

Stoic Minimalism: ‘Just Enough Stoicism’ for Modern Practitioners¹

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Abstract: Stoic Minimalism may be described as ‘just enough Stoicism.’ Just enough for what? Just enough to lead the good life. Just enough to cope with the stress of modern life. Just enough to not be rattled by the constant changes that characterize the times we live in. Just enough to be resilient in the face of misfortune. Just enough to have the freedom to reject unproven or unprovable concepts.² In essence, Stoic Minimalism is an attempt to retain whatever is valuable in ancient Stoicism and the freedom to discard whatever is unproven, unhelpful, or incompatible with our everyday lives. For the Stoic Minimalist, Stoic ethics is a logically self-contained system in which *rationality is the principle, wisdom is the means, and happiness is the end. The purpose of this paper is to expand on this theme.*

Keywords: Stoicism, Ethics, Stoic Minimalism, Eudaimonia.

1. What Stoic Minimalism Is and what It Is not

Stoic Minimalism focuses on Stoic practice. Stoic Minimalism focuses on those aspects of Stoicism that help us live better rather than debate better. Such aspects may or may not include what is considered important from an academic perspective.

Stoic Minimalism aims to define its terms such that they are lean and rational and not unnecessarily bloated, paradoxical, vague, or all encompassing. Because ancient Stoicism developed over five centuries, and Stoics didn’t agree among themselves on the meaning of many basic concepts, many concepts such as ‘living in accordance with nature,’ ‘god,’ ‘virtue,’ and so on have bloated or multiple meanings in Stoicism. They could mean whatever one wants them to mean, providing rich fodder for academic arguments. (If we review academic papers on

¹ This article is an expansion and formalization of the paper I wrote a few years ago: “Stoic Minimalism: Stripping the Dead Bark off Orthodox Stoicism,” *Modern Stoicism*, October 20, 2018 (<https://modernstoicism.com/stoic-minimalism-stripping-the-dead-bark-off-orthodox-stoicism-by-chuck-chakrapani/>). An extended but informal version of the concepts discussed in this paper can also be found in a series of open letters exchanged between the author and CBT therapist Tim LeBon. The letters are available in a book format: *Stoicism: Cobwebs and Gems*, published by The Stoic Gym, 2021. A free ebook version is available from thestoicgym.com or academia.edu.

² When I say ‘unproven or unprovable concepts,’ I mean unproven or unprovable concepts by modern inductive and deductive logic rather than by Stoic logic which covers a larger range of topics.

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Stoicism, it becomes obvious that the academic arguments still swerve around what Stoics could have meant by such terms.³)

Stoic Minimalism is not intellectually ambitious and does not attempt to rewrite Stoic philosophy. It is modest in what it seeks to do: to clear the cobwebs surrounding ancient Stoicism and adapt it to modern sensibilities without compromising the basic principles of Stoicism. It is like renovating a property – throwing out things that are no longer or never were useful, minimizing things that may only be marginally useful, and making sure that whatever remains is strengthened, polished, and preserved.

Stoic Minimalism is not against orthodox Stoicism but holds that Stoic ethics can be understood and practiced without the help of superfluous, vague, or dated concepts. It asserts that Stoic ethics is at the core of Stoicism and it is based on reason and not revelation. It argues that, if reason underlies Stoic ethics, we should be able to derive the principles of Stoic ethics logically without having to resort to things that are unproven, unprovable, or proven wrong.

2. The Rationale for Stoic Minimalism

Stoic Minimalism is not an academic intellectual exercise. It goes to the core of Stoicism. As Martha Nussbaum says in her interview with Roger Crisp,

[The Stoics] ... thought that philosophy should be not merely theoretical, but also practical. ... people should be in charge of their own critical thinking.⁴

A similar stand is taken by Pierre Hadot.

[Stoic philosophy] is not the deposit of philosophical concepts, theories, and systems to be found in the surviving texts of Graeco-Roman antiquity, the subject matter of courses of study in the curricula of modern universities. (Hadot 2002, 127)

If we accept Nussbaum's and Hadot's views of Stoicism (as Stoic Minimalism does), what we should be really concerned more about is the relevance and application of Stoicism to modern life rather than treating it as fossilized subject matter of courses of study in academe with all the trappings and obscure arguments that accompany such treatment. As A.A. Long points out, Stoics were *proudly committed to consistency using deductive methodology* (Long 2018). We

³ For instance, if we search in Academia.edu for academic articles that deal with (Stoic) god, nature, or ethics, we will find papers that rival the controversies that centre around the number of angels that dance on the head of a pin such as 'Stoic soul in Stoic corpses,' 'The compulsions of Stoic assent,' 'Stoic ontology and Plato's sophist,' and 'Quasi-being in Stoic ontology,' to name a few. I don't dispute the need for such scholarly papers but just want to point out how little relevance such distinctions have for average practitioners of Stoicism who approach Stoicism to better their lives.

⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum in conversation with Roger Crisp. <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/oxford-think-festival-10th-18th-november-2018/>.

