

The Promises and Problems of Two Stoic Big Tents

Alyssa Lowery

Abstract: Stoicism's tremendous recent popularity provides an opportunity to update the tradition for a contemporary audience. In this paper, I review one such update: Stoicism's conception as a 'big tent,' first as depicted by two prominent figures in contemporary Stoicism – Ryan Holiday and Massimo Pigliucci – then how it fares in light of two challenges, Stoic Resignation and Stoic Reductionism. I conclude by arguing for a self-determination that emphasizes Stoic ethical commitments and attends to its social features, even at the cost of such a big tent.

Keywords: contemporary Stoicism, demarcation, reductionism, resignation.

Introduction

Stoicism has become enormously popular in recent years. This growth has entailed new developments in Stoic practice and ideas, including the rise of conflicting accounts of who can *really* call themselves a Stoic and who's peddling philosophy-lite for their own gain. In this paper, I'm interested to explore this phenomenon of contemporary Stoicism in its divergent forms by focusing specifically on the phenomenon of 'big tent' Stoicism as found in the work of Ryan Holiday and Massimo Pigliucci.

The paper has 3 parts. In Part 1, I provide a taxonomy of contemporary Stoicism as represented primarily by Ryan Holiday and in a lesser sense by Massimo Pigliucci (who I treat as a representative, albeit a limited one, of Modern Stoicism). I focus in particular on their characterization of Stoicism as a 'big tent,' what I consider one of the primary developments of the Stoic tradition. In Part 2 I examine two strands of criticism of Stoicism and consider how these may be updated or amplified in light of Stoicism's modern formulation. In Part 3 I consider possible responses to these challenges and how they fare, including how they inform the future of Stoicism. I conclude by elaborating briefly on how this challenge can enable us to make helpful distinctions concerning Stoicism and philosophy going forward.

1. Contemporary Stoicism as a 'Big Tent'

The central feature of modern Stoicism with which I'm concerned in this paper is its conceptualization as a 'big tent.' This term is frequently used in contemporary Stoic circles, and its multiple meanings should be distinguished. The first is that everyone is welcome to be a student of Stoicism, as when Whiting and

Konstantakos write that Stoicism “caters to all walks of life,” but distinguish those pursuing Epicurean ends from properly Stoic ones (2021, 22). The second refers to the inclusion of atheistic or agnostic individuals as considered properly ‘Stoics.’ Third and finally is the understanding of Stoicism wherein many kinds of things can qualify as Stoicism itself, a Stoic view, or a Stoic practitioner, even without self-identification as such. Here, Stoicism’s big tent entails that a surprising array of things in the world are Stoic already. I’m interested in these second and third forms, as I think there is some overlap and both represent recent developments in Stoicism.

1.1 The Big Tent Stoicism of Ryan Holiday

The third view is represented by Ryan Holiday, who doesn’t use the term ‘big tent’ explicitly, but whose treatment of Stoicism demonstrates such an approach. Specifically, his descriptions of Stoicism and the justifications he offers for it – most notably his Great Person and Common Sense justifications – reveal him to understand Stoicism as a markedly expansive tradition.

Stoicism as a big tent is most apparent in Holiday’s claim that anyone who has ever conquered a challenge in their life is a Stoic. Following a list of notable figures (who are not self-identified Stoics), Holiday tells us that: “Knowingly or not, each individual was a part of an ancient tradition, employing it to navigate the timeless terrain of opportunities and difficulties, trial and triumph.” (2014, xv-xvi) Even if they had never read a Stoic text or done a Stoic practice, they were Stoics, inasmuch as they embodied Marcus Aurelius’ maxim: the obstacle is the way: “There were people who flipped their obstacles upside down... lived the words of Marcus Aurelius and followed a group which Cicero called the only ‘real philosophers’ – the ancient Stoics – even if they’d never read them.” (Holiday 2014, 4) Furthermore, any of us who would take up the same effort at overcoming obstacles are “the rightful heirs of this tradition. It’s our birthright.” (Holiday, 2014, xvi) For anyone who finishes reading *The Obstacle is the Way*, Holiday lets them know that now “the thread of Stoicism runs through [their] life just as it did through [other successful figures] – just as it has for all of history, sometimes explicitly, sometimes not.” (Holiday 2014, 138) In this sense, Holiday seems to be suggesting that all wisdom related to perseverance has been a testament to Stoicism, or an instantiation of it. Such an approach is echoed when the response to exposure to Holiday’s work is the shared sentiment and frequent refrain that “I was a Stoic and didn’t even know it!” (Arcis 2017, Ginsburg 2015) Stoics and Stoicism are everywhere, even if the affiliation isn’t drawn out or named explicitly. This is unsurprising once one sees that for Holiday, Stoicism is “about the mental game... not a set of ethics or principles. It’s a collection of spiritual exercises designed to help people through the difficulty of life.” (Holiday, quoted in Bishop 2017)

