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THE EMMANUEL Q. FERNANDO PHILOSOPHY UNDERGRADUATE CONFERENCE

THE LOGIC OF THE INNER CITADEL: RECLAIMING STOIC AGENCY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL EXTERNALITY

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the digital and contemporary world, Stoicism is often marked as emotional invulnerability and relentless self-optimization. This paper argues that such readings, social media influencers, and literature could distort classical tradition, which is better understood as a philosophy of disciplined judgement, moral agency, and rational compassion in the midst of the externals that each individual cannot reign over.

My interest in Stoicism was rooted in the innate desire to discover what it is, if not my foundation of Christianity or religion, that made it the *citadel* of who I am. I have a belief that we humans are citadels that embody a stronghold that serves the people, not only the ones in our lives, but also ourselves. In times of trouble or war, metaphorically speaking, we run towards structures that will protect us from harm. From a personal perspective, we run towards people who give us advice on how we ought to deal with these adversities. Holiday's book and the majority of his works were rooted in Stoicism, and I have realized that he communicated this philosophy to the contemporary era in an incredible yet digestible way. Centuries after its birth, I

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have found myself reading Ryan Holiday's *Ego is the Enemy* back in 2023. The word 'ego' caught my attention, so I decided to delve into this book. I would like to emphasize how Holiday's book gave me a feeling of satisfaction on a personal level, as he discusses selected Stoic phrases from the Big 3 of Stoicism (Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius). However, I cannot shake the feeling that something is missing from a philosophical view if I only see Stoicism as a source of mere satisfaction for selfish reasons.

As we think about it, Stoicism was founded back in the Ancient Era in the early 6th Century BC to early 5th Century A.D. during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Back then, historians' interest came from how the natural sciences were declining to give more focus to ethics and religion. With the rise of the contemporaries and new generations, the youth of today seems to be more awake than in the past. According to social media influencers, the youth of these generations are both known as the more daring and bold individuals, as they bring their worth to life in every interaction they have. However, this does not save these kids the trouble of real life, and whenever troubles come, we all resort to different ways to cope and or find a solution to these troubles. A lot of creators, surprisingly, claim that they have mastered the art and the philosophy of Stoicism. They spread this persona of being a stone, being stoic, and it is concerning and alarming in a manifold of ways. Therefore, I would like to debunk through this paper the logic behind what Stoicism truly is, or rather, how the concept of Amor Fati has been

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redefined for this era to be fully understood. Most importantly, I deeply understand that this is Western philosophy that I am using. With that being said, I would like to mention that I am writing my arguments from a contemporary and Filipino perspective.

II. LOGIC OF CONTROL

“I could not make your body yours, I [Zeus] have given you a portion of myself instead, the power of positive and negative impulse, of desire and aversion – the power, in other words, of making good use of impressions.” – Epictetus, Discourses

Epictetus begins Stoicism with a practical distinction: some things are within our power, while others are not. This distinction becomes especially urgent in digital life, where individuals are encouraged to attach their well-being to metrics and reactions they cannot govern. And as a means to point out this philosophy’s arguments, it will also be worth mentioning that Epictetus did not have the privilege to explore life with immediate resources to reach his level of education, which made him worthy of teaching philosophy. Epictetus was a slave, in this case, an educated slave of Epaphroditus, who had one of the most famous stories about Stoic endurance. There was a day when his master showered all his anger towards Epictetus and cruelly twisted his leg. Normally, someone would scream out of immense pain once this action

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has been done towards them, yet Epictetus did not react and remained completely composed. All he merely did was warn his master that he might snap a bone, which did happen.

To be fair, none was specifically mentioned in his *Discourses* as to whether he had a bitter relationship with Epaphroditus, which then caused Epictetus to call himself ‘a lame old man’. As we have mentioned his work on the *Discourses*, I would like to lay down the very foundation of my arguments from Book 1, which talks about the things we can and cannot have control over. From the very beginning, Epictetus generally argued that no art or faculty can analyse itself. In the case of using English grammar, it is a tool that I could use in writing this paper, yet the tool itself cannot help me understand when is the perfect time for me to use it. He also used music as an example, as to how it is confined to the analysis of harmony, yet it cannot tell me whether I am listening to a good or bad kind of music. Epictetus’ point is clear, and I think that he came across this realization as he wrote it, that it is only the faculty of reason that can analyse itself. Its meaning is that through Reason alone, it can take in Music and the English grammar and judge their benefits, and as to when it is perfect to use them. Epictetus also gave emphasis as to how out of all the gifts that Zeus and the gods could give, Reason was the most suitable for we are in the physical world, living in some body that we do not own, and so we cannot be saved from any external desires.

