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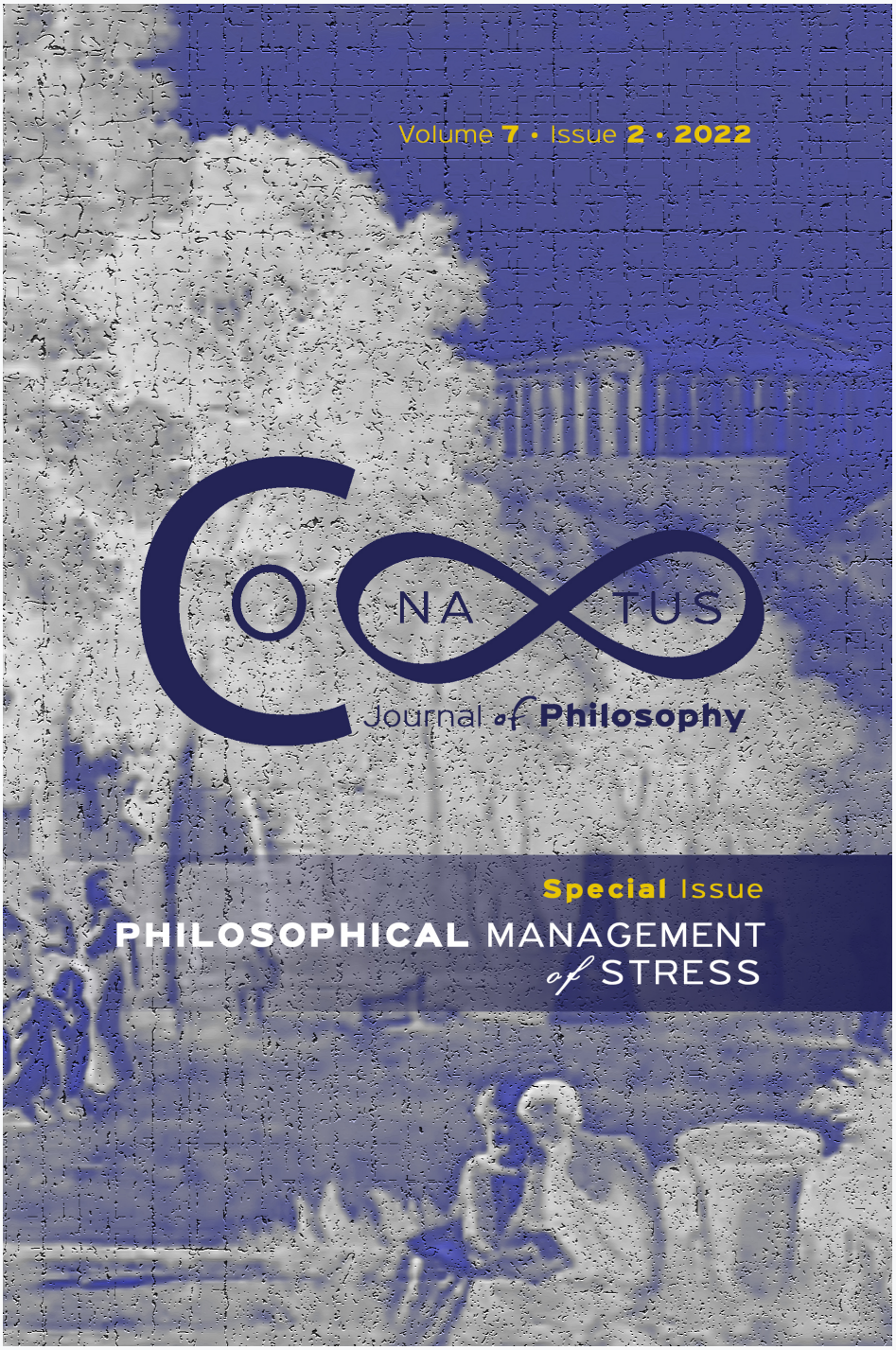

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# CONATUS

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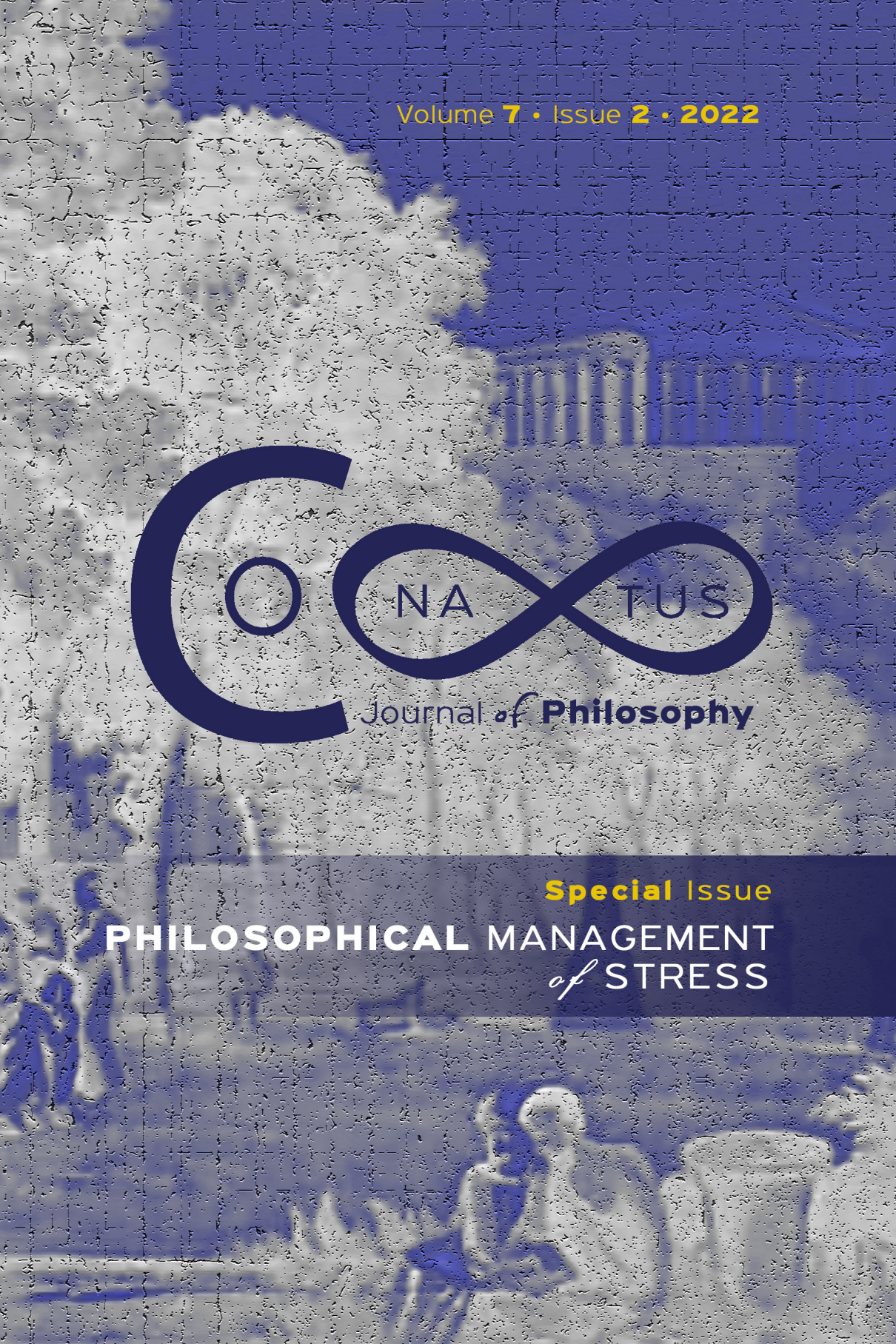
Special Issue

## PHILOSOPHICAL MANAGEMENT of STRESS

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**Philosophical Management of Stress**

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**Christos Yapijakis**

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# Philosophical Management of Stress: An Introduction

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## Abstract

*All human needs are compromised by everyday stressful conditions, which may be objectively devastating or subjectively augmented due to idiosyncratic way of thinking. Unmanaged acute stress can affect emotions, thinking and behavior and chronic stress can result in several severe health problems. Philosophy may provide a frame of thinking that may help in managing everyday stress. There are personal dimensions in the philosophical management of stress based on examples of Aristotle's eudaimonia consisted of morality and pleasure, Plato's transcendence aiming to join with the supreme good, Pyrrho's serenity through suspension of judgement and the Stoics' rational attachment to virtue. Furthermore, there are social dimensions of philosophical management of stress, since there is abundant scientific evidence that stress affects moral decision-making and therefore an ethical theory of life may not be sufficient in stressful conditions. In this context, such social aspects include the relationship of eudaimonia with community life, the artistic practice and the virtual eroticism in the contemporary world of digital media as a stress relief from physical confrontation with other persons in real life, the empathy and care as a crucial quality for stress relief and social change, as well as the Epicurean approach of stress management that may have both personal and social utility. Intervention programs of stress management combining many lifestyle techniques have been shown to enhance resilience and decrease stress for a period of time, based on systematic behavioral change. Two successful novel empirical pilot studies of pure philosophical management of stress based on cognitive psychotherapy and modification of mentality have been presented, both of them realized in the COVID-19 pandemic period: a three-month positive psychology intervention combined with Epicurean and Stoic concepts was provided to adolescent students and a month-long philosophical management of stress program based on Science and Epicurean Philosophy was offered to public sector professionals.*

**Keywords:** *human needs; stress management; eudaimonia; pursuit of happiness; Aristotle; Plato; Pyrrho; Epicurean philosophy; Stoicism; positive psychology; cognitive psychotherapy; sociology*

## I. Introduction

According to Maslow, the hierarchy of human needs includes a) basic needs that are physiological (food, water, warmth, rest) and related to safety/security, b) psychological needs related to love/belonging (intimate relationships, friends and family) and esteem (feeling of accomplishment, dignity, self-respect and prestige), and c) self-actualization needs related to personal fulfilment (achieving one's full potential, creative activities).[1] All these human needs are compromised by everyday stressful conditions. Stress is a state of mental or emotional strain resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances, which may be objectively devastating or subjectively augmented due to idiosyncratic way of thinking.[2] Stressful situations that are not managed properly can affect emotions, thinking and behavior. Chronic stress can create several health problems, including high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, depression, anxiety disorder, obesity and diabetes.[3]

It follows that the management of stress is a human need, a fact that the whole humanity has realized empirically during the recent period of the COVID-19 pandemic.[4] If people are not resilient to everyday stress, they may have emotional and mental problems in their present and severe psychosomatic health problems in the future. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, established in 1948), "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."[5] That definition of health corresponds very well with Epicurus' description of the state of happiness (eudaimonia) as absence of mental

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[1] Andrew J. Hale, Daniel N. Ricotta, Jason Freed, Christopher C. Smith, and Grace C. Huang, "Adapting Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a Framework for Resident Wellness," *Teaching and Learning in Medicine* 31, no. 1 (2018): 109-118.

[2] George P. Chrousos, "Systems Biology and the Stress Response: From Pythagoras and the Epicureans to Modern Medicine," *European Journal of Clinical Investigation* 42 (2012): 1-3.

[3] George P. Chrousos, "Stress and Disorders of the Stress System," *Nature Reviews Endocrinology* 5, no. 7 (2009): 374-381.

[4] Cyril Emeka Ejike, "COVID-19 and Other Prevalent Diseases in Africa: A Pragmatic Approach," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 33-59; Michael Anderson, Susan Leigh Anderson, Alkis Gounaris, and George Kosteletos, "Towards Moral Machines: A Discussion with Michael Anderson and Susan Leigh Anderson," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 177-202; Roberto Andorno, and George Boutlas, "Global Bioethics in the Post-Coronavirus Era: A Discussion with Roberto Andorno," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2022): 185-200; Dimitrios Dimitriou, "Corporate Ethics: Philosophical Concepts Guiding Business Practices," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2022): 33-60.

[5] World Health Organization, "Constitution of the World Health Organization – Basic Documents, 45th edition," October 2006, https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/constitution-of-the-world-health-organization.

agitation (ataraxia) and absence of physical pain (aponia).[6] It is self-evident that "the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal" as clearly stated in the United Nations resolution 66/281, which was adopted by the General Assembly on June 28, 2012. The means to successful pursuit of happiness is the recognition of common stress symptoms and their management.

Philosophy may provide a frame of thinking that may help in managing everyday stress. Socrates claimed that an unexamined life is not worth living[7], which is clearly an exaggeration. Nevertheless, Socrates was right that introspection and examination of one's life from time to time may prompt positive corrections, as Pythagoras had previously suggested. Furthermore, Epicurus warned that a happy life without agitation is impossible without some basic scientific knowledge of nature.[8] The Athenian philosopher emphasized that philosophy is useful only when it soothes the turmoil of the soul.[9]

There are several philosophical approaches that can be used for management of stress, but their effect depends on their relation to real life. Idealistic approaches of stress management may include philosophical, religious, political and social beliefs that may provide short-term security from anxiety or even escape practices from the contemporary world that may provide physically or virtually a stress relief from real life conflicts. An idealistic approach is based mainly on how strong is the belief in it and the short period of time in which there is no major disentitlement by real life events. In the longer period of time, the inevitable reality shock may cause devastating results ranging from disappointment, burnout and depression to life threatening thoughts. On the other hand, there is accumulating evidence that indicate the stress management efficacy and utility of pragmatic philosophical approaches such as Epicurean, Aristotelian or Stoic ones that are compatible with observations of Science, as well as with practices of Cognitive Behavioral Psychotherapy and Positive Psychology. Intervention programs of stress management that combine the reinforcing role of pragmatic philosophical framing may result in beneficial cognitive reconstruction and mental well-being of people, especially in eras of crisis, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

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[6] Christos Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics and Molecular Medicine in Epicurean Philosophy," in *History of Human Genetics*, eds. Heike I. Petermann, Peter S. Harper, and Susanne Doetz (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 41-57.

[7] Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 38a 4.

[8] Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* XII (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 10:143).

[9] "Empty is the word of that philosopher that cannot cure any human passion. As medicine is of no use if it does not cure the diseases of the body, so philosophy lacks utility if it does not cure the passions of the soul" (Epicurus, cited in Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella* 31).

## II. Personal dimensions of the philosophical management of stress

The philosophical management of stress has its personal dimensions, since every thinking individual is using a guiding philosophical theory of life.[10] As Epictetus famously mentioned: "People are disturbed not by the things that happen, but by their opinion of the things that happen."[11] In this context, Pia Valenzuela, Albrecht Classen, Nikos Dimou, and Panagiotis Kormas have presented respectively an Aristotelian, a Platonic, a Pyrrhonic and a Stoic dimension of stress management.

Pia Valenzuela discusses Barbara Fredrickson's approach of human flourishing through positive emotions and Aristotle's *eudaimonia*.[12] Valenzuela mentions that Fredrickson's theory of positive emotions is "at the crossroads of Philosophy and Psychology, the connection of happiness – well-being – and affective states."[13] According to observations of Fredrickson and colleagues, "existing data suggest that hedonia and eudaimonia are not only positively correlated but that aspects of hedonia predict and even cause increases in eudaimonia prospectively."[14] In particular, Positive Psychology research has indicated that:

> [...] positive emotions and purpose – hedonia and eudaimonia –, as theory and evidence suggest, are not merely facets of living well. Instead, they function as active ingredients that help maintain and strengthen biological systems that support upward spirals of well-being.[15]

Studies have shown that:

> [...] people who flourish generally responded with a more considerable 'boost' in positive emotions in response to everyday, pleasant events as helping others, social interactions, playing, learning and spiritual activity.[16]

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[10] Massimo Pigliucci, Skye C. Cleary, and Daniel Kaufman, eds., *How to Live a Good Life: A Guide to Choosing your Personal Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 2020); see also Alexander Nehamas, et al., "A Good Life: Friendship, Art, and Truth," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2017): 115-121.

