

# **Manual of Reformed Stoicism**

**Piotr Stankiewicz**

**Series in Philosophy**



**VERNON PRESS**

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[www.vernonpress.com](http://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: 2019957903

ISBN: 978-1-62273-648-5

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*to Olga and Natalia*



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*It is interesting [...] 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, [...] Hume and Kant, Darwin and Marx, and the vicissitudes of ethics in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>*

Lawrence C. Becker





# Introduction

*The ancients have found out proper remedies, for the several maladies of the mind, but how they are to be applied, and when, it is the business of the party concerned to enquire.*

Seneca, *Epistles*, 64.8<sup>ii</sup>

*Try at least: the [...] attempt is not disgraceful.*

Epictetus, *Discourses*, IV.1.177

We, reformed Stoics, have a plain but ambitious goal. We want to learn together how to live well and happily. We live today so we don't merely recount ancient Stoicism. Instead, we offer a reformed version for the modern times.

This book is a manifesto of reformed Stoicism. It's intended to be a practical and positive manual, one which is accessible to everyone. It requires nothing from the reader but an open mind. No academic or philosophical background is needed. Besides a few remarks in this Introduction and a fuller outline in Conclusions and Discussions, this book contains no vague theory and no abstractions. Reformed Stoicism is about practice and real action. Also, this book contains no jargon. Reformed Stoicism is clear and comprehensible. It has nothing to do with verbal abracadabra and terminological muddle. It's a philosophy of life and a way of life.

Stoicism was originally developed around 300 BC in ancient Greece. From day one, it has had its distinct features. First of all, it's available to everyone. There are no bounds. Everybody can become a Stoic and live happily by its precepts, regardless of their gender, age, race, sexuality, nationality, intelligence, education, worldview and sense of humor. Second, it can make us happy no matter what our situation is. In these ways, it is universal. It never fails us and it proves helpful in every turn of events. Third, it's easy. It's easy to learn the Stoic way of life and the Stoic happiness is always within our grasp.

Reformed Stoicism is about enjoying and exercising our agency. It's about the flow of making autonomous and right decisions, and about celebrating our ability to make them. The ability to go with this flow (the ancients called it "virtue"), if properly understood, endows us with an almost godlike power which can be put to use in almost all instances of life. This universally available human agency is the best contemporary translation of the ancient Stoic idea of a divine spark present in every human. Its universal availability

accounts for the Stoic emphasis on egalitarianism and cosmopolitanism (this part of Stoicism is more important today than ever). The awareness that even in the most difficult situation, we are always capable of making autonomous and right decisions is the Stoic key to happiness.

To these ends, Stoicism offers an impressive and comprehensive system for living a life. Highly original, it was not only one of the first such systems that Western philosophy yielded, but also, in my profound conviction, it is the most fruitful and coherent one. Stoicism is focused on finding the most adroit and most fortunate way of dealing with worldly affairs, all-things-considered<sup>iii</sup> and given the resources available. Stoicism insists that a right way to deal with life can always be found: both when the resources abound and when they are scarce. The latter case translates into the famous Stoic promise that happiness is independent from the external world and that it can be achieved no matter the circumstances.

Why *reformed* Stoicism? Because it is time, in short, for a new generation of Stoics: new Stoics to cope with new problems and seize new opportunities. Human eyes now look into the new millennium and beyond: into a new world of breathtaking change, unprecedented challenge and unfathomable advancement. For these reasons and according to the founding doctrines of our school, our quest for progress and our pursuit of happiness require us to evolve. Our time, in short, calls for a fresh interpretation of Stoicism.

Thus, contrary to our venerable predecessors, we no longer bind our decision-making capabilities to any pre-ordained cosmological order. We don't associate ourselves with any cosmic element, and we don't appeal to any higher power. We neither trust nor rely on "nature" (be it purposive or not), and we don't count on rationality of the universe. We don't shackle ourselves to any metaphysical point of view and we don't root our principles in any speculative insight.