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will follow this tradition. Our eventual aim is to follow the path defined by Epictetus:

To assent to what is true, dissent from what is false, and suspend judgment when uncertain. (*Discourses* iii.3)

In areas of uncertainty, a Stoic minimalist is free to believe whatever she chooses to, provided it doesn't contradict the basic tenets of Stoicism. In the next section, I outline a framework for these tenets.

3. A Framework for Developing Stoic Minimalism

A framework is a set of propositions that give a structure to the discussion. It outlines logical means of accepting, rejecting, or revising what constitutes Stoic Minimalism. Here are the basic propositions of Stoic Minimalism.

1. *Stoicism is a eudaimonic philosophy. Its goal is happiness.* [All Stoics]
2. *Stoicism is a rational and deductive system.* [A.A. Long 2018]
3. *There is no obligation to accept things that are neither rational nor deducible.* [Corollary of (2) above]
4. *When multiple versions of the same concept are offered, the least complicated version should be preferred.* [Loosely based on Occam's razor].
5. *Concepts that are less widely agreed upon and for which there is no direct proof should be avoided, especially if we can achieve the same results without using those concepts.* [Corollary of (4) above]
6. *Metaphysical explanations that cannot be proven one way or another should be avoided.* [Corollary of (2) above.]
7. *Stoic Minimalism does not attempt to rewrite Stoic principles. It only aims "to assent to what is true, dissent from what is false, and suspend judgment when uncertain."*
8. *When established modern science conflicts with ancient Stoicism, ancient Stoicism may be modified to reconcile the two.* However, this should be done carefully, sparingly, and only when it is absolutely necessary, because modern science itself is subject to change. There is no need to modify Stoicism every time a scientific paper is published.
9. *Ancient expression of Stoicism may be modified to conform to modern usage and idiom of the day.* [Making Stoicism relevant to a wide variety of practitioners.]

With this framework in mind, we are now ready derive modern Stoic Minimalism from ancient Stoicism.

4. Traditional Stoic Theory

Ancient Stoics believed that Stoicism consisted of three aspects.

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| 1. Physics | How the universe is organized and run. |
| 2. Logic | How to establish what is true. |
| 3. Ethics | How best to live our lives. |

The essence of Stoicism for a practitioner is Stoic ethics, which deals with how best to live our lives. However, according to the ancient Stoics, Stoic ethics cannot stand on its own. On the face of it the ancient schema sounds reasonable. Who could possibly object to knowing how the world works (physics) and knowing

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what is true (logic) before understanding how we can apply this to live our lives? But when we specifically examine the contents of Stoic physics and Stoic logic, a different picture emerges. So, before exploring Stoic Minimalism in detail, let's review briefly the contents of Stoic physics and Stoic logic to understand if we need these two disciplines to understand and practice Stoic ethics.

5. Stoic Physics: A Brief Outline⁵

Stoic physics covers both physics (the scientific understanding of how things work) and metaphysics (the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space.) As Tad Brennan points out,

Stoic physics... included theology, ontology, determinism, the nature of causation, as well as topics such as cosmology and the study of plants and animals. (Brennan 2015, 32)

Stoic physics is a blend of what we call physics and the ancient Stoic notions of how everything works, not necessarily based on principles of physics.

The Stoics wanted to understand Nature because Nature taken as a whole is the greatest thing there is, and we are parts of it. (Sellars 2015)

However, wanting to understand something and actually understanding it are two different things. The Stoics might have thought that they had identified the foundation of Stoic ethics. But did they? Before concluding one way or another, let's quickly review what the Stoic physics says.

5.1 Creation of universe

Our world has a starting point. Before that, only the perfection of Zeus (God or Reason) existed. Zeus or Reason is corporeal, and it is continuous in space. In the beginning, everything else was inert. Zeus pervaded through inert matter and created the living body and the cosmos. Creation started when divine fire condensed into a liquid. This liquid was partly vaporized and partly condensed into the earth, while the fire continued to exist. The fire has been the source of all objects and all changes to come. The principles inherent in fire drove the creation and development of our world.

5.2 The basis of rationality

We are influenced by two principles: active and passive. These two principles are based on four elements: Fire, Air, Earth, and Water. Air and Fire are light elements dominated by an active principle. Earth and Water are heavy elements dominated

⁵ This summary of Stoic physics is not based on a single source but on several sources I have consulted over the years. They include Sambursky (1959), Gaca (2000), Wiegardt (2009) White (2003), and Hahn (1977).

by a passive principle. When we are influenced more by an active principle, we are rational and divine; when influenced by a passive principle more, we are less so.

The world is an interaction between the active principle (fire, air, or *pneuma*) and the passive principle. They constitute a dynamic continuum, fluid and in flux with no independent part. There is no void in the cosmos. It begins only at the edge of the cosmos.

5.3 Causal determinism and the nature of the soul

After having created the cosmos, Zeus set in motion an inexorable causal chain of events. So, all events in the course of history are connected, each cause producing an effect which causes the next effect.

