

WHY STOICISM NEEDS UPDATING

Piotr Stankiewicz

One of the attractions of Stoicism is that its main ideas have withstood the test of time. However, the peripheral ideas and what the ancient Stoics believed to be the foundation of Stoicism have been challenged by many. In recent times, among others, Lawrence Becker (New Stoicism), Massimo Pigliucci (Stoicism 2.0) and myself (Stoic Minimalism) have written about this. Piotr calls his version 'reformed Stoicism', and presents his thoughts in this series of articles.

Chuck Chakrapani, Editor.

My quarter-life crisis

A personal story is always a good opening of a piece and of a column too. So let me open with one. How did my Stoic path begin?

It was back in my early twenties, when the 21st century was still young. I was a Physics major about to become a student of philosophy too. It was August; I was vacationing. Yet, the summer was quite rainy, and my mood was quite gloomy. A big life-changing event would fit a Stoic origin story here, but I will disappoint you. It was all ordinary with me. I was simply in the painful process of figuring out what to do next, which is what some jokingly call a quarter-life crisis.

Pulling myself together on the Stoic grounds

Then a thought came to my mind — how about I try to pull myself together on the Stoic grounds? I knew the basics of Stoicism but not much more. Why not learn more while trying to help myself? It seemed like a plan, so once the vacation was over, I went to the library first thing and simply

started reading more. I remember that moment with eerie specificity. I grasped Reale's History of Ancient Philosophy and dug in. So it began.

Soon it escalated. In the coming months and years, I found myself immersed deeply in the Stoic works. In these depths, two things started dawning on me.

Dealing with confused expositions

First, that while there are many sources — ancient and modern — on Stoicism, most of them aren't systematic enough to satisfy the nerdy standards of my analytical mind.

I found a fair deal of confusion out there. I've seen principles mixed up with case studies, and comments from very different levels of insight lined up next to one another. I didn't like it that way, and I realized that there was room (and market) for my own works on Stoicism. I realized that I might want to share the story of my investigations with others. This is how my Stoic books were born.

Dealing with modern sensibilities

On the other hand, I also recognized that there is quite a lot in Stoicism that is not perfectly in tune with our modern sensibility and with the conceptual framework we use today. Some Stoic teachings, if taken verbatim, sound dated, some sound naive, and some, well, turn out irrelevant. I have believed adamantly in the core Stoic promise of self-sustained happiness, but after years of study, I also knew already that it couldn't be achieved by following the

ancient Founding Fathers blindly. Too much has changed over the last two millennia. Too much has changed in philosophy and in science, in human society and its politics. I came to understand that the Stoic challenge for today is to reframe, reinterpret and — yes! — reform Stoicism so that it can be coherently expressed in the language of our time. Thus the concept of reformed Stoicism was born.

Stoicism, valid and vivid

If we want a valid and vivid Stoicism today (and we do want it!), then simply studying the ancients is not enough. We need to be bold, we need to rethink them. We need to consider carefully which parts of Stoicism hold, which require a new expression and which we need to leave out. This is the only way we keep ideas alive. Stoicism is way too precious to leave it to the museum of dead past. In the new century and the new millennium, in the new world of breathtaking change and unfathomable advancement, we need a new version of Stoicism. We need reformed Stoicism. I set it forth in my book *Reformed Stoicism* and I will be presenting it here in this column in my monthly pieces. We start today. Hop on, embark on the journey with me!



Piotr Stankiewicz, Ph.D., is a writer and philosopher, promoter of reformed Stoicism. He authored Manual of Reformed Stoicism, and Does Happiness Write Blank Pages? as well as other books in

his native Polish.