[11] Epictetus. *Encheiridion*, 5:1.

[12] Pia Valenzuela, "Fredrickson on Flourishing Through Positive Emotions and Aristotle's Eudaimonia," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 37-61.

[13] Ibid., 37.

[14] Ibid., 44.

[15] Ibid., 46.

[16] Ibid., 46.

Valenzuela emphasizes that there are:

> [...] two fundamental tenets in Fredrickson's theory [...]. First, positive emotions do not simply mark well-being but play a role in creating it. [...] Second, positive emotions are related to hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of flourishing.[17]

Furthermore, in accordance to Fredrickson the author notices that: "[...] Aristotle defends that a noble and virtuous life is in itself pleasant" since "a sign of being a good person is to rejoice in good actions and with all that is noble."[18]

Valenzuela remarks that "morality and pleasure come together within Aristotle's eudaimonia," but unlike Aristotle "in Psychology, most authors maintain neutral-value accounts."[19] Valenzuela discusses various views on the subject which rests on "the tension between the subjective and objective aspects of happiness."[20] The author mentions that "well-being has a subjective dimension but rather emphasise transcending subjectivity (i.e., physical health, purposeful activity, observable joy)."[21] Valenzuela offers her plausible opinion that "at least for the deep and enduring happiness Aristotle bears in mind moral and intellectual virtues are required."[22]

Albrecht Classen discusses the example of Boethius' philosophical reflections as a paradigm for management of stress in our modern life.[23] The author first mentions:

> [...] the famous "Serenity Prayer" originally formulated by the German-American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), to meditate on a regular basis on the meaning of all existence, to explore our emotions and to come to terms with them peacefully, to organize all our actions in a calm way so as to avoid stress resulting from time and other conflicts, or to reduce our dependency on material conditions [...].[24]

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[17] Ibid., 48.

[18] Ibid., 52.

[19] Ibid., 55.

[20] Ibid., 56.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 57.

[23] Albrecht Classen, "Management of Stress Through Philosophical Reflections: Teachings by Boethius for Our Modern Life," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 63-78.

[24] Ibid., 63-64.

Subsequently, Classen admits that:

> [...] stress cannot be overcome through blind faith; stress is human-made and self-imposed, so it is up to us as humans to come to terms with it and to develop effective strategies to handle this unnecessary psychological problem effectively.[25]

The author mentions the work *Consolations of Philosophy* written in 524 or 525 AD by imprisoned Boethius at a period when he was facing the death penalty. The work is presented "as a critically important approach to stress management."[26] Classen describes how:

> [...] Boethius explores the profound question of what constitutes human life and what parameters we need to operate effectively and happily during our existence in order to achieve at least a modicum of happiness.[27]

Boethius imagines that Philosophy as entity enters his cell:

> [Philosophy] lays the foundation for a fundamental change of his mind, his attitude, and his perception of life in the larger context. All of his stress proves to be the result of his shortsightedness and blindness regarding the inner realities of this life.[28]

Classen remarks that,

> Philosophy helps [Boethius] to understand that practically all forms of happiness traditionally identified in life would be only superficial and unreliable [... that] life is never ideal or perfect since it is moving away from the state of perfection and goodness [... and ultimately that] our existence is the natural and perpetual endeavor to join with the supreme good – summum bonum, sometimes translated as God.[29]

[25] Ibid., 64.

[26] Ibid., 66.

[27] Ibid., 69.

[28] Ibid., 70.

[29] Ibid., 71-73.

The author concludes that "stress arises because the individual does not understand the larger picture of life, determined by the fundamental drive toward happiness as defined by Philosophy."

Nikos Dimou (eminent Greek author, and one of my favorite modern thinkers) discusses the influence of Indian Buddhism on Greek Skepticism in his article "The two 'Greek Buddhas.'"[30] Dimou mentions:

> Pyrrho of Elis had travelled to the East, following Alexander the Great and his court of learned men, and had met with the leading thinkers of India. It is more than probable that Pyrrho met with the disciples of Buddha. Coming back to Greece, Pyrrho became the originator of the post Aristotelian thought. The school of the Skeptics, which he founded, was the first. Epicureans and Stoics followed.[31]

The author remarks that there are many parallels in Buddhism and Skepticism, since "excerpts from early Buddhist Sutras and Sextus Empiricus' texts match perfectly" and the Buddhist philosopher Chandrakirti's notion of emptiness (sunyata) is an analog of the Greek epoche, the suspension of judgement, the act of abstaining from affirmation or negation on any matter.[32] Dimou emphatically mentions that suspension of judgement "was Pyrrho's method to fight stress, angst and fear. He was the one who coined the word ataraxia, which became the leading value in all Hellenistic Philosophy."[33] The influence of Buddhism on Pyrrho was "the subject of two books with similar titles mentioning the 'Greek Buddha,' as Pyrrho was called by Nietzsche."[34] The first book was written in Greek by Dimou in 1984, while the other was written in English by Christopher I. Beckwith in 2015.[35] Both books "discussed the similarities of the Eastern and the Western tradition regarding the goal of serenity, ataraxia."[36] Dimou maintains that "both traditions offer a practical way of philosophical management of everyday

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[30] Nikos Dimou, "The two 'Greek Buddhas,'" *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 79-86.

[31] Ibid., 81.

[32] Ibid., 84.

[33] Ibid., 82.

[34] Ibid., 79.

[35] Nikos Dimou, *The Greek Buddha* (Athens: Nefeli Publications, 1984); Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Press, USA, 2015).

[36] Dimou, "The two 'Greek Buddhas,'" 79.

stress and suffering through the mentality of suspension of judgement and non-attachment to certainties."[37]

Panagiotis Kormas discusses the point that cognitive philosophical theories of Stoicism stand at the center of the contemporary neuropsychological treatments.[38] Kormas mentions "the relevance of Hellenistic thought to psychotherapy" and remarks that recently "Stoic philosophy in particular has experienced great popularity," because "a parallel between the modern psychotherapist and the ancient Stoic philosopher has been drawn" since "both recognise reason as a mediator between environmental stimuli and human emotional responses."[39] The author observes that "Aaron Beck, who has been called the father of Cognitive Therapy, has openly acknowledged the Stoic origin of this theory" and explains that since "maladaptive cognitions involve general beliefs and generate specific and automatic thoughts about situations" it follows that "treatment protocols for maladaptive cognitions ultimately modify emotional disturbance and problem behaviours."[40] Kormas asserts that "this therapeutic intervention is the methodology followed by Stoicism; the therapeutic effect comes through the rational judgments which are part of the functions of the ruling faculty."[41] The author mentions:

> [...] Stoic psychology is closely related to the theory that no separation exists between the rational and non-rational parts of human psychology. This means that emotions and desires can be continously shaped and reshaped via changes in beliefs.[42]

Kormas discusses how "a series of philosophical approaches are now recognized in modern psychotherapy," including "the Socratic method of questioning and control," "Epictetus' cognitive distancing (detachment)," "the Stoic vigilant self-consciousness (attention)," and its closely related to "focusing on here-and-now."[43] The author concludes: "Stoicism promotes a life-long process in which the individual is responsible for using reason" and that approach may be effective because scientific research has shown that "rational and non-rational aspects of human psychology are not separate,

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Panagiotis Kormas, "Stoic Cognitive Theories and Contemporary Neuropsychological Treatments," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 87-102.

[39] Ibid., 88.

[40] Ibid., 90-91.

[41] Ibid., 92.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 97.

thereby permitting active engagement in logical remodeling and moral development."

## III. Social dimensions of the philosophical management of stress

The philosophical management of stress has its social dimensions. The ethical set of principles of a guiding philosophical theory of life when the moral person is interacting with others may not be sufficient in stressful conditions. There is growing evidence from Experimental Psychology research that both stress and stress-related increases of cortisol affect moral decision-making.[44] As Epicurus famously emphasized: "It is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, well and justly, as well as it is impossible to live prudently, well and justly without living pleasantly."[45] In this context, the social dimension of eudaimonia was presented by Emmanuel Roberto Goffi; the artistic practice in the virtual eroticism in the contemporary world of mass media as a stress relief from physical confrontation with other persons in real life was conversed by Luka Janeš, Vanja Novaković, and Tanja Todorović; the virtual experience of pornographic images via digital media and on the internet as a means of managing and reducing stress that stems from one's social interactions by George Arabatzis; the empathy and care as a crucial quality for stress relief and social change was proposed by Darija Rupčić Kelam and Ivica Kelam; the Epicurean approach of stress management that may have both personal and social utility was discussed by George P. Chrousos and me.

Emmanuel Roberto Goffi supports the notion that the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic crisis has taught humanity the limits of individualism and underlined the fact that the pursuit of eudaimonia is a social issue.[46] Goffi notices:

> [...] with the rise of socio-physical distancing imposed due to the pandemic, people around the world have experienced isolation and the lack of human contact and interaction [that] has led to an increase in mental health issues.[47]

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[44] Nina Singer, Monika Sommer, Katrin Döhnel, Sandra Zänkert, Stefan Wüst, and Brigitte M. Kudielka, "Acute Psychosocial Stress and Everyday Moral Decision-making in Young Healthy Men: The Impact of Cortisol," *Hormones and Behavior* 93 (2017): 72-81.

[45] Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* V (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 10:140).

[46] Emmanuel Roberto Goffi, "Back to Eudaimonia as a Social Relation: What Does the Covid Crisis Teach Us about Individualism and its Limits?" *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 105-118.

[47] Ibid., 105.

The author emphasizes that "[...] the pandemic has shed a light on the limits of the individualism" and the erroneous concept of "a solipsistic world in which there would exist no reality, no truth outside individuals' perceptions."[48] Goffi observes that:

> [...] even if we do not want to admit it, we feel the limits of our opinions in time of crisis. Doubt leads to uncertainty and uncertainty to anxiety. Doubting everything can be very uncomfortable and lead to mental health issues.[49]

The author adds:

> Denying any truth that derives from our perceptions is dangerous for it closes us out of otherness. [...] Moving back to Aristotelian ethics, which founds *eudaimonia* on relations between humans, might help us overcome our concerns and anguishes.[50]

Goffi concludes that

> Managing stress is, then, not only related to the improvement of individuals' environment and providing them with solutions. It is also to teach them, through philosophy, to challenge themselves, to confront others, and to reconnect with *eudaimonia* through social relations.[51]

Tanja Todorović, Luka Janeš, and Vanja Novaković present a manifold of mimesis in the age of simulation examining the interconnection of aesthetics, soul (psyche) and media, by discussing artistic practice in the contemporary world of media as a stress relief from physical confrontation with other persons in real life.[52] The authors mention that "the contemporary world of media can be considered in dialogue with the philosophical tradition, can be evaluated in the phenomenological psychopathology evaluation horizon (Fuchs)," and can be understood by "the notion of variation (Manovich) replacing the traditional notion of mimesis" known from "Plato's ontology"

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[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., 112.

[50] Ibid., 112, 116.

[51] Ibid., 116-117.

[52] Tanja Todorović, Luka Janeš, and Vanja Novaković, "Aesthetics, Psyche and Media: A Manifold Role of Mimesis in the Age of Simulation," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no 2 (2022): 119-141.

and "Aristotle's constitution of education and community."[53] Todorović, Janeš, and Novaković claim that "only avant-garde movements can be the antithesis of the mass culture" in a comparable way to the one that the "Romantic movement challenged the traditional educational systems" by questioning "the traditional way of understanding the truth, especially in the domain of the philosophy of art."[54] The authors discuss the view that:

> [...] the new media represent the extension of reality, [since] every critique, every affirmation, every truth, and every lie, immediately enters into the common area of intervention. [...] There is no neutral content because every new piece of data produces new fields of action [by] reproduction and repetition.[55]

Todorović, Janeš, and Novaković mention:

> [...] artistic practice in new digital media that allows maintenance of desired (identity) simulations, enabling subjects to express their individuality, as well as in searching for new ways to improve their quality of life.[56]

Nevertheless, the authors remark that the perception of "an embodied and extended consciousness is not quite possible in the domain of simulacra, or more precisely, it is blocked and antagonized in many ways"[57] and therefore they wonder:

> [...] whether the "avatar issue" represents the reduction and closure of the width of a person's beingness within the set image, or whether it facilitates and stimulates its realization by depriving them of the stress and discomfort that is caused by physical confrontation and intercourse with other persons in the living space?[58]

Todorović, Janeš, and Novaković notice that "the given issue inevitably points to the problem of the general narcissism of our culture, calling upon

[53] Ibid., 122.

[54] Ibid., 123.

[55] Ibid., 125.

[56] Ibid., 119.

[57] Ibid., 133.

[58] Ibid., 135-136.

philosophical orientation to enter the discussion."[59] Particularly illuminating is the authors' comment on the concept of "post-truth, interpreted as an adjective referring to a communication paradigm in the 21st century in which: 'I think, therefore, I exist' is replaced by 'I believe, therefore I am right.'"[60] The authors suggest that "the phenomenological method [...] perhaps reveals in the best way the deep connection of these processes in a common virtual space although they act separately."[61] The authors claim:

> [...] new identities are created in a chain of intersubjective relations in which the questions of truth and falsehood, simulacrum and simulation, such as the differences between original and the copy content are left aside in these considerations. In this new age, emphasis is placed on important ways in which singular identity interferes with others, while traditional ontological questions are left aside.[62]

The authors conclude that,

> new forms of education that operate through these new media and virtual spaces cannot necessarily be labeled as something negative overall but that all their effects should be examined in relation to the contextual situations in which they operate.[63]

George Arabatzis discusses the obsessive viewing of pornography in digital media and on the internet as a means of managing and reducing stress.[64] The author examines

> [...] the weight of the specific factor of representation in relation to stress and its alleviation through pornographic viewing by individuals [...] The relevant process can be seen in the relation of pleasure and pain in the obtainment of the first by the diminution of tension in Freudian psychoanalysis.[65]

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[59] Ibid., 119.

[60] Ibid., 130, n. 28.

[61] Ibid., 138.

[62] Ibid., 138-139.

[63] Ibid., 139.

[64] Georgios Arabatzis, "Pornography and Stress," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 143-156.

[65] Ibid., 143-144.

Arabatzis remarks that:

> [...] the modern psychoanalysis is, for its part, right in arguing that the father of psychoanalysis abandoned biological reductionism, adopting a more structural and therefore more autonomous conception of his psychological and cultural analyses.[66]

Arabatzis underlines the fact that according to Freud "the symptom becomes an element of personality, and this is an idea extremely suitable for understanding the compulsory viewing of pornography."[67] The author mentions that "realism in pornography is highlighted according to its position in the systems of representation of a historical era," and "film is an exemplary art of modernism."[68] Arabatzis emphasizes the point that "what distinguishes today's special effects from simple animation is the presence of the human body, which serves as a point of validation of realism."[69] Nevertheless, the author questions the essence of the reality cinema:

> [...] it is not the body-idea that has been realistically depicted on film, endowed with the ontological fluency of the realistic depiction of the world. The alibi-body of digital special effects is a second body into which the existence of the actor's physical body has been transfused. This is clearly shown in the title and theme of James Cameron's recent film, *Avatar* (2009). The word avatar comes from the Sanskrit avatara meaning 'transition into a new flesh,' in other words, reincarnation.[70]

Furthermore, Arabatzis argues that:

> [...] we ought to speak here of New-age spiritualism where the disembodiment of the physical body is achieved in cyberspace which resembles the Platonic supercellular country. In other words, it is a techno-spiritualism that does not constitute a renunciation of the body according to the ascetic spirit, but a digitalisation of the body. The cyberspace body obeys a body

[66] Ibid., 145.

[67] Ibid., 146.

