

Symposium: Stoicism Reconsidered: Part II

More or Less within My Power: Nature, Virtue, and the Modern Stoic

Christian Coseru
College of Charleston

“Stoicism,” as Massimo Pigliucci informs us in a synoptic overview of its recent resurgence both inside and outside academia, “is back.”¹ After a hiatus roughly corresponding to the triumph and abatement of Christianity in the West, Stoicism has been gaining ground on the heels of a resurgent virtue ethics research program. Professional philosophers, save for neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists and those few specialists in Hellenistic philosophy, may have had little to do with its upsurge in mainstream culture, but it would be unwise, we are told, to brush it aside as just another intellectual fad. As Pigliucci exhorts in his lead article, philosophers have a duty to “take notice, understand, and insofar as it is possible, contribute to the increasing interest in practical philosophy, of which modern Stoicism is but one manifestation.”²

I welcome both the challenge to help broaden interest in practical philosophy within academia and the invitation to consider—or rather, reconsider—what Stoicism has to offer denizens of the global post-industrial West, though I will limit my comments to the latter. Specifically, I want to examine the relation between virtue and power—captured by what I take to be the most salient and fundamental of Stoic principles, namely, that some things are up to us and some are beyond our control—and see what the contemporary embrace of

¹ Massimo Pigliucci, “Toward the Fifth Stoa: The Return of Virtue Ethics,” *Reason Papers* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2018), pp. 14–30, quotation at p. 14. Also see Massimo Pigliucci, *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

² Pigliucci, “Toward the Fifth Stoa,” p. 14.

revisionary metaphysics³ means for the modern Stoic's conception of living according to nature. As Epictetus himself so eloquently puts it, "Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing."⁴ This principle, which Pigliucci labels "the dichotomy of control," reflects a certain ambivalence about power and the human capacity to effect change whatever the goal may be (e.g., overcoming hubris or just cultivating a serene disposition).

³ Since Peter F. Strawson first introduced the phrase, "revisionary metaphysics" has been conceived (in opposition to "descriptive metaphysics"), as a project concerned with producing a better structure of the world than "the actual structure of our thought about the world"; see Peter Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959), p. 9. One way to understand revisionary metaphysics, then, is as a project concerned with "what the structure of reality would be if it were accurately mirrored in the conceptual scheme we *ought* to have"; see Uriah Kriegel, "The Epistemological Challenge of Revisionary Metaphysics," *Philosophers' Imprint* 13, no. 12 (June 2013), pp. 1-30, quotation at p. 1. Since studying the world's *real* structure preoccupies most metaphysicians today, it is revisionary rather than descriptive metaphysics that dominates most debates in ontology and cosmology (even as most metaphysicians eschew this nomenclature). Indeed, Frank Jackson's sustained and influential defense of the relevance of conceptual analysis to serious metaphysics (conceived as the task of providing a "comprehensive account of some subject-matter—the mind, the semantic, or, most ambitiously, everything—in terms of a limited number of more or less basic notions") is just one example of how revisionary (or "serious") metaphysics makes explicit what is implicit in a given (scientific) theory of the world; see Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4. More overt examples of such an undertaking, in this case centered on the metaphysics of personal identity, are found in Carol Rovane's *The Bounds of Agency: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Galen Strawson's *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), both of which, as their subtitles announce, are conceived as "an essay in revisionary metaphysics."

⁴ Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 1.1, in *Epictetus: Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, trans. Robin Hard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Clearly, insofar as we are capable of exercising any kind of agency, whether in thought or deed, the Stoics must be right that some things are going to be under our control (our opinions, judgments, and so on) while others are going to be outside of our control (how others feel and think about us). The question of control, however, depends not simply on the capacity to recognize what is and what is not up to us, but on a deeper metaphysical question about agency. Pigliucci rightly identifies some of the roadblocks a modern Stoic might face when confronting the problem of agency, but, as I will argue, he downplays their importance. We may well be able, as he says, to “retain a meaningful sense of living according to nature”⁵ by interpreting the Stoic concept of nature to mean *follow the facts*, and the concept of human nature to mean our *sociality* and *capacity to reason*. In doing so, though, we assume an unproblematic assimilation of (the Stoic conception of) nature to facts about our biology and psychology, in particular of *biological* nature to the findings of evolutionary biology and behavioral genetics and of *moral* nature to the empirical facts and hypotheses of moral psychology.

It seems plausible to assume that, at the most basic level, choice is deeply embedded in mechanisms that regulate our capacity to discriminate and form judgments, and that some causal explanation is in order if we are to make sense of what it means to live according to nature. However, causal explanation is no substitute for understanding what it is about our capacity to choose that makes us *moral* agents,⁶ given that what makes an action moral (and thus praiseworthy) is the agent’s autonomy—in particular the autonomy of practical reason⁷—and hence her responsiveness to reasons.⁸ As I have argued elsewhere,

⁵ Pigliucci, “Toward the Fifth Stoa,” p. 23.