The human soul consists of eight streams: five senses and three faculties (reproduction, speech, and command). All our cognition takes place in our command center. Command faculty controls the remaining seven streams of the human soul. It is a two-way street from the center to the surface and back. We are nurtured by Eros, the God of Love, the creative force. It unifies the opposites, bringing active and passive principles together (as noted by Gaca 2002 and Weigardt 2009). Life is created, nurtured, and reproduced through Love and it is as important as eating, resting, sleeping, and other important activities. As a rational being, one can experience love without attachment to any particular person, place, or thing.

Death occurs when the soul loosens its tension and separates from the human body. Even though the active and passive principles are thoroughly intertwined, they retain their unique properties and separate at death. The soul then joins with the 'World Soul.' In Stoic physics, there is no reward or punishment after death. There is no heaven, no hell. In fact, there's no after-life.

5.4 Hierarchy of beings

The entire cosmos is a rational animal but there is a hierarchy. The hierarchy is determined by the nature of the *pneuma* (divine breath) that shaped each layer.

- God has perfect logos and therefore he is on the top of the Stoic hierarchy.
- Humans come next. They have logos.
- Then come non-rational animals. They can perceive.
- Plants come fourth. They neither think nor perceive but they respond to their environment.
- All non-living stuff is inert and therefore at the bottom of the hierarchy.

6. Do We Need Stoic Physics?

As we discussed earlier, Stoic physics is deeply into metaphysics speculating on the origin, the development, and the ending of the universe and the individual.

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Many modern Stoics – probably the majority – don't consider Stoic physics relevant. But there are others who still do. Let's briefly review the assertions of Stoic physics and see if they bear any relevance to the practice of Stoicism now.

The issue of the relevance of Stoic physics to Stoic ethics hinges on two questions:

1. Does what Stoic physics says correspond to the principles of modern physics?
2. If it does, does it make any difference at all to our understanding of Stoic ethics?

The latter question is the more important one because if Stoic physics has no bearing on Stoic ethics, then it would make little difference whether its principles are true and whether modern physics confirms it. So, let's look at the second question: Does Stoic physics have any bearing on Stoic ethics?

6.1 Do the principles of Stoic physics affect Stoic ethics?

Stoic physics asserts our universe begins and ends with fire. Let's examine the implications of the universe beginning and ending with water instead of fire. Would it have any bearing on Stoic ethics? There's nothing in our Stoic ethics – the principle of dichotomy, living in accordance with nature, living a virtuous life – that depends on how the universe began or will end.

Stoic physics informs us that we are rational when dominated by an active principle, such as fire or air. As with the previous one, we cannot prove this proposition either and, even if we could, it has no bearing on Stoic ethics.

Stoic physics says that the human soul consists of eight streams: five senses and three faculties. If the human soul is the same as our senses and faculties, does Stoicism accept an abstract notion of a soul? If the human soul is more than our senses and faculties, how is it defined and how does it relate to Stoic ethics?

Stoic physics believes that we are nurtured by Eros, the God of Love. We cannot prove this. Whether it is true or not, Stoic ethics will work equally well.

Stoic physics conceives of the entire cosmos as a rational animal with a hierarchy (God at the very top and non-living beings at the very bottom.) Again, this has no bearing on Stoic ethics. Even if the entire universe is an unconscious jumble of atoms, Stoic ethics would still work. As we shall soon see, even the Stoics who believed in Stoic physics such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius acknowledged this. We all assume some sort of rational world (such as the sun rising in the morning, seasons changing) which is broadly governed by cause and effect (such as gravity pulling things down, fire burning things, and so on). But there is no reason to view the entire cosmos as a rational animal.

Stoic physics views death as the soul loosening its tension and separating from the human body. If the human soul is no more than our senses and faculties, then this proposition has nothing to contribute to our understanding of death, since it has nothing to say as to why the tension between human body and soul is loosened.

As we can see, there is nothing in the basic principles of Stoic physics that contributes to our understanding of Stoic ethics. We will return to this later to discuss more topics arising out of Stoic physics.

6.2 Evaluating the argument for Stoic physics

It is not just ancient Stoics such as Chrysippus and Cleanthes who believed that Stoic physics provided the foundation for Stoic ethics. Some modern scholars also believe it. For example, Pierre Hadot, an influential modern Stoic scholar and an ordained priest, believes that the discipline of assent can be derived from Stoic physics (1998). Some academics such as Massimo Pigliucci (2017) accept this assertion presumably under the assumption that Hadot's derivation is strictly based on logic. But Hadot's derivation is not based on formal logic. Rather it is an assumed connection.