[68] Ibid., 149.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

> philosophy and a meta-physiology. Mechanism, theosophy and sci-fi culture intertwine and coexist while cyberculture moves from counter-culture to mythical reductionism and techno-mysticism.[71]

The author observes that:

> [...] in the digital space, virtual immateriality is combined with the ontic identity of the body through a discourse that invokes myths. It is a decontextualized and narcissistic reinvention of the themes of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: electricity as a magical force expressed in strange radiations that create new bodies. This constitutes the new form of dealing with anxiety through pornography. The mythical dimension of digital bodies facilitates the anti-stress magic. Thus, technology appears as an anti-stress warrant through pornography.[72]

Furthermore, Arabatzis discusses the anti-stress function of pornography in the light of the psychoanalytic theory of motivation: "There are two kinds of drives: (a) self-preservation and (b) sexuality. The latter drives are structured by an energy called *libido*."[73] The author continues:

> [...] from here we can deduce the Pleasure Principle, which means the maximum de-escalation of the urges and thus the reduction of stress. The Pleasure Principle is subject to the modifications imposed by the Reality Principle.[74]

Arabatzis discusses the psychoanalytic theory that "sexual drives may be repressed in the unconscious" because through "idealization" the "satisfaction of the initial sexual targeting can be removed through a rationalizing calculation combined with some ego excellence and thus substitute immediate satisfaction."[75] The author mentions that "through psychoanalysis, one can put forward the idea that ideas are rationalized impulses," that "we cannot overlook the unconscious element at the theoretical level where one understands 'perfectly' the phenomenon of the production of ideologies,"

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[71] Ibid., 150.

[72] Ibid., 150-151.

[73] Ibid., 151.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., 152.

and that "to coercion is added the libidinal appetite of common people."[76] Arabatzis thinks that in modern societies the cultural mechanism of socially acquired behavior corresponds to "the path from technology to the libidinal structure and to the intellectual sphere."[77] The author concludes thus:

> Pornography has to do with stress inasmuch as this last is at the origin of the first, while feelings of anxiety are the result of what we would call the hedonic failures that contaminate a social Being [...]. The pornographic phenomenon is not homogeneous but proportional to the stress that triggers it [...]. Realism appears thus as a factor of stress management in the form of pornography.[78]

Darija Rupčić Kelam, and Ivica Kelam propose that empathic care is a crucial quality for stress relief and social change.[79] The authors pose the main question of basic human nature: "Are we humans inherently selfish and aggressive beings, or are we more likely empathic, tender, and careful?"[80] Rupčić Kelam, and Kelam notice:

> More and more findings present a new interpretation of the history of civilisation by looking at the empathic evolution of the human race and nature and the profound ways it has shaped our development.[81]

The authors mention:

> [...] the ethical and philosophical implications which appeared within the context of scientific discoveries [...] led to the birth of a new field of science, namely neuroethics, [...] that empirically investigates the biological basis of ethical thought and behaviour.[82]

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[76] Ibid., 154.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid., 155.

[79] Darija Rupčić Kelam, and Ivica Kelam, "Care and Empathy as a Crucial Quality for Social Change," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 157-172.

[80] Ibid., 159.

[81] Ibid., 159.

[82] Ibid., 160.

Rupčić Kelam, and Kelam underline the fact that:

> [...] the contemporary research exploring the connections between the brain and morality proves that the idea of a biological basis of morality has to be considered, as Aristotle and Epicurus taught by observing human nature.[83]

The authors think that the biological basis of morality obviously lies in:

> [...] empathy [...] conjures up active engagement [...] the willingness of an observer to become part of another's experience [...] of walking in someone else's shoes, understanding of emotions of other beings and using that understanding for channelling one's behaviours and acts.[84]

Nevertheless, the authors mention that "care is the first step and precondition to empathy that is much more comprehensive and profoundly richer than care,"[85] since:

> [...] empathetic extension is the awareness of the vulnerability we all share and allows an individual to experience another's plight or condition "as though it were one's own" and that involvement itself also loops back to reinforce and deepen one's sense of selfhood because he has been there himself.[86]

Rupčić Kelam, and Kelam conclude that "the ethics of care builds on that experience that all persons share, though they have often been unaware of its embedded values and implications," and highlight "the importance of empathy and care as a crucial means for social change, alleviation of human suffering and anxiety, as well as the promotion of human well-being and happiness."[87]

George P. Chrousos and I describe a philosophical approach of stress management based on the Epicurean concept of stability (eustatheia) and group psychotherapy.[88] We remark that, within the friendly social environment of their School,

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[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid., 162.

[85] Ibid., 166.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid., 169-170.

[88] Christos Yapijakis, and George P. Chrousos, "Epicurean Stability (Eustatheia): A Philosophical Approach of Stress Management," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 173-190.

> the teaching methodology of the Epicureans included psychoeducational counseling through therapeutic criticism based on friendly freedom of speech and aiming at psychotherapy and at knowledge of maintaining mental health and well-being.[89]

We tried to explain:

> [...] the Epicureans called eustatheia (stability) the psychosomatic balance, which today we call homeostasis, and considered it the basis of true happiness; they recognized empirically the stress that disturbed psychosomatic homeostasis as an agitation of the psyche or a painful feeling of the body and used a number of mental and affective techniques (including the *tetrapharmakos*) to manage stress at its onset, so that it does not evolve into the particularly troublesome conditions of anxiety and/or depression, which may become chronic psychosomatic disorders.[90]

We intended to emphasize,

> the relation of the main ethical teachings of Epicurus with the biological basis of human brain functions and with the management of stress by cognitive and behavioral psychotherapy.[91]

We underline that according to Epicurus:

> [...] prudence can maintain psychosomatic balance (eustatheia) by consciously choosing what brings happiness, namely by wise satisfaction of natural and necessary desires (which concern our instincts), by understanding the nature of our emotions as criteria of truth, and by wise selection of those pleasures that are useful and not harmful.[92]

We explain: "Epicurus taught that through the scientific knowledge of nature and through prudence people can deal with irrational phobias about the unknown, with ideas and feelings of superstition, with the fear of not having

[89] Ibid., 174.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid., 173.

[92] Ibid., 180.

their foolish desires fulfilled"[93] and above all the philosopher considered especially important the philosophical "treatment of the constant anxiety of death as a condition for psychosomatic eustatheia."[94]

We conclude that "Epicurus proposed specific philosophical 'medicines' for achieving psychosomatic eustatheia and eudaimonia, which are timeless, as long as the biological nature of humans remains the same."[95]

## IV. Empirical pilot studies of philosophical management of stress

There are several methodologies used for management of stress and modifying stress-related response associated with suffering and chronic disease: lifestyle and healthy dietary choices, adequate sleep, regular exercise, cognitive behavioral psychotherapy, and biopsychological techniques such as relaxation, biofeedback, hypnosis, yoga, etc. (for a review).[96] Intervention programs of stress management that combine many techniques have been shown to enhance resilience and coping techniques and decrease stress for a period of time, based on systematic behavioral change.[97] One such multidimensional behavioral three-month program has also used the Pythagorean philosophical approach of introspection and memory practicing in order to assess self-mastery and self-awareness.[98] In this context, two successful novel empirical pilot studies of pure philosophical management of stress based on cognitive psychotherapy and modification of mentality have been presented, both of them realized in the COVID-19 pandemic period. A three-month positive psychology intervention combined with Epicurean and Stoic concepts was provided to adolescent students by Eleni Michopoulou; a month-long philosophical management of stress program based on Science and Epicurean Philosophy was offered to public sector professionals by Christos Yapijakis, Evangelos D. Protopapadakis and George P. Chrousos.

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[93] Ibid., 184.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid., 187.

[96] Anastasia Bougea, Nikolaos Spantideas, and George P. Chrousos, "Stress Management for Headaches in Children and Adolescents: A Review and Practical Recommendations for Health Promotion Programs and Well-Being," *Journal of Child Health Care* 22, no. 1 (2018): 19-33.

[97] Maria-Despoina Kallianta, Xrysoula E. Katsira, Artemis K. Tsitsika, Dimitrios Vlachakis, George P. Chrousos, Christina Darviri, and Flora Bacopoulou, "Stress Management Intervention to Enhance Adolescent Resilience: A Randomized Controlled Trial," *EMBnet Journal* 26 (2021): e967.

[98] Eleni S. Zigkiri, Nicolas C. Nicolaides, Flora Bacopoulou, Dimitris Simos, Dimitrios Vlachakis, George P. Chrousos, and Christina Darviri, "The Effect of the Pythagorean Self-Awareness Intervention on Psychological, Lifestyle and Cognitive Measures of a Community Sample," *Journal of Molecular Biochemistry* 9, no. 1 (2020): 32-40.

Eleni Michopoulou describes the program "Living happily in the era of COVID-19," which is an intervention of Positive Psychology combined with Hellenistic Philosophy in secondary education.[99] The author discusses the pilot application of a program, which was:

> [...] an innovative school intervention program was applied and its effect was investigated. The program involved a structured 11-weeks-long psycho-educational intervention on a sample of 11 Greek high school students (aged 16-17 years), combining principles of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy with Positive Psychology techniques, aiming at promoting their mental well-being and the effective management of the psychological effects of the pandemic crisis.[100]

Michopoulou mentions that "a qualitative methodology was used" and explains that:

> Before the intervention, the students' needs and expectations were investigated through written narratives and, after the intervention, semi-structured individual oral interviews and group interviews recorded their personal experiences and evaluative judgments.[101]

The author observes:

> The application of positive techniques [...] had beneficial effects on the participating students, including emotional state improvement, mental well-being enhancement, and improved aspects of quality of life, such as subjective health, cognitive and school performance, family and interpersonal relationships.[102]

The author quotes some of the students' responses that reveal that the success of the intervention was due to its pragmatic basis. An illustrating example of a student's comment is the following:

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[99] Eleni Michopoulou, "'Living Happily in the Era of COVID-19': Philosophical and Positive Psychology Intervention in Secondary Education," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 193-227.

[100] Ibid., 193.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

> the Philosophy we were taught has a scientific basis and I liked that, Positive Psychology is also based on Science; we can be and feel well, if what we learn and we apply have to do with human nature, as Science investigates it. I agree with Epicurus, it is not possible to get rid of our fears, if we don't know our nature, it is not possible to be happy and enjoy our life without scientific knowledge. That's why it was useful the connection of Philosophy with Psychology.[103]

Michopoulou emphasizes that:

> The highlighting of the reinforcing role of Hellenistic Philosophy in the effectiveness of the applied techniques of Positive Psychology [...] is a novel finding in the existing literature [that resulted in] cognitive reconstruction based on the principles of Epicureanism and Stoicism that had beneficial effects on the mental well-being of adolescents in an era of crisis.[104]

Evangelos Protopapadakis, George P. Chrousos and I discuss a pilot study of philosophical management of stress based on Science and Epicurean Philosophy.[105] We describe:

> [...] an innovative program named Philosophical Distress Management Operation System (Philo.Di.M.O.S.) [...] designed to be implemented in a period of crisis, therefore it uses a fast-paced (one-month-long), easy to learn and practice philosophical approach to stress management that is based on cognitive psychotherapy and has the advantage that it can be offered to all people, regardless of age and educational level.[106]

We mention that,

> [...] the program of philosophical management of stress was based on Science, Humanism and Epicurean Pragmatism [and] it was offered to 100 employees of social structures in the Greek Prefecture of

[103] Ibid., 215.

[104] Ibid., 218, and 193 respectively.

[105] Christos Yapijakis, Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, and George P. Chrousos, "Philosophical Management of Stress based on Science and Epicurean Pragmatism: A Pilot Study," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 229-242.

[106] Ibid., 229.

> Attica [who corresponded to] a wide spectrum in respect to age, education level and specialty.[107]

We report:

> The pilot program was proved to be effective in achieving its objectives, based on the set evaluation criteria. Comparison of the trainees' responses of the anonymous questionnaires before and after the monthly training.[108]

We observed:

> [...] half of the trainees felt that they learned completely or very much to manage perceived stress, while a further 37.7% said that they gained a moderate ability to manage perceived stress [and] to advise others to manage their subjective perceived stress.[109]

We quote some of the trainees' comments that indicate why the program was successful. A remarkable example is the following statement of a philologist with a Master's degree:

> I have learned in this seminar to try to manage things in a cool way and not to create stressful scenarios in my head. I have been trained in humanities, but I had learned only superficially what the philosophers taught. Only now I have understood what Epicurus said about serenity, about happiness. A seminar that lasted so little time has covered six years of education and I finally comprehended all the essentials.[110]

We conclude:

> The successful implementation of the pilot program of Philosophical Management of Stress verified the initial assumption that cognitive restructuring with philosophical psychotherapy is feasible even when taught to a heterogeneous group of people within a month. Basic requirements for such an educational program are to, first, provide

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid., 237.

[109] Ibid., 238.

[110] Ibid., 239.

> real scientific data, so that trainees can be convinced that there is a need to manage stress to prevent psychosomatic health problems, and second, to follow a clear pragmatic Epicurean approach in the management of perceived stress, which someone can learn to apply in every real-life situation.[111]

It is worth mentioning that the application of the one-month-long Philo. Di.M.O.S. program was even more significantly successful[112] when offered to a small group of friends of Epicurean Philosophy at the 'Garden of Athens,' which is a circle of educated Athenians who meet once a week in order to freely discuss and experience the Epicurean way of thinking in friendship.[113] Although more data need to be collected, the initial results suggest that the program seems to be more effective in persons with philosophical inclination.

## V. Concluding remarks

It is obvious that the philosophical management of stress has a long history, but its full potential has not been yet appreciated. A self-evident big picture is emerging from the interconnected bits of personal and social dimensions of philosophical stress management discussed here, especially in the light of the important empirical evidence of the applied intervention approaches combining Philosophy with Science and Positive Psychology. The management of stress in everyday life and in periods of crisis seems to be more effective if it is based on philosophical approaches that are less egocentric/solipsistic and at the same time more pragmatic, empathic and connected to other people.

Accumulating evidence suggests that applied Philosophy which is compatible with scientific observations can be efficiently used in stress management. Our future as a species depends on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic that have touched the whole humanity, regarding the high priority of both physical and mental health, as well as the importance of meaningful human relations in pursuit of eudaimonia.

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[111] Ibid., 239-240.

[112] Christos Yapijakis, et al., unpublished data.

[113] Christos Yapijakis, ed., *Epicurean Philosophy: An Introduction from the "Garden of Athens"* (Athens: Stavrodromi Publications, 2022).

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# articles

# I. Personal dimensions

P. Valenzuela · *Conatus* 7, no. 2 (2022): 37-61
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# Fredrickson on Flourishing through Positive Emotions and Aristotle's Eudaimonia

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**Abstract**

*Is it possible to be happy without virtues? At least for the kind of enduring human happiness Aristotle bears, virtues are required (NE, I). In addition to virtues, some prosperity is necessary for flourishing, like having friends and minimal external goods. Nowadays, we witness different approaches to happiness – well-being – focusing on mental states – i.e., affective – usually without reference to moral issues, concretely moral dispositions, or virtues. At the crossroads of Philosophy and Psychology, the present article discusses the connection of happiness – well-being – and affective states by presenting Fredrickson's theory of positive emotions, which has been criticised as approaching only hedonic well-being and therefore overlooking its eudaimonic aspects. In her approach, there is no reference to the good life connected to the human good, as in Aristotle's ethics. However, there is instead an understanding of becoming a benevolent, a better person as a necessary human aspiration.*

**Keywords:** *happiness; flourishing; eudaimonic well-being; hedonic well-being; virtues; (positive) emotions; Aristotle; Fredrickson*

## I. Introduction

Fredrickson abstains from using the term happiness because of its ambiguous meaning. She prefers instead to speak about human flourishing as being beyond happiness in that it encompasses both feeling good and doing good.[1] This 'doing good' relates only to an individual's healthy physical and psychological functioning but does not include the moral sense of becoming a good person or developing a morally good-virtuous life, at least not at first glance of her research. That is not surprising because, unlike philosophers, most psychologists and social scientists striving to understand

[1] Barbara Fredrickson, *Positivity* (New York: Crown, 2009), 17.

well-being through empirical research are not explicitly making ethical claims about the nature of a good life in their studies.[2]

Fredrickson deals with the role of positivity in human flourishing, meaning by positivity the different positive emotions she identifies. She highlights the contribution of emotional well-being to overall flourishing.