⁶ Choice, unlike the sort of automatic heuristic-based processes that characterize our perceptual engagement with situations and things, is a demanding, time-consuming, and resource-intensive operation that presupposes some measure of deliberation and the weighing of alternative possibilities before action is finally undertaken; cf. Richard Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), p. 57.

⁷ Elizabeth Anderson, “Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods,” in *Incommensurability, Incompatibility, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 90-109, quotation at p. 92.

⁸ In discussing the varieties of autonomy (e.g., self-control, power in the

moral agency is a type of achievement that comes with learning the norms of ethical conduct. The norms themselves are not traceable to specifically neurobiological mechanisms and processes, although, once learned, they would have their neural correlates when enacted.⁹

Pigliucci is in broad agreement with Lawrence Becker that the Stoic's moral reasoning, which has been reduced to "practical reasoning all-things-considered,"¹⁰ can survive without the teleological physics and biology that put classical Stoicism at odds with the modern scientific consensus. Does this stripped down, bare-bones Stoicism without metaphysical beliefs suffice for canvassing a conception of moral agency robust enough to serve as a guide for living well? How exactly can the modern Stoic face the dilemmas of modern life without appealing to some special-purpose point of view (e.g., law, efficiency, care, prudence)? That is, beyond the broadly shared idea that, as Pigliucci puts it, "we thrive in social groups and . . . are capable of reason,"¹¹ how do we know when our employ of reason has improved social living and engendered our flourishing? Without belaboring the point, my concern is that the dilemmas of modern life (e.g., life-style choices in the face of climate change, epistemic trust in a science that is not entirely value-free, striving for justice in an unequal world) demand not less but more scrutiny of the Stoic's moral and metaphysical norms. The main issue, as I see it, is whether the modern Stoic can heed Epictetus's warning that attributing "freedom to things

world, psychological independence, having moral rights, authenticity), Nomy Arpaly thinks that Stoic *ataraxia* is best understood as a kind of "heroic autonomy," since ideally only the Stoic sage would exhibit the capacity to act such that externals or indifferents (*adiaphora*) (e.g., wealth, fame, education) exercise no influence, though some indifferents are preferred (e.g., health) while others are not (e.g., poverty); see Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 124.

⁹ Christian Coseru, "Breaking Good: Moral Agency, Neuroethics, and the Spontaneity of Compassion," in *A Mirror Is for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Jake Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 109-30; see esp. p. 111.

¹⁰ Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 117.

¹¹ Pigliucci, "Toward the Fifth Stoa," p. 23.

by nature dependent” and taking “what belongs to others for your own”¹² can be a source of distress without acquiescing to social injustice or falling prey to a false consciousness.

The new sciences of human nature where the modern Stoic seeks, and claims to find, ground for action, also tell us, among other things, that human behavioral traits are heritable, that the effects of nurture are smaller than those of our genes, and that much of the variation in human behavior is accountable in terms of neither genetic inheritance nor family rearing conditions.¹³ Neither my genetic programming nor my family upbringing is within my power. The evidence from behavioral genetic research also suggests, though, that much of who we are (and are capable of) is determined by our unique experiences.¹⁴ One’s familial and social environments may constrain the range of opinions that one can form, just as one’s genetic inheritance may determine whether or not piano lessons at an early age are going to disclose a musical prodigy. However, it is one’s unique experiences (a lasting childhood friendship, an accident, or a chance encounter with an influential mentor) that in the end push the boundary of what is possible.

If the modern Stoic’s conception of living according to nature is *follow the facts*, then these findings in particular make it harder to hold onto the dichotomy-of-control model. Just as the cultural and social revolutions of the modern era brought forth new forms of human expression, gene replacement therapy may one day alter the extent to which our physical and intellectual abilities are constrained by our biological inheritance. For the modern Stoic, *follow the facts* may mean that nothing is entirely under our control just as nothing is entirely beyond it. Rather, things are *more* or *less* within my power, depending on the range of possibilities that living in accordance with a constantly evolving conception of nature affords.

¹² Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 1.3, in *Epictetus: Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*.

¹³ Jonathan Flint, Ralph Greenspan, and Kenneth Kendler, *How Genes Influence Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chap. 11.

¹⁴ David Moore, *The Developing Genome: An Introduction to Behavioral Epigenetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 155f.

