



Focus on the timeless principle

Piotr Stankiewicz

As I mentioned a month ago in my first piece, in this column I will step by step explain reformed Stoicism, i.e., my reinterpretation of updated Stoicism for our time. Just as the name suggests, reformed Stoicism diverts many times from the original doctrine. Sometimes I skip certain Stoic dogmas and sometimes I deeply reframe them. Yet, I feel tempted to begin with where I stick to the original Stoic story.

A 21st century lens

For it is a really remarkable matter to consider. I start off with quite a simple intention. I want to keep the Stoic message alive and thus I want to look at it through a 21st century lens. Once I put it on, plenty of fascinating things happen. Some portions of original Stoicism fade out of view, some get to look quite different. But what remains intact? Is there any such thing? Is there something we hold on to verbatim?

Absolute vs. relative truths

This problem is much broader than Stoicism alone. It is a perennial debate in philosophy. Are there any absolute truths of any sort, truths that hold no matter the historical, social or political context? Or maybe it's the other way around, maybe everything is cultural

and nothing is independent from time, place, and society?

One of the key lessons from 19th and 20th philosophy is that such absolute truths are hard to come by. Circumstances, language, culture, and all sort of contingent factors have a critical impact on the way we think.

They hold our thoughts in quite a grip (steadfast, but sometime sneaky). If we want to be Stoics for real today, we mustn't neglect that lesson.

A truly timeless canon

But I will tell you this. If there is anything that can pass this test, if there is anything that is truly timeless – it is the Stoic dichotomy of control.

I assume there is no need to explain it from the scratch. The concept of dichotomy of control is beautifully simple. All the things, facts, occurrences, and experiences are either within our power or outside of it. We either can control them or we can't. We need to realize this and we need to focus on the part we can control. As simple as that.

The simplicity of the idea

The ultimate simplicity accounts for the inherent beauty of this idea, but it's

surely no coincidence. It's precisely this breath-taking, quasi-tautological simplicity that makes dichotomy of control timeless. Its paramount logical power makes it stand out, it makes it immune to changing circumstances, intellectual fads, and cultural contexts.

If there is a reasoning that holds and bears fruit no matter where, when, and how one lives — it is this one. If there is a self-evident, self-explanatory ethical guideline that can help any person live a more satisfying life – it is this one.

The infallibility of the idea

Ernest Renan once remarked that *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius is a perennial gospel that will never be disproved because it contains no dogma that might be falsified. Kudos to Renan and greater kudos to Marcus still, but it's the dichotomy of control that the praise fits best. Utter simplicity makes dichotomy of control infallible. There is nothing in it that could be falsified. If any idea is eternal — it's this one.

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