Fredrickson's understanding of hedonic well-being captures individuals' global satisfaction with life alongside their pleasant affect. In contrast, eudaimonic well-being encompasses their sense of purpose and meaning and their resilience and social integration.[3]

Human flourishing involves hedonic and eudaimonic aspects as well:

> the construct includes both feeling good (hedonia) and functioning effectively (eudaimonia) and in this way is the mirror opposite of common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, which encompass negative affect and poor functioning.[4]

However, this comprehension of eudaimonic well-being differs from approaches based directly on Aristotelian eudaimonia.[5] Aristotle's discussion of eudaimonia covers aspects like feeling good and some external conditions – and principally the well-doing according to the highest potentiality of human being, the life according to human excellences or virtues. These essential aspects of eudaimonia conduct to a fulfilled, good life. Conversely, the failure to either understand human nature or behave according to the best in human nature will lead to failures of human flourishing.[6]

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[2] Veronika Huta, and Alan Waterman, "Eudaimonia and its Distinction from Hedonia: Developing a Classification and Terminology for Understanding Conceptual and Operational Definitions," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 15, no. 6 (2014): 1428.

[3] Barbara Fredrickson, "Updated Thinking on Positivity Ratios," *American Psychologist* 68, no. 9 (2013): 816.

[4] Ibid. Fredrickson adopted Keyes' understanding of flourishing that contrasts not just with pathology but also with languishing and conceptualises and measures human fourishing as a multidimensional combination of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being [Corey Keyes, "The Mental Health Continuum: From Languishing to Flourishing in Life," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 43, no. 2 (2002): 207-222].

[5] Blaine Fowers, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia: On the Virtue of Returning to the Source," in *The Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being*, ed. Joar Vittersø, 67-83 (New York: Springer, 2016); Daniel Haybron, "Philosophy and the Science of Subjective Well-Being," in *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*, eds. Michael Eid, and Randy Larsen, 17-43 (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008); Daniel Haybron, "The Philosophical Basis of Eudaimonic Psychology," in *The Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being*, ed. Joar Vittersø, 27-53 (Switzerland: Springer, 2016); Carol Ryff, and Burton Singer, "Know Thyself and Become What You Are: A Eudaimonic Approach to Psychological Well-Being," in *The Exploration of Happiness*, ed. Antonella Delle Fave, 97-116 (New York: Springer, 2013).

[6] Thomas Spalding, James Stedman, Christina Gagné, and Matthew Kostelecky, *The Human*

## II. Positive emotions and well-being

Fredrickson argues the connection between flourishing and affective states, specifically, positive emotions. Positive emotions like joy, interest, love have unique cognitive attributes that constitute not only epistemic access to well-being but may lead to enhance well-being by building resources.

She based her argumentation on several prospective correlational and longitudinal randomised experiments. Their results show that daily experiences of positive emotions forecast and produce growth in personal resources such as competence (e.g., environmental mastery), meaning (e.g., purpose in life), optimism (e.g., pathways thinking), resilience, self-acceptance, positive relationships, as well as physical health. In other words, feeling good does not simply sit side by side with optimal functioning as an indicator of flourishing; feeling good drives optimal function by building the enduring personal resources upon which people draw to navigate life's journey with greater success.[7]

The novelty in Fredrickson's approach is arguing that experiencing positive emotions and feeling good does not simply indicate the presence of human flourishing. Beyond being one dimension of flourishing, positive emotions also promote its development and maintenance. She refers to many markers of optimal functioning or eudaimonic well-being that can be cast as enduring personal resources helping people cope with the changing circumstances of life.[8]

The essential question is how positive emotions produce or help to enhance flourishing. Let us review Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. According to Fredrickson, positive emotions denote a range of discernible pleasant affective states, including joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love. This list is not exhaustive; instead, it groups ten representative positive emotions that research suggests people experience frequently. Like all emotions, positive emotions are brief, multisystem activation patterns related to how people appraise their present circumstances. An individual's past experiences and current situation ultimately shape the emotion(s) experienced. When these multisystem activation patterns register that an individual's circumstances are somehow bad for the self, he/she experiences an unpleasant affective state; when it registers good prospects or good fortune, a pleasant affective state. According to Fredrickson, these pleasant states cannot be confused

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*Person. What Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas Offer Modern Psychology* (Cham: Springer, 2019), 16.

[7] Fredrickson, "Updated Thinking," 816.

[8] Ibid.

with sensory or bodily pleasures which arise from desire or want. Although sensory pleasure and positive emotions often co-occur, unlike sensory pleasures, emotions require appraisals or meaning assessments to be initiated.[9]

Fredrickson's theory explains that positive emotions broaden thought-action repertoires. Within the explanation of each positive emotion, Fredrickson includes the appraisal theme, the thought-action tendencies and the resources each of them helps to build.

To start, *love* – the most frequent positive emotion, viewed as an amalgam of distinct positive emotions (e.g., joy, interest, and contentment) – broadens thought-action repertoires by creating momentary perceptions of social connection and self-expansion. Fredrickson's theory adds that positive emotions help build psychological, social, and even physical resources through the broadening effect. Love, for instance, builds a wide range of enduring resources, especially social bonds and community.

*Joy*, instead, creates the urge to play and be creative, pushing the limits. These urges are evident not only in social and physical behaviour but also in intellectual and artistic behaviour.

*Interest*, a phenomenologically distinct positive emotion, creates the urge to explore, take in new information and experiences, and expand the self in the process.

*Contentment* or *serenity* creates the urge to sit back and savour current life circumstances and integrate these circumstances into new views of the self and the world.

*Gratitude* comes when we appraise the fact of receiving an altruistic gift by which we tend in turn to give creatively. This broadening helps to create social bonds and skills for loving. *Hope* arises when we fear the worst but yearn for the better, and it leads to being inventive and helps build or increase resilience.

We feel *pride* in socially valued achievement, by which we tend to dream big, leading us to further achievements. *Amusement* comes with non-serious social incongruity when we are prone to share laughs, insights, and this broadening led to building friendship and creativity mishap.

*Inspiration* appears at witnessing human excellence in others. We are inclined then to aspire to human excellence. The outcomes are to gain skills and morality. In the end, *awe* arises when we feel overwhelmed by greatness. We tend to accommodate the new, trying to view and understand the self as part of a larger whole.

These various thought-action tendencies to play, explore, or savour and integrate, represent ways that positive emotions broaden habitual modes of thinking or acting. As said, broadening builds enduring personal resources.[10]

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[9] Barbara Fredrickson, "Positive Emotions," in *The Handbook of Positive Psychology*, eds. C. R. Snyder, and Shane J. Lopez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121-122.

[10] Barbara Fredrickson, "The Eudaimonics of Positive Emotions," in *The Handbook of Eudaimonic*

The broadening effects (thought-action repertoire) leading to building resources lead to greater well-being. The increased well-being tends to produce more experiences of positive emotions, which, in turn, lead to new forms of well-being, creating an upward spiral.[11]

What is this kind of well-being? According to Fredrickson, it includes enhanced health – mental and physical – in the form of psychological and biological resources, survival, and fulfilment. As referenced above, more or less, each positive emotion helps to build resources, principally cognitive and social resources. How can the experiences of (fleeting) positive emotions enhance well-being and promote flourishing? Fredrickson argues that frequent though fleeting affective states produce effects. It is through their broadening effects that positive emotions can help build resources – building effects – that in turn lead to enhanced well-being: expanded perception, more inclusive social categorisations, greater perspective-taking, increased action ideas. These broadening effects contribute to building psychological resources as knowledge, agency, hope, social resources, i.e. support, connectedness, and physical resources, e.g. significant heart rate variability, which means a solid ability to tolerate stress or recover from prior stressful situations.

The effects of positive and negative emotions accumulate and may become emotional habits or, in Fredrickson terms, *attitudes*. A transient emotion – explains Arnold – can gradually become an *emotional attitude* and, in turn, an *emotional habit*, which is an enduring emotional state through residues left by an emotion. According to Arnold, we deal with the long-range or cumulative effects of emotion rather than with emotions themselves in emotional attitudes and habits.[12] This explanation can support Fredrickson's claims about the cumulative effects of positive emotions, which lead to building resources enriching the self and contributing to the overall well-being.[13] Given that the effects of positive emotions accumulate, they can influence a person's well-being and well-doing.

In this discussion, one might note the relevance of the temporal dimension, as in all human life issues. That is why Fredrickson nuances: at least some positive emotional states are marked by broadened mindsets. As studies demonstrate, broadened mindsets may be advantageous at the

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*Well-Being*, ed. Joar Vittersø, 183-190 (New York: Springer, 2016).

[11] Laura Kiken, and Barbara Fredrickson, "Cognitive Aspects of Positive Emotions: A Broader View for Well-Being," in *The Happy Mind: Cognitive Contributions to Well-Being*, eds. Michael Robinson, and Michael Eid, 157-175 (Cham: Springer, 2017), 160.

[12] Magda Arnold, *Emotion and Personality*, Volume 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 199.

[13] Barbara Fredrickson, "The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions," *American Psychologist* 56, no. 3 (2001): 218-226.

moment – referring to the fleetingness of positive emotions. Moreover, these broadened mindsets create a context for potentially more enduring benefits of positive emotions related to present and future well-being.[14]

Fredrickson references prospective, longitudinal studies that link positive emotionality to future personal and social resources. She also evidences the results of a follow-up study on the same participants after 15 months. The participants maintained the resources they had accumulated during the increased positive emotions from meditation training, regardless of whether or not they continued to meditate after the intervention. What is relevant in this study is not so much the way of increasing positive emotions but the lasting resources for well-being or that they were not lost. For Fredrickson, increases in positive emotions over time cause increases in resources for well-being.[15]

She points out that consistently – rather than variably – experiencing positive emotions on a daily basis is most beneficial for well-being. It might seem more manageable when life seems unmistakably pleasant. However, as Fredrickson argues, positive emotions also are possible and vital in the wake of unpleasant experiences. She emphasises the benefits of positive emotions in the face of life's difficulties.[16]

Positive emotions can accompany or follow negative emotions that arise in the context of difficult or unpleasant experiences. Positive emotions can influence them twofold: they can offset potentially undesirable effects of negative emotions – helping to 'undo' the effects of negative emotional states – and they can help individuals use a range of options for coping.[17]

For instance, negative emotions such as fear or anger tend to narrow individuals' thinking to focus on a potential threat and prompt cardiovascular reactivity to ready the body to fight or flee, which helps act quickly in the face of immediate threats. Although, such effects of negative emotions may be harmful to mental and physical health when they are prolonged.[18]

Positive emotions that occur amidst or following negative experiences may facilitate recovery and resilience. Fredrickson evidences that resilient individuals may use positive emotions and their ensuing benefits to cope with adversity.[19]

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[14] Kiken, and Fredrickson, "Cognitive Aspects," 163.

[15] Ibid., 165.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Barbara Fredrickson, and Robert Levenson, "Positive Emotions Speed Recovery from the Cardiovascular Sequelae of Negative Emotions," *Cognition and Emotion* 12, no. 2 (1998): 191-220.

[18] Kiken, and Fredrickson, "Cognitive Aspects," 166.

[19] Ibid., 166-167; Michael Tugade, and Barbara Fredrickson, "Resilient Individuals Use Positive

If negative emotions are prolonged and frequent might lead to downward spirals of negativity implicated in psychopathologies (depression, anxiety). Positive emotions instead may promote upward spirals of positive emotions and well-being. Metaphorically, the fruit of positive emotions – broadening and building effects – essentially contain seeds for future positive emotions. For this reason, positive emotions and their effects may show reciprocal relations.[20]

Does it mean that an individual should feel no longer negative emotions and seek only positivity? Not. Fredrickson explicitly advises about this possible misunderstanding. As a response to a situation one appraises, emotions are negative or positive in terms of the feeling (pleasant/unpleasant). There are costs in mental and physical health – and consequently for well-being – whether an individual has a prolonged experience of negative emotions or instead overemphasises positive emotions. Paying continuous attention to feel 'happy' in a hedonic sense can backfire, causing frustration and emptiness, leading to less 'happiness.'[21] Instead, one should strive for a sustainable pursuit of happiness: a balance between positivity and negativity is necessary.[22]

Consequently, Fredrickson suggests that a better strategy for experiencing positive emotions and their more significant benefits for well-being may be to structure life to prioritise situations in which one is likely to experience positive emotions. Additionally, the ability to savour the moment should lead to more positive emotions, but it depends on individual dispositional mindfulness. Mindfulness or other means of generating and regulating positive emotions might help to savour the moment – i.e. to be present writing this work; in the conversation with a friend – to promote positive emotions and their ensuing benefits for well-being.[23]

At this point, a question arises: which kind of well-being underlies Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions?

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Emotions to Bounce back from Negative Emotional Experiences," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 86, no. 2 (2004): 320-333. Under other assumptions, according to Epicurus, we may become prudent and resilient in stressful conditions only by understanding how nature works and how we perceive it empirically. Mark Walker, "Don't Fear the Reaper: Towards an Epicurean Grief Therapy," *Philosophical Practice* 13, no. 2 (2018): 2120-2128.

[20] Ibid., 168; Eric Garland, Barbara Fredrickson, Ann Kring, et al., "Upward Spirals of Positive Emotions Counter Downward Spirals of Negativity: Insights from The Broaden-And-Build Theory and Affective Neuroscience on the Treatment of Emotion Dysfunctions and Deficits in Psychopathology," *Clinical Psychology Review* 30, no. 7 (2010): 854, 857.

[21] Lahnna Catalino, Sara Algoe, and Barbara Fredrickson, "Prioritising Positivity: An Effective Approach to Pursuing Happiness?" *Emotion* 14, no. 6 (2014): 1156.

[22] Barbara Fredrickson, "Positive Psychology," *Coursera*, available at https://www.coursera.org/learn/positive-psychology.

[23] Kiken, and Fredrickson, "Cognitive Aspects," 170.

Positive emotions do feel good in the moment and thus are a defining feature of hedonic well-being. However – Fredrickson explains – positive emotions do much more, and they contribute, additionally, in fundamental ways to a broader sense of well-being in the future.

## III. Positive emotions and eudaimonia

Fredrickson observes the tendency to characterise positive emotions as merely representing the pleasures of self-gratification, leading to eudaimonic experiences on a high pedestal while situating hedonic ones as more lowly human motivations. She also notices that

> these prevailing representations of hedonia and eudaimonia can divert scholars from investigating other, more complex and dynamic interrelationships between these two forms of well-being, and in turn, the contributions that each holds for physical health.[24]

Fredrickson argues that positive emotions are related to a broader sense of well-being, by which she understands the eudaimonic aspects of flourishing. In her perspective, eudaimonic well-being encompasses what transcends immediate sensory or emotional gratification, and thus, the experiences of purpose, meaning, contribution, and interconnectedness. In order to explore the relationships between eudaimonia and hedonia, Fredrickson tries to find out how are connected positive emotions and transcendent experiences.

In *The Eudaimonics of Positive Emotions*, Fredrickson clarifies her position: hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are not mutually exclusive approaches to happiness, nor do they represent a simple typology or a tradeoff. She argues that existing data suggest that hedonia and eudaimonia are not only positively correlated but that aspects of hedonia predict and even cause increases in eudaimonia prospectively. She refers to King and colleagues' prospective correlational studies of daily life experience together with tightly-controlled laboratory experiments. The studies demonstrate that positive affective states forecast and cause people to be more likely to detect meaning in life.[25]

Related to the six subdomains of eudaimonic well-being indexed by the Ryff Psychological Wellbeing (PWB) measure,[26] Fredrickson and colleagues observed

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[24] Fredrickson, "The Eudaimonics of Positive Emotions," 183.