What does this mean for the pursuit of virtue? Classical Stoicism holds that one cannot be in between virtue and vice. Like a stick, which must be either straight or crooked, “so a man must be either just or unjust, but not either more just or more unjust, and likewise with the other virtues.”¹⁵ This view had already come under close scrutiny in antiquity, though. As Alexander of Aphrodisias remarks in *On Fate*, “‘If,’ they [the Stoics] say, ‘those things are in our power of which we are also capable of the opposites,’ and it is to such cases that praise and blame and encouragements and discouragements and punishments and rewards are given, being prudent and having the virtues will not be in the power of those who have them, since they are no longer capable of receiving the vices which are opposite to the virtues.”¹⁶ What does this mean for the Stoic conception of virtue as identical with rationality and as a vehicle for the normative propositions of practical reason?

The implication of a conception of virtue as rooted in nature is that vice becomes in some sense unnatural, a product of unreason rather than a natural inclination. If this is the case, then prudence and virtue are no longer within our power since we could not in principle have done otherwise. This picture of human agency, which pitted classical Stoicism against the Greek tragedians, is now also at odds with a great deal of empirical research that regards traditional views of human rationality as flawed.¹⁷ Against the Socratic dictum that “none of the wise men considers that anybody ever willingly errs,”¹⁸ which provides inspiration for the Stoic conception of moral purpose (*prohairesis*), Aeschylus paints an akratic picture of human nature when he has Prometheus declare: “Of my own will, yes, of my own

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius, 7.127, in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers, Vol. I* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 380.

¹⁶ Alexander, *On Fate*, 196.24-197.3, in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, p. 381.

¹⁷ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

¹⁸ Plato, *Protagoras*, 345d, in *Plato: Gorgias, Meno, Protagoras*, ed. Malcolm Schofield, trans. T. Griffith (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

will I erred—I will not deny it.”¹⁹ If critics of the rationalist traditions in Western thought are correct, then moral failure cannot be due to an intellectual error alone. Contrary to Chrysippus’s view that “the impulse of man is reason prescribing action to him,”²⁰ the passions (anger, shame, dread, etc.) are *upheavals* of thought rather than *rational* movements.

The modern Stoic may reject this Promethean upending of human reason or insist that desires, so long as they are thoughtful (*orexis dianoētikē*) and do not exceed the bounds of reason, are within our power (e.g., I can give up meat and walk to work, and encourage others to do the same without despairing or getting angry when they don’t). Either way, the question of power remains a central concern.

First, power itself is a relational concept. This means that both those things that are said to be under my control (e.g., my opinions) and those that are not (e.g., the weather) are relative to what I am capable of. For example, my opinions reflect ways of seeing and habits of mind that I can reflect on, but also whose underlying mechanisms I don’t fully understand, let alone control. Similarly, while I may not be able to control the weather, my ability to find shelter, build a camp fire, or adjust the thermostat represent ways in which I *can* wrest some measure of control over my immediate environment. Even though there are limits to my physical and intellectual abilities, I can jump higher and sing better if I am in peak shape. This relational view of power, according to Pigliucci, has led interpreters such as Donald Robertson to propose a trichotomy-of-control model,²¹ since a great many things are just partially under our control (e.g., exercise and a healthy diet is one way to have some control over one’s body). The better we understand the natural world, the more we are able to control its impact on us: we build dams to control flooding, advance epidemiology to prevent disease outbreaks, and maximize well-being for working people through social welfare programs. Second, the findings of contemporary cognitive science seem to restrict the scope

¹⁹ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. Deborah H. Roberts (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2012), p. 265.

²⁰ Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1037f, in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, p. 317.

²¹ Donald Robertson, *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013).

of human agency, and thus to limit the range of things that are, on Epictetus's view, "up to us."

What should the neo-Stoic view of eudaimonia be, given our growing understanding of the various factors that inform and influence our value judgments? Pigliucci thinks we can easily avoid the first problem by restricting the scope of human agency to, and thus grounding eudaimonia on, those things only "which we completely control," while "the rest should be accepted with equanimity."²² As for the second problem, he points to works such as Seneca's *De Ira* to make the case that the Stoics were well aware of the vast undercurrent of "instinctive reactions and automatic thoughts over which we have no control."²³ He thinks the Stoics may have gotten their psychology broadly right and cites such evidence-based approaches to psychotherapy as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy²⁴ to bolster the claim that our best approach to a broad range of affective and cognitive states reflects broadly Stoic principles.

Of course, as framed, the dichotomy-of-control model reflects a moral rather than metaphysical concern: the issue is not whether agency and power are constitutive aspects of *my* nature, but whether I can live in a way that conforms to how nature *actually is*. As Zeno urges, for the Stoic, "the goal was to live in agreement with nature, which is to live according to virtue."²⁵ Why live in such a way? Because nature leads to virtue.

Leaving virtue aside for a moment, just what it means to live in agreement with nature is a vexing question for the Stoic. Chrysippus thinks that it is a matter of living "according to experience of the things which happen by nature." Diogenes takes it to mean that one should be

²² Pigliucci, "Toward the Fifth Stoa," p. 24.