From a strictly logical perspective though, if A can be derived from B, it does not follow that B is indispensable for deriving A; it may simply be one of the many antecedents from which it can be derived. It could also be a non-causal connection. Therefore, to demonstrate that Stoic physics is needed for Stoic ethics, one has to demonstrate not just that Stoic ethics can be derived from Stoic physics but also that Stoic ethics cannot be derived without Stoic physics. *To my knowledge, Stoic scholars haven't demonstrated that Stoic ethics can be derived from Stoic physics and ONLY from Stoic physics.* Without such a demonstration, Stoic physics cannot be considered the foundation of Stoic ethics. As a matter of fact, Stoic scholar Julia Annas points out that Stoic ethics can stand on its own two feet without having to be propped up by Stoic physics.

I don't believe that we are under any obligation to conform our use of the term 'Stoic ethics' to the ethical part of philosophy as understood by the Stoics themselves. I am more comfortable using Stoic ethics as an independent area of Stoic inquiry that does not in any way depend on Stoic physics for its existence. (Annas 2014, 330)

A.A. Long, one of the most respected modern Stoic scholars, maintains that Stoic physics is foundational, and "Stoic ethics should be understood in terms of Stoic physics." (Long 2018, 23) And yet, he goes on, as Julia Annas points out,

[T]o discuss impulse, emotion, virtue, and indifferents and the other ethical topics we find in the ancient sources and do so without once bringing in *pneuma* or the cosmos, indeed often locating Stoic understanding of these topics in engagement with Socratic and other traditions of ethical thinking. (Annas 2014, 215)

It is tempting to believe that Stoicism derives its ethics from a comprehensive understanding of the universe. But, so far as I can see, Stoic ethics is self-contained and can be derived from self-evident principles, as A.A. Long (2018) himself appears to have done. It can be treated as any other branch of social science. As Julia Annas contends this is exactly what even those who believe

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is Stoic physics often end up doing. In any case, there is nothing new or revolutionary about focusing our attention on Stoic ethics to the exclusion of Stoic physics and Stoic logic. As Brad Inwood points out, “The narrow focus on ethical improvement is also an authentic component of ancient Stoicism.” (2018, 106)

6.3 Stoic physics in its historical context

The rejection of Stoic physics, especially for a practitioner, is not a modern revisionist idea. Almost as soon as it was proposed by Zeno, one of his students, Aristo(n) of Chios challenged it. Aristo wanted to discard Stoic physics saying that Stoic physics “was beyond our reach” (Diogenes Laertius 7.161). Cleanthes stood against this view. Although Cleanthes’ view on Stoic physics prevailed, Aristo continued to be influential for centuries to come. Some scholars believe that it was the writings of Aristo that finally transformed the 25-year-old Marcus Aurelius into a full-fledged philosopher, as evidenced in his letter to his rhetoric teacher Marcus Fronto (see Haines 1919, 218 and Richlin 2006, 142).

The acceptance of ethics as the sole purpose of philosophy goes all the way back to the Cynics, who greatly inspired Stoicism. The Stoic philosopher Posidonius of the middle Stoa did not reject Stoic physics or logic, and yet he “clearly treated ethics as the ultimate point of philosophy” (Inwood 2018, 36). The last undisputed scholar of Stoicism, Panaetius, ignored Chrysippus and rejected the notion of a phoenix cosmos (Holowchak 2008).⁶

Later Stoics such as Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca did not explicitly reject Stoic metaphysics but gave it less prominence. They went out of their way to state explicitly (although not frequently) that many of these theoretical topics may be superfluous. For example, this quote with reference to metaphysical questions is attributed to Epictetus:

What do I care whether matter is made up of atoms, indivisibles, or fire and earth?... Questions beyond our ken we should ignore, since the human mind may be unable to grasp them. However easily one assumes they can be understood, what’s to be gained by understanding them in any case? It must be said, I think, that those who make such matters an essential part of a philosopher’s knowledge are creating unwanted difficulties. (Fragment 1)

Marcus Aurelius expresses a similar view in several passages in *Meditations*, *emphasizing* that Stoic principles will work even if we don’t accept Stoic metaphysics. For example,

Either all things spring from one intelligent source and form a single body (and the part should accept the actions of the whole) or there are only atoms, joining and splitting forever, and nothing else. So why feel anxiety? (*Meditations* 9.39)

⁶ Panaetius did not reject Stoic physics completely but did not accept Chrysippus’ version of it. What is of relevance here is that no matter who believed which version of Stoic physics, it made zero difference to Stoic ethics.

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Musonius Rufus also talked in general against the multiplicity of concepts and argued for a form of Stoic Minimalism.

... nor is there any need that pupils should try to master all this current mass of precepts on which we see our sophists pride themselves; they are enough to consume a whole life-time. (Lecture 11)

Neither do all modern Stoics believe that Stoic physics relevant to Stoic ethics. For instance, Julia Annas (2014) has this to say about the (non-existent) relationship between Stoic physics and Stoic ethics.

We find no texts in which virtue, impulse, and the like are derived from Stoic physics. (315)

Not just that. She goes a step further and concludes that

We have no support for the claim that Stoic ethics can only be understood in terms of the concepts of Stoic physics. (315)

As we see from this historical account Stoic physics is not a universally accepted part of Stoicism, ancient or modern.