[25] Laura King, and Joshua Hicks, "Detecting and Constructing Meaning in Life Events," *Journal of Positive Psychology* 4, no. 5 (2009): 317-330.

[26] Ryff, and Singer, "Know Thyself and Become What You Are," 102: *self-acceptance*, *purpose in life*, *environmental mastery*, *positive relationships*, *personal growth*, *autonomy*.

from increments in positive emotions systematic and consequential increases in four eudaimonic subdomains – purpose in life, environmental mastery, self-acceptance and positive relations with others – and these facets of eudaimonia, in turn, predicted increases in life satisfaction and decreases in depressive symptoms. Research studies concretely showed that both types of well-being share some common sources (e.g., perceived social connections) and can reciprocally influence one another. The evidence-based prospective and causal connections between positive emotions and facets of eudaimonia led Fredrickson and collaborators to the following conclusions based on findings on the genomic correlates of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being:

1) The hedonic experiences of positive emotions, with their documented abilities to expand momentary awareness, might contribute to the subsequent detection of meaning and the emergence of eudaimonic experiences more generally.
2) Facets of eudaimonia are related to a health-supportive pattern of gene expression – one marked by reduced expression of proinflammatory genes and increased expression of antiviral and antibody synthesis genes.
3) Consequently, hedonia might contribute *indirectly* to a healthy gene expression pattern due to its direct relationship with eudaimonia.[27]

The above correlation depends on the association between positive emotions and eudaimonic facets of well-being. Fredrickson argues that

> many pleasant, uplifted emotional states are likely to broaden people's awareness, enabling them to see the big picture, connect the dots, or otherwise transcend the self or the moment. Expanded mindsets like these appear to facilitate people's ability to perceive the many ways they contribute to, and are interconnected with others, or are otherwise called to a higher purpose or meaning [...] Although eudaimonia may be more directly tied to the molecular shifts that support physical health, hedonia may be the more experience-near springboard that leads to increments in eudaimonia.[28]

She suggests moving beyond 'either-or' thinking and proposals of separate paths to well-being. Hedonia and eudaimonia might be seen as dynamically intertwined facets of well-being, each of which plays a vital role in the overall process of human flourishing.[29]

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[27] Fredrickson, "The Eudaimonics of Positive Emotions," 187.

[28] Ibid., 188.

[29] Ibid.

Contemporary well-being researchers, and as stated, also Fredrickson, agree that mental health is one of the relevant well-being factors. We include physical health when speaking of mental health because they are related, and Fredrickson emphasises this holistic perspective. For this reason, she also investigates the neurophysiological basis – the biological underpinnings – of positive emotions and well-being.

Just like malleable risk factors (e.g., pessimism, inflammation) can deter health and well-being by altering affective processes, malleable vantage resources (e.g., purpose in life, cardiac vagal tone) can support health and well-being by amplifying positive emotions experienced in day-to-day living, creating an upward spiral dynamic. As stated, such upward spiral processes offer a systems-level perspective on the dynamic and reciprocal causality among affective, social-psychological, and biological constructs. In this line, Fredrickson poses that positive emotions and purpose – hedonia and eudaimonia –, as theory and evidence suggest, are not merely facets of living well. Instead, they function as active ingredients that help maintain and strengthen biological systems that support upward spirals of well-being.[30]

Another study investigated whether and how routine activities promote flourishing. It hypothesised that flourishers thrive by experiencing greater positive emotional reactivity to pleasant events and building more resources over time. Results from the tested hypothesis showed that unlike those who were languishing or depressed, people who flourish generally responded with a more considerable 'boost' in positive emotions in response to everyday, pleasant events as helping others, social interactions, playing, learning and spiritual activity. A greater positive emotional reactivity, over time, predicted higher levels of mindfulness. These higher levels of mindfulness were positively associated with higher levels of flourishing at the end of the study than initial levels of flourishing. So far, evidence suggests that the most beneficial for well-being are positive emotional reactivity to pleasant everyday events and the regular – daily – experience of positive emotions.[31]

Certain positive emotions – awe, admiration, and elevation – involving an appraisal of something or someone more excellent than the self may be significantly related to facets of eudaimonic well-being. Described as self-transcendent positive emotions, they help promote kind and patient views toward others. Concretely, Fredrickson's interest in the little-studied emotion of elevation might show the

[30] Three distinct biological vantage resources might underpin people's experiences of positive emotions and purpose: leukocyte gene expression, cardiac vagal tone and oxytocin. Barbara Fredrickson, "The Biological Underpinnings of Positive Emotions and Purpose," in *The Social Psychology of Living Well*, eds. Roy Baumeister, and Joseph Forgas, 163-180 (New York: Psychology Press, 2018), 165.

[31] Lahnna Catalino, and Barbara Fredrickson, "A Tuesday in the Life of a Flourisher: The Role of Positive Emotional Reactivity in Optimal Mental Health," *Emotion* 11, no. 4 (2011): 938-950.

inclusion of the morality factor in emotions and well-being research.[32] Elevation is related to the appraisal of a moral exemplar, someone or some action worthwhile for being imitated.

A study in which the authors induced awe, compared to induced general happiness, led to an expanded sense of time and more willingness to donate time to help a charity. According to Fredrickson,

> these findings provide preliminary evidence of some potentially unique broadening effects from positive emotions marked by a self-transcendent quality.[33]

Fredrickson also quotes the results of other research. Working adults were randomly assigned to receive a daily positive emotion induction for eight weeks through a guided meditation focused on generating feelings of love and compassion. After this period, they got happier and reported having better close relationships, greater self-efficacy, psychological well-being and improved physical health.[34]

The last research Fredrickson has been developing shows her interest in connecting positive emotions with eudaimonic aspects of well-being. From a scientific perspective, she intends to understand those trajectories that build virtues and goodness, leading to more benevolent views of the world.

Among the virtues that seemed most relevant to positivity resonance, she highlights a sense of connection to others – oneness between people – and humility. She notes that humility places us on equal footing with another person, so we do not think "I am better than the other person." Fredrickson argues that when we experience more positive emotions with others, we feel more humble. So we tend to cluster those experiences of connection and virtue. When we seek to increase those moments of positivity resonance, those virtues will also increase in step.[35]

In Fredrickson's theory, the complex interplay between positive emotions (PE) and well-being is mediated by cognitive processes. The broadening effects of PE lead to building resources for well-being; increasing well-being based

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[32] Jonathan Haidt, "Elevation and the Positive Psychology of Morality," in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived*, eds. Corey Keyes, and Jonathan Haidt, 275-289 (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003). Quoted in Fredrickson, *Positivity*, 39; 237.

[33] Kiken, and Fredrickson, "Cognitive Aspects," 162.

[34] Michael Cohn, and Barbara Fredrickson, "Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions," in *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology*, ed. Shane Lopez, 105-110 (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 108.

[35] Fredrickson's Project (1 Sept. 2018 - 31 Aug. 2020), "Understanding Everyday Love: Do Increases in Positivity Resonance Increase Virtuous Behavior?" *Tempeton World*, accessed August 29, 2020, https://www.templetonworldcharity.org/projects-database/understanding-everyday-love-do-increases-positivity-resonance-increase-virtuous/, where is the video *Positivity Resonance: Building Virtue*, presenting the findings of the project.

on positive emotions depends on awareness, mindfulness of an individual in her/his ability to savour the moment.

In sum, the two fundamental tenets in Fredrickson's theory have been explained. First, positive emotions do not simply mark well-being but play a role in creating it. That is to say, positive emotion might occur after a job well done and might also help get the job done. In other words, positive emotions are both the aftermath and the antecedent of well-being. These reciprocal relations between positive emotions and their benefits may result in upward spirals of well-being. Second, positive emotions are related to hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of flourishing.

## IV. About Aristotle's eudaimonia

This section offers a brief review of Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* – commonly translated as happiness – with direct references to *Nicomachean Ethics* and other works to purify the contested term.[36] First of all, Aristotle speaks about *eudaimonia* as understood in his time by ordinary and more educated or specialised people:

> for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness and identify *living well and faring well* with being happy; but about what happiness is, they differ, and the many do not give the same [20] account as the wise.[37]

We find different *eudaimonia* (happiness) accounts among the 'wise' in ancient times and contemporary well-being researchers. That said, as Haybron poses, eudaimonia meant the same thing for Epicurus and Aristotle: a life that is good for the person leading it. However, they had a substantive ethical disagreement about what sort of life is best for human beings.[38]

The ethical disagreement leads Aristotle and every moral philosopher to note and try to elucidate the analogical sense of goodness:

> Further, since things are said to be good in as many ways as they are said to be (for things are called good both in the category of [25] substance, as God and reason, and in quality, e.g. the virtues, and in quantity, e.g. that which is moderate,

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[36] My attempt here is less ambitious than Fowers' project (Fowers, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia"), but it has the same intention: reviewing the original sense of Aristotle's eudaimonia.

[37] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* I, 4, 1095a 15-20 (emphasis added).

[38] Haybron, "Philosophy and the Science of Subjective Well-Being," 28; *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics,* I, 5, 1095b 15-20.

> [...] and the like), clearly the good cannot be something universally present in all cases and single.[39]

The pluriform sense of goodness obeys the various goods we tend as humans. Aristotle describes the natural teleology underlying human action.[40] People aim at things like accomplishments, honours, pleasures, etc. Nevertheless, Aristotle notes that we want these things generally for the sake of something higher or the sake of happiness. In other words, they are not complete ends or, better said, they are parts of the whole of which a happy life may consist. Then happiness is the complete end we look for.[41]

As quoted, eudaimonia has to do with *living and doing well*. What does this mean for human beings? Functioning well as humans at best. In this point, Aristotle associates eudaimonia with human *ergon*:

> Now if the function of man is an activity of the soul in accordance with, or not without, rational principle, and if we say a so-and-so and a good so-and-so have a function which is the same in kind [...] If any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if [15] this is the case, human good turns out to be the activity of the soul in conformity with excellence, and if there is more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete. But we must add 'in a complete life.' For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.[42]

The paragraph contains condensed the core ideas on eudaimonia: 1) it has to do with the human good; 2) which consists in the activity of the human soul according to reason; 3) that means well-performed activities according to excellences; 4) it supposes the human temporal condition, and concretely an overarching life story. The following text adds some specific characteristics to eudaimonia:

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[39] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* I, 6, 1095a 25-28.

[40] Ibid., I, 7, 1097a 15-23.

[41] Ibid., I, 7, 1097b 1-8.

[42] Ibid., I, 7, 1098a 8-18. In Juan Andrés Mercado, "Origin of the Metaphysics of the Living: From Plato to *De anima* 2.5," *Acta Philosophica* 22, no. 1 (2013): 45, there is an interesting consideration about the 'perfect activity' (*teleia energeia*) in Aristotle's *Protrepticus*.

> The characteristics that are looked for in happiness also seem, all of the excellence, some with practical wisdom, others with a kind of philosophic wisdom, [25] others with these, or one of these, accompanied by pleasure or not without pleasure; while others also include external prosperity.[43]

Aristotle refers to the intellectual and moral excellences or excellences of character which correspond to the two parts of the human soul.[44] The excellences for doing well in our lives pertain to our composite nature – body and soul. Aristotle bears in mind that a happy life is one of both theoretical wisdom and moral goodness, including, in turn, practical wisdom:

> Again, the function of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom and moral excellence, for excellence makes the aim right, and practical wisdom the things leading to it.[45]
> If happiness is an activity in accordance with excellence, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest excellence; this will be the best thing in us. Whether it be intellect or something else that is this element which [15] is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper excellence will be complete happiness. That this activity is contemplative, we have already said.[46]

Though the precedent paragraphs seem to be contradictory – there is a long debate on that –[47] they might be seen as complementary, taking into account Aristotle's insistence on human composite nature.[48]

Aristotle also considers some external conditions for eudaimonia. A kind of external prosperity is needed for humans to flourish:

> Yet evidently, as we said, it needs the external goods as well, for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper

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[43] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* I, 8, 1098b 22-26.

[44] Ibid., VI, 12, 1144a 1.

[45] Ibid., VI, 12, 1144a 5-7.

[46] Ibid., X, 7, 1177a 10-18.

[47] Richard Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness," Philosophical Review 88, no. 2 (1979): 167-197; Terence Irwin, "Conceptions of Happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, ed. Christopher Shields, 495-528 (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012).

[48] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 8, 1178a 20.

> equipment [...] As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune, though others identify it with excellence.[49]

Notwithstanding, it does not mean that Aristotle is basing happiness on fortune neither on external conditions:

> while a single man may suffer many turns of fortune's wheel [...] Success or failure in life does not depend on these, but human life, as we said, also needs these, while excellent activities or their opposites determine happiness or the reverse.[50]

Furthermore, he adds that "for the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances."[51] Clearly, for Aristotle, eudaimonia depends on one's excellences or, better said of one's acts performed excellently: "it is even more necessary that his acts should be of a certain character."[52]

Therefore, Aristotle adopts a more moderate position regarding external goods influencing one's happiness:

> Still, we must not think that the man who is to be happy will need many things or great things, merely because he cannot be blessed without external goods; for self-sufficiency and action do not depend on excess, and we can do noble acts without ruling earth and sea; for even with moderate advantages one can act excellently.[53]

A typical discussed issue on Aristotle's account of eudaimonia is the role pleasure (*hedonia*) plays in it. As known, he deals specifically with that in *NE* VII and X, though is also referenced in other works:

> we have defined and declared happiness to be an exercise of excellence in a complete life, and excellence has to do with pleasure and pain; it is indispensable to speak about pleasure since happiness is not apart from pleasure.[54]

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[49] Ibid., I, 8, 1098b 30-1099a 7.

[50] Ibid., I, 10, 1100b 1-10.

[51] Ibid., I, 10, 1101a 1.

[52] Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics,* 1215a 2.

[53] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7, 1179a 1-5.

[54] Aristotle, *Magna Moralia,* 1204a 30.

Aristotle defends that a noble and virtuous life is in itself pleasant. Moreover, a sign of being a good person is to rejoice in good actions and with all that is noble. Here morality and pleasure come together within Aristotle's eudaimonia:

> excellent actions are such so that these are pleasant for such men and their own nature. Their life, therefore, has no further need for pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm but has its [15] pleasure in itself [...]. If this is so, excellent actions must be in themselves pleasant. But they are also *good* and *noble*, and have each of these attributes in the highest degree since the good man judges well about these attributes [...]. Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing.[55]

Besides this kind of rejoicing, Aristotle discusses the connection of happiness with the more common delight: amusement.[56] Contemporarily, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi distinguish between pleasure and enjoyment.[57] Vittersø criticises this division, explaining that "they are not the only scholars to ignore the concept of interest when looking for an experiential and functional contrast to pleasure."[58] Mercado notes, following Aristotle, that we can feel pleasure while, e.g. playing the flute depending on the command of the basic skills of a particular discipline. For Aristotle, pleasure consists in the perfection of activity, something that "completes the activity [...] as an end which supervenes as the bloom of youth does on those in the flower of their age."[59] Then it is something intimately linked to the activity but at the same time irreducible to it.[60]

Lastly, Aristotle's emphasis on eudaimonia as living well – meaning acting and doing well, also morally – suggests that one can assess whether a life has been happy only when it ends:

> For to do well and to live well is held to be identical with being happy, but each of these – living and doing – is employment, an activity [...]

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[55] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 8, 1099a 5-25.

[56] Ibid., X, 6, 1176a 30-1177a 1.

[57] Martin Seligman, and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 12.

[58] Joar Vittersø, "The Feeling of Excellent Functioning: Hedonic and Eudaimonic Emotions," in *The Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being*, ed. Joar Vittersø, 253-276 (New York: Springer, 2016), 265.

[59] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 4, 1174b32-33.

[60] Juan Andrés Mercado, "Harmonising Reason and Emotions: Common Paths from Plato to Contemporary Trends in Psychology," in *Desire and Human Flourishing. Perspectives from Positive Psychology*, ed. Magda Bosch, 89-105 (New York: Springer, 2020), 92; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 5, 1175b 1ff.

