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Into the Heart of Darkness Or: Alt-Stoicism? Actually, No...

In several conversations over the last months, people have independently raised a troubling sign of the times. Since the mid-2010s, it seems, “Alt-Right” bloggers have begun to populate Facebook and other online venues of the “Modern Stoicism” movement, claiming that the ancient philosophy vindicates their misogynistic and nativist views, complete with sometimes-erroneous “quotations” from Marcus Aurelius.

Donna Zuckerberg, in several articles¹ and in her recent book, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*², has done a courageous service to us all by examining and documenting this phenomenon. As she writes:

The *Red Pill* emphasizes Stoicism practicality in nearly every article about the philosophy... *Illimitable Men*, a blog that uses a more literary and philosophical approach than most manosphere sites, lists Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* second in the top ten “books for men,” describing it as “helpful as a spiritual guide to dealing with, and perceiving life.” *Meditations* also appears on a list of “Comprehensive Red Pill Books” on the *Red Pill* subreddit, where it is described as “a very simple pathway to practical philosophy.” In a review of Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* on *Return of Kings*, Valizadeh praises Stoicism and claims that “Stoicism will give you more practical tools on

1) Donna Zuckerberg, “How to Be a Good Classicist Under a Bad Emperor,” *Eidolon*, November 22, 2016, <https://eidolon.pub/how-to-be-a-good-classicist-under-a-bad-emperor-6b848df6e54a>; Donna Zuckerberg, “So I Wrote a Thing,” *Eidolon*, October 8, 2018, <https://eidolon.pub/so-i-wrote-a-thing-6726d9449a2b>.

2) Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

approaching life and dealing with its inevitable problems.” Valizadeh also wrote a 2016 review of *Meditations* with the effusive title “Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* Is the Best Manual We Have on How to Live.” An article in the online alt-right journal *Radix*, “Viewing Stoicism from the Right,” admits that “Stoicism gives you practical directions to follow” ...³

Zuckerberg’s stance on this “Alt-Stoicism”, as it might be called, is two-sided. On the one hand, Zuckerberg observes that because of Stoicism’s putative ethicopolitical commitments (on which more in due course), it is at least “paradoxical” (if not an “irreconcilable contradiction”⁴) that the Alt-Righters have tried to mount the steps of the porch, in their bid for cultural hegemony in the Age of Messrs Putin, Trump and company.

On the other hand, Zuckerberg issues an urgent call to those involved in, or sympathetic to the modern Stoicism phenomenon to directly engage with Alt-Stoicism’s proponents and arguments, rather than dismissing them as so many distasteful interlopers, without any basis or warrant.⁵ For her, “a closer reading” of the Stoic texts reveals more complex and ambivalent attitudes towards gender in particular, so that “Red Pill” versions of Stoicism are not wholly misreadings: “they may be responding to and drawing on parts of Stoicism that advocates of the philosophy would prefer to ignore.”⁶

Jules Evans has gone some way to answering Zuckerberg’s call for a Modern Stoic response to “Alt-Stoicism” in a November 2016 article: “How the Alt-Right Emerged from Men’s Self-Help.”⁷ Massimo Pigliucci, whom Zuckerberg cites, has also offered such a reply in the more recent: “Stoicism and Politics: between the Scylla of the New Left and the Charybdis of the Alt-Right.”⁸ So, I do not want either to reinvent the wheel, or steal anybody else’s thunder here. But I do think it is worth venturing a few new considerations in response to *Not All Dead White Men’s* challenge to non-Alt-Right friends of Modern Stoicism. Classicists and lovers of the classics should, I agree with Zuckerberg:

focus on the parts of antiquity that aren’t elite white men. Read and cite the work of scholars who write about race, gender, and class in the ancient world. Be open about the marginalization and bias that exists within our discipline.⁹

There is also a work to be done to push back directly against what she acknowledges in the same piece as the “shallow, poorly contextualized, and unnuanced” reading of the ancient sources themselves that the Alt-Righters are proselytizing.¹⁰

To do a little more of that work here, and as such to contest Zuckerberg’s stronger claim that an “Alt-Stoicism” is more than an exercise in polemical cherry-picking, I will begin in the heart of darkness, looking at why the Nazi classicists all abhorred Stoicism. This analysis will allow us next to pinpoint what the attempt to forge an

3) Ibid., 41

4) Ibid., 33.

5) Ibid.

6) Ibid.

7) Jules Evans, “How the Alt-Right Emerged from Men’s Self-Help,” *Philosophy for Life, and Other Dangerous Situations*, November 16, 2018, <http://www.philosophyforlife.org/how-the-alt-right-emerged-from-mens-self-help/>.