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To make it closer to home, I decided to look for other contemporaries who could best mirror Epictetus' Stoicism. Here I came across Massimo Pigliucci, a Professor of Philosophy at the City College of New York, who holds a PhD in Philosophy, genetics, and evolutionary biology, and wrote *How To Be A Stoic* in 2017. Through this book, Pigliucci was able to re-argue how Stoicism is not clearly about keeping a stiff lip and maintaining a cold demeanor when things go out of control. He also made it clear that it is not a type of therapy that focuses on short-term approaches to help people overcome a specific psychological gap. Stoicism is rather a philosophy of life that a human being requires to function, which can be developed consciously or not. With that being said, it should have been clear as to why it is a problem for businessmen to share how Stoicism is the best way for everyone to succeed, yet that is not even their point. From this contemporary perspective, it is also worth noting that just as Friedrich Nietzsche greatly critiques Stoicism's ways of thinking, its ancient works may come across as permanent and its ways are set in stone. According to Pigliucci, the Stoics were open to considering, if not all, some challenges to their doctrines and changing them. Therefore, it does not make true sense as to why people, particularly those who work or are coming from a 'higher' working and experienced position, preach that to gain success and admiration is to be indifferent towards everyone and anything that brings you pain and suffering, whilst the very same philosophy urges us to be kind and humane as we aim to thrive for success.



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III. INNER CITADEL VS. DIGITAL EXTERNALITY

*“If you have sharp sight, use it; but as the poet says, add wise judgment.” – Marcus Aurelius,
Meditations.*

Marcus Aurelius’s image of the inner citadel offers a corrective to the digitalized externalized self. Rather than seeking security in visibility, praise, or affirmation, Stoicism locates stability in the governance of one’s judgments. As we are talking about the concept of pain, Marcus Aurelius defined it in his *Meditations* as either evil to the body or to the soul. Pain inflicted on the body can give its evidence through bleeding or scars, and yet those to the soul could only do such as keeping the soul in peace and not seeing it as evil. By nature, we will all encounter problems that he calls external obstacles that would hinder us from achieving our aspirations. But to reach that, we ought to gladly accept these, go through the obstacles, and aim for our main goal.

So far as I have observed both personally and professionally, I tend to hear my colleagues struggle with judgments about them made by their colleagues. Without a doubt, talking about a person that you despise could serve as an interesting topic. Maybe it is part of nature that

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gossiping about one's judgments towards others has become too normalized, hence leading every one of us to create fragments of ourselves to disprove each other's conception of a person. Extending this problem elsewhere, let us assume that a couple had broken up, and the other party decided to post screenshots of their ex-partner's conversation with different people, exposing how they had inflicted pain on her. In addition to that, assume that the one who posted unnecessarily mentioned that the other cheated on her when, in fact, it was never the case that it was true. Stoicism would say that it would be best if the one being posted would rather proceed with their lives and think that there is actually no logical or reasonable action other than to move along in life.

Digitalizing such problems and decisions that used to be private matters is becoming too public and open for everyone to judge. Hence, I think this proves Donald Robertson's contemporary point that pain is tolerable, say when judged by many people with the wrong reasons, as long as we remember that our attitude towards the event is what really determines how upset we will become. Robertson also mentioned that Marcus Aurelius observed that people who cope well in these stressful situations tend to have the skill of "withdrawing" their minds from any bodily sensations, which he called *cognitive distancing*. I think this phrase can be better understood in this phrase: "It's not events that upset us but our judgements about events." To make things clear, Marcus is not asking the victim or us of the ex-partner to deny the pain and



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betrayal inflicted since it is part of life. He rather emphasized that one should not suppress their emotions but rather accept them while being detached from them. And since these judgments do originate from our Reason, it is crucial to know that something is helpful or harmful depending upon our goals.

IV. TIME AND AGENCY

“It is not that we have a short space of time, but that we waste much of it. Life is long enough, and it has been given in sufficiently generous measure to allow the accomplishment of the very greatest things if the whole of it is well invested.” – Seneca, On the Shortness of Life (De Brevitate Vitae)

Seneca’s warning that life is not short but often wasted finds a sharp contemporary parallel in the economies of distraction that dominate digital culture. In his *De Brevitate Vitae*, Seneca argues that as humans, we were not only given a long life but a good one. It is just that we spend too much of it on waste. How can we determine that we are indeed wasting it? By understanding that, as men, our nature is civilized.