> we cannot ascribe happiness to the existence of a single day, or to a child, or to each of the ages of life [...] Never to call a man happy when living, but only when his life is ended. For nothing incomplete is happy, not being whole.[61]

The temporal condition delimits the progression of one's life and simultaneously allows us to evaluate our life with perspective.

The implications of this idea may well connect with life narratives' accounts.[62] In telling the story of human life, Malo argues that personal truth – the realisation of one's identity according to a life project/goals – has a central role. Personal truth is not a set of theoretical truths or a series of norms of behaviour, but it is the narration of a life with meaning.[63] Aristotle would probably agree with that.

## V. Concluding remarks

After reviewing Aristotle's account of eudaimonia and Fredrickson's theory of positive emotions, it follows a few reflections, analysing how Fredrickson's and Aristotle's views can fit as partly combinable.

We are before two levels and kinds of explanations, the empirical-psychological and the philosophical, even if with some overlappings. Fredrickson's focus is on the physiological and psychological contributions of positive emotions for flourishing. Aristotle offers a philosophical and theoretical argumentation of happiness based on his conception of human nature framed in his ethical writings.

At first sight, these epistemological and methodological differences appear to make it impossible to combine or even compare both views. However, as said, some overlappings seem to dissolve a bit the boundaries between the perspectives.

One of the overlappings is the same Aristotle's interdisciplinary work. The atmosphere of the Lyceum seems to have been more scientific, in modern understanding, than philosophical. The sciences of observation were encouraged, and the inductive method was practised. According to Aristotle, the composition of living beings affords an extraordinary pleasure to anyone with a philosophical disposition capable of understanding causes. In all natural things, there is something to move wonder. In addition to

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[61] Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics,* 1219b 1-7.

[62] Robert Gahl, "MacIntyre on Teleology, Narrative, and Human Flourishing: Towards a Thomistic Narrative Anthropology," *Acta Philosophica* 28, no. 2 (2019): 279-296.

[63] Antonio Malo Pé, *Los senderos perdidos en el bosque. Diálogos en torno a la verdad personal* (Madrid: Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias, 2007), 9.

Philosophy, Aristotle's interest in biology and natural sciences to grasp the principles of health and disease – in part inherited by his physicians' ancestors –[64] would lead him probably if he would live nowadays to engage in empirical neurophysiological research when studying happiness.

Empirical findings concerning coping, positive relationships, self-acceptance, broadened thinking could be of interest for philosophers analysing the components of well-being and vice-versa. The philosophical conceptualisation about emotions, eudaimonia, hedonia could be helpful for psychologists in the conceptual framework of flourishing.

Fredrickson is not directly a well-being researcher, but her account of positive emotions has led her to the contemporary discussion on eudaimonia/hedonia. We cannot tag her as having a strict hedonist approach to well-being; either she deals with the philosophical discussion on the topic. Her approach is rather entirely psychological – bio-neuropsychological –, and thus, primarily empirical. However, her views are holistic, and even if not philosophically-based, contribute to considering human flourishing from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Fredrickson's insights on positive emotions – supported by many contemporary researchers – [65] might be well complemented with Arnold's – who shared most of the Aristotelian views – considerations about emotion and meaningful life. As Fredrickson, Arnold also speaks about positive emotions.[66] Furthermore, she lists some of them: interest (desire to know), the union with others, love, joy, sympathy and empathy, the love of beauty, the joy of doing and making, mirth and laughter, religious emotions, happiness.[67] Positive emotions may help deal with our goal, which gives meaning to life and conduces to flourishing or maturity of one's personality.

Interestingly, Arnold's reflections – with a philosophical background, as said – support Fredrickson's findings on the build effect of positive emotions. In the long run, thanks to the cumulative feature of emotions, they might become emotional attitudes and habits, and as such, more stable dispositions, even virtues.[68]

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[64] William Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20; 41-42, referencing Aristotle's *On the Parts of Animals*, 645a 5-17. About the current debate on Aristotle's naturalism: Sophia Connell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Biology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Timothy Kearns, and Oswald Schmitz, "Flourishing: Outlines of an Aristotelian Natural Philosophy of Living Things," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2021): 335-351.

[65] For example, Alice Isen, Martin Seligman, and Ed Diener.

[66] Arnold, *Emotion and Personality*, Volume 1, 195-196.

[67] Arnold, *Emotion and Personality*, Volume 2, 321-330.

[68] Arnold, E*motion and Personality*, Volume 1, 190-191.

As all emotions – stemmed from appraisals – positive emotions are intentional – object-referenced – and say something about what we value, so they are also subject-referenced. That emotions are intentional and have a cognitive component is present already in Aristotle.[69]

For example, joy at human love or when listening to a symphony can make life meaningful, and joy itself has meaning in its content or intention. Then, positive emotions can make life meaningful when they aim at objective values: feeling joy at human love and listening to a symphony. Therefore, the meaning of life must be in value, which is the realm of objectively real goals. Like Fredrickson's theory of positive emotions put with values, some hedonic approaches can be reconciled partly with eudaimonic approaches.

As exposed, for Fredrickson, positive emotions cannot be just identified with pleasure, and Aristotle's remarks about pleasure and a good-virtuous life make them reconcilable and indispensable aspects of well-being. The boundaries between hedonia and eudaimonia are not rigid but liquid, with more overlappings than commonly discussed.

Regarding Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia as feeling and doing well, one might argue that it matches Fredrickson's remarks partly. However, as soon as we consider what eudaimonia means for each, we doubt this similarity. As explained, Fredrickson understands eudaimonia as having a purpose in life. For Aristotle, eudaimonia is a life well-lived, both intellectually, morally and with some good external things. Although Aristotle is ambivalent in his explanations, sometimes he favours understanding eudaimonia as the theoretical contemplative intellectual life and others as the practical virtuous life. As Abbà notes, if there is ambiguity in the Aristotelian conception of eudaimonia, this fact perhaps reflects the very problem of possible happiness for nature as complex as a human.[70]

For Fredrickson's part, in contrast to Aristotle's eudaimonia, she does not deal openly with ethical aspects of flourishing, just like most authors in psychology maintain neutral-value accounts,[71] a position criticised by Fowers.[72] Also, Gulliford points out this situation, posing that modern psychotherapeutic psychologies should be viewed as disciplines that blend psychological insights with ethical and metaphysical assumptions.

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[69] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1370a 18-19; 1378a 20-21; Kristján Kristjánsson, *Virtuous Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9-14.

[70] Giuseppe Abbà, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù. Saggio di filosofia morale* (Roma: LAS, 1995), 18, 23.

[71] Todd Kashdan, Robert Biswas-Diener, and Laura King, "Reconsidering Happiness: The Costs of Distinguishing between Hedonics and Eudaimonia," *Journal of Positive Psychology* 3, no. 4 (2008): 220.

[72] Fowers, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," 70.

Psychologists cannot avoid making assumptions about human nature and ethics while inhabiting the worldviews implicit within these psychologies.[73]

Csikszentmihalyi indicates that Aristotle believed that happiness resulted from the 'virtuous activity of the soul.' He agrees with this aetiology to the extent that the proximal cause of happiness must also be a psychological state. External conditions like health, wealth, love or good fortune can help bring it about, but only if mediated by an appropriate subjective evaluation that labels the external conditions conducive to happiness.[74]

The above refers to the tension between the subjective and objective aspects of happiness. Some authors like Fowers do not deny that well-being has a subjective dimension but rather emphasise transcending subjectivity (i.e., physical health, purposeful activity, observable joy). This aspect is well considered by Fredrickson, too.

However, it is not easy to differentiate subjective and extra subjective dimensions of happiness, and it seems they cannot be cleanly and fully separated. For Aristotle, eudaimonia is mainly activity, and the activity cannot be conceived as either a subjective state or a purely objective event because, in Aristotle's understanding, the activity includes intentions and observable actions in one inextricable whole.[75]

Haybron highlights the interdependence of subjective and objective aspects by explaining that what is good for an individual depends partly on what human beings are characteristically like. It does not mean that all people should live the same way. There is much room for individual differences, though certain things – being a social species – seem essential for well-being, regardless of who the individual is. This consideration supports Fredrickson's assumption of human nature and her remarks on relatedness, social interactions as occasions to experience positive emotions and opportunities for personal growth.

Subjective well-being (with life-satisfaction measures) does not identify with the hedonic well-being perspective (related only to pleasure/pain or suffering). Subjective well-being refers to various mental states: judgment-like states as life satisfaction and affective states like pleasure and emotional well-being. Interestingly, there is a particularly close link between life satisfaction and subjective perceptions of meaning in life, and the latter is a classic eudaimonic metric.[76]

These considerations go beyond the experimental psychology domain. Fredrickson's work on positive emotions related to human flourishing

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[73] Liz Gulliford, "Virtue in Positive Psychology," *Acta Philosophica* 29, no. 1 (2020): 94.

[74] Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, *The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (New York: Springer, 2015), 72.

[75] Fowers, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," 82.

[76] Haybron, "The Philosophical Basis of Eudaimonic Psychology," 41-50.

could profit from philosophical insights. In that way, at the crossroads of psychology and philosophy, moral psychology could be developed, getting insights from both disciplines. Some efforts in this line exist already.[77]

Towards the end, regarding the initial question about the plausibility of happiness without morals, or if the wicked may flourish, opinions are divided. However, even if intuitions divide on this question, many people find it implausible that someone could profit from a life of immorality.[78] At least for the deep and enduring happiness Aristotle bears in mind moral and intellectual virtues are required.

Regarding Fredrickson's account, we cannot argue the same. She could say probably that a wicked person is not happy even if he/she is physically healthy because of the negative emotions experienced sooner or later. Albeit not considered by Fredrickson, negative emotions like shame, repentance could help redirect one's life on the rails of virtue. Moreover, positive emotions like love and joy are mainly present in a good-virtuous life since it is enjoyable. Though a relevant one, this is only one side of happiness. Fredrickson and contemporary (positive) psychology's contribution is to highlight what has been omitted in happiness discourse in general, the subjective evaluation – as Csikszentmihalyi noted – with its psychological components, affective, cognitive and psychological health. True, not only the mentally healthy individual can be happy, but mainly everyone who interprets a life situation – and the whole life – in terms of value or good.

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[77] For instance, Paul Wong has proposed a new model for Positive Psychology in "Positive Psychology 2.0: Towards a Balanced Interactive Model of the Good Life," *Canadian Psychology* 52, no. 2 (2011): 69-81.

[78] Haybron, "Philosophical Basis," 35.

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# Management of Stress through Philosophical Reflections: Teachings by Boethius (d. 524) for Our Modern Life

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**Abstract**

*While many scholars in the medical and psychological profession offer specific suggestions about how to handle stress and to overcome its negative impact, very few have ever considered philosophical reflections as a critical tool for this problem. One of the greatest moments of stress would certainly be when an individual has to face his/her death penalty and subsequent execution, especially if s/he feels innocent. Already ca. 1.500 years ago, the late antique philosopher Boethius (d. ca. 524) had to answer for himself how to cope with this situation, being imprisoned and waiting for his last terrible moment. When he composed his treatise, The Consolation of Philosophy, he created one of the most influential philosophical reflections on life's burning issues. This treatise continues to offer fundamental insights into how to come to terms with the conflicts and stresses of human existence, and it is discussed here as a profoundly philosophical answer to stress in universal terms.*

**Keywords:** *stress management; philosophical approaches; Boethius; quest for happiness; meaning of life*

## I. Introduction: What is stress?

Modern society seems to be deeply influenced by the unfortunate experience of stress, that is, being subject to personal conflicts, dilemmas, paradoxes, excessive amounts of work, pressure, and the like. Consequently, there are countless advice books on how to combat stress, urging us to manage our time better, to stay focused in our daily activities, to separate clearly the private from the public part of our lives, to pursue the famous "Serenity Prayer" originally formulated by the German-American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), to meditate on a regular basis on

the meaning of all existence, to explore our emotions and to come to terms with them peacefully, to organize all our actions in a calm way so as to avoid stress resulting from time and other conflicts, or to reduce our dependency on material conditions, to move away from urban centers and to enjoy an existence in the calm countryside. Since the current challenge consists of probing how we might manage our stress today through philosophical endeavors, it seems best to quote the critical and relevant verses by Niebuhr's prayer:

> God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.[1]

Indeed, serenity, courage, and wisdom can be clearly identified as fundamental virtues in all of human existence to cope effectively with the challenges that present themselves all the time for everyone in the world. Interestingly, however, some people, some cultures, and some social groups appear to operate more stress-free than others, which cannot be the case by accident, maybe because they already live by the ideal concepts developed by Niebuhr. But how would we acquire those virtues, if the prayer itself might not help directly? Stress cannot be overcome through blind faith; stress is human-made and self-imposed, so it is up to us as humans to come to terms with it and to develop effective strategies to handle this unnecessary psychological problem effectively.

To draw from one of many different definitions of stress available online, we could claim that

> Stress is a normal biological reaction to a potentially dangerous situation. When you encounter sudden stress, your brain floods your body with chemicals and hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol.
>
> When you sense danger, the hypothalamus at the base of your brain reacts. It sends nerve and hormone signals to your adrenal glands, which release an abundance of hormones.
>
> These hormones are nature's way of preparing you to face danger and increase your chances of survival.

[1] See the study by Niebuhr's own daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: Norton, 2003).

> One of these hormones is adrenaline. You might also know it as epinephrine, or the fight-or-flight hormone.[2]

We could approach stress by means of what psychologists, trauma doctors, physiotherapists, and others have suggested. Life is, after all, stress, especially if it is out of balance and threatens to overpower the individual who cannot cope with a specific situation because s/he is overburdened in terms of work, does not receive sufficient support from family members, friends, or colleagues, or is threatened by external forces.[3]

## II. Stress from an interdisciplinary approach

Today, many of our issues and problems are best handled through an interdisciplinary approach, and this would also be the case with stress. The present investigation offers a rather unusual critical approach to the syndrome of stress, not relying on medicine or psychology, but on philosophy. I suggest turning our attention to a philosopher from late Antiquity, Boethius, who went through some of the greatest stress any human being can suffer from, after he had been apprehended, placed in a prison in Pavia, Italy, and then faced the certain death penalty. Indeed, he was executed either in 524 or 525, without having ever seen a judge, his accuser/s, or a legal court. He was charged with state treason and eventually killed by way of stoning in 525. The trumped-up charges pertained to Boethius's effort to build and maintain diplomatic ties between the Eastern Roman capital of Constantinople, still ruled by a Greek-speaking emperor, and the remnant of the formerly Western Roman empire governed from Rome, the Senate. At that time, however, the Ostrogoths, a Germanic tribe, ruled over Italy under the leadership of King Theodoric the Great (454-526), whereas Boethius tried his best to develop open channels with the Byzantine empire and to preserve the traditional cultural ties between both parts of the old Roman empire.

The historical details do not matter to us in the present context, whereas his highly stressful situation under which he then composed his famous philosophical treatise, *De consolatione philosophiae* (On the Consolation of

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[2] Timothy J. Legg, "Everything you Need to Know about Stress," *Healthline*, last modified February 25, 2020, https://www.healthline.com/health/stress#hormones.

[3] "Stress and your Health," *Medline Plus*, last accessed December 20, 2020, https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003211.htm#:~:text=Stress%20is%20a%20feeling%20of,danger%20or%20meet%20a%20deadline. See also Shirley Fisher, ed., *Handbook of Life Stress, Cognition and Health* (Chichester: Wiley, 1988); E. Ronald de Kloet, Melly Oitzl, and Eric Vermetten, eds., *Hormones and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: Basic Studies and Clinical Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008). There is, of course, much more current medical research on stress than can be cited here.