8) Massimo Pigliucci, “Stoicism and Politics: Between the Scylla of the New Left and the Charybdis of the Alt-Right,” *How to be a Stoic*, August 7, 2017, <https://howtobeastoc.wordpress.com/2017/08/07/stoicism-and-politics-between-the-scylla-of-the-new-left-and-the-charybdis-of-the-alt-right/>.

9) Zuckerberg, “How to Be a Good Classicist Under a Bad Emperor.”

10) Ibid.

“Alt-Stoicism” today must deny or ignore: namely, Stoicism’s cosmopolitanism, as well as its egalitarian assessment of the capacities of women. Our concluding remarks will then reflect on the complex question of the relationship between Stoicism and politics, querying whether Stoicism prescribes any single political stance today, but insisting that it nevertheless strongly proscribes all forms of nativism or white supremacism.

Why the Nazi Classicists Hated Stoicism

Zuckerberg rightly associates “Alt-Right classicism” today with the disturbing efflorescence of National Socialist classicisms in Germany after January 30, 1933.¹¹ As Johann Chapoutot’s remarkable study *Le nazisme et l’Antiquité* has documented, Hitler’s ascent to power led to a wave of German classicists coming forwards with attempts to legitimize the Nazis’ worldview through revisionist readings of Greek and Roman antiquity.¹²

The problem, then as now, is that some parts of antiquity fitted this kind of Far-Right agenda better than others: eugenic, militaristic, agrarian Sparta, as against democratic, sea-trading, dynamic Athens; the more “primordial” or “Aryan” Greeks, as against the immigrant-inclusive and religiously-tolerant Rome,¹³ the Roman Imperium versus the Republic ... not to mention the Plato of the political dialogues (with their own eugenic moments), versus the ugly, plebeian Socrates, who spoke to all comers.¹⁴

Le nazisme et l’Antiquité in this light contains a section on the Nazis and Stoicism which the Alt-Righters today would do very well to read.¹⁵ For the first thing that leaps out here is that the leading proponents of Stoicism were not dead white men at all, a fact that was far from lost on the race-obsessed Nazis. Nearly all of the leading Stoics of the Hellenistic era came from the Near East. As Fritz Schachermeyr lamented:

Amongst the scholars which succeeded [Zeno] up until Panaetius, not one of them came from a town with mostly Greek blood ... The others came from Cilicia, from Cyprus and from Babylon. Zeno, the founder, came from the Semitic town of Kition [*sic!*], on the island of Cyprus.¹⁶

As we might say today, the rise of the Porch in Athens, and then more widely, was already a multicultural story. Stoicism was one product of what the National Socialist philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his infamous *Black Notebooks*, decries as the “Hellenistic-Jewish ‘world’”, whose philosophies he (not by chance) never deigns to consider.¹⁷ But compare Schachermeyr again:

Hellenism shows us the Greek people in full dissolution into cosmopolitanism, thus into complete de-Nordification. The most remarkable product of Hellenism, the Stoa, will very much go in the same direction. It was elaborated by Semites and bastards, in order to become a pseudo-ideal

11) Ibid.

12) Johann Chapoutot, *Le nazisme et l’Antiquité* (Paris: Broché, 2012).

13) Cf. Ursula Rothe, “What the Romans can Teach us on Immigration and Integration,” *The Conversation*, February 18, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/what-the-romans-can-teach-us-on-immigration-and-integration-36391>.

14) Chapoutot, *Le nazisme et l’Antiquité*, 284–300.

15) Ibid., 306–312.

16) Ibid., 307.

17) Martin Heidegger, *Überlegungen VII–XI (Schwarze Hefte 1938/39)*, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann [GA 95]), 339.

expressly shaped to give arguments to people without fatherlands (*apatrides*) and to the racial enemies of future epochs.¹⁸

In the Nazis' "raciological" imaginings, the mixing of races in the Hellenistic period (fourth century- first century BCE) necessarily effected profound cultural changes – and for the worst. The "healthy" tribal, closed, hierarchical values of the Greek *poleis* (at least suitably downplaying the widespread movement towards democracy after the mid-sixth century) gave way to more open, cosmopolitan and egalitarian worldviews. Ludwig Schermann hence could edifyingly describe Stoicism, which was central to this cultural opening, as a "Semitic poison",¹⁹ as well as a symptom of the Greek world's increasing emasculation and decadence after the Peloponnesian war.

