanuel Levinas, whose own philosophy is quite antipodal to Stoicism, paid his respect and named Stoicism among the "highest, exceptional hours"[23] of Western philosophy. The list goes on and on.

The late 20th and early 21st century have witnessed an upsurge of interest and publications on Stoicism – something that might be called "a Stoic boom." This includes theoretical and interpretative works[24], new translations of the classical Stoic works[25] and new biographies of the ancient Stoics[26]. This boom, however, transcends the boundary of scholar study. The goal is greater: it's an attempt to reestablish Stoicism as a viable philosophy of life. Among authors germane in this regard we should count, first and foremost, Lawrence Becker[27], then William B. Irvine[28], Massimo Pigliucci[29], Donald Robertson[30], William Stephens[31] and many others (and, last and least, myself[32]). Many of them share Becker's manifesto of reinterpretation, i.e. the idea that "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."[33] As mentioned, this approach has overflowed the usual brim of scholarship, and it picks up momentum as a popular movement. There is, for example, the Modern Stoicism endeavor[34], there are events like the annual "Stoicon," there are various online Stoic communities[35] and blogs[36], and there is an increasing presence of Stoicism in the social media[37]. This revival of interest in modern, applied Stoicism adds of course to the relevance of the subject matter of this book.

This book doesn't lay out any definition of what Stoicism is. I outline specific concepts whenever necessary, but this work is by no means an introductory volume. It is justified by the practical reasons since it would be difficult to fit both the exposition of the doctrine and the critical discussion into just one book of reasonable length. More importantly, we need to keep in mind that Stoicism has never been a closed, perfectly defined and immutable system of definite propositions. Seneca loyally reminded his reader not to "think [of him as] a deserter," who "speaks without book and authority"[38], for he wasn't the first representative of Stoicism to has his own opinion. As A. A. Long said: "Stoicism, unlike Epicureanism, was never a monolithic church."[39]

Stoicism has never been a fixed codex, and the Stoic tradition has always been to evolve. Even in the ancient school, there was no uniformity of thought. The lack of consensus between the founding fathers was almost proverbial. There was even "a dispute between Cleanthes and Chrysippus upon this very point of walking: they could by no means agree."[40] In this light, it seems acceptable to continue with a detailed discussion of Stoicism without droning too much over the basics. The discussion set forth below is legitimate even without a precise specification of what particular flavor of Stoicism I embrace. And if this is not enough, then let it be said that I would go with the interpretation of Stoicism as cheerful exercise and contemplation of one's agency. This is along Becker's understanding of Stoic virtue as perfect agency, in his own words, "we hold that, considered as an end, virtue consists in perfected agency."[41] To borrow from his idiom some more, this interpretation can be expressed as: Stoicism is about constructing and employing all-things-considered normative propositions of practical reason[42]. This reading is also akin to what MacIntyre says in *After Virtue*, that the core of Stoicism is the "right action by an agent with a rightly formed will."[43]

Another preliminary issue that requires a brief discussion is the question of "a Stoic sage vs. a Stoic in training." The question is, to speak loosely, whether this inquiry pertains to sages only, i.e., to the alleged individuals

who live perfect and pristine Stoic lives, or if it also applies to the "Stoic progressors," (to use Holowchak's term[44]) who are just on their way to become Stoics and who merely aim at the elevated goal of Stoic sagacity.

The imbalance between "sages" and "progressors" has always been a factor in Stoicism. The ancient Stoics were well aware that their philosophy set a very high standard for moral behavior and that an actual Stoic sage was very hard to come by. In other words, Stoicism is self-aware that it's difficult to embrace. What follows from this is not only that the vast majority of self-proclaimed Stoics are actually merely Stoic progressors, but also that the argument presented in this book is valid throughout. It applies both to the ideal Stoic lives and to those who barely started their adventure with Stoicism.

Challenges facing Stoicism

There is a number of problems that Stoicism faces, and there is a string of charges that the Stoics may be – and have been – taxed with. Among the challenges that are most important from the today's (and mine) point of view, I should name at least the following.

[1] Stoicism has been accused of being inhumane[45]. It has been accused of demanding too much, of placing the bar too high, in a word, of calling for unmeetable standards. According to this charge, Stoicism is too difficult, or even impossible, to uphold.

This criticism has taken a plethora of specific forms. Denis Diderot reflected upon his reading of Seneca, that "demanding too much from a man, isn't it a way to achieve nothing?"[46] David Hume pointed out that "the fabric and constitution of our mind no more depend on our choice, than that of our body,"[47] and thus "nature has, in large measure, deprived us"[48] of the "resource"[49] of intellectual malleability the Stoics want to build on. Also, many contemporary psychological and psychotherapeutic currents oppose the Stoic idea that it's easier to reshape one's mental framework than the external circumstances.

