

## Modern Stoicism as Modern Therapy

Over the past few years I have followed with interest the recent resurgence of interest in Stoicism as found in such books as Massimo Pigliucci's *How to be a Stoic* and Donald Robertson's *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* as well as on blogs such as *Modern Stoicism* and the *Daily Stoic*. Why has an ancient philosophy, traditionally known for its austerity, attracted so much attention at this time? Many answers to this question abound, but for the purposes of this paper, I shall focus on Stoicism's practicality in providing "spiritual exercises," as Pierre Hadot refers to it, so that people can progress in Stoicism.

First, a little background is given on the modern Stoicism movement. In his 1998 book, *A New Stoicism*, Lawrence Becker began the adaptation of this ancient philosophy to contemporary use, discarding what was outdated (most notably the providential cosmos) and focusing on what can be used in the modern world, (i.e. the Stoic emphasis on virtue). Even before this, James Stockdale used Epictetus' principles as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. In the last few years, popular interest in Stoicism has flourished. Several thousand have participated in the annual Stoic Week at the University of Exeter and *Stoicon* (modelled after comic-con?). Books, blogs and other media discuss the relevance of Stoicism not only for the military but for everyday life, politics, sports, business, etc.

Now, let us turn to the aspect of spiritual exercises in modern Stoicism. The term "spiritual exercises" obviously goes back to French scholar Pierre Hadot. In a blog post on Modern Stoicism, Matthew Sharp describes Hadot in the following way: "if there is one figure whose work underlies the rise of modern Stoicism, it would be the French philosopher, Pierre Hadot." Hadot argued in various works that ancient philosophy was not just abstract systems of theoretical principles, but a way of life putting these principles into action: "Philosophy as it was

lived and experienced thus implied continuous exercises of meditation and constant vigilance, in order to keep alive in one's mind the principles taught by theoretical discourse." The most significant of these exercises were connected with three areas (τόποι) proposed by Epictetus in *Discourses* 3.2: (1) the area of desire (ὄρεξις); (2) that of impulse or motivating inclinations (ὄρμη); and (3) that of assent (συγκατάθεσις). Each of these areas are explained in some detail. The pervasive influence of Epictetus and Hadot may be seen in the format of many of the modern Stoicism books which I have cited above. Most often these authors will refer to "disciplines" instead of "areas." Thus, Pigliucci's book is divided into the Discipline of Desire, of Action, and of Assent. So also Robertson's book has chapters on these three disciplines. A detailed comparison is then offered observing what is similar and different about the ancient and modern versions of the three disciplines.

The paper concludes with reflections (mostly questions) on what has been included and what has been left out in these modern Stoic approaches in comparison with ancient Stoicism. The early Stoics believed that their ethics was intimately connected with their physics and logic. Can Stoic physics simply be discarded without affecting the ethics? Often little mention is found about indifferents in modern Stoicism; rather there is more talk of internals and externals. Ultimately, do these modern spiritual practices lead to a consistent moral development or are they more a grab bag of practices from which to pick?

#### Bibliography

Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton UP 1998).

Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. A. Davidson and tr. M. Chase (Madden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. 1995)

M. Pigliucci, *How to be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life* (NY: Basic

Books 2017).

Donald Robertson, *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Life* (John

Murray Learning 2018)

<https://modernstoicism.com/pierre-hadots-stoicism-by-matthew-sharpe/>