This view is further clarified by a brief look at Holiday’s justifications: why ought one become a Stoic? The Great Person argument is inescapable: the first

thing one notices when reading Holiday's books is their ubiquitous references to notable figures. Some of the figures Holiday references were explicit about encountering or approving of Stoicism themselves, including: "George Washington, Walt Whitman, Frederick the Great, Eugène Delacroix, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Jefferson, Matthew Arnold, Ambrose Bierce, Theodore Roosevelt, William Alexander Percy, Ralph Waldo Emerson," as well as contemporary notables, including Tim Ferriss and Jonathan Newhouse (Holiday 2016). In the promotional material for one of his courses is the following: "There's a reason everyone from George Washington to Tom Brady to Anna Kendrick to John Steinbeck have read, studied, quoted, and admired the Stoics." (Stoicism 101) Great people are here, Holiday makes it clear, and have been Stoics. You, who also wants to be a great person, should therefore take up Stoicism as well. This dovetails with Holiday's Common Sense justification: that you should be a Stoic because Stoicism is obviously true, thanks to its consistency with 'ancient wisdom' found in multiple religions and multiple heroic lives. See Holiday's remark that the four Stoic virtues: courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom are "to millions... known as the cardinal virtues, four near-universal ideals adopted by Christianity and most of Western philosophy, but equally valued in Buddhism, Hinduism, and just about every other philosophy you can imagine." (2021, 12) And the ubiquity of the wisdom he's discovered doesn't just extend from tradition to tradition, but includes contemporary 'wisdom,' as Holiday seamlessly blends Seneca with selections from *The 48 Laws of Power* and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (2016).

1.2 The Big Tent Stoicism of Massimo Pigliucci

In contrast to Holiday's gesturing at big tent Stoicism, Pigliucci is explicit, representing our second understanding. Stoicism is "an ecumenical big tent for people of different religious inclinations (from Buddhists to Christians to atheists) and political persuasions to come together and explore whether the life of virtue really is the good life." (Pigliucci 2016b) "Stoics," he writes, "can build a very large tent indeed," and this is "simply the realization that what is important in life is to live it well, and that such an objective... depends very little on whether there is a God or not, and if there is one, on what it's specific attributes may or may not be." (Pigliucci 2017, 64) A variety of people can self-identify as Stoics even if they don't share a variety of formerly common Stoic beliefs. There are limits to Pigliucci's Big Tent, however. Most importantly, Pigliucci claims that there is a core which *has* to remain for Stoicism to be Stoicism: that "if you don't think that virtue – meaning prosocial behavior guided by reason – is fundamental in life, then you are veering pretty far from Stoicism." (Pigliucci 2021) Pigliucci also criticizes those who use Stoicism as purely a means for material success, in the process making a distinction between those who 'merely use Stoic techniques to achieve whatever goal' from 'Stoic philosophy' itself (2017b).

Alyssa Lowery

I'm now interested to consider how this view fairs in philosophic terms: does Stoicism's characterization as a big tent enable it to respond better to the challenges Stoicism has historically faced? Does it invite new challenges? And does this more expansive understanding entail the failure of Stoicism to provide a meaningful definition of itself?

Section 2: Challenges to Contemporary Stoicism

Stoicism has faced its fair share of criticism, and in this section I'll present the two critiques which I think have the most salience for contemporary Stoicism: Stoic Resignation and Stoic Reductionism.