7. Causal Determinism

As we noted earlier, Stoics were causal determinists. Who can disagree with the cause-and-effect chain? Our entire learning is based on finding causes for things that happen. Even children understand the relationship between cause and effect. But strict causal determinism poses a dilemma. If there is a strict causal chain from the time things were set in motion, then it can't be interrupted. Presumably, the first cause, whatever it may be, had decided the rest of history. If someone apparently interrupts it, that interruption itself has to be the effect of an earlier cause. Even though you may think that you took it upon yourself to interrupt it, you did not. You are helplessly carrying out what is in fact your part in the causal link.

7.1 *The lazy argument and Chrysippus' reply*

So, it would seem that everything is predetermined. If everything is predetermined, what need is there for us to act? Why should we bother to go to a doctor when we are ill? Why should we take any responsibility for our actions? Why should we be virtuous? If we are immoral, that is predetermined. If we are not virtuous, that is predetermined too. So where is individual responsibility in all this and why should we bother to study Stoicism or any other philosophy for that matter? This argument is called the lazy argument. One may call it a 'lazy' argument, but as we will see, it is not a stupid one.

In an attempt to counter this 'lazy' argument, Chrysippus introduced a rather clever position known as *compatibilism*. It is based on the concept that there are two types of causes: *internal* and *external* (Cicero, *On Fate* 28.9).

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The *external* cause (for example, that you fall ill) may be predetermined, but the *internal* cause (your decision to go to the doctor) is generated by you. Another person, depending on *his or her* personality may have decided differently. Thus, both causal determinism and your freedom/responsibility are both preserved. You are free to act, even though everything is predetermined.

To explain compatibilism Chrysippus introduced a rather disingenuous analogy. Suppose there is a cone and a cylinder, each standing on end motionless. Even if it is predetermined that both would be pushed, they don't respond the same way. When a cylinder is pushed (an *external* act) and falls over, it rolls, compatible with its *internal* nature; when a cone is pushed and tips over, it spins, compatible with *its* internal nature. So, although the universe (the external cause) is deterministic, the individual (the internal cause) is free to make her choice and choose what is compatible with her nature. Suddenly, everything that is predetermined can be overruled and depending on what an individual decides to do (the internal cause), the course of events can be changed forever.

But wait a minute. Who determined my nature that is the cause of my internal decision? Surely, it couldn't have been me because I myself am a unit in the causal chain and my nature is a consequence of other causes. Who instilled in Donald Trump his potential responses and, in Mother Teresa, her potential responses? Who gave the cone the attributes of a cone and the cylinder the attributes of a cylinder? Since cones cannot choose to roll and cylinders cannot choose to spin, *they simply do not have a choice*. Marcus Aurelius reasons similarly: "A cylinder cannot move at will" (*Meditations* 10.33). We are back to hard determinism. The apparent freedom of cones to spin and cylinders to roll is an illusion. What they could possibly do when pushed is fully determined long before they were ever pushed. As Tad Brennan puts it, compatibilism is an unstable and unsatisfying compromise,

...the doctrine that Fate causes but Fate does not necessitate turns out to be an unstable and unsatisfying sort of compromise. (Brennan 2005, 278)

Stoic determinism suffers from the same shortcomings as the other aspects of Stoic physics – trying to answer unanswerable questions and then trying to justify them by logical-sounding arguments that don't add up.

7.3 Can we resolve this?

I believe that this is an unresolvable issue like the existence of God. I prefer to be an agnostic on unresolvable issues. I don't want to accept *any* answer because I cannot produce *the correct* answer. The foundations of Stoic ethics are logical and empirical. To claim that Stoic ethics needs the support of Stoic physics in any shape or form is a purely academic exercise and has no foundation in fact.

Academic credentials are not proof. Endlessly parsing and guessing what secondary sources might have meant is not proof. Belief is not proof. Obscure arguments are not proof. Tenuous connections are not proof.

Evidence, at least in my view, is what stands up to logical scrutiny and empirical observations that can be proved, disproved, or modified.

As I have been saying, there is no evidence whatsoever that any aspect of Stoic ethics needs the support Stoic physics to be proven true. Not even a little. There is no evidence whatsoever to the claim that we need Stoic physics to understand Stoic ethics. Not even a little.

Let me conclude this section with these two earlier quotes from Julia Annas (2014), which are unequivocal and unambiguous.

We find no texts in which virtue, impulse, and the like are derived from Stoic physics. (315)

We have no support for the claim that Stoic ethics can only be understood in terms of the concepts of Stoic physics. (315)

8. Academic Contention

Of course, there is the academic contention that we *need* Stoic physics and Stoic logic because they provide the foundation for Stoicism.⁷ Without necessarily challenging that point of view, I would like to relate my personal experience⁸ as a practitioner. While I have been familiar with Stoicism for decades, I had not read much about Stoic physics and Stoic logic until the past few years. After studying Stoic physics more closely (including a full-length book on Stoic physics by Sambursky 2016) I can confidently say my understanding of Stoic ethics has not increased even marginally after my exposure to Stoic physics.