Instead, we place emphasis on human autonomy. We rely on the usefulness rather than on the truth value of narratives. We dismiss the overtly conservative as well as the overtly ascetic misinterpretations of Stoicism. We don't summon the vanity argument. We appeal neither to alleged worthlessness and transience of worldly affairs, nor to the alleged glory and harmony of the universe. Ethically, we don't provide ready-made guidelines for conduct. We accept the burden of individual responsibility instead. We detest the stereotype of "a Stoic" pictured as a lifeless and ice-blooded figure, whose entire ambition amounts to "accepting fate." We prove the dictionary use of the word "stoical" wrong. We advance an interpretation of Stoicism as a philosophy of living an *active* life, understood as a practice of action and discipline of thought. For these reasons, a considerable number of

traditional Stoic terms are not employed in this book. There is no reference to “following nature,” “conformity to reason,” providence or eternal return. The Conclusions and Discussions section provides some more theoretical backing for any interested reader.<sup>1</sup>

The structure of the book is this: in 24 chapters I present 24 Stoic principles *aka* exercises. They are tools which we can use to organize our life, secure happiness and combat mishap. I strove to present each tool as clearly and precisely as possible and I’ve illustrated them with plain examples from daily life. Each chapter starts off with a brief “in a nutshell” section, which provides the essence of a given principle. The body of each chapter contains a selection of quotes by the ancient Stoics and each quote is followed by my extensive commentary.

This specific structure serves a few purposes. **First**, it introduces a wide array of principles. You can pick and choose whatever you think is best for you. I don’t insist that I hold the only correct interpretation. There are many ways to take Stoicism on and everyone should draw what they please. **Second**, as Seneca said, “though one might think that neither of these [precepts] alone were able to [work] [...] yet it must be confessed that when combined they have great power.”<sup>iv</sup> **Third**, this book can be used in several manners. One can read it cover to cover and page by page, treating it as a comprehensive handbook of reformed Stoicism. One can also read it piecemeal, whenever and wherever the mood strikes. The “in a nutshell” section can be used as a lifeline to momentarily refresh Stoic ideas. Chapters can be read in any order that seems suitable at the moment. **Fourth**, as reformed Stoics, we divert freely from the original doctrine wherever necessary. On the other hand – we still stick to many points of it. Extended use of the words of the ancient Stoics is the expression of our allegiance to them. **Fifth**, voicing our own argument in the form of commentaries to their works opens up an interpretive space between the original text and its modern meaning. My intention was that the process of thinking up the commentaries may somehow “repeat” itself in the reading process. My wish is that this book can be treated as an open body of writing, an invitation to a joint (author’s and reader’s) examination of the Stoic curriculum. I hope that whenever you read and re-read this book, the inquiry into the meaning of the Stoic formulas will be repeated and it will become a Stoic exercise in itself.

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<sup>1</sup> And so does my other Stoic book. See: Stankiewicz, *Does Happiness Write Blank Pages? On Stoicism and Artistic Creativity*.

Finally, a few personal remarks. I wrote this book with the understanding that teaching others is the best way to teach oneself. I can sincerely say that thanks to having written it, I've made one more step towards becoming a better Stoic. If reading it has a similar effect on you, dear reader, I will be nothing but happy. If you find something vague or incomprehensible on these pages – the fault is entirely my own, not the Stoics'. And if you feel overcome by doubt – please remember that you are not the first. Stoicism is not for those who have never fallen, but for those who want to stand up. This is not a book for those who already live perfect lives and have no second thoughts. This is a book for those who want to improve. This is a book that proposes that we go up this path – together. Let's go then.

Part one.  
Prime matters

How to look at things



## Chapter 1

# It's all about narratives

*What tortures us, therefore, is an idea. Now every evil is just as great as we consider it to be.*

Seneca, *Of Consolation. To Marcia*, 19.1

**In a nutshell:** The world we live in is not a world of facts, things and events, but a world of our narratives about facts, things and events. We won't live well and we won't be happy unless we understand that our life and happiness hinge on our narratives and nothing else.

\*\*\*

Our life consists not in facts, but in our narratives (fragment I). Narratives mediate our perception of the world, they insulate us from it (II). Most importantly, our happiness and misery depend on our narratives (III). Narratives mirror our language and *vice versa*: we create narratives by using specific words (IV). All happiness and all misery is caused by our narratives, not by the external world (V). How do we know this? Because, if it was the other way around, everyone would react in the same way to the same facts (VI) and because we often fear things before they actually happen (VII). We are responsible for forming and nourishing our narratives (VIII). Thus, we can't allow our thoughts to be careless and we mustn't forget that we ourselves are the source of everything that concerns us (IX). Stoicism doesn't hold the hardcore position that physical pain doesn't exist and that it's just a narrative (X). Yet, luxuries themselves are not the root of envy and greed, but rather our narratives about luxuries are (XI).

### Fragment I

*Such as are your habitual thoughts [i.e. narratives], such also will be the character of your mind. For the soul is dyed by the thoughts.*

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.16

**Commentary:** This core idea opens not only our first chapter but also the whole Stoic story. The way we live and the way we deal with the world

depends on how we think, that is, on our narratives. To be more precise: our every interaction with the world (for example doing something or making a decision) is always preceded by an *act of thought* (which is more or less conscious). In other words, it all starts with us thinking in a certain way about facts, events and errands. At the beginning, we pass a judgment and form an opinion about things. We do it all the time, wittingly and unwittingly, and thus we construct narratives for ourselves. Narratives make up that voice in our head that explains and comments on all things, all day long, 24/7. These narratives constitute all our experiences. This is one of the ground rules of Stoicism: we don't live in the world itself, we live in the world of our narratives.