2.1 Stoic Resignation

The first of these, Stoic Resignation, is an instantiation of a long-standing challenge to Stoicism. This owes to Stoic cosmological and metaphysical commitments concerning the constitution of the universe and the subsequent ethical theses which follow. There is of course tremendous debate over the exact relationship of Stoic cosmology to Stoic ethics,¹ but all that matters to initiate the critique of Stoic Resignation are the theses that Nature is rationally and providentially ordered, and that virtue is the only good – necessary and sufficient for happiness – while all other seeming goods are indifferents.² These theses rely on the Stoic commitment to the idea that, “the current state of the cosmos, as well as its creation... are fully rational in the sense of being intelligently organized,” due to “god's all-pervading reason, which physically penetrates the cosmos through and through.” (Salles 2009, 1) As such the world is not an irrational place but has the qualities of being rational and good, such that whatever takes place is not unfair or unwarranted, but has some justification – even if we aren't privy to it. There are both morally neutral and a morally weighty versions of this critique, but the primary challenge concerns the morally objectionable form of this criticism. This is the threat that the Stoics discourage or even disallow someone from taking notable moral action, such as the kind required to remedy significant social ills.

In the world of contemporary Stoicism, this view is presented tongue-in-cheek by Mary Beard and seriously by Sandy Grant. As Beard puts it, it's ‘mystifying’ that people are so interested in Stoicism, given that it was ‘nasty, fatalistic, bordering on fascist,’ arguing that the confidence in Stoicism comes from its ‘rubber stamp of great antiquity,’ despite the fact that Marcus Aurelius was “an emperor who was about as brutal in massacring the enemy as Julius Caesar.” (Beard, 2021) Grant's arguments are harder to summarize in a single quotation, but as she memorably put in Quartz magazine, drawing on critiques of Stoicism

¹ See Salles, *God and Cosmos in Stoicism*.

² Not to mention concerns about determinism or fatalism and their implications for our ability to choose our actions. See Frede (2003), who concludes that “Stoic determinism, therefore, does not lead to resignation.” (205)

from Nietzsche and Sartre: “the problem with this attitude is that it can lead us to accept things that we shouldn’t. As we confront the global rise of authoritarianism, we should not respond by attempting to gain control over our emotions.” (Grant, 2017)

Despite the fact that these challenges aim to go directly at the heart of Stoicism, they’re rebuffed quickly by committed Stoics. Beard was criticized as ‘abysmally ignorant about Stoicism’ by Pigliucci, and Holiday tweeted that Grant was ‘silly’ and wrote that she ‘should know better.’ (Holiday, 2017) As such, there’s a sense in which this debate has already happened, and it seems many contemporary Stoics see the problem as solved. But how do our two forms of the Stoic big tent look in light of this challenge?

Concerning Holiday’s form of big tent Stoicism, I think we can raise a more precise form of the problem. The more damaging form of the Stoic Resignation critique is that, even if we accept some solution to the initial problem of Stoic moral resignation – say, a particular emphasis on oikeiōsis or Stoic ‘cosmopolitanism,’ as Holiday does – it’s not clear that his variety of contemporary Stoicism actually takes its adherents there. Instead, it looks like being a Stoic by Holiday’s lights is to live a life remarkably similar to most non-Stoics. This thought is perhaps most helpfully framed through a brief discussion of a key element of virtue ethics: the moral role model. These are the figures who add much-needed color to the outlined virtues of the Hellenistic traditions. Consider that Aristotle, unlike Plato, doesn’t take the time to justify the value of being virtuous, instead he knows his audience of young, well-off, educated men will already have a roughly accurate sense of what virtuous individuals look like, as well as why it’s worthwhile (Kraut, 2018). Similarly, the Stoic model of sagehood is unpopulated; as Brouwer argues, the only person who the Stoics (perhaps) understood as having reached sagehood is Socrates (2014). Additionally, given the openness of Stoic ethics – particularly when boiled down to the minimum, as in Holiday’s presentation – the person you identify as embodying these qualities plays a significant role in concretizing your understanding of how Stoic ethics look in practice.

So who does Holiday offer as objects of emulation? Looking at the ‘Stoics’ Holiday discusses, one finds a list of highly accomplished, famous, and frequently wealthy people. There are only ‘remarkable historical figures’ in Holiday’s books, which Zuckerberg calls ‘subtly elitist,’ in that he recounts their many successes without regard for “the structures of privilege and oppression that make success more easily accessible to some than to others.” (2018, 69) For example, the celebrated figure which opens *The Obstacle is the Way* is oil baron John D. Rockefeller. As Holiday puts it, Rockefeller’s genius – and more importantly – his *Stoicism* – was in recognizing that “the market was inherently unpredictable and often vicious – only the rational and disciplined mind could hope to profit from it.” (Holiday 2014, 14) Common non-Stoic heroes are easily identified as Stoic ones viewed with the right lens. This suggests that to be a Stoic is to finally have the

tools I need to accomplish all of the desires I acquired in a world that celebrates wealth and fame – just with less suffering or anxiety. This is the heart of the oft-stated charge that Holiday presents Stoicism as ‘life-hacking,’ as merely a productivity tool for entrepreneurs (Rosenberg, 2020). If I can be a Stoic like Holiday – and yet continue seamlessly seeking after the goals I had before I became a Stoic – does Stoicism have much of an ethic at all?