Stoic ethics has been found useful in healing professions. Stoic ethics has also been acknowledged as the source of some models of psychotherapy, especially Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive and Behavior Therapy (REBT). It is also used by the US military to build discipline as well as to overcome trauma. In all cases where the application of Stoic principles is the focus, Stoic physics has no role to play. I believe it is fair to say that the resurgence of Stoicism in the past decade is largely due to practitioners for whom Stoic physics and logic hold no relevance.

Because the Minimalist believes that Stoic ethics is a self-contained system that can be built on verifiable and self-evident truths (or on axioms if necessary), she avoids all religious and metaphysical explanations in preference to potentially

⁷ See for example, Massimo Pigliucci. *How to Be a Stoic*, 2018. Basing his arguments on Pierre Hadot's original exposition (*The Inner Citadel*, 1998), Pigliucci makes the point that discipline of desire and the virtues that relate to them (courage and temperance) are based on Stoic physics. Even if this is true, it does not follow that Stoic ethics can *only* be derived from Stoic physics and Stoic logic, and not in any other way. *A link between two concepts, even it is a sufficient condition, cannot be assumed be a necessary condition.*

⁸ I am aware that this is just my personal experience. While personal experience is not proof, it nevertheless supports the argument that Stoic physics is not needed to understand Stoic ethics.

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provable propositions. (A Stoic Minimalist, however, is not necessarily against religion or metaphysics.)

9. Stoic Logic: A Brief Outline

Stoic logic is broader in scope than the term logic implies in modern usage. While ancient Stoic logic included what we understand by logic today (a systematic study of the valid rules of inference), it included many other things including epistemology, such as development of reasoning in human beings.

Stoic logic is the study of *logos* and it includes speech and reason. It has two aspects: broad and narrow. The broad aspect deals with what makes us rational and the narrow aspect deals with proper ways to assess the true value of what is presented to us (sayables and meanings). In modern usage, the word 'logic' refers to the narrow aspect.

Human beings are born with several preconceptions and an innate structure. But the mind at birth has no conceptual content. It is a blank slate, *tabula rasa*. Different stimuli – some real, some imaginary – make *impressions* on the soul. Stored impressions become memories. These memories are what we call *experience*. Memories are organized into categories to form common notions.

We judge the truth and falsity of new impressions based on our experience with the collection of past (similar) impressions. Such *judgments* are called reason. We assent to what appears true to us, dissent to what appears false to us. We withhold assent when we don't have a common notion to guide us.

Only human beings are capable of thought, and this is because we are capable of rationality. Other animals are not capable of rationality. Thought is mediated by language and has three aspects:

1. The signifiers (the spoken word, vocal or subvocal);
2. The signified (the meaning of that word); and
3. The denotation (the object referred to by the word).

Syllogisms are concerned with valid forms of deductive reasoning. Stoic logic went beyond simple syllogisms and included modal and propositional logic. Stoic contributions to logic are still considered very sophisticated.

10. Do We Need Stoic Logic?

When we ask the question “do we need Stoic logic?”, we are *not* asking whether Stoic logic is useful or not. We are asking if we need Stoic logic to understand Stoic ethics. As we saw, Stoic logic broadly deals with two aspects: how our reasoning develops and what the rules of valid arguments are. The Stoic theory of how our reasoning develops may or may not be correct. Either way it has no implications for Stoic ethics. Stoic logic pertaining to deductive reasoning (syllogisms), modal, and propositional logic have been found to be valid and useful. However, we don't need the help of complex Stoic logic to understand Stoic ethics. In fact, the logic

that one implicitly uses in studying *any* subject such as natural sciences, social sciences, architecture, geology, or mathematics is sufficient to understand Stoic ethics.

No subject – be it science, mathematics, psychology, or any other – can be understood without some kind of logical reasoning. This is true of Stoic ethics as well. However, no special study of Stoic logic is needed to understand Stoic ethics any more than is needed to understand any other subject. While Stoic logic has contributed a lot to inductive and deductive reasoning, one has no need to study Stoic logic to understand and practice Stoic ethics. A vast majority of modern Stoics are not exposed to Stoic logic at all. An Amazon search yields no more than 3 books on Stoic logic, all of them obscure. Even general books on Stoicism do not pay much attention to Stoic logic. It is interesting to note that none of the popular modern Stoic books devote even a chapter to explaining what Stoic logic is even as they emphasize its importance.⁹

Logic is a very useful subject in its own right and the Stoic contribution to logic is substantial. But Stoic logic is not a prerequisite for understanding Stoic ethics.

11. Clarifying the Concepts: God, Nature, Virtue, and Ethics

Concepts like God, virtue, and ethics have religious overtones. However, many religions are largely based on faith while Stoicism is based on reason. So, what exactly did the Stoics mean by these concepts? This is an important question because demonstrating the logical basis of Stoic ethics would make it accessible to a wide variety of practitioners.