²³ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁴ Appealing to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to make the case for the viability of Stoic psychological principles assumes that CBT is indeed as effective as its advocates have claimed. For a different view that calls into question the efficacy of CBT-based therapies, or at the very least their superiority over other therapies, see T. Baardseth et al., "Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy versus Other Therapies: Redux," *Clinical Psychology Review* 33 (2013), pp. 395-405.

²⁵ Zeno, *Lives of Philosophers*, 7.87, in *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, ed. and trans. Brad Inwood and Lloyd Gerson (Indianapolis, IN, Hackett, 1997), p. 113.

“reasonable in the selection and rejection of natural things,” Archedemus glosses it as “to live completing all the appropriate acts,” and Antipater notes that it is best understood as “invariably and unswervingly to do everything in one’s power for the attainment of the principal natural things.”²⁶ All of this is just another way of saying that, as Seneca puts it, what is best in us is our reason, “which when right and perfect makes the full sum of human happiness.”²⁷ Only when such reason is perfected can it truly be said that we have attained that which is within our power: the perfect reason that the Stoic calls virtue.

However, as should be clear by now, our conception of nature in general—and human nature in particular—has evolved to the point that “living according to nature” is too vague and confusing an injunction to provide a useful guide to daily life. The new sciences of human nature may tell us what comes to us naturally given current understanding of the function of chromosomes and neurotransmitters, but they cannot tell us why we find it reasonable to care for things seemingly beyond our control, such as the health of the environment, far-away political conflicts, or the welfare of seniors. Nor can it tell us why we often embrace ways of being and living that sacrifice short-term comfort for long-term gains (e.g., serving in the military, joining the Peace Corps, volunteering for Mars One). Most importantly, it cannot tell us why so much of life’s accomplishments comes out of frustrating natural drives and instincts that have seemingly no specific genetic basis or evolutionary logic. As Louis Menand put it some time ago in a review of Steven Picker’s *The Blank Slate*, “To say that music is the product of a gene for ‘art-making,’ naturally selected to impress potential mates . . . is to say absolutely nothing about what makes any particular piece of music significant to human beings. No doubt Wagner wished to impress potential mates; who does not? It is a long way from there to ‘Parsifal.’”²⁸

Leaving aside for now the problematic aspect of moving from a conception of “natural” as normal or regular—“regular” in a way that retains enough of what Pigliucci regards as the Stoic directive to “keep

²⁶ Stobaeus, *Anthology*, 2.75.11-76.8, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p. 211.

²⁷ Seneca, *Letters*, 76.9-10, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, p. 395.

²⁸ Louis Menand, “What Comes Naturally: Does Evolution Explain Who We Are?” *The New Yorker* (November 25, 2002), accessed online at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/11/25/what-comes-naturally-2>.

in harmony with the Logos”²⁹—to that of “natural” in the sense of right or proper, the Stoic cannot plausibly argue that we naturally evolve to act both in a self-interested manner and that our intentions to act this way are rationally motivated.³⁰ The starting point for Stoic ethics may have been the concept of “familiarization” (*oikeiôsis*), which captures the sense of self-preservation and sociability that is indispensable to living well. It should be obvious that this capacity to be at home in the world, which for the Stoic is not merely a function of survival and sociability, but a guiding principle of reasoned agency, cannot be easily reconciled, if at all, with the disenchanting picture of the world advanced by modern science.

What, then, does our scientifically informed understanding of human nature mean for this Stoic principle that power must figure in our conception of what is natural? On the one hand, the advent of cognitive enhancers seems to have expanded, however problematically, the scope of human freedom, resulting in improved memory, sustained creativity, and enhanced performance. On the other hand, discoveries in the brain and behavioral sciences seem to limit the scope of human freedom. More to the point, can the Stoic conception of what is within our power be adapted to fit our scientifically informed view of nature in general and of human nature in particular? I think that it can, but not without some costs, which may leave the modern Stoic on too shaky a ground for comfort. Given the extent to which the Stoic way of life flows from a certain conception of what is real, a revision of the latter is bound to affect the former, which, in turn, calls into question whether human nature is indeed such that we are predisposed to grasp “the moral point of view”³¹ or accept with equanimity those things that are seemingly beyond our control. Pigliucci is right to claim that the dichotomy-of-control model underscores the Stoic view that “our eudaimonia should depend only on things which we completely control, and that the rest should be accepted with equanimity.”³² What we can completely control nowadays, however, is no longer merely a

²⁹ Pigliucci, “Toward the Fifth Stoa,” p. 23.

³⁰ A. A. Long, *Epicurus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 183-84.

³¹ Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 170.

³² Pigliucci, “Toward the Fifth Stoa,” p. 24.

function of how we reason and what we assent to. It is also a function of what we have and will continue to achieve in terms of altering our embodied condition and enhancing our intellectual capacities.