The ancient Stoics themselves were well aware of this problem. Seneca refers the "common outcry against the Stoics,"[50] that they "command impossibilities."[51] He declares that he knows "that the doctrine of the Stoics is unpopular among the ignorant as being excessively severe."[52] In the ancient Stoic writings, this problem is often expressed in a discussion of how rare a real Stoic sage is. In *On Firmness*, Serenus, the addressee of the treatise and Seneca's imaginary interlocutor, is, reportedly, in the habit of saying that the "wise man of ours [i.e., the Stoic sage] is nowhere to be found."[53] Seneca partially agrees and declares that "what is great [...] is not

often produced."[54] He also admits that "only one [sage] appears at long intervals"[55] and even gives an approximate time frame: "[a good man of the first class] you will scarce find such a phoenix in a thousand years."[56] In a similar vein, Epictetus defies his audience to show him at least one genuine Stoic sage:

> You will find that most of you are Epicureans, a few Peripatetics [...] But show me a Stoic, if you can. Where or how? [...] Show me a man who is sick and happy, in danger and happy, dying and happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy. Show him: I desire, by the gods, to see a Stoic.[57]

[2] The general charge of "inhumanity" can take the specific form of "excessive harshness toward fellow humans." According to this line of criticism, Stoicism compels us to be somewhat cruel, cold-hearted or at least less than compassionate towards others. This, as Davidson calls it, "over-emphasis on the stern, austere, unsympathetic side of morality"[58] is in part rooted in the fact that other people are unavoidably counted in the category of "things not in our power" (more on this in chapter 13). There is powerful evidence to substantiate this charge.

Some ancient Stoic formulas make our sensitivity flinch. Just consider this: " – Suppose that my friends have died [...]. – What else have they suffered than that which is the condition of mortals?"[59] Or: "My family [...] will starve. – What then? Their starvation does not lead to some other end than yours, does it?"[60] Some Stoic advice is quite brutal, to say the least: "If you are kissing your child or wife, say that it is a human being whom you are kissing, for when the wife or child dies, you will not be disturbed."[61] Some precepts are just shy of inducing trauma: "while you are kissing your child say with a lisping voice, 'Tomorrow you will die.'"[62]

The ancient Stoics didn't shrink from the rhetoric of dehumanization, which is particularly unsettling to a contemporary ear:

> Why [...] did you call him a human being? [...] Neither are the nose and the eyes sufficient to prove that one is a human being, but you must see whether one has the judgments that belong to a human being. Here is a man who does not listen to reason [...] he is an ass. Here is one whose sense of self-respect has grown numb; he is useless, a sheep, anything but a human being[63].

Finally, some of the Stoic attitudes toward other humans are downright unacceptable in the world after Auschwitz, Kolyma, and Rwanda:

> Wars and factions and deaths of many men and destructions of cities? And what is there great in all this? – What, nothing great in this? – Why, what is there great in the death of many oxen and many

> sheep and the burning and destruction of many nests of swallows or storks? – Is there any similarity between this and that? – A great similarity. Men's bodies perished in the one case, and bodies of oxen and sheep in the other. Petty dwellings of men were burned, and so were nests of storks. What is there great or dreadful about that?[64]

This problem has been widely commented on by philosophers and scholars. In *On Firmness*[65] Seneca recounts the story of Stilbo, who stated that he had lost nothing although "his inheritance had been given up to pillage, his daughters had been outraged by the enemy, his country had fallen under a foreign dominion."[66] Denis Diderot remarked that he was "revolted"[67] by these words and by Seneca's praise of Stilbo conduct. Diderot calls Stilbo "a man of bronze,"[68] and says that he "must be peculiarly isolated from all that is dear to us, from all things sacred to other people."[69] Diderot also declares that if Stoicism advises to follow Stilbo's steps, then Diderot himself "is not at all Stoic and he takes pride in it."[70] "If a sage […] cannot be found more than once, all the better. If one should resemble him, I swear never to be a sage."[71]