11.1 God in Stoicism

A generally accepted view is that the Stoics were pantheists and equated God with Nature or the universe, which is the totality of everything. Yet there are passages in Stoic literature that conceive of God not just as Nature, but a separate being with intent. Here is an example:

How else could it come about so regularly ... when he [god] tells plants to flower they flower, and to bud, they bud, and bear fruit, they bear it, and to bring their fruit to ripeness, it ripens ... how else could it be that the moon waxes and wanes and the sun approaches and recedes... (*Discourses* I.14.3)

This passage gives the impression that God and Nature are not the same but God is a separate entity instructing Nature how to act. This impression is strengthened by Epictetus' assertion,

⁹ See for example, see recent books by Pigliucci (2017), William Irvine (2019), and Donald Robertson (2018) on Stoicism.

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So, a wise and good man...submits his mind to him [God] who administers the universe (*Discourses* I.12.4)

God is not the universe, but someone who ‘administers it.’ Seneca also seemed to have in mind a separate entity that controls Nature:

Seneca presents Nature as being under the control of a deity (Sellars 2019, 24).

It is possible other Stoics believed that the universe or Nature is identical with God. It is unclear whether the Stoics had an agreed upon view of God.

Nevertheless, we will go along with the view expressed by the modern Stoic scholar Christopher Gill (1995) who contends that God in Stoicism stands for the “inherent rationality and order” (xxi) of the universe. If we assume that most Stoics were indeed pantheists and equated God with the totality of Nature, the term God can be interpreted as ‘the way things are’ or ‘the way things work.’ The Stoic Minimalist accepts this definition of the Stoic God. We *don’t have to* know why Nature, or the universe, works the way it does. Stoicism is a way of facing up to whatever happens. Therefore, to a Minimalist, it matters little whether a Stoic believes in God or is an atheist or is an agnostic. It has no bearing on the practice of Stoicism.

11.2 Ethics in Stoicism

Ethics, as we understand the word now, relates to moral right and wrong. Ethics is derived from the objectives of the system. Thus, for example, business ethics may be based on different principles compared to religious ethics. What then is Stoic ethics? Because Stoicism is a eudaimonic philosophy and its goal is eudaimonia (happiness or the good life, however one defines it), to a Stoic Minimalist whatever contributes to eudaimonia is ethical; whatever stands in the way of eudaemonia is unethical. The rest are indifferent.

11.3 Virtue in Stoicism

As with ethics, ‘virtue’ also has moral and religious overtones. What did ancient Stoics mean by virtue? Here we will again turn to Christopher Gill, “virtue is a form of expertise or skill, knowledge of how to live well” (2015). Virtue is wisdom and it has four components to it: Practical wisdom (knowing what is good and what is bad and what is neither), moderation (knowing what to select and what not to select), courage (knowing what to fear and what not to fear), and justice (knowing how to apportion things properly).¹⁰

To a Stoic Minimalist, virtue is a special skill that is needed to achieve eudaemonia. It is the perfection of wisdom, which has four aspects: practical wisdom, moderation, courage, and justice.

¹⁰ The definitions of virtues are based on Arius Didymus’s conceptualization.

11.4 'Living in accordance with Nature' in Stoicism

One of the fundamental themes in Stoicism is 'living according with Nature.' But what does this mean to a practitioner? Living according to Nature can be seen as reconciling with Nature.

Hierocles suggested that there are two main classes of reconciliation: internal and external. Internal reconciliation occurs when there is no conflict between us and our Nature (Ramelli 2009). External reconciliation occurs when there is no conflict between us and Nature that is external. A.A. Long calls these *human nature* and *external nature* (2018).

What is human Nature? Of all the animals, humans are the only ones who are endowed with reason. Human nature is rationality. So, we live in accordance with our internal nature when we live rationally. We try to exert control only on things we have control over.

What is 'external' Nature? It is what is presented to us, what we are faced with every minute of every day. It is reality itself. So, we live in accordance with our external nature when we accept reality as presented to us. We accept what is not under our control.

So, to a Stoic Minimalist, living according to Nature means living rationally (living according to human Nature) and not struggling against reality, no matter what it is (living according to external Nature.) We control what we can but don't struggle against what we cannot.

11.5 Concepts that are time- and context-specific

We often tend to judge the past with the wisdom of the present. We fail to take into account that what was seen as neutral or progressive at one time may be seen as offensive at some other time. We may consider ourselves progressive today but there is no guarantee that we will be so seen by generations to come.

In particular, there are passages (although not many) in Stoic literature which would perhaps be considered sexist if we judged them by present day sensibilities. Does it make Stoicism sexist? Stoics by and large didn't fight against slavery. Does that mean that Stoicism approved of slavery? Some Stoics believed in omens. Does that mean that Stoicism is superstitious?

