

<https://doi.org/10.31108/7.2025.3>

Mykhailo BOICHENKO

*Doctor of Sciences in Philosophy, Professor,
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Kyiv, Ukraine)*

Nataliia BOICHENKO

*Doctor of Sciences in Philosophy, Professor,
Shupyk National Healthcare University of Ukraine (Kyiv, Ukraine)*

A CRITICAL VIEW OF STOICISM’S TEACHINGS ON HAPPINESS (USING THE EXAMPLE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF WAR)

Abstract. The Stoics offer a certain minimalist concept of happiness, which nevertheless cannot be considered satisfactory – not only in a utilitarian sense, but also in a conceptual meaning. Stoicism is often criticized for the inconsistency of its teachings with real life – sometimes even in the actions of the Stoic philosophers themselves. This criticism is partly fair, and partly less or more than it should be. The Stoics take too many things as *adiaphora* beyond their relevance to morality – which is doubtful in theory, but even more harmful in practice. Unwittingly, but inevitably, the Stoics became the cause of the development of ideas of moral retreatism, social escapism and political absenteeism. In times of war, it is extremely insufficient to be simply calm and mentally balanced, as Stoicism recommends – because such a position tempts to agree to what is detrimental to human dignity and social justice. War requires the decent man to pursue the pursuit of public glory, the defense of honor, and the application of moral virtues much more actively than the Stoics suggest.

Keywords: happiness, *adiaphora*, virtues, retreatism, escapism, absenteeism, glory, justice.

Михайло БОЙЧЕНКО

*доктор філософських наук, професор,
Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка (Київ, Україна)*

Наталія БОЙЧЕНКО

*доктор філософських наук, професор,
Національний університет охорони здоров'я України імені П. Л. Шупика
(Київ, Україна)*

КРИТИЧНИЙ ПОГЛЯД НА ВЧЕННЯ СТОЇЦИЗМУ ПРО ЩАСТЯ (НА ПРИКЛАДІ ФІЛОСОФІЇ ВІЙНИ)

Стоїки пропонують певну мінімалістичну концепцію щастя, яку все ж не можна вважати задовільною – не лише в утилітарному сенсі, але й у концептуальному стосунку. Стоїцизм часто критикують за невідповідність його вчення реальному життю – інколи навіть у вчинках самих філософів-стоїків. Ця критика є частково справедливою, а частково – меншою або більшою, ніж належало би їй бути. Стоїки надто багато речей виносять як *адіафору* за межі їх релевантності моралі – що сумнівно у теоретичному аспекті, але ще більше шкоди завдає на практиці. Не бажаючи того, але неминуче стоїки стали причиною розвитку ідей морального ретретизму, соціального ескапізму і політичного абсентеїзму. У

добу війни вкрай недостатньо бути просто спокійним і душевно врівноваженим, як рекомендує стоїцизм, – адже така позиція спокушає погоджуватися на те, що шкодить людській гідності і суспільній справедливості. Війна вимагає від порядної людини слідувати пошукам громадської слави, захисту честі і застосуванню моральних чеснот значно активніше, аніж пропонують стоїки.

Ключові слова: щастя, адіафора, чесноти, ретретизм, ескапізм, абсентеїзм, слава, справедливість.

Stoicism, as it seems at first glance, generally takes a philosophical position on matters of happiness, which can be metaphorically characterized using Aesop's fable "The Fox and the Grapes." In this fable, the fox, vainly trying to jump to a juicy bunch of ripe grapes, which is located high on a branch, decides for himself that this task is not useless, but unnecessary – because, supposedly, the grapes are sour and green.

The moral of this fable is obvious: it is wrong and shameful to refuse to achieve difficult goals, deceitfully discrediting these goals as inappropriate and false. In fact, it is not the goals that are false, but the refusal of these goals is false. And if this rejection of honorable goals is also conscious, based on a deliberate distortion of reality and a falsification of these goals, that is, on the abusive formation of epistemic bias – then this rejection turns into a component of gaslighting. A person who refuses proper behavior on false grounds not only refuses an honorable lifestyle himself, but also tries to convince others of the correctness of his choice, creating not only epistemic, but also ethical deformations, as well as all other distortions of proper social behavior – in political, legal, economic and other types of social activity. It is impossible to achieve happiness on this basis: after all, this is a strategy of loser. By refusing to live a proper life, a person does not gain happiness, but actually corrupts his own life in the original sense of corruption: such moral retreatism easily turns into political absenteeism and is something much worse than escapism. This moral retreatism is one of the worst individual forms of self-removal from the struggle for the best.

But to what extent can this criticism be directed against Stoicism? On the one hand, the Stoics do call for being content with less, with what you already have, and not striving for the unattainable. On the other hand, the ethics of Stoicism consistently directs a person towards a moral and righteous life. Therefore, the question is, in fact, how much of what you already have is enough not only to be moral, but also to be happy. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, in the spirit of Stoic philosophy, argued that one should strive to be worthy of happiness, and not to strive for happiness itself [Kant 1997; Döring, & Düringer 2013]. Obviously, this is enough for a moral position, but it is unlikely to make one happy.