Bertrand Russell also wrote about a "certain coldness in the Stoic conception of virtue,"[72] which he understood as follows. "The sage does not feel sympathy; when his wife or children die, he reflects that this event is no obstacle to his own virtue, and therefore he does not suffer deeply. Friendship [...] must not be carried to the point where your friend's misfortunes can destroy your holy calm."[73] The conclusion is simple: "Love, except in a superficial sense, is absent from [the Stoic] conception of virtue."[74] John Rist, put it this way: "Each man has one and only one object of value to be cherished, namely his own higher self. By a law of nature, he is not able to love others as he loves himself."[75] Nancy Sherman formulates her doubts starkly: "If we are to prepare ourselves to see the loss of children and friends as little different from bidding adieu to a favorite crystal goblet that breaks, then what is the point of building a life around family and friends? [...] This is the unacceptable face of orthodox Stoicism."[76] In the "Defects of Stoicism" section of his 1917 book William de Witt Hyde says this:

> It may be well enough to treat things as indifferent, and work them over into such mental combinations as best serve our rational interests. To treat persons in that way, however, to make them mere pawns in the game which reason plays, is heartless, monstrous [77].

Finally, Edwyn Bevan articulates it this way: "The Wise Man was not to concern himself with his brethren [...] Benevolence he was to have [...] but there was one thing he must not have, and that was love. [...] Pity, in the

sense of painful emotion caused by the sight of other men's suffering, is actually a vice."[78]

[3] Today's meaning, status, and validity of the flagship Stoic principle of "following nature" is far from clarity. This issue deserves a book-length study of its own, but the gist of the problem is this. **First**, the onset of the scientific discourse in recent centuries has pushed the teleological view of nature into a much more irrational (or even mystical) sphere than the ancient Stoics originally conceived. **Second**, the Darwinian revolution undermined our reliance on teleology even further. **Third**, "conformity with nature" was quite a self-evident concept for the ancient Stoics. Today it's quite the contrary. We have a gamut of possible interpretations of it. Some of them are highly tautological[79], some are ethically empty[80], some make the very term "nature" redundant[81], and none of them is superior or more convincing than others. **Fourth**, the social, political, scientific and technological progress has made "nature" incomparably more malleable than the Stoics had held. **Fifth**, the rhetorical power of the "appeal to nature" can be used for unethical purposes, for example when it is applied to support the alleged superiority of genders, races, nations or sexual orientations. **Sixth**, "following nature" may dangerously devolve into a form of Nuremberg defense, i.e., it may relinquish responsibility for our actions and transfer it upon abstract and inhuman "nature" whose "higher orders" cannot be disobeyed.

[4] Finally, Stoicism has also been criticized for making its adepts miss certain elusive but essential elements of human experience. This point was particularly inspiring to me, and this book originated as an assessment of such a "price tag" on Stoicism. My intention was to study whether pursuing a good Stoic life forces us to renounce some vital aspects of our humanity.

What are these aspects? For instance, the Stoics made their followers avoid something so intrinsically human as laughter. Their stance was quite unequivocal in this respect. "Let not your laughter be much, nor on many occasions"[82] and "take care also not to provoke laughter"[83] as Epictetus advised. Another example is the argument that Stoicism demands us to "petrify" ourselves. Alexander Pope put it this way: "In lazy apathy let Stoics boast / Their virtue fix'd; 'tis fix'd as in a frost."[84] Common criticism (particularly in recent times) that the Stoics require their adherents to suppress their emotions is yet another facet of this problem. In John Rist's words: "The picture-book Stoic wise man is devoid of passions, emotionless and unfeeling. In some respects this picture is accurate, but in a number of others it is an influential caricature."[85] In Dorothea Frede's

phrasing: "Stoicism is a philosophy of moral rigor. This rigor has given rise to […] [a stereotype that] a Stoic either has no feelings or successfully suppresses them."[86] Last and foremost, we have Nietzsche who explicitly claims that for some people assuming the Stoic position might be a loss (or even a loss of losses): "[For those] whose work is of the spirit [...] it would be the loss of losses to be deprived of their subtle irritability and be awarded in its place a hard Stoic hedgehog skin."[87]

Why artistic creativity?

The last passage from Nietzsche serves as one of the mottos of this book, and it does so for a reason. I won't dwell much on the thickness of the Stoic skin, but we may safely assume that "those whose work is of the spirit" are artists, writers and creative persons of all sorts[88]. And this is the central idea of this book: to analyze whether it would be a "loss of losses" for artists to adopt the Stoic philosophy of life. In other words, the big question is about whether Stoicism dams artistic creativity, or, in yet another formula, whether the essential tenets of our contemporary understanding of artistic creativity are translatable into the Stoic idiom or not.

Why does artistic creativity deserve interest at all? Why is it so important? There are a few specific reasons for this.

[1] There is a cluster of premises which make us suspect that there is a fundamental divergence between the Stoic and artistic models of life (I will analyze them in detail in chapter 3). Given that our culture holds both Stoicism and artistic creativity in exceptionally high regard (details will follow), we face a landscape in which two apexes of the human spirit possibly negate each other. It seems promising and inspiring to pursue an analysis of this alleged conflict.