Since Stoic philosophy does not say anything specific about these things, it is more likely that such beliefs were the beliefs of the time with no particular relevance to Stoic philosophy in general. This means that a Stoic Minimalist ignores time- and context-specific ideas that cannot be shown to be a part of Stoic philosophy.

12. Interim Summary

So far we have discussed

- Why Stoic physics does not have any relevance to a practitioner of Stoic ethics and so can be safely ignored;

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- Why Stoic logic, useful by itself as it may be, is not needed to follow Stoic ethics;
- How terms such as God, virtue, ethics, and Nature can be understood and used without relying on metaphysical explanation; and
- Why we should ignore time- and context-specific references.

We are now left with only Stoic ethics without metaphysical explanations and without incidental concepts that are not relevant to our times. We call this Stoic Minimalism, and I outline its principles in the next section.

13. The Principles of Stoic Minimalism

Here then are the basic principles of Stoic Minimalism:

1. **Happiness may be defined as a life that flows smoothly, without friction.**
2. **Avoiding friction means being in harmony with Nature. In concrete terms this means that we should be rational (our Nature) and not struggle against reality (external Nature).**
3. **We are not bothered by events but by our thoughts about them. By managing our thoughts, we can cease to be bothered by events.**
4. **The basic principle of Stoicism is ‘Some things are up to us and others are not’.** This first principle – that we can achieve happiness or *eudaimonia*¹¹ by confining our thoughts and actions to things under our control (‘up to us’) and ignoring what are not (‘not up to us’) – contains the wisdom needed to achieve happiness and is fundamental to Stoic ethics. However, this principle by itself is not enough to achieve the good life.
5. **To use the basic principle correctly, we need wisdom. Wisdom is made up of four cardinal virtues.** Even if we get rid of our anxieties and worries using the basic principle, it is quite possible that our decisions with regard to what is under our control could go wrong. For example, whether to control your anger or not is under your control. But if you choose to be angry, it may not lead to happiness. Therefore, the corollary to the third principle is that, to achieve excellence as conceived by Stoicism, we need special knowledge in four different areas: self, others, our desires, and our aversions. The special knowledge we need is *practical wisdom* (in all our dealings), *justice* (in dealing with others), *moderation* (in dealing with our desires), and *courage* (in dealing with our aversions). These four virtues are aspects of wisdom.

For the Stoic Minimalist, Stoic ethics is a logically self-contained system in which *rationality is the principle, wisdom is the means, and happiness is the*

¹¹ *Eudaimonia* is a single concept with multiple shades of meaning. For example, when Socrates, Nelson Mandela, and Gandhi were thrown in prison, they had means of not being imprisoned in the first place or means of getting out. They chose not to because doing so would have put them in conflict with their nature and made them unhappy. In fact, Gandhi told the judge that he had no option but to send him to jail, which he was willing to accept completely, if the judge believed the law to be just. So, what to an outsider is an unflourishing life was indeed a flourishing one for them. They did not consider a preferred indifferent as the source of their happiness.

end. Anyone who accepts this definition, in my opinion, is a Stoic irrespective of whether they agree or disagree with anything else about Stoicism.

14. Conclusion

Any rational idea should be subject to refutation. How then can we refute Stoic principles if we claim that Stoicism is a rational system? The answer is simple. The refutation of any of the Stoic ethical principles can be done in the same way as it is done in other disciplines. For example, Stoicism holds that we have total control of our inner lives (Stoic dichotomy). What if science proves that while this is mostly true, there are parts of our inner lives over which we have no control? We just accept this and move the line between what we can or cannot control. This does not have to be a major issue. It does not call for a major rewrite of the basic principle. As I suggested earlier, this can be done, but it has to be done sparingly, carefully, and only when it is absolutely necessary. There is no need to revise Stoic ethics to conform to the latest scientific finding, which may itself change as we are exposed to more research.

There is a reason why the philosophy that provided solace to a Greek slave and a Roman Emperor 2000 years ago continues to provide solace to modern people from various walks of life (such as James Stockdale, Rhonda Cornum of the US military, presidents of many countries, corporate CEOs, modern psychotherapists, and hundreds of thousands of modern adherents to Stoicism.) The underlying philosophy of Stoicism works and it works well, even without having to conform to the latest scientific findings.

While a rational philosophy of life cannot be totally at odds with science, it would be a mistake to continually update Stoicism to conform to the latest research findings. Philosophy is not science and it does not have to change every time there is a new scientific insight. Science is always in a state of flux, while philosophy seeks relatively enduring truths and ideas. There are many ideas on which scientists themselves don't agree. Many scientific findings are overturned by subsequent research. It is a belief of Stoic Minimalism that the core concepts of Stoicism should be tampered with lightly, if at all.

By clearing the cobwebs of Stoic physics, metaphysics, and religiosity along with "its paradoxes, and the willful misuse of language, ... its extravagance," (Stock 1908, 1), and by paying greater attention to the differences in time, changes in language and culture over the past 23 centuries since Stoicism was first propounded, we come upon a timeless philosophy, simple, yet profound. This is Stoic Minimalism.

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