

BOOK REVIEW

Manual of Reformed Stoicism by Piotr Stankiewicz

Reviewed by Dr. Chuck Chakrapani

Manual of Reformed Stoicism by Piotr Stankiewicz is a tightly structured, well-written, and beautifully produced book. It deserves to be among the top three modern books on applied Stoicism. It covers the same ground as most modern books on applied Stoicism, only better.

Structure

Every chapter of the book is structured the same way. The author starts with a concept, explains it in a couple of paragraphs, and supports it with a series of Stoic quotes from one of the 'big three' Roman Stoics; Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Seneca. Each quote is followed by the author's commentary.

Writing style

Piotr's writing is clear and untroubled. His examples are modern and relevant. It's impressive, given that the author is a non-native speaker of the language. He is proud of it, and rightly so.

Contents

The first four chapters cover two mostly non-controversial principles of Stoicism: 1. Our judgments (stories, or narratives) underlie our problems; and 2. We should confine ourselves to what we can control and stay away from what we cannot. The remaining 20 chapters are applications of these principles to our daily life—acting deliberately, living in the present, making decisions, preparing for things going wrong, dealing with adversities, being autonomous, being happy, etc.

In most instances, the quotes and commentaries that follow are relevant. But there are places where one gets the feeling that the author had decided what he wanted to say and then went looking for a quote to support it. For example, in support of living in the present (p. 82),

the author quotes Marcus Aurelius, "If one should suddenly ask 'What do you have now in your thoughts?' with perfect openness you might immediately answer 'this or that.'" Marcus says this in the context of our thoughts not being malicious. It has little to do with what the author is trying to support. His following commentary supports his idea even less.

From time to time, Piotr indulges in idiosyncratic interpretations of solid Stoic principles, reminiscent of William Irvine's "Trichotomy of Control." For example, instead of examining impressions without our narratives, the author proposes (Ch. 2) that we could potentially substitute our own "useful" narratives. His reasoning is that we can't say what is "true" but we can say what is useful. If only it were that simple. Many of our problems can be traced back to our comforting narratives arising out of rage, revenge, or greed, but considered useful by the narrator.

While interpreting what he doesn't agree with, Piotr's take seems to take a literal and narrow view. For example, he dismisses Marcus Aurelius' putting everything in context of the whole on the grounds that "it is highly doubtful (or even dangerous)" to quantify suffering. (p. 187) Yet, when it comes to supporting arguments he likes, the author takes a broader view and rightly reminds us that we aren't "coerced to abandon common sense." (p. 132)

Reformed Stoicism

Piotr tells us that reformed Stoicism attempts to answer the question, "What would Stoicism look like today, if it had enjoyed an uninterrupted intellectual and institutional history for the past 23 centuries?" (p.312). Nice work, if you can

get it.

Reconstructing 2,300 years of what-ifs? I cannot even

reconstruct what would have happened if I had missed the train yesterday. Besides, which (non-religious) philosophy has ever endured for two thousand years?

So what is left? It's Stoicism that is applicable today without any metaphysical support. Broadly speaking it is the modernized version of ancient Stoic ethics. There is nothing new here. The rejection of Stoic physics and logic goes way back to the time of Zeno and continues to this day.

Stripped of its evangelism ("The house of Stoicism won't collapse and it won't be undermined...", p.264), hyperboles ("Reformed Stoicism is powerful enough to withstand all intellectual turns . . . ", p.269), and the "we vs. they" rhetoric ("We, the reformed Stoics,..." p.267), this is a good book on applied Stoicism, and compares favorably with *The Practicing Stoic* by Ward Farnsworth which covers the same ground (different focus), the same way (quotes and commentaries), and avoids physics and logic, without the polemic.

I suspect Piotr's attempt to define the nature and scope of 'reformed' Stoicism may be premature especially in an applied book format. It may be while before a broad consensus emerges on this.

Notwithstanding all such quibbles, *Reformed Stoicism* is a good book. It could have been even better (and shorter) if it had stuck to the applied part without being so self-consciously "reformed." It deserves a wide audience but at \$67 it could be too pricey for many.