Does it mean that all the well-known phenomena of common experience, like trees on the earth, like stars in the sky, like waves on the sea, like gossip and splendor, like recognition and oblivion are not there? Not so. These things exist undeniably, but at a distance from us. They don't have an immediate impact on us. We are separated and insulated from them by a soft cocoon of narratives which envelopes us and which mediates our contact with the world. We have direct, real contact with our narratives and with nothing else.

It sounds a bit like a paradox. Let's imagine that it's a beautiful summer day and we are driving out of town for the weekend. We feel the pleasant touch of the sun on our skin, we see the blue sky, we enjoy the prospect of having two days off work. How are we *separated* from that? Where are the narratives which envelop us? How is our experience of these things "mediated?"

The Stoic answer is this. Indeed, we can feel the sun and enjoy the prospect, we can see the sky and take in the great weather. But these sensations aren't the source of our bliss themselves. What's the source then? Our narratives about them. Let's take another example: a grim December morning. It's still dark outdoors, but we have to wake up, get dressed, and depart into the cold and snow. We are "used to" thinking about such a situation in quite unpleasant terms. And that's the entire point. It's not the darkness and low temperature that make us unhappy, it's the way we think about it. It's the narrative we have.

Facts, things and events don't define our narratives. We do that ourselves. Fact, things and events, all the outside conditions and circumstances are impotent to form any concrete narrative in our mind. All they can do is offer some bullet points around which we ourselves develop a narrative. Let's go back to the cold weather situation. It's our decision whether we narrate it as unpleasant and difficult, or maybe the contrary: as advantageous to our health or to our exercise regimen. The crucial point is that the narratives make it all possible. Between us and the summer road trip, as well as between us and the dreadful morning, there's a sphere of narratives which enables us to experience both situations in whatever way we like.



Let's take another angle and let's imagine now that we are in pain. Let's imagine that we have a toothache. If there was no difference between the pain itself and our narrative about it, how could we even discuss the possibility of a good life independent of circumstances? A toothache would automatically tarnish any possibility for happiness. Yet, this is not the case. It may be difficult but it's definitely *possible* to be happy despite a toothache. We know this for sure, since even if we can't do it ourselves, there are people who manage to do it. This is because there is the space of our human freedom between external stimulus and our reaction to it. This freedom consists in our narratives which are the buffer between us and the world. This idea is the foundation of the whole Stoic edifice explored in this book.

### Fragment II

*Things stand outside of us, themselves by themselves, neither knowing naught of themselves, nor expressing any judgment.*

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 9.15

**Commentary:** The sphere of narratives enfolds us closely. Outside of it, there is an ocean of facts and events from which we are safely separated. Marcus Aurelius pictures it the following way: we reside in a neat and comfortable house and cohabit with nothing but our narratives. All that is outdoors is detached from us, cordoned, fenced off. No outside din can reach us, no turmoil can disturb us. Facts and events are mute. They cannot speak for themselves. They will never say anything unless we give them the floor.

This "house" may be so comfortable because there are no unwanted guests in it. We personally invite and take in all the narratives we live with. Our home is our castle and our own world is our own governance. No visitor is ever a surprise: we personally court, invite and introduce all of our narratives.

The big question that arises now is which narratives should we invite? Which of them should we live with in order to live happily? Which of them should we foster? Which of them should we combat? The book you are holding right now is one big answer to these questions. Read on!

### Fragment III

*It is not uncommon for the mind, even when there is no apparent sign of distress, to afflict itself with vain imaginations [or] to make the worst interpretation of some doubtful word.*