[2] Artistic creativity is an idea that our contemporary Western world attaches great importance to. As George Steiner puts it, it "is considered the highest capacity that human beings possess."[89] Henryk Elzenberg calls artistry "the highest, the most perfect embodiment of the sense of life"[90] (and assesses that Marcus Aurelius "lacked it completely"[91]). In Alexander Pope's words, "invention" is "the highest capacity of man, a near-divine attribute."[92] It's clear that the zeitgeist of our era hinges more directly on artistic creativity than that of antiquity did. It would undoubtedly raise eyebrows if we heard someone applying the words of Epictetus to *Hamlet*, condescendingly asserting that Shakespeare's work is nothing more than "perturbations of men who value externals."[93]

[3] Artistic creativity today has also a broader sense and even wider impact. It's linked to the capability of reinventing oneself and reinventing the discourse as such. In other words, artistic creativity connects with the ability, audacity, and will to advance new ways of life, new outlooks on the world and new vocabularies (in the Rortian sense of the word[94]). As Isaiah Berlin and Richard Rorty have argued, and as I will discuss in detail in chapter 2, this implies that our present understanding and experience of "the human" can be – to a certain extent – explained in terms of creative capacities. This way, the discussion of Stoicism and artistic creativity contributes to the discussion of the relevance of Stoicism as such.

[4]Focus on the possible contradiction between Stoicism and artistic creativity provides an organized and useful platform to study several other problems yielded by either Stoicism itself or by its juxtaposition to modern sensibility. This will happen in chapter 6 with the "ascetic misinterpretation" of Stoicism and in chapter 10 with the "conservative misinterpretation." In other words, salient parts of the discussion of the current validity of Stoicism can be neatly arranged around artistic creativity.

[5] The problem of Stoicism and artistic creativity is greatly underrepresented in the existing literature of the subject. As far as I'm aware, there exists neither a comprehensive work to discuss the issue, nor even one to provide a clear and explicit exposition of it. Scholars and researchers have done extraordinary work reconstructing the Stoic doctrine and accounting for its intricacies. Yet, gaps between Stoicism and other realms of human experience have received less attention. The Stoic scholars haven't been drawn to the problems of artistic creativity and, on the other hand, authors writing on artistic creativity haven't exhibited great interest in Stoicism. This book fills this gap. It's needed particularly given the last upsurge of popular interest in Stoic philosophy and its insistence on the practical approach. The Stoic boom of recent years only adds weight to the question of compatibility between Stoic and other ideals of human life.

* * *

All that said, we can now address one final issue, namely, artistic creativity as contrasted with creativity in general. Just like the Stoic understanding of happiness is one among many, artistic creativity is a specific instance of creativity in general. How does it play out here?

Chapter 2 contains a detailed presentation of the understanding of artistic creativity assumed in this book. It's the *artistic* creativity, not

creativity in general, that I juxtapose with Stoicism. I believe that there are substantial reasons to do so.

First of all, an examination of artistic creativity and Stoicism is, so to speak, more philosophically weighty than a discussion of Stoicism and creativity in general. This so happens because artistic creativity is a much more specific and particular subject than creativity in general. If I had focused on the latter, the conclusions would have been vaguer. **Second**, an attempt to discuss the whole spectrum of creativity, not just its artistic subdomain, would be infeasible in a single book. From the practical point of view, it would just be too complex and too multifarious a subject. **Third**, this is all uncharted territory. Stoicism has never been positioned against neither creativity as such, nor artistic creativity specifically. Thus, it's prudent to deal with a narrowed-down and well-defined subject before the immense and blurred complexity of the greater problem is taken on. Particularly given that, **fourth**, this limited subject is of extraordinary significance. Artistic creativity enjoys its very special status in our culture; it has its own gravity and weight. Artistic creativity holds – culturally – a very special, elated, or even somehow "magical" or "sacred" position. All of this makes the Stoic assessment of it an inspiring and pressing issue.

Remarks on methodology

The methodology I employ in this book can be best described on two levels. On the tactical level, the argument will be organized around a string of dialectical exchanges. I anticipate counter-arguments, and I reply to them. This approach is rooted in my core belief that the convincing power of any philosophical position doesn't come from blind devotion which ignores the darker side of the coin. The value of things and value of arguments comes not from hiding the existing cracks but rather from the courage to bring them to the spotlight. Ideas get their strength and vigor not from careless ignorance but from tackling the problems head-on.