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However, this should not be taken from a perspective that we are being forced to act as if we should be more physically and literally be one with nature, as in some religious practices. Along with Seneca, Pigliucci continued his stance that while it is not wrong to subscribe to one's desires, this brought us to a situation where both scientists and philosophers alike are increasingly uncomfortable with the very idea that human nature is now somewhat in trouble. The truth is that distraction, too, is not being criticized for its existence, for I do get the impression that nothing would serve as a distraction only if man would look at it for what it truly serves and nothing more. Meaning, people like you and me tend to believe that our next birthday will come around, as we hope that that special day will be our "Day one" for pursuing that long-fetched dream. As Seneca has placed it, why do we even begin late, just when we must cease to live? Realistically, in the context of the Philippines and our undeniable culture of pakikisama, we tend to thrive better in the concept of helping and caring. However, the majority would think that, as one has already made a personal relationship with people, we then unconsciously succumb to their affairs, invited or not. Gossip is what I think Seneca would consider as *busy idleness*. A little dissatisfaction would allow you to make certain gossip that is, first and foremost, nonsense and false, so how ironic that a person is willing to stretch out days for these matters but worry and stop once they have been cut short in their lives? One could resort to blaming all but the self, not batting an eye at looking for ways to better his or her life and attitude towards life.



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So, if we are to use Reason and subscribe to it just because it is human nature, does this mean that the Stoic philosophy is committing a logical fallacy as we “appeal to nature”? This problematic appeal to nature can be specifically tackled in a case of ethics, which was then discussed by David Hume. Hume calls this problem the *is/ought* problem, and that is Stoicism’s framing. From this framework, we can analyse how humans possess reason and that nature is rationally ordered (descriptive). This will then transition to how humans should live according to nature to reach eudaimonia and live in harmony with nature. It is also through this transition and appeal that skeptics of Stoicism had founded their critiques. As mentioned, Nietzsche’s view of this philosophy is that of a murderer of human expansion. In addition to that, many would come to see that this philosophy is asking us to suspend our worries and not be swayed by any problems. In other words, critics of Stoicism would say that the Stoics are asking you to just accept everything at face value and to not do anything at all.

In his book, Pigliucci believed that, coming from Hume’s problem, ethics had to come from somewhere, and the naturalistic take on it is so far the most promising approach. And as to whether the Stoics are asking us not to be emotional about our troubles? This is not too close to what Epictetus is trying to teach us. No one was forbidden to whine, for Stoics do that as well.

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However, there is something that Stoic philosophers invite us to reconsider instead, and that is through accepting one's Fate and doing something actively, not passively.

V. AMOR FATI AND PERSPECTIVE

"I am prepared to show you that you have resources and a character naturally strong and resilient; show me in return what grounds you have for being peevish and malcontent."

– Epictetus, *Discourses*

Stoic acceptance is frequently mistaken for passivity, yet Epictetus presents it as a way of aligning oneself with reality so that action may become clearer and less reactive. Found in his *Discourses*, Epictetus discusses Fate in his chapter *On Providence*, which, by the way, is a synonym for fate or destiny. He began by sharing that humans are both given the skill of seeing events from an individual to a larger scale and are also given the sense of gratitude. This is where *Amor Fati* originates, a Latin phrase that translates to "Love of Fate."

In layman's terms, you can also take it literally as how some events happened and should be treated for what they are, for it was once a "could be" that has already actualized. The Stoics describe this action as something that by nature is already given, and all we have to do is



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maximize the gifts given to us by God [Zeus]. But then, Epictetus shared his thoughts as to why, despite all gifts, we choose to worry and be anxious over events that are uncertain that will happen. From a contemporary and Filipino perspective, I could sense that a possible counter to this is how societal changes and the government *should* be blamed, and that the ordinary people do not have direct *control* over what is happening. Therefore, if I were a liberal or someone who is not made aware of what Stoicism truly is and came across this kind of thinking, I might think of the Stoics as philosophers who had not been through the hardships and are too idealistic and restrictive of human nature!

To be fair, I think Epictetus would argue that as long as people in society are fundamentally aware of where the problems are stemming from, it is completely valid as to how certain responsibilities and control can only be administered by those in the government, making the blame truly valid. However, I also firmly believe that as ordinary people in society, there are lots that we can contribute by using our voices. In this society, Social Media played a major role not only in shaping the minds and beliefs of the youth but also in how it can dangerously reshape an adult's perception and ethics towards their state of being. As to how I may not be fully disclosing the political perspective of Stoics for I think it deserves to be tackled more in a different paper, I could assert some confidence as to how one's acceptance towards what one can realistically do can be seen as a way to maximize the gift of Reason and by also reasonably using



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the gifts of the digital world under the means of spreading information for kindness and nothing else.