Seneca, *Epistles*, 13.12

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# Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Lawrence C. Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6.
- <sup>ii</sup> Throughout this book I use the following translations of the classic Stoic works (unless explicitly stated otherwise in an individual endnote). (1) All quotes from Seneca's *Of Providence, On the Firmness of the Wise Man, Of Anger, Of Consolation. To Marcia, Of Consolation. To Helvia, Of Consolation. To Polybius, Of a Happy Life, Of Peace of Mind, Of Clemency, Of Leisure and Of the Shortness of Life* come from: Lucius Anneus Seneca, *Minor Dialogues Together with the Dialogue on Clemency*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1889); (2) All quotes from Seneca's *On Benefits* come from Lucius Anneus Seneca, *On Benefits*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1912). (3) Lucius Anneus Seneca, *The Epistles of Lucius Annaeus Seneca; With Large Annotations, Wherein, Particularly, the Tenets of the Antient Philosophers Are Contrasted With the Divine Precepts of the Gospel, With Regard to the Moral Duties of Mankind. In Two Volumes. By Thomas Morell, D.D.*, trans. Thomas Morell, vol. I-II (London: W. Woodfall, G.G.J., J. Robinson, 1786); (4) Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus with the Encheiridion and Fragments. Translated with Notes, the Life of Epictetus, and a View of His Philosophy*, by George Long, trans. George Long (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890); (5) Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Translated by George Long, M.A. With a Biographical Sketch and a View of the Philosophy of Antoninus by the Translator*, trans. George Long, (New York: A.L. Burt, Publisher, 189?). As discussed in "Conclusions and Discussions" I occasionally modernized grammar and spelling and changed it to American English.
- <sup>iii</sup> I borrow the phrase "all-things-considered" from Lawrence C. Becker. See: Becker, *A New Stoicism*, 5.
- <sup>iv</sup> Seneca, *Of Consolation. To Helvia*, 8.2.
- <sup>v</sup> "Fragment 9" in "Fragments" as published in: Epictetus, *The Discourses*, trans. W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), vol. II, 451.
- <sup>vi</sup> The tennis match example and its analysis are based on the excellent insight by William B. Irvine (see: William B. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life. The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95-96).
- <sup>vii</sup> Seneca, *Epistles*, 93.7. In: Seneca, *Epistles*, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).
- <sup>viii</sup> This formula is borrowed from: William B. Irvine, *A Slap in the Face: Why Insults Hurt, and Why They Shouldn't* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2013) 192, 202-203, 211 and others.
- <sup>ix</sup> Quoted from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0236%3Atext%3Dfrag%3Abook%3D0>, retrieved January 18, 2015. The website refers to *The Discourses of Epictetus, with the Encheridion and Fragments*, trans. George Long (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890).
- <sup>x</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*, I.4.13.
- <sup>xi</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses*, II.15.4-13.
- <sup>xii</sup> See: Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, 43.

- xiii Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, translated by R.D. Hicks, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942).
- xiv Seneca, *Epistles*, 94.40. In: Seneca, *Epistles*, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).
- xv Seneca, *Epistles*, 98.12-14. In: Seneca, *Epistles*, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).
- xvi Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.
- xvii "Fragment 16" in "Fragments" as published in: Epictetus, *The Discourses*, trans. W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), vol. II, 461.
- xviii See: Becker, *A New Stoicism*.
- xix Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.49.
- xx Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 12.22.
- xxi Becker, *A New Stoicism*.
- xxii Piotr Stankiewicz, *Does Happiness Write Blank Pages? On Stoicism and Artistic Creativity* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2018), xvi.
- xxiii See: Becker, *A New Stoicism*.
- xxiv In these passages I mostly rephrase what I wrote in a corresponding section about nature in: Stankiewicz, *Does Happiness Write Blank Pages?*, xvi.
- xxv See: Stankiewicz, *Does Happiness Write Blank Pages?*, 70-83.
- xxvi See: *ibid.*
- xxvii See: *ibid.*, 30-41.
- xxviii See: *ibid.*, 70-83.
- xxix Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 6.13.
- xxx The idea that "this reasoning can be reversed" comes from Henryk Elzenberg. See: Henryk Elzenberg, "Marek Aureliusz. Z historii i psychologii etyki," in: Henryk Elzenberg, *Z historii filozofii*, ed., Michał Woroniecki (Kraków: Znak, 1995), 97-213.
- xxxi Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3.24.
- xxxii Stankiewicz, *Does Happiness Write Blank Pages?*, 30-41.
- xxxiii Becker, *A New Stoicism*.
- xxxiv Irvine, *A Guide to The Good Life. The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*.
- xxxv Massimo Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).
- xxxvi Piotr Stankiewicz *et al.*, "Symposium: What Is Modern Stoicism", source: <https://modernstoicism.com/symposium-what-is-modern-stoicism/>, published July 29, 2017, retrieved November 8, 2019.
- xxxvii Piotr Stankiewicz, *Sztuka życia według stoików*, (Warszawa: G.W.FOKSAL, 2014).
- xxxviii Stankiewicz, *Does Happiness Write Blank Pages?*
- xxxix Stankiewicz, *Does Happiness Write Blank Pages?*, 114.
- xl Arrian's introduction to the *Discourses* by Epictetus. In: Epictetus, *The Discourses*, trans. W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), books I-II, 7.

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