Even a Stoic scholar as eminent as Max Pohlenz, in this climate, would feel it meaningful to designate Zeno as "a Phoenician of pure blood" and claim in 1942 that we can understand "very many traits" of Stoicism when "we recall that its founders were not Greek."²⁰

Arguably the leading Nazi classicist-come-ideologue, the "race pope" Hans Guenther likewise decried Stoicism as "one of the racially destructive forces of Roman history."²¹ Stoicism was for him as for his lesser fellows a fifth, Semitic column that introduced foreign, egalitarian ideals into Nordic, hierarchical Rome. These ideals pushed the Imperium towards a vapid "individualism" which was the flipside of an equally rootless cosmopolitanism²² – one "which recognized no other tie [between peoples] than that of reason," as Fritz Geyer concurred.²³

It was Schachermeyr who would draw the long-term historical conclusions. Stoicism's "Semitic" commitment to the equality of all human beings, he counselled, must be seen clearly by Germans for what it is: the deep antecedent of the modern liberal "ideas of 1789" that underlay both the permissive Weimar constitution and the punitive Treaty of Versailles. "The consequence of this fundamental equality of men has been the conceptions of the dignity of humanity, the rights of man, [and] the demand for tolerance," he protested.²⁴ From a Nazi perspective, case closed.

As Chapoutot shows, Stoicism was accordingly embraced by exactly *no* leading Nazi ideologues, even as they thumbed the pages of the ancients for anything and everything that could be mobilized. From the perspective of a Far Right at that time far better informed than our postmodern "Alt-ernative", that is to say, Stoicism was nothing short of a "diabolical" philosophy, deeply threatening to all those set upon Making Germany Great Again.²⁵

What the Alt-Righters Must Deny, Ignore or Forget About Stoicism

There is an old saying that whoever appeals to the Nazis in any argument has lost. So, I hope the reader will accept my apologies for citing this lurid, albeit newly relevant historical material. The point is that the Nazi classicists, with polemical venom, honed in upon and railed against the universalistic, cosmopolitan dimensions of Stoic thought. Recalling their readings of the Stoics hence allows us very quickly to put our finger on

18) Chapoutot, *Le nazisme et l'Antiquité*, 307.

19) *Ibid.*, 308.

20) *Ibid.*

21) *Ibid.*, 309.

22) *Ibid.*

23) *Ibid.*, 311.

24) *Ibid.*, 310.

25) *Ibid.*

the key dimensions of Stoic thought that the Alt-Righters today cannot accommodate into their worldview, and so must deny, ignore, fudge or forget.

I realize as I write this that I am pushing against a partly-open door, since Donna Zuckerberg has already stressed this point in *Not All Dead White Males*. As she writes:

Stoicism is a cosmopolitan philosophy. Epictetus advised, following Socrates: “When someone asks you to what country you belong ... say rather that you are a citizen of the world [*kosmos*]” (Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.9). Epictetus’s “citizen of the world” concept is shared by all ancient Stoics. Musonius argument that exile is an evil depends on the idea that “the world is the common fatherland of all human beings,” and Marcus Aurelius writes, “As Antoninus, my city and fatherland are Rome. But as a human, they are the world. So what is good for me must also be good for both of these” (Musonius, *Lectures* 9.2; Aurelius, *Meditations* 6.44). Many of the factions within the *Red Pill*, particularly the white nationalists of the Alt-Right, would call any attention to the interests of other nations a sign of being a cuck. Multiculturalism is the avowed enemy.²⁶

And the same of course holds for *Red Pill* “thought leaders” attempts to use Stoicism to argue for innate masculine superiority over women. To make such a case, as Pigliucci notes, would-be “Alt-Stoics” must simply ignore passages wherein such superiority is explicitly raised and denied by the Roman Stoics.²⁷ “Women have received from the gods the same reasoning power as men,” says Musonius Rufus (*Lectures* 3.1): “the power which we employ with each other and according to which we consider whether each action is good or bad, and honourable or shameful.”²⁸ Seneca, consoling a grieving aristocratic woman, likewise exhorts her by protesting: “who would say that nature has dealt grudgingly with the minds of women, and stunted their virtues? Believe me, they have the same intellectual power as men, and the same capacity for honorable and generous action.”²⁹

Of course, Zuckerberg (alongside Martha Nussbaum or Lisa Hill, whom she cites) is right to highlight that, with this said, much of Stoic rhetoric, with its stress upon self-reliance, most certainly reflects the patriarchal standards and values of the ancient world.³⁰ There are also Stoic texts, which Zuckerberg cites, in which Stoics clearly assume that women are naturally more emotional than men, which is not from their perspective a positive trait. Moderns must always remember that, whatever the ancient Greeks’ merits, their treatment of women was especially repressive, even in contrast to the Romans – to say nothing of the slave trade which neither society opposed.