Philosophy), will serve us here as a critically important approach to stress and stress management. After all, Boethius faced the death penalty; he knew that he had no defense because the opponents did not care about any legitimacy of his imprisonment and his charges, and because even the king did not bother to protect his former servant. As far as we can tell, this poor man was innocent, but he was in the way of certain political groups opposed to his diplomatic endeavors reaching out to Constantinople, hence to the Greek world in the eastern Mediterranean. So, in short, Boethius had to realize that his life was coming to an end through a brutal and unjustified execution.

## III. Boethius's responses

In this precarious situation, with stress rising to the highest possible level, this famous philosopher, teacher, translator, musical theoretician, and poet resorted to his ultimate abilities in order to come to terms with his stress and embarked on composing this treatise while still in prison.[4] While he did not yet know the term 'stress' as such, he successfully developed a major philosophical strategy to overcome his personal suffering and thereby to leave behind a grand document of human intellect, self-composure, and deep insights into the foundation of all existence both within its material and its immaterial dimensions. By analyzing the meaning of true happiness, Boethius succeeded in developing an amazingly effective, relevant, and logical argument how to liberate oneself from the confines of the physical constraints where all our stress rests, and aim for a higher noetic perspective taking the individual to a deep understanding of what brings about happiness.

Boethius was subsequently killed, but not without leaving behind this most influential narrative which deeply influenced centuries of his readers who consistently regarded him as one of the greatest schoolteachers of the West. In fact, we can trace the impact of *De consolatione philosophiae* throughout the entire Middle Ages and the early modern age, and it would actually be impossible to determine any moment in time when his treatise would no longer have been regarded as one of the most important philosophical treatises of all time.[5]

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[4] I have engaged with the history of imprisonment and freedom, as also reflected on by Boethius, in a recent new monograph, *Freedom, Imprisonment, and Slavery in the Pre-Modern World: Cultural-Historical, Social-Literary, and Theoretical Reflections* (Berlin, and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021). See also my introduction and contribution to the volume *Incarceration and Slavery in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: A Cultural-Historical Investigation of the Dark Side in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Albrecht Classen, 1-58 (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books, 2021).

[5] For convenience's sake, I draw here from the English translation, Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans., with intro. and notes Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis, IN, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2001), with text citations embedded. For background and critical analyses,

## IV. Boethius today: Philosophy and psychology combined

While Boethius's famous work has mostly been studied by medievalists and historians of philosophy, we can certainly draw from it as well regarding the management of stress. Whereas we are commonly bothered by everyday types of stress, and hence seek out everyday types of remedies or coping mechanisms, we ignore the fundamental approach to stress per se and are hence helpless when individual situations emerge which would have to be handled with a variety of approaches. In short, we tend to sweep the real reasons for our stress under the carpet and continue with our daily lives as if nothing had happened, and ignore, out of convenience, the underlying conflicts and problems. To put it differently, there is a wide-spread tendency to rely on placebos in cases of human conflicts and tensions, whereas the real *raison d'être* is left aside, maybe because most people have lost the ability to work through issues that affect them all the time by means of philosophical reflections.

Put differently, without a philosophical grounding, most common strategies employed to allow us to operate in ordinary life without facing

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see, for instance, Margaret Gibson, ed., *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981); Ralph McInerny, "Boethius," in *Medieval Philosophers*, ed. Jermiah Hackett, 110-117 (Detroit, and London: Gale Research, 1992); Joachim Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae* (Berlin, and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978); John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For the most recent perspectives, see the contributions to Maarten J. F. M. Hoenen, and Lodi W. Nauta, eds., *Boethius in the Middle Ages: Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the* Consolatio philosophiae (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Noel Harold Kaylor, Jr., and Philip Edward Phillips, eds., *Vernacular Traditions of Boethius's* De consolatione philosophiae (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2016); Brian Donaghey, et al., eds., *Remaking Boethius: The English Language Translation Tradition of* The Consolation of Philosophy (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 2019). I myself have engaged with Boethius on numerous occasions; see, for instance, "Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae*. Eine 'explication du texte, '" *Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik* 32, no. 2 (2000): 44-61; "What Do They Mean for Us Today? Medieval Literature and Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century. Boethius, John of Salisbury, Abelard, and Christine de Pizan," *Mediaevistik* 12 (2001): 185-208; "Boethius in the Middle Ages: Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the *Consolatio philosophiae*" *Carmina Philosophiae* 15 (2006): 63-88; "Boethius and No End in Sight: The Impact of *De consolatione philosophiae* on Early Modern German Literature from the Fifteenth through the Seventeenth Century: Andreas Gryphius and Johann Scheffler (Angelus Silesius)," *Daphnis* 46, no. 3 (2018): 448-466; "Literature as a Tool of Epistemology: Medieval Perspectives for Post-Modernity. Or, the Post-Modern World Long Anticipated by the Pre-Modern: Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, Apollonius of Tyre, Marie de France, and Ulrich Bonerius," *New Literaria – An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2020): 1-19. Imprisonment has often served as a catalyst for the creation of major treatises, letters, journals, travelogues, and essays; see Jamie S. Scott, *Christians and Tyrants: The Prison Testimonies of Boethius, Thomas More, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York, Washington, DC., Baltimore, MD, et al.: Peter Lang, 1995).

the real challenges prove to be fragmentary or piecemeal. Normally, in cases of stress, or other problems, people look for simple and direct solutions, and would certainly prefer taking pills to fix things than to think thoroughly about the causes and conditions of their stress. Once, however, we have turned our attention fully to Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and have mastered his basic teaching, a much more universal explanation of most issues in life might become available.

Following, I do not suggest that Boethius's treatise would be a panacea for all problems in our existence, especially because he was stuck in a particularly terrifying situation. But since he was faced with the most fundamental question regarding the tragic unhappiness he had to suffer from, we can take his treatise as a model for the philosophical working through of human suffering at large and as a gateway toward the solution of how to acquire true and lasting happiness. Boethius's readers throughout the centuries have acknowledged his deep insights and have hence embraced the philosophical teachings contained in his treatise. There is thus no reason why we would want to ignore those today, particularly because they have withstood the test of time, at least in academic terms. Here I want to suggest that they can and ought to be instrumentalized once again because they shed such important light on the roots of most of our problems today. As is often the case, a more holistic approach to conflicts or issues in the twenty-first century, drawing from historical resources, promises to open innovative perspectives and long-term solutions.[6]

## V. Life's stresses: Historical-philosophical perspectives

As we have observed above, human life is commonly influenced negatively by stress, whether of a trivial or an existential kind. A philosophical reflection on suffering, hence on stress, promises to yield significant insights from the past that have proven to be of timeless value, except that his *Consolation of Philosophy* has mostly disappeared from public view over the last two hundred years. Without his treatise being part of the critical reading list in

[6] See now the contributions to Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema, eds., *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medieval Studies Contribute to Improving Our Understanding of the Present* (Berlin, and Boston: Walther de Gruyter, 2020). For a critical evaluation, however, see my review to appear in *Mediaevistik* 34 (2021). Cf. also Bettina Bildhauer, and Chris Jones, eds., *The Middle Ages in the Modern World: Twenty First Century Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). For new efforts, from a very broad interdisciplinary approach, see now the contributions to Albrecht Classen, ed., *The Relevance of The Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: Past and Present*, *Humanities*, Special Issue (2020), https://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities/special_issues/pas_pre. Here, medievalists and modernists likewise address the same question.

higher education, Boethius was bound to be ignored.[7] Ironically, however, neither his personal experience nor his theoretical reflections have lost any value for us today, especially when we face the issue of stress. Stress comes in many manifestations, and in its extreme form as suffering, such as when Boethius suffered deeply from his realization that he was unjustly held in prison and that he was certainly facing his death penalty without having any resort to defense.

Examining the arguments as developed in *De consolatione philosophiae*, we quickly realize that Boethius explores the profound question of what constitutes human life and what parameters we need to operate effectively and happily during our existence in order to achieve at least a modicum of happiness. Being a neo-Platonist, the philosopher heavily works with the concept of anagnorisis, the phenomenon of remembering of what the individual had known already for a long time but then forgot. What Boethius had forgotten, as we are told at the beginning, was nothing less but the meaning of and the path toward true happiness. As we would say today, we as individuals are stressed and suffer because we have lost the sense of what our life might mean and the understanding of how to pursue an existence aimed at achieving profound and full happiness.

## VI. Not stress, but lack of comprehension

The real issue would hence not even be stress, but the lack of comprehension of what constitutes happiness or the path toward that goal. However, by way of analyzing the meaning of happiness, fundamental strategies and concepts easily open up which make it possible to come to terms with stress as well. In other words, stress is ultimately an external manifestation of internal conflicts, or the absence of the true understanding of who and what we are as human beings.

Moreover, as *De consolatione philosophiae* also indicates, the critical issue would not even be the mundane conflicts or tensions in our daily lives which can easily lead to stress. Instead, from a philosophical point of view, without a clear understanding of the purpose and goal of human existence, any wrinkle or ripple on the surface of our lives can threaten to trip us up and make us fall. Unfortunately, most people, maybe especially today, mistake

[7] Online, we find more information on Boethius than we might have expected: The School of Life, "Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy," March 29, 2018, YouTube video, 9:27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMUP48stXDc; https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/boethius-and-the-consolation-of-philosophy/; Carl R. Trueman, "Boethius: The Philosopher Theologian," *Ligonier*, last revised August 1, 2006, https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/boethius-philosopher-theologian/; Classical Academic Press, "Teaching Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy," last accessed December 20, 2020, https://www.classicalu.com/course/teaching-boethius-the-consolation-of-philosophy/.

those little ripples – stress – as the essential issues, whereas stress would have to be identified simply as a manifestation of the core troubles in our existence. This is the very point where philosophy comes in and challenges us to remember what the true teachings would be, based on logic, rationality, principles, values, and ideals.

## VII. Philosophy as our teacher

This very realization proves to be the essential strategy pursued by Boethius, who has the allegorical figure of Philosophy appear in his prison cell and teach him the old lessons once again which he had forgotten. The treatise, as it stands, continues to appeal to us today to listen to Philosophy and to follow her arguments which she develops in a stunningly logical fashion, ripping away all false pretenses about the common assumptions concerning the usual notions of happiness in our lives. Stress has much to do with the individual's inability to cope with the demands of life, to handle various tasks, or to carry out jobs in a timely and effective manner. This stress, however, is not just the outcome of our daily affairs, but the result of conflicts and contradictions in our entire human make-up, worldview, self-concept, and perception. We could thus claim that stress emerges because we suffer from misconceptions about what constitutes the ultimate values and ideals of human existence.

Examining how Boethius handled his stress, i.e., his personal suffering while on death-row, and comprehending how he translated his superficial stress-experience into an opportunity to recover his true senses and concept of happiness in a philosophical interpretation of the word, we stand to gain new insights into coping mechanisms, or rather profound insights into the workings of this world. On that basis, most forms of stress would then be compartmentalized and exposed as trivial issues, whereas the finite challenge really rests in the quest for happiness in philosophical terms.

The prisoner is at first surrounded by the Muses and thus given in to emotional responses. All he knows to do in this situation is to cry and to grieve, being helpless and despondent, being a complete victim of his stress. Only once Philosophy has entered his cell, does the situation change because she immediately goes into action and begins her teaching, which lays the foundation for a fundamental change of his mind, his attitude, and his perception of life in the larger context. All of his stress proves to be the result of his shortsightedness and blindness regarding the inner realities of this life. There are several profound lessons which Philosophy slowly but surely conveys to the prisoner, which at the end take him out of his misery, his slump, his desperation, and hence his mental stress.

She does not address the question at all whether Boethius's imprisonment would be justified or not, especially because she herself has already suffered

from various attacks by enemies who refuse to listen to reason and logic and only aim for power, influence, status, and wealth – her dress is damaged to some extent, a clear reference to the death of Socrates. For Philosophy, by contrast, the central task focuses primarily on the issue of what constitutes happiness, and who grants this happiness to the individual. The meaning of life is thus identified as the foundation upon which happiness can be achieved. Without grasping this critical condition, Boethius would never free himself from his stress, i.e., his anger over the injustice imposed on him, the frustration about his situation in the prison, and his fear of the execution.

Philosophy at first helps him to understand that practically all forms of happiness traditionally identified in life would be only superficial and unreliable. Whether power, money, honor, goods, or family life, all of that proves to be nothing but a loan from Fortune, and ultimately would have to be returned. All material forms of happiness would be illusions and could not be trusted. In fact, Fortune herself turns out to be defined by constant and perpetual change, i.e., by the wheel, and the only truth that would exist could be discovered in the very mutability of all life. When individuals suffer from stress, both in the past and in the present, they moan about the impact of Fortune and the perpetual changing of its wheel, although this turning constitutes the very property of all material existence – contingency.[8]

## VIII. Stress as lack of happiness

Philosophy does not argue that Boethius should reject all physical pleasures, but she suggests that he recognize that they are defined by temporality and never represent true happiness. She reminds him that he can look back to his own family life, which was a very happy one, together with his wife, his two currently highly decorated sons (appointed jointly as Consuls), and his father-in-law. However, true happiness would not rest in them either. Anyone of high power would be constantly afraid of losing it again, or would have to fear being attacked, robbed, or even killed. Public honor would come and go and could never be relied on. Material wealth would grant just temporary happiness and could never be relied on for good. Even family would not be a guarantee for happiness because contingency would certainly undermine this

[8] Howard Rollin Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927); Emanuele Narducci, Sergio Audano, and Luca Fezzi, eds., *Aspetti della fortuna dell'antico nella cultura Europea: atti della quarta giornata di studi, Sestri Levante, 16 marzo 2007* (Pisa: ETS, 2008). For an excellent overview, see "Fortuna," *Wikipedia*, last modified October 14, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortuna, which, despite much criticism of this online encyclopedia (often with good reasons), serves our purposes well.

social structure as well. In fact, Philosophy ultimately emphasizes that truth could be found only when misfortune strikes because only then would the person suffering from it learn who the true friends are and who not.

Again, Philosophy does not dismiss any of the traditional sources of happiness per se, but deconstructs them as contingent and hence as unreliable, if not even unworthy of further attention by the one looking for true happiness. Only a rational approach to one's life's framework would facilitate a constructive handling of stress because it can be identified as the result of disorientation, confusion, lack of self-control, lack of independence, and a weak will, all of which subjugate the individual under external pressures.

Once this concept has been fully developed and explained, Philosophy turns to the second strategy to liberate the protagonist from his illusion, and hence his stress. While Fortune would be defined by its regular lack of constancy, i.e., ordinary human life in all of its trivial dimensions and conditions, the real goal for the individual, when philosophically properly trained, would be to transcend those material conditions and to recognize them as what they all really are, loaned by ever-changing Fortune.

Philosophy clearly deconstructs all common assumptions about those worldly aspects seemingly offering a sense of happiness; worldly honor depends on all others; money proves to be highly volatile, and political or economic power is nothing but contingent on the current conditions. She also dismisses family and friendship as any valid sources of friendship, but she does not dismiss any of those criteria as completely meaningless. They could and should be enjoyed while one has them, but they cannot be the source of actual happiness. Contingency thus proves to be the key term in this context. As long as the individual operates within the framework of contingency, no real freedom, i.e. happiness, can ever be achieved.

Maybe true happiness might not even exist, and since all humans kind of stumble through life, constantly bumping into hindrances, hurdles, and problems, the entire hope for a stress-free life might be illusory. Boethius might have also reached that conclusion, especially since he faced certain death despite being completely innocent, as he claimed. However, Philosophy then moves one step further and reminds the miserable man that he has forgotten about the true essence of happiness, which cannot be based on ephemeral objects (material) or offices (fame, authority). Freedom of contingency would be the only avenue to move away from this constant dependency and make it possible for the individual to be him/herself. The key term used here is "self-sufficiency," meaning that a person would be self-content and without any need of outside resources.