This theme is intensified by the ongoing rise in contemporary awareness of the way in which our social situations affect our achievements. What is and is not under our control varies dramatically from person to person, but Holiday insists on treating all forms of what isn’t under our control as equivalent. As Zuckerberg writes: “Holiday puts racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and a host of other prejudices into a box, labels it ‘disadvantage,’ and then makes it vanish by proclaiming disadvantage universal to the human condition.” (2018, 65) This neglect of social context amplifies the scrutiny one ought to pay to Holiday’s celebrated ‘Stoics.’ Are the figures which ubiquitously populate his texts ‘Stoics’ in a meaningful sense of the word, or is Holiday committing a kind of mass survivorship bias fallacy: anyone who has succeeded is a Stoic?

The final consideration here is to note how those who inhabit Stoicism’s other big tent – the Modern Stoics who allow for differences – fare under the Stoic Resignation line. Many modern Stoics seem unbothered to slough off the more cosmological elements of Stoicism which are often the driving elements of Stoic Resignation. For those who are atheists or agnostics, they seem primed to maneuver all the more deftly around this challenge. They don’t need to justify any current injustice as providential, and the full-throated pivot to a primarily ethical Stoicism enables a robust turn to an activist Stoic ethic – even one that acknowledges where Stoicism has previously fallen short (Gill 2016, Pigliucci 2021). This is to be commended, but it remains to be seen how the Modern Stoics will respond to the next challenge: Stoic Reductionism.

2.2 Stoic Reductionism

Stoic Reductionism is concerned with the way in which contemporary Stoicism distorts Stoicism’s aims *as a philosophy*. It argues that Stoicism in its contemporary form and flourishing is an inadequate or even false picture of Stoicism, criticizing both the method and criteria of contemporary Stoicism and its content. Julian Baggini argues that as it’s practiced and popularized today, popular Stoicism reduces the vibrancy and richness of Stoicism to merely its therapeutic aims (Baggini 2012, 2013). It’s ‘perfectly legitimate’ that the developers of therapeutic systems cherry-picked certain features of Stoicism, but what he objects to “is praising the joys of scrumping as though it were on a par with the care, dedication and understanding of growing an orchard.” (Baggini 2012) Merely stealing fruit from an orchard (adopting elements of Stoicism) is fine, but treating that practice as *proper philosophizing* is where one goes awry. He writes on the difference between one who uses Stoic tools to achieve a certain

therapeutic end, and a Stoic: “adapt[ing] and borrow[ing] any particular Stoic methods that work... no more makes you a Stoic than practising meditation makes you a Buddhist.” (Macaro and Baggini 2013)

What’s the alternative to cherry-picking? Baggini says that “to become a stoic is to endorse the truthfulness of its world view and accept its prescription for how you ought to live, not just to like how it makes you feel.” (2012) And herein lies the real critique. Baggini wants to preserve Stoicism as a *philosophy*, as the kind of thing that ought to be judged solely by its *arguments*: “Like any philosophical position, Stoicism itself stands or falls... on the soundness of its arguments, not its effect on our psychological wellbeing. Philosophy is first and foremost the pursuit of truth, albeit without a capital T.” (Macaro and Baggini 2013) Doing philosophy requires a certain openness to revision; to philosophize is not to “simply adopt a fully formed world view in its entirety,” but to “follow up and through, and not simply after.” (Macaro and Baggini 2013)