With this much said, these ancient prejudices, real as they are, are not what is surprising and *distinct* in the Stoics’ thought. It is indeed arguable that we should in no way be surprised that the Stoics shared the values of their time, retrograde in matters of gender, if not of race. This much can be granted even by non-historicists to historicism. We should criticize those values and call attention to them, especially when it is a matter, as in Modern Stoicism, of trying to reanimate ideas and traditions from the ancient pagan world. But what is

26) Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 43.

27) Pigliucci, “Stoicism and Politics.”

28) Musonius Rufus, “Lecture III: That Woman Too Should Study Philosophy,” in *Musonius Rufus, the Roman Socrates: Lectures and Fragments*, introduction and trans. Cora E. Lutz, Volume X of the Yale Classical Studies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1947), https://sites.google.com/site/thestoiclife/the_teachers/musonius-rufus/lectures/03.

29) Lucius Annaeus Seneca, “Of Consolation: to Marcia,” in *Minor Dialogs Together with the Dialog “On Clemency,”* trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), xvi, www-site: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Of_Consolation:_To_Marcia#XVI.

30) Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 46–50.

surprising and distinctly *Stoic* – as against conventionally “ancient” – is that, in slave-holding societies in which the place of all women who were not in the world’s oldest trade was very much in the home, the Stoic philosophers nevertheless expounded philosophical ideas which allowed these customs, in principle, to be challenged and called into question.

So, still today, we can combat the Alt-Right’s nativism by evoking the Stoic Hierocles’ famous notion of the widening circles of proper human concern, which reaches out to embrace all peoples, independent of race, religion, or nationality.³¹ Still today, we can point to the contradiction between the Stoics’ theoretical commitment to the equal capacities of men and women to decry their sexist assumptions elsewhere as fundamentally unjust or *contra naturam*. And still today, Stoic cosmopolitanism can be appealed to in order to criticize the partiality of anyone interested in the “spiritual exercises” Stoicism prescribes to meet and overcome adversity, without taking account of the wider physical or metaethical understandings in which these exercises were grounded. As Pierre Hadot amongst others has stressed, one entire discipline of Stoic exercises is based in Stoic physics, so they simply do not make sense when abstracted from the Stoics’ conception of the larger whole of which each human being forms a small, rational part.³²

However, just such a cherry picking of certain exercises and virtues from the larger Stoic whole is what the “Red-Pillers” have been undertaking, in part taking their lead from some of the more theory-lite advocates of Stoicism led by Ryan Halliday.³³

Closing Caveats: on the Porch and Politics

I hope readers can see that it is not a matter here of another version of the following syllogism, which is very often parsed in different contexts by different authors, whether consciously or not:

1. The author admires Stoicism [or some philosopher or philosophy];
2. The author is a cosmopolitan, culturally more or less liberal, democratic socialist ...; hence:
3. Stoicism [or the other philosophy at issue] must, like the author, have been more or less cosmopolitan, in spite of any countervailing evidence that might emerge.³⁴

It is not that these premises do not happen to be true. So, I believe, is the conclusion (3), minus the unscientific caveat. Yet the operative premises for the conclusion that Stoicism was an ancient form of cosmopolitanism do not come from the author’s own, later modern value preferences. As the Nazi classicists lamented, they hail from the ancient sources themselves: Stoicism itself was an ancient form of cosmopolitanism, whatever we might today wish or lament.

Can we therefore infer anything prescriptive about what politics a “modern Stoic” or “modern Stoicism” should have, on this basis? Should we say that the Stoics were proto-feminists, or proto-social democrats, or proto-liberals ..., and that all would-be modern Stoics therefore need to be any one of these things?

31) Hierocles, *Hierocles the Stoic: Elements of Ethics, Fragments, and Excerpts*, trans. David Konstan (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); Brad Inwood, “Hierocles: Theory and Argument in the Second Century AD,” *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter* 115 (1983): 17–19.

32) Pierre Hadot, “La Physique comme exercice spirituel ou pessimisme et optimisme chez Marc Aurèle,” *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, 22 (1973): 225–239; Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

33) Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 43–46. The complete justice of Zuckerberg’s treatment of Halliday could be disputed, since the would-be Alt-Stoics also arguably read his work somewhat selectively.

34) We can see the potential force of this argument in pushing people to deny new, “illiberal” evidences when we look at the history of “the Heidegger case”, as it is called in the Anglosphere.