On the strategic level, I use presentism, i.e. "an attitude toward the past dominated by present-day attitudes and experiences."[95] In saying this, I intend both to make a methodological declaration and to answer a possible objection. This objection is that my approach to Stoicism and the demands I make from it are heavily influenced by today's conceptual grid and by the modern understanding of certain concepts, particularly the concept of artistic creativity. This is unacceptable – the objection goes – because an ancient philosophy cannot be confronted with expectations which are only expressible in the contemporary terms. The idiom of ancient Stoicism and the current idiom of artistic creativity are incompatible, hence it's fundamentally illegitimate to juxtapose the two.

I acknowledge this objection, and my answer is this. The power of reinterpretation of Stoicism throughout history and its ability to retain validity across historical eras comes precisely from that it takes questions about any given present. There is a continuous reception of Stoicism since antiquity, and it has its impact throughout the centuries – it is so because every new interpretation of Stoicism is presentist. If Marcus Aurelius was possible if Justus Lipsius was possible and if Lawrence Becker is possible, they are possible because they ask Stoic questions from within their very own time. Thus, it seems only right to juxtapose the contemporary understanding of artistic creativity with a contemporary reading of Stoicism.

One more methodological remark is that in this book I frequently assume the position of an inquisitor who examines whether or not a given notion is agreeable with Stoicism. This is of course merely a convention, a rhetorical device. I don't aspire to be an *arbiter Stoicorum* or any other embodiment of an omniscient spectator. As mentioned before, Stoicism is a pluralistic school of philosophy, and I'm – as Seneca would put it – not the first one to speak from his own opinion.[96]

Also, I'm far from suggesting that what is at odds with Stoicism is inferior. Quite the opposite, this book is inspired by a great reverence for *both* Stoicism and artistic creativity. A conclusion that a given outlook on artistic creativity cannot be reconciled with the Stoic way of thinking is not a reason to condemn it. If a personal viewpoint be admitted, I would say that whenever some Stoic and creative concepts contradict each other, it rather saddens me. I would imagine that in some utopian world they would always concur.

When it comes to the sources, I rely in great measure – possibly exceedingly – on the three Roman Stoics: Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. The reasons for this are as follows. **[1]** Obviously, in Long's words: "We have only scraps of the pre-Roman Stoics."[97]. Only the mentioned trio can offer us a bigger picture, coherent, however warped, instead of snippets, dispersed fragments or second-hand reports. **[2]** To quote Long again, "it is the Stoicism of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus which has had greatest influence on later authors."[98] **[3]** There is the position held by Troels Engberg-Pedersen, that the views of the late Roman Stoics could actually be much closer to the original Old Stoa than the scholars originally assumed. As he puts it: "it is gradually becoming clear that late Stoicism [...] represents something of a return to early Stoicism across the developments that took place in the middle Stoicism of philosophers like Panaetius [...] and his pupil Posidonius [...]."[99]

What I want to pursue in this book is philosophy which is English in language, analytical in clarity and continental in scope. The frame of this book, alas, is predominantly Western and my loyalty to the good old hopes of traditionally understood liberalism can clearly be seen in some portions of the book. On the larger view, this book is undoubtedly a part of the "West," where the term stands for the amalgam of Greek philosophy, Roman law and Jewish religion transmitted by the Western Roman Empire and Latin Christianity, and further shaped by the Renaissance, Protestant Reformation, Enlightenment, Colonialism, Industrial Revolution and the heavy legacy of the 20th century. Obviously, this is not because of lack of deference to non-Western cultures, but because it's the Western history of ideas that Stoicism is a part of and because non-Western cultures are, sadly, beyond my area of expertise. This book quotes authors who wrote in Danish, English, French, German, Greek, Latin and Polish. Some Russian poets are mentioned, but Russian philosophers aren't. Not a single example is summoned from the great realms of the Arab, Persian, Indian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, African, Latin American, and other traditions.

The book is a result of my ongoing interest and research in Stoicism. The motivation which has drawn me to it is twofold: personal and professional. On the personal level, I have been captivated – as so many others have – by the grandiose ambitions of the Stoic ethics which promise freedom from fear and doubt. This personal matter swiftly yielded professional interest. As a philosopher, I became curious what the limits and restrictions of the Stoic commitment are and whether Stoicism can be a viable solution in the 21st century. This book is one of the products of my inquiry thus fueled.

Unless otherwise specified, all translations from French were done by Olga Kaczmarek, all translations from German were consulted with Michał Dobrzański, and all translations from Polish are my own. Obviously, all the slips of thought and shortcomings of argument are also my own.

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