This lies in contrast to the way I’ve framed Holiday’s Stoicism, where one can realize has been a Stoic all along, that one can become a Stoic and retain one’s previous heroes, or that one can call oneself a Stoic without undergoing any serious ethical revision. It’s also at odds with Pigliucci’s framing of the decision to become a Stoic. In earlier work Pigliucci stressed a distinction between the adoption of a philosophy of life and a religion, writing (in a way that seems quite consistent with Baggini) that “ultimately religious belief must be a matter of faith. One simply accepts scriptures as the word of God... [whereas] the contrast should be stark with philosophy: by its very nature, philosophy not only can but has to be questioned.” (2015) But in the more recent *How to Live a Good Life*, co-edited with Skye Cleary and Daniel Kaufman, this distinction between religion and a philosophy of life is rejected; they argue instead that such a distinction would be ‘fuzzy’ at best, and ‘pointless’ when choosing a life philosophy (2020, 8). The choice to become a Stoic isn’t the naïve acceptance of faith, nor a reasoned agreement with truth, but a personal selection from many equally good ‘philosophies of life,’ made if it’s ‘really one that makes sense for [you].’ (Pigliucci, Cleary, and Kaufman 2020b) To illustrate, see Pigliucci’s account of his own choice to become a Stoic, made because the “two major [paths] on offer for those seeking a meaningful secular existence – are unsatisfactory.” (Pigliucci 2017, 10) These ‘two paths’ are secular Buddhism and secular humanism; the former is ‘a bit too mystical’ and the latter “comes across as cold and not the sort of thing you want to bring your kids to on a Sunday morning.” (Pigliucci 2017, 10-11)

The overall charge from Baggini holds up if we are committed to treating Stoicism as exclusively a philosophical position that ought to be adopted on precisely the same grounds one adopts an epistemological or metaphysical view. But the tide of contemporary Stoicism is solidly against this idea; the therapeutic value is understood as core to Stoicism’s appeal and value, and can be easily traced

back to Stoicism's origins.³ As such, Baggini's critique is an external one, easily rebuffed by Stoicism's contemporary committed adherents. This isn't to say the Stoic Reductionist challenge is over, instead there's an internal form: the challenge that removing certain features of Stoicism, most specifically its cosmological commitments, entails a break with the tradition which is so egregious as to no longer be a continuation of it. In other words, how much revision can the tradition handle? While Modern Stoicism provides an opportunity to correct for the morally weighty criticisms of the tradition, they now risk producing a vacuous form of Stoicism.

3. Responses and Revisions to Contemporary Stoicism

While there are Traditional Stoics who (according to their website traditionalstoicism.com) insist that to be a Stoic is to retain Stoicism's 'religious' character and their 'fundamental assumptions about the nature of humankind and the nature of the cosmos,' the Modern Stoics (on their website, modernstoicism.com) have firmly committed to an 'inclusive' big tent which 'encompass[es] different interpretations and applications of Stoicism' ('About Us'). Resolving that debate is beyond the scope of the paper, but it's clear that the tradition is coming to solidify on the side of inclusivity. The concern from some Traditional Stoics is that to allow this adjustment is to open the door to a Stoicism that rejects even its ethical dimensions (Drew 2022). And this concern isn't unreasonable; in order to be meaningful designators, definitions have to exclude some instances from their scope.

The response to this has been that like other traditions, Stoicism can and should be *updated*. As Pigliucci writes, Stoicism is "an open philosophical system, meaning a framework based on some general ideas and insights advanced by the ancient Greco-Romans, updated to the 21st century, in light of intervening advancements in both science and philosophy." (2015) The fluctuations in Stoicism are a predictable part of the ebb and flow of any tradition; even Christianity has 'mainstream' forms and its "corruptions, like the abomination known as 'prosperity gospel.'" (Pigliucci 2018) As long as the constitutive core of Stoicism is preserved – for Pigliucci, that virtue keeps its central place – and the updates are "organic and sufficiently respectful of the original version of Stoicism that the modern one can reasonably be considered to have a family resemblance," such updates are appropriate (Pigliucci 2015). Most anyone who self-identifies as a Stoic counts as one; this is the promise of the big tent.

My overall agreement on this topic lies with this openness to a revisionary tradition. Consider the question of Stoic feminism. While commenters are quick to point out that the Stoics understood women as capable of philosophizing, and that it's important to correct this misconception, it's also true that Stoics have an 'uneven track record' on feminism, such that the misconception may not be so

³ On this tradition, see Nussbaum (1994) and Hadot (1995).

inaccurate (Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014).⁴ But for whose sake is anyone interested in preserving one version of Stoicism or the other as the truest? In whose interest is it to make sure that Stoicism in the contemporary eye remains free from misconceptions or misunderstandings? Stoics have no god who would be offended, nor any saints with reputations to protect. The only people invested in Stoicism are contemporary Stoics themselves, which means they have the power to determine the shape of the tradition, including ensuring it has explicit feminist commitments or not. An explicit commitment to a revisionary Stoicism seems the best available response to concerns about Stoic Resignation.