These are very complex questions. From an historiological perspective, evaluating ancient sources in the light of our later modern political struggles is something about which great caution should be exercised. To read ancient texts intelligently does not require that we uncritically accept all of the value orientations of ancient thinkers as beyond reproach, subordinating ourselves to their “greatness”: a criticism that is made of Straussian readings of the ancients.³⁵ But we do need to understand that the ancient philosophers were thinkers working within historical and cultural contexts that necessarily exerted influences upon them, as our contemporary milieu exerts influences upon us. We cannot feasibly expect the Stoics, or any other ancients, to wholly agree with us, or even to have raised as issues and problems many of the issues and problems that we presently face. Future generations can be expected to find many of our unexamined presumptions equally contestable.

Moreover, from a philosophical perspective, it has to be said that, if a necessary condition for having what we can call a “political philosophy” is having a developed theoretical account of the different kinds of regimes and institutions, of the effects of various extrinsic (geographical, cultural, educational, linguistic...) factors of political life, and even of the best and second best regimes, then the Stoics did not have a political philosophy in the way that Plato or Aristotle did.

Seneca addressed several texts, notably *De Clementia*, to leading Roman political figures – and the Lucilius of the *Moral Letters* himself was a political figure. But these texts, or a text like *De Otio*, concern the personal and social ethics that these figures ought to adopt, and which virtues they should admire and cultivate. Zeno’s *Politeia (Republic)* battled a reputation of being a highly Cynical production, written “on the tail of a dog,” rather than a positive contribution to political thought.³⁶ Concerning what survives of this text, it is even harder to say than it is with Plato’s *Republic* just how literally we should take the apparently scandalous political prescriptions it makes concerning sexuality, marriage, and social and religious life, or whether the whole is meant as an edifying provocation.

When we move from theory to practice and look at the historical record of how the ancient Stoics equipped themselves politically, there is once more no single “Stoic” political stance that can be unequivocally identified. Most famously, some Stoics, associated with the philosopher Gaius Blossius, sided with the Gracchi brothers in their attempts to implement the second century land reforms: redistributive reforms which, with the benefit of hindsight, might perhaps have saved the Roman Republic. Others, followers of the middle Stoic Panaetius, opposed the measures – not to mention Cicero, who would fulminate against them from the rostrum and denounce them in his philosophical dialogues.³⁷

During the Principate, again, some Stoics served as household advisers and what we might call “life coaches” to leading Roman politicians. Yet, many others suffered exile for involvement (whether real or suspected) in resistance against the Emperors, including Epictetus and Seneca. The latter paid the ultimate price for being suspected of conspiring against his former pupil, the Emperor Nero.

So, there are real limits that confront the attempt to make any too prescriptive, positive assertions concerning the politics of the Porch, in antiquity or today. It is uninformative, if not nugatory, to try to name Seneca an honorary Democrat or Republican, a feminist or a conservative. Nevertheless, with that many caveats presented, the Stoics’ ethical system surely prescribes moral *limits* as to what political actions and movements a Stoic could conceivably support. And no matter what fudging anyone might attempt, a “Stoic” cannot be

35) See Miles Burnyeat, “Sphinx without a Secret,” *New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1985/05/30/sphinx-without-a-secret/>.

36) Cf. Andrew Erskine, *The Hellenistic Stoa: Political Thought and Action* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1990), 9–42.

37) Erskine, *The Hellenistic Stoa*, 150–180; Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Of Friendship [*De Amicitia*],” in *Cicero, On Old Age. On Friendship. On Divination*, trans. Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library 154 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 11–13.

a nativist or a white supremacist and remain a Stoic. Such convictions violate the Stoics' basic cosmopolitan commitments, and their arguments that all human beings, of all races and genders, are equally capable of reason and virtue, the only true good.

Justice towards others, as well as moderation and courage for oneself, remained for the Stoics a cardinal virtue – as it was the first of the virtues for Cicero.³⁸ And the cultivation of self-mastery was always figured as a precondition for acting justly towards others – in Hierocles' image of the concentric circles of proper human concern, whereby we are enjoined to ultimately bring even the outer circle encompassing the whole human race into the inner circles of our care. By contrast, anger, fear and hatred, even or especially when they are decked out in highly-selective appeals to august cultural authorities, as in the *Red Pill* "manosphere",³⁹ are vices to be countered and opposed, not exalted and stoked.

Ultimately, the very idea of an Alt-Stoicism is a *contradictio in adjecto*.

38) Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Of Duties*[*De Officiis*], trans. W. A. Falconer, Loeb Classical Library 30 (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1923), 43–44.

39) Cf. Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 50–54.