## IX. Freedom as a remedy against stress

Only if that freedom would be achievable, the individual could rely on itself and distance itself from all other people, institutions, locations, events, or

activities because those would not be needed. This would also entail, at least in our context, that this being would be completely stress-free, free from all frictions, conflicts, tensions, and arguments, because it would be responsible only to itself and draw everything from itself. Stress, to be sure, tends to be the result of two or more contrasting, if not conflicting demands on oneself, or of the clash between the own self and others, often because we simply are unaware of the natural path toward ourselves, or to the absolute good.

The most difficult task would be, according to Boethius, to realize the nature of this self-sufficiency or whether it could ever be achieved by a human being. Philosophy solves this issue by resorting to a Neoplatonic concept, arguing that all life descends from a perfect being and evolves throughout time, increasingly moving away from that original ideal. People, however, tend to forget about their own origin, which can be traced back to the status of being complete, unified, self-assured, and free from contingency. Stress results, hence, because the individual has forgotten what s/he is and where it originated from.

One more time, life is determined by stress because there are too many conflicts, demands, pressures, and the absence of one or the other thing that we might desire or need to have. Since people, if not all life, is far away from complete independence, contingency continues to dominate material existence, which thus allows stress to reappear over and over again. Life is never ideal or perfect since it is moving away from the state of perfection and goodness. Only the original being from which all life stems was independent and completely self-sufficient, hence happy. Philosophy therefore identifies our existence as the natural and perpetual endeavor to join with this supreme good – *summum bonum*, sometimes translated as God. Since self-sufficiency proves to be unachievable and ever-evanescent, stress enters our lives. However, we are also told that the individual life is actually determined by the constant quest for the good in order to overcome the dependency from the workings of Fortune. We might identify Fortune itself as the ultimate source of stress because of its very nature of being inconstant.

If true happiness cannot be achieved by those means provided by Fortune, it can only rest beyond it, in the very goodness or independence identified above as the source of all being. But would it ever be possible to leave this material existence behind and to reach the absolute good, or to merge with it? Most likely not, as Philosophy would also suggest. However, the primary goal would not be this achievement, but the constant effort to get outside of the domain of Fortune and to aim for the real good, i.e., self-sufficiency, or freedom of contingency. Philosophy emphasizes that this sense of ultimate goodness, fullness, completion, or freedom rests in all beings, and in order to gain happiness, which also means in our context to become liberated from

stress, the only strategy would be to follow the own call of the inner nature to return to this *summum bonum*.

## X. Stress and non-existing evil

This then leads to the rather surprising claim by Philosophy that there is no real evil. If all beings naturally aim for the one and only goal, to be whole, good, self-sufficient, or independent again, then those who commit something evil – at least within the sphere of Fortune, hence in the material dimension – really operate against their own self-interest and thus ultimately eliminate themselves. Philosophy compares those evil creatures with plants or animals that deliberately turn their back toward this ultimate good, the dream of all living endeavors and seek out the worst possible place of all existence, where they thus transform into non-beings. Every plant, every worm, every creature would naturally strive to be one, a self within itself, fulfilled, complete, or self-sufficient. By contrast, those who commit something evil move in the very opposite direction and thus eliminate themselves, at least in philosophical or spiritual terms.

As much as Boethius wished that this self-elimination would happen faster and liberate him from his prison and expected death penalty, Philosophy must remind him that those evil beings would only deserve pity because of their utmost inner weakness. They would be so weak because they could not even pursue the most natural, virtually instinctual drive of all life, to live out its full potential and reaching the stage of self-sufficiency as part of the *summum bonum*. However, since we all exist in the material dimension, we are all subject to Fortune and thus have to realize regularly the degree to which we are constantly subject to the vagaries of life. But that is exactly where all our stress rests, coming both from the external and the internal dimensions, forces, issues, or conditions.

In the final two books of *De consolatione philosophiae*, Boethius, or Philosophy, turns increasingly to larger and more esoteric issues, probing the difference between Fortune and Providence, the nature of time, and the very quality of this absolute goodness, the *summum bonum*. This also sheds light on the physical character of time and the fact that this goodness is beyond time. Providence means that it exists both in the past and in the present and has also complete knowledge of the future – certainly issues that go beyond our own investigation and our understanding as human beings.

## XI. The philosophical mind

Undoubtedly, Boethius's treatise requires a philosophical mind to comprehend the specific arguments. But the narrator himself intervenes regularly and

questions Philosophy about the very same issues that would concern the modern reader. The poet proves to be a great didactic author who easily anticipates where and why the audience would face serious problem of comprehension. Through the dialogue with Philosophy we can follow the argument rather easily and can thereby realize in gradual progression where the external issues rest and how the rational thinker can overcome them.

Fundamentally, as Philosophy teaches Boethius and us today once again, most of the problems in our live rest in our misunderstanding of the workings of Fortune and mistake the worldly forces such as power, wealth, or honor with the real source of happiness, the absolute goodness, self-sufficiency, and thus the freedom from contingency. We only need to tweak the entire argument slightly in order to recognize the direct response to the question of how the human being can overcome stress and withdraw into its own self where the origins of goodness and self-sufficiency rest. Boethius did not argue for asceticism, eremitism, monasticism, or any other form of self-deprival for religious reasons. He did not reject the material world, with all of its goods but also its stresses and conflicts. However, in face of his own stress, being imprisoned and facing certain death through execution, he developed a profound philosophical answer regarding life's ultimate question where true happiness rests. By means of transcending worldly concepts of happiness, he succeeded in projecting philosophical happiness predicated on self-sufficiency and freedom from contingency.

This thus would be the critical answer to the question we have raised here. Stress is a human problem, mostly self-created, but often insurmountable, unless, as I have suggested here, the individual resorts to philosophical reflections about the nature of true happiness, the meaning of life, and the purpose of all existence, as outlined by Boethius in his *De consolatione philosophiae*. Stress arises because the individual does not understand the larger picture of life, determined by the fundamental drive toward happiness as defined by Philosophy. Apparently, Boethius succeeded in overcoming his own anger, fear of death, and the stress of his imprisonment and anxiety about being on the death-row by way of his philosophical ruminations. The astoundingly extensive reception history of his treatise confirms that he had indeed discovered one of the secrets how to overcome stress and how to orient one's life toward the ultimate good.

## XII. Conclusion: Past ideas for our future

There is truly much to learn from our past in order to cope with the issues of today. Boethius was certainly not a psychologist or a psychotherapist, and he did not have in mind any medical suggestions of how to come to terms with stress. Nevertheless, his treatise proves to be a most critical tool providing

also modern readers with theoretical reflections about human life and the necessary direction to be pursued in order to liberate oneself from all the dilemmas, conflicts, contradictions, and aggressions that vex people all over life.

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# The Two 'Greek Buddhas'

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**Abstract**

*This article discusses the influence of Indian Buddhism on Greek Skepticism and their philosophical method of stress management through the Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis. That influence was the subject of two books with similar titles mentioning the "Greek Buddha," as Pyrrho was called by Nietzsche. Both books, one written in Greek from a layman's perspective approximately 40 years ago and one written in English from a scholarly perspective approximately 6 years ago, discussed the similarities of the Eastern and Western traditions in terms of the goal of serenity, ataraxia. The book published in 1984 was the first one in Greece to link Greek Hellenistic Philosophy to Oriental Wisdom and especially to the early Philosophy of Buddhism. Both traditions offer a practical way of philosophical management of everyday stress and suffering through the mentality of suspension of judgement and non-attachment to certainties.*

**Keywords:** *Pyrrho; skepticism; Greece; Buddhism; India; ataraxia*

The man who changed radically the face of Ancient Greek Philosophy after Aristotle, converted the search for knowledge, truth, and beauty to a discipline allowing humans to weather "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," and introduced the terms αταραξία (ataraxia – tranquility) and αλυπία (alypia – lack of sorrow) in the philosophical vocabulary, was a Greek philosopher who became a disciple of Buddha, during his visit to India as a member of the party of Alexander the Great.[1]

[1] Diogenes Laertius, "Pyrrho," in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers,* IX, vol. 2., trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

This was thoroughly stated and demonstrated in a book published in 1984 in Athens, Greece,[2] discussed in some other publications, and elaborated in a book published in the USA by Princeton Press in 2015.[3] Both books had the same title (*The Greek Buddha*) and the same subject (Pyrrho of Elis).

I am a Greek writer, born in 1935 in Athens, Greece. After I graduated from Athens College, I studied philosophy at the University of Munich, Germany from 1954 to 1960. I specialized in Hellenistic philosophy. My doctoral thesis on the logical and anthropological aspects of skepticism, was finished in May 1960; however, owing to the sudden death of my supervising professor Dr. Joseph Stürmann, it was published later in Greece under the title *Backgammon vs. the Absolute* (backgammon refers to a sentence by David Hume – the leading skeptic philosopher of modern times).

Furthermore, I have written and published 52 books (essays, poetry, stories, and dialogues), some of which have been translated in 10 foreign languages.

I was very much interested in oriental philosophy and art. In 1960 I saw for the first time the earliest specimens of Greek-Buddhist art in the Berlin Museum of Eastern Art. It is interesting that although Buddha had forbidden any depiction of him, his disciples insisted on creating statues and reliefs. This became possible approximately 500 years after his death, when Greek (or Hellenistic) sculptors reached India, creating a new style known as Greco-Buddhist Art. This style is also known as the Gandhara style, after the Indian province in which it originated. In those first specimens the Buddha is depicted with the traits of the Greek god Apollo. The basic difference is the hairdo, a pyramid-like prominence on the top of the head.[4]

I contemplated writing a book about Greco-Buddhist art, when I became interested in another problem of greater importance; that of the transformation of the Greek philosophical thought after Aristotle. The philosophers of the classic period were in search of knowledge and truth. The post Aristotelian schools (Skeptics, Epicureans, Stoics – in chronological order) did not care mostly about truth or knowledge. They tried to alleviate suffering and pain as well as to comfort humans and bring them to a state of "ataraxia" (tranquility). The Romans of the same period called philosophy "medicina mentis" (medicine of the soul).

But wait a moment: this is a purely oriental concept! How did it creep into Greek thought? Indian and Chinese philosophy have no interest in

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[2] Nikos Dimou, *The Greek Buddha* (Athens: Nefeli Publications, 1984).

[3] Christopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Press, 2015).

[4] Benjamin Rowland Jr., "Bodhisattvas or Deified Kings: A Note on Gandhara Sculpture," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 15 (1961): 6-12.

metaphysics. How did this radical change happen? The explanations furnished by scholars ("decline of Greek thought and society") were not convincing.

Then I remembered that Pyrrho of Elis (Πύρρων) had travelled to the East, following Alexander the Great and his court of learned men, and had met with the leading thinkers of India. Coming back to Greece, Pyrrho became the originator of the post Aristotelian thought.[5] The school of the Skeptics, which he founded, was the first. Epicureans and Stoics followed.

It is more than probable that Pyrrho met with the disciples of Buddha. The "enlightened" lived approximately 200 years before Alexander's visit so his memory and his teaching were still alive.

## I. The influence of early Buddhism on Pyrrho

It is clear to all students of early Buddhism, that this cult was not a religion.[6] It became a religion many centuries later, when believers started building temples, erecting statues of the Master, praying to him, and making offerings. As a matter of fact, in Buddha's teaching there is no mention of God or Gods. He offers a method to overcome the pain of living. In the sutra "about the raft," he makes clear what importance he gives to his method.

> A man makes a long journey until he comes to a deep river. There is no bridge over the water and no ferry to cross. He sees that the only way was to build a raft. He works hard over many days because the river is wide and deep and the raft must be strong. After two weeks he finishes building the raft and an oar to steer it by. He manages to cross the river and then ponders what he should do with the raft. It cost him a lot of work and he cannot just leave it there. So, he hoists it on his back and continues his journey.

Then the Buddha asks his disciples: "Is that the right decision?" Some answer "yes" and others "no." "It is not the right decision" says the Master.

> This raft was useful for crossing the river – now it is just a heavy burden. So is my teaching. It helps you understand a few things about yourselves – and then it is useless. After having understood it, forget it.

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[5] Adrian Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

[6] David Drewes, "Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism I: Recent Scholarship," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 2 (2010): 55-65.

There is a basic similarity between Buddhism and the Greek Hellenistic thought. All three Hellenistic schools reject metaphysical and religious subjects. Either totally (remember how Lucretius rejects any religion whatsoever and glorifies Epicurus[7]) or partly by stopping any discussion on such matter as it does not lead to any result.

The main argument of the Skeptics is ἰσοσθένεια (the equal truth value of contrary statements), which leads to the suspension of judgement. This equality is the path to ἀταραξία (ataraxia), i.e., quietude. One should not worry about things that cannot be proven.

Buddha also did not care about Gods or absolute truths. Therefore, there are no holy scripts in early Buddhism. According to another parable:

> In battle a warrior is struck by an arrow. There is no meaning in trying to find what the arrow is made of, who shot it, etc. The main thing is to extract the arrow and heal the wound. So, in life it is not of any use to ask if a God has sent us an ill and which God – the important is to take care of the wound.

Additionally, the Buddha was a man of a few words and even fewer theories. His method was practical: to alleviate pain and suffering. His teaching consisted of a few sentences: "We suffer because we attach ourselves to people or objects. When we lose them, we feel pain." Thus, he preached non-attachment, independence, and distance. In more advanced forms of Buddhist thought, a process of "eliminating" the Self through intensive meditation was attempted. As all our pains start with our self, it seemed a logical proposition.

If Buddha was no orator, Pyrrho was a man of even fewer words. He is the only Greek philosopher who did not leave a written statement behind. Even no quotations from him have survived. However, many anecdotes demonstrate that he was distant and aloof.

It was Pyrrho's method to fight stress, angst, and fear. He was the one who coined the word "ataraxia," which became the leading value in all Hellenistic Philosophy. His behavior reminded me of a sentence in the *Nachlass* of Friedrich Nietzsche: "Pyrrho, the Greek Buddha" in volume 13 of the *Sämtliche Werke*.[8]

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[7] Christos Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics and Molecular Medicine in Epicurean Philosophy," in *History of Human Genetics: Aspects of its Development and Global Perspectives*, eds. Heike I. Petermann, Peter S. Harper, and Susanne Doetz, 41-57 (Cham: Springer, 2017).

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche. *Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 13, eds. Giorgio Colli, and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980). In pages 264, 265, and 347 Nietzsche writes: "Pyrrho: A Greek Buddhist," "The Summit: Pyrrho reached the level of Buddhism," and "Pyrrho. A Buddhist, although Greek, a real Buddha," respectively.

Nietzsche in his late years provided the title of my book. This was in the early 1980s. As I had already done a lot of work on Hellenic-Buddhist art (I had photographed hundreds of statues in museums, especially the Guimet in Paris) I decided to combine these two aspects of Greek-Eastern relations. Therefore my book consisted of two parts; I consecrated 70 pages to art (plus 10 with plates) and another 70 to philosophy.

It was strange but, in the bibliography I consulted, almost nobody had given any attention to this ideological relationship. The shift in Greek thought was attributed to many factors, but not any influences from the East, not to Pyrrho, his voyage, and his contacts. The only mention I found was by David Sedley in his contribution "The Motivation of Greek Skepticism" in the volume *The Skeptical Tradition* edited by Myles Burnyeat (1983) where he remarked about the "exotic provenance" of skepticism, which was "revolutionary" for Greek thought.[9] Otherwise, the German historian Zeller writes about moral decay and the shift in the role of philosophy whose main use is to "protect the individual from the vicissitudes of life." Bertrand Russel in his *A History of Western Philosophy* writes that "fear took the place of hope; the purpose of life was rather to escape misfortune than to achieve any positive good." Additionally, C. F. Angus in *Cambridge Ancient History* writes that

> Philosophy is no longer the pillar of fire going before a few intrepid seekers after truth: it is rather an ambulance following in the wake of the struggle for existence and picking up the weak and wounded.

All these historians, blinded by the glory of Classic Greek Philosophy, of Plato, and Aristotle, miss the fact that philosophy in the Hellenistic world acquired a new depth and a new humanity. It came much closer to the common man; it took more trouble in analyzing and studying everyday life