I am, however, sympathetic to the concern over the future of Stoicism, to the urge to tighten the tent, for two reasons. The first can be drawn out through a comparison: Buddhism has faced a similar line of critique and correction as Stoicism in recent years.⁵ The most famous example is Ronald Purser's *McMindfulness*, a criticism of the way Buddhist spiritual practices have been co-opted for capitalist ends (2019). Despite these criticisms, it seems mindfulness has fully entered the Western arena and is here to stay. And yet, most people who practice mindfulness in an offhand way are often happy to refrain from calling themselves practicing Buddhists; there are even mindfulness exercises in public schools. In contrast, people who adopt Stoicism, even explicitly as a life-hack, still seem very comfortable calling themselves practicing Stoics. Even further, these same people proclaim themselves the *truest Stoics*.

Secondly, while mindfulness was co-opted (according to Purser) for capitalistic ends not native to it, Stoicism has been adopted for even more nefarious purposes. As Zuckerberg details, the alt-right and men's rights movements frequently draw on Stoic sources to support their views, arguing that they are the tradition's *proper inheritors* (2018, 59). And while Zuckerberg rightly notes that Holiday 'is not quite a member of the Red Pill community,' I want to point out how clearly his characterization of Stoicism and philosophy plays to their narrative of superiority and disenfranchisement (2017, 62). This is evident in the disdain Holiday regularly displays towards academic philosophers. In his introduction to *The Daily Stoic*, Holiday writes that, "while academics often see stoicism as an antiquated methodology of minor interest, it has been the doers of the world who found that it provides much needed strength and stamina for their challenging lives." (2016, 12) There's a contrast, it seems, between the stodgy academic engagement with Stoicism, and the *real living* of the thing. Stoicism 'seems to have been particularly well designed' 'for the field of battle,' and it's those Stoics on the battlefield who 'weren't professors but practitioners.' (Holiday 2016, 13) Those laboring to produce analysis on Stoicism are in fact not 'doers' after all; or if they are, it is in spite of their philosophizing, not because of it. And this inhibits their ability to even understand Stoic texts appropriately: in a

⁴ For an example, see the comments on Pigliucci (2018).

⁵ Thanks to Keya Maitra & Scott Aikin here for suggesting this connection.

YouTube video discussing the *Meditations* and the importance of understanding it a journal, not a treatise, Holiday explains that “one of the criticisms of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* by academics who don’t get this is that it’s repetitive.” (2021) Repeatedly Holiday explains that Stoicism is wasted on professional philosophers, and worse, that it was hoarded by them: Stoicism is a ‘wisdom’ that was “taken from us, co-opted and deliberately obscured by selfish, sheltered academics.” (Holiday 2014, 184) Philosophers too caught up in the nuances of Stoicism are failing at other more critically important, yet unnamed, tasks. In contrast, anyone who has read Holiday’s book *The Obstacle is the Way* and become ‘a person of action,’ is now, ‘by every definition that counts,’ a philosopher (2014, 183). Holiday, in contrast, has decided to not ‘play by the rules,’ and therefore discovered the truth of Stoicism and shared it with the people who deserve it.⁶ That sense of righteous entitlement, specifically against the academic elite who want to keep him down, sounds familiar.

It’s also ultimately this line of thinking which is Holiday’s response to the twin challenges of Stoic Resignation and Stoic Reductionism. Criticisms like those are made by academics who simply don’t understand or appreciate Stoicism rightly (Holiday 2017b).

Conclusion

To close, I’m not telling Holiday what he’s doing *isn’t* philosophy. I may want to say he does a poor job philosophizing, but I don’t need to police the boundaries. That Holiday does, and that he does so voraciously is the interesting phenomenon. He’s drawing the borders of the philosophical tent tightly, seemingly to undermine academia and intellectual expertise, purportedly to make philosophy more accessible – even as he limits it to others like him. Now, what does this move have to do with Pigliucci’s Modern Stoicism?