For example, during the war that the Russian Federation launched against Ukraine, one can be happy just because the Russian troops did not capture Kyiv in three days and have not yet occupied all of Ukraine. But this happiness cannot be complete and sufficient - because as long as the war continues and as long as the Russian Federation has not suffered a convincing defeat in it, it can still achieve its shameful goal of subjugating all of Ukraine. Therefore, for happiness, Ukrainians must not calm themselves down and be satisfied with what they have, but fight and make new efforts to achieve Ukraine's victory in this war.

Critique of adiaphora

The appeal to the Stoic doctrine of adiaphora is one of the oldest ways of philosophically justifying moral retreatism – but is the Stoic doctrine of adiaphora itself such a retreatism?

The point is that the Stoics did indeed divide all things not only into good and bad, but also defined a fairly large set of things as morally “neutral”: “A transliteration of the Greek word ἀδιάφορα, which means ‘things indifferent’” [Oxford Reference 2005]. As André Martens argues: “Stoicism encourages us to focus on what is in our control, particularly our thoughts and moral character, while accepting that other factors, like wealth or social status, are indifferent to our happiness” [Martens 2025].

If this is understood in such a way that some questions can be left, as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “beyond good and evil” [Nietzsche 2014], then there is indeed a big question for the Stoics, because, for example, from the position of Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems, each social system must evaluate everything globally from the perspective of its basic semantic code [Luhmann 1984]. Thus, a businessman tries to sell and buy everything, a politician tries to use everything to gain power, and a moralist must evaluate everything as something that promotes moral behavior or as something that hinders it. Whereas “adiaphora denotes conditions in life that are neither virtues nor vices” [Oxford Reference 2005].

The practical consequence of such a position was, in particular, the suicide of the founder of Stoicism, Zeno, and later also of his student Cleanthes [Diogenes Laertius 1925, Book 7: 28, 176]. Another prominent Stoic, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, also ended his life by suicide (albeit on Nero’s orders), no matter what he wrote in his Moral Letters to Lucilius, but he still did not renounce suicide in them [Seneca 2013]. This cannot be called an accident. This is the exercise of “the right of the wise man to seek a reasonable departure (eulogos exagôgê) from life” [Englert 1990, p. 2]. Of course, one can call it a “happy death” – “euthanasia”. But it is unlikely that everyone will agree with such an understanding of happiness, and even more so with such a position during a war with the enemy.

Thus, it is difficult to call adiaphora a classic moral retreatism, but it is also impossible to call it a moral victory or at least a justified moral position in the search for happiness.

Why escapism is a dubious means of fighting for a better life

Whatever justifications the Stoics may give, suicide is still an escape, as are other, less radical forms of refusing to participate in social life under the pretext of their “neutrality” with regard to good and evil.

Here it is worth dwelling on these “neutral” things, which the Stoics divide into those that they nevertheless prefer and those that they advise avoiding. Thus, according to Diogenes Laertius, the Stoics advise giving preference to “life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, noble birth” and avoiding the opposites of “death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, low repute, ignoble birth and the like” [Diogenes Laertius 1925, Book 7: 102]. It is obvious that a person cannot choose noble birth for himself at all, except to try to provide it for his children. As for life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, they are often difficult to acquire and always easy to lose. Therefore, it is understandable that the Stoics do not want to put them at the basis of virtue. If the threat of their loss often comes from society – from enemies, envious people

and other ill-wishers, then one can understand the Stoics' desire for solitude in an attempt to somehow ensure their well-being, including their happiness.

However, suicide may seem like a worthy choice only to the person who commits it – but it is unlikely to find approval from family, friends and others among those people in society who depend on you (in particular, those whom the Romans did not very politely call clients). Gaining your happiness at the expense of others is a dubious strategy, but neglecting others is not much better either. Not to mention that suicide, depriving a person of life, takes away their happiness with it.

Another important argument is given by Matthew Sharpe. He draws attention to the fundamental difference between Stoicism and Cynicism – the Stoics were always sensitive to issues of close people: they are always "undifferentiated things, not indifferent people" [Sharpe 2023].

Therefore, of course, the Stoics still advise taking care of that "neutral" that is still desirable – especially concerning persons. It was better to do this in a minimal community. Therefore, it is not surprising that the ideas of Stoicism had a great influence on those moralists who criticized industrial society and sought harmony in a solitary life in nature, such as Henry Thoreau [Thoreau 1854].

There is also the social side of the matter. Without those things that the Stoics do not oblige to do, but only recommend taking care of them, it is generally problematic to imagine a person's public life, and not only his personal small social world. And the Stoics' desire to only partially, to the extent possible, protect *adiaphora* regarding himself and his loved ones does not correlate well with the interests of society. An insurance company will require its client to actively protect his health, and at the front a soldier must survive, not die – live, in order to be able to carry out military orders.

What is the danger of political absenteeism

If escapism gives questionable ethical advice, then political absenteeism generally leads to political defeats. Seneca suffered an inevitable defeat in the confrontation with Nero, but Marcus Aurelius, already an emperor himself, was unable to secure a reliable political legacy. The reason for this can be considered the individualism of the Stoics. Although they recommended a moral way of life, they considered the path to it to be exclusively a matter of the individual himself. And the Stoics were reluctant to engage in politics – unlike the Cynics, who constantly actively interfered in political affairs – no less than they annoyed all their acquaintances.

Thus, political life was more undesirable than desirable for the Stoics. In this they are followed by most Protestants, especially Lutherans, who develop the Stoic doctrine of *adiaphora* [Dominiak 2022]. For the Stoics, as for all who adhere to their line, political institutions, like, indeed, all other social institutions, cannot be morally positive - after all, only individuals can be bearers of moral virtues. Henry David Thoreau, on the other hand, chooses the path of civil disobedience as an active opposition to the imperfection of political institutions [Thoreau 1849]. In this way, he combines his escapism with an active political position – even if it has the appearance of systemic opposition.

Political absenteeism, therefore, does not contribute to the achievement of the goals of the ethics of Stoicism, but rather the opposite – it hinders the achievement of a noble life. A better alternative is offered by the philosophy of the Italian Renaissance, in which glory from deeds for the benefit of one's homeland comes first: "...a citizen's worth

must be measured not by the length of his lineage or the extent of his wealth, but rather by his capacity to develop his talents, to achieve a proper sense of public spirit, and so to deploy his energies in the service of the community” [Skinner 1978, p. 81]. Glory is the direct opposite of escapism and political absenteeism, but the achievement of well-deserved good fame is a great contribution to the achievement of happiness.

The struggle for happiness is already happiness

However, not only the achievement of a good reputation in the eyes of fellow citizens, but also the persistent struggle for such fame significantly increases a person’s happiness. After all, in the struggle for a good reputation, a person must improve his virtues, and the motive for this will be the support of not only friends and relatives, but also all fellow citizens. After all, the Stoics, in their desire to avoid social institutions, do not demonstrate true humility – rather, they are characterized by a sense of superiority over other people. By their refusal to achieve social benefits, the Stoics demonstrate their vanity, not so much by placing themselves outside of social competition, as by striving to rise above this competition. This vanity is selfish, while the struggle for the recognition of fellow citizens thanks to their exploits for the benefit of their homeland is more altruistic vanity. The path of the egoist is much riskier and more slippery if a person seeks to become happy – while the path of the altruist, although it requires certain sacrifices from the individual, still makes these sacrifices justified in the future, and the act of sacrifice itself is able to make a person happy immediately.

And yet it seems that it is possible to accept the initial theses of Stoic morality, giving them something different, namely a Renaissance application – to direct the search for ways to improve one’s own virtues not to one’s own small social world, but to achieve the good of the entire community, which is one’s homeland. In times of war, it is extremely insufficient to be simply calm and mentally balanced, as Stoicism recommends – because such a position tempts to agree to what is detrimental to human dignity and social justice. War requires the decent man to pursue the pursuit of public glory, the defense of honor, and the application of moral virtues much more actively than the Stoics suggest.

References

1. Aesop. (2025). The Fox and the Grapes. *Aesop's Fables*. University of Massachusetts Amherst. <https://www.umass.edu/aesop/content.php?n=10&i=1>
2. Diogenes Laertius (1925). *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. R.D. Hicks, Ed. Cambridge: HUP.
3. Dominiak, Paul. (2022). ‘All Things Are Lawful’: Adiaphora, Permissive Natural Law, Christian Freedom, and Defending the English Reformation. *Perichoresis*, 20, 75-103. <https://doi.org/10.2478/perc-2022-0011>.
4. Döring, Sabine and Düringer, Eva-Maria. (2013). Being Worthy of Happiness: Towards a Kantian Appreciation of Our Finite Nature. *Philosophical Topics*, 41(1) Happiness (SPRING 2013), pp. 143-159.
5. Englert, Walter. (1990). Seneca and the Stoic View of Suicide. *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*, 184. <https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/184>
6. Kant, Immanuel. (1997). *Critique of Practical Reason*. Trans. and ed. by Mary Gregor. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
7. Luhmann, N. (1984). *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

8. Martens, André. (2025). *Adiaphora in Stoicism and Its Role in Achieving Happiness*. <https://gluecksquellen.de/en/adiaphora-in-stoicism/>
9. Nietzsche, Friedrich. (2014). *Beyond Good and Evil / On the Genealogy of Morality*. Transl. by Adrian Del Caro, Stanford: Stanford University Press
10. Oxford Reference. (2005). Adiaphora. Campbell, G. *The Oxford dictionary of the Renaissance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=adiaphora>
11. Seneca, L. Annaeus. (2013). *The Complete Moral Letters to Lucilius*. Trans. by Richard M. Gummere. Updated, annotated and expanded by Michel Daw. Ottawa: STOICI CIVITAS PRESS.
12. Sharpe, Matthew. (2023). Stoicism, 'Indifferents,' and Generosity. *Modern Stoicism*. September 30 2023. <https://modernstoicism.com/stoicism-indifferents-and-generosity-by-matthew-sharpe/>
13. Skinner, Quentin. (1978). *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought: in 2 volumes. Vol. 1. The Renaissance*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press.