VI. MISUSE OF STOICISM TODAY

With every new philosophy and way of life, it is no longer new if someone misuses a term. What would be dangerous is when we use an ancient philosophy like Stoicism to threaten lives and make individuals create unnecessary pain for themselves and others. Now, by definition in a dictionary, a Stoic can be a noun and an adjective. Being “Stoic” could mean “a person who can endure pain without showing their emotions or complaining” and also “a member of the ancient philosophical school of Stoicism” (Bing,2026).

Seneca's *On the Shortness of Life* perfectly echoed the present state of affairs of humans. In his essay, he shared how we truly have a long life, yet we choose to succumb to things that do not truly matter. With that being said, I would love to point out that whenever you type Stoicism, it will automatically display business tycoons talking about how the grind culture is best paired with this philosophy. A businessman would say that for your business to thrive, you have to be stoic. Another example is how a man or a woman should be as hard as stone when their romantic relationships fail. In essence, I think they aim towards prioritizing the self-development aspect of



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this philosophy to better deal with future situations concerning these areas in life. But then, it places the philosophy and the human being in a dangerous position by giving the impression that one should never feel or acknowledge their emotions anymore. This is dangerous, most especially for the human being, for this will leave them with a fear of pain. But then, to fear pain, according to the Stoics, is nonsense and would make the human lose track of their purpose through giving in to their vices and continue living a life with the perception that being Stoic is the best way out.

Despite these challenges as to how we may view Stoicism, we also cannot deny how a lot still chose the path towards practicing it as it encouraged us to pause and reflect in a time where everything is moving fast. I also think that the 20th century has pulled us to different paths, digital noises and standards surrounding us, hence making it harder for us to decipher whether we are moving away or towards the goal of a good and well-spent life.

VII. CONTEMPORARY RESONANCE

“The only relationship between work and chatter is that the one kills the other.” – Ryan Holiday;

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Much of today's popular Stoicism evidently strips the philosophy of its ethical depth, recasting it as coldness, grind culture, or indifference. These distortions obscure Stoicism's commitments to justice, reason, and human connections. That said, it would be unfair if I failed to mention that I, too, had reservations about Stoicism. As I read on through Ryan Holiday's *The Daily Stoic*, I could sometimes find myself challenging the advice of Marcus Aurelius. Imagine yourself as someone who challenges Marcus' concept that "*everything has come into being for a purpose*" (*Book 8 [19] of The Meditations*) and apply it to your own life. This would look as if it is easier said than done, right? However, I have been able to see that Massimo Pigliucci's explanation as to how Stoicism can be thought of as a combination of intuitionism, empiricism, and rationalism, and that made my thinking of this philosophy as indeed more "natural" to me.

To make it clear, simplifying ancient philosophies is not entirely bad. After all, doing so can serve as a bridge between the old days and the present generation. As an example, younger people in their 20s have become more open with what kind of beliefs they subscribe to, and they practice Stoicism simply because they have heard about it from a TikTok influencer. Before writing this paper, I had read some of Holiday's works, and I think that this prior exposure led me to write about Stoicism and shifting to Philosophy from Statistics as an undergraduate degree. The dangers that it could, however, give are that, first, misinterpretation and misuse of the philosophy will affect a human's outlook in life. Relating to this is when contemporary



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writers may or may not use words showing extremes in one's actions, hence could make the reader assume an initial reaction, throwing away their past beliefs, and go through a reset. The tricky part with philosophy is that we tend to think that for some grand conclusions to work, we have to quote it as if it were a life hack.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Talking about Stoicism as someone who is yet to reach halfway through adulthood despite being an undergraduate of Philosophy made me think as to whether or not I have argued about something as ancient as this and brought justice to this philosophy. However, I also have been striving to live this way, maybe not as traditional as it is, for I deeply understand how our methods of living in our generation seem to be fast paced. At the same time, I also firmly believe that Stoicism in its essence has truly maintained, if not proved Epictetus' point that at the end of the day, everything that happens is in accordance with nature. Above all, no matter what era it is today, as long as we accept everything that is given to us and accept our vulnerabilities in these moment while choosing to act in accordance with Reason and kindness, therefore we can live and reach the good life that the Stoics have been thriving to help us to attain until we perish.

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