Today’s Stoics have their own tent borders to mark off, and it seems the pendulum is swinging towards the biggest tent possible, as in Pigliucci’s claim that Stoicism is a philosophy of life that ‘Buddhists to Christians to atheists’ can adopt (2016b). The appeal of this kind of view is clear. At the time of the greatest political polarization America has ever faced, that such division may be more illusion than reality, that it could be corrected by a return to a commonsense ethical and moral perspective, sounds like a welcome relief. But why does that perspective need to be Stoicism? The big tent has moved beyond inclusivity of varying metaphysical commitments, to inclusivity of even distinct accounts of the good (unless we

⁶ This can be seen most clearly when Holiday writes about his initial feelings of jealousy at Massimo Pigliucci’s being asked to write for the *New York Times* about Stoicism. What’s telling is a commentator who writes: “Ryan, your feelings of jealousy were displaced simply because you decided a long time ago that you wouldn’t play by the ‘rules,’ dropping out of the college. Are you surprised that the NYT, which revers academia, would go with a scholar over you on this one.” Holiday’s response: “Of course not. But we all want to have our cake and eat it too.” See Holiday (2015).

simultaneously deflate religious commitments like Christianity or Buddhism to merely their metaphysical claims).

Instead, I want to advocate that contemporary Stoicism draw the tent a little tighter. This is not to say the goal is more rigorous policing of who gets to call themselves a Stoic. Rather, if contemporary Stoics want a Stoicism which can be more socially or politically active, one that emphasizes the serious ethical claims Stoics put forward of cosmopolitanism and universality,⁷ then they have to risk a smaller tent. Without one, the line between who's a Stoic and who isn't comes down to a general notion of who's a roughly reasonable person and who isn't.⁸ But rough reasonability, or an assumed similarity of ethical commitments, isn't stable ground. If it were, if Stoicism were genuinely as pervasive as Holiday seems to think, or as reducible to such a common set of ethical commitments as Pigliucci seems to, then the question asserts itself all the more strongly: why doesn't the world (and even the Stoic movement itself) already embody the kind of cosmopolitanism they both say it celebrates? The supposed pervasiveness of Stoic values would entail that becoming a Stoic is more *recognizing* one's own values in the tradition, rather than being *transformed* by it.

One objection to calls for a narrower demarcation is that philosophy at any cost is worthwhile. Holiday and others like him get people to reflect on their lives, and that ought to be enough (Whiting and Konstantakos 2018). But I think this is a mistake. People are interested in things they believe will benefit them; it seems purely incidental to me that at this point on the culture carousel, it's philosophy on center stage. As Holiday clarifies repeatedly, he isn't interested in what populates philosophy departments: if it's not making people's lives immediately better, he doesn't want it. But this is utterly reductive of philosophy, even as therapeutic philosophy is very important. What we learn from Holiday is not how to make philosophy popular, but how thoughtfully and carefully we should take the act of demarcating a tradition. Doing so for a tradition you feel you deserve ownership of, as a way to establish your authority – what Holiday is doing with philosophy – is risky, as is doing the same alongside an assertion to be the rightful inheritor of its truest form, what Holiday is doing with Stoicism.

So as contemporary Stoics try to draw the borders of their tent, the question to ask is: for what reasons are the borders drawn? What commitments are essential, and what justifications will they respect? If the borders are drawn for the sake of merely protecting Stoicism as a coherent tradition – that's questionable.

⁷ As I think many do: see Gill (2016), Pigliucci (2021).

⁸ This is evident in Pigliucci's claim that "if we are talking about mainstream religionists, as opposed to fundamentalists, our opinions on most crucial matters of ethics and politics are rarely that different." (2017, 63-64) But what constitutes a 'mainstream religionist' and a 'fundamentalist?' In other words, it may be easy to recognize such a distinction in religious terms (though I'm skeptical of this as well), but what about someone who's an advocate of Critical Race Theory? Are they a fundamentalist? Are they mainstream? These terms are poor ones to use as a framework.

Alyssa Lowery

But drawing borders to preserve Stoicism's robust commitment to a specific ethical future strikes me as the right avenue. Finally, I wonder if conceptual analysis is the right tool here; I'm inclined to say a quite relevant feature of the debate is the social role Stoicism is playing in an enormous amount of people's (and often enough to note, white men's) lives. When those who want to set up the Stoic tent ask themselves what it is about Stoicism they're interested in protecting or preserving, they would do well to consider the social features it includes – not merely its conceptual elements.

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Alyssa Lowery

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