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The Conceit

AFTER FIVE hundred years of prominence in Greek and Roman antiquity, Stoic ethics was pillaged by theology and effaced by evangelical and imperial Christianity. A few Stoic philosophers survived, most of them by providing analgesics for use in pastoral counseling, the military, and what then passed for medicine and psychotherapy. Only those shards of our doctrines were widely seen during the Middle Ages, and the term Stoic came to be applied merely to people who used our remedies. This confusion persists.

In the Italian Renaissance there was a brief effusion of interest in our historical roots, and some of us were emboldened to publish the work we were then doing. A living philosophical tradition changes, and Renaissance neostoicism, as it is now called, quite naturally bore only a strong family resemblance to that of Zeno and Chrysippus. This wider interest in our views soon dwindled, however, and in still smaller numbers we again went back to private practice. A few major figures in modern philosophy continued to use our doctrines in their ethical theories, typically without attribution, and just as typically denounced us for good measure.

Modern science presented significant challenges to our metaphysical views, and during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we gradually abandoned our doctrine that the universe should be understood as a purposive, rational being. With that, we lost contact with theology of all sorts. Moreover, we continued to organize ethical theory along eudaimonistic lines and thus lost contact with the secular side of moral philosophy as well, mobbed as it was (and is) by people clamoring for a priori principles, sentiment, commonsense virtues, utility, rights, duties, and justice in contractual arrangements. Our obliteration began in this period, with the emergence of claims for the autonomy of ethics.

Even our analgesics were discarded in the nineteenth century, largely due to the rise of romanticism. This Barmecidal substitute for religious fervor was (and in its current decadence still is) contemptuous of stoic moral training. But it was philosophy in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that finally laid waste to our project—not in direct attacks on stoicism's intellectual merit but in a blizzard of fads that undermined commitments to reason and nature. The social sciences bought the fact-value distinction, and philosophy peddled it to them. Nonnaturalism arose, collapsed into noncognitivism, and rose again as intuitionism and

constructivism. Moral truth was given a coherentist interpretation. Pluralism, relativism, and irony abounded, alongside various forms of dogmatism about natural duties and the intrinsic moral worth of human beings.

Only three small groups will now say anything in our favor. Some soldiers, actual or spiritual, still prefer our psychotherapy to morphine and mood enhancers. Logicians appreciate our early work on the propositional calculus. Hellenists admire the Stoics of antiquity and argue that their ethical doctrines were not (for their time) foolish.

It is a complete disaster. Only a few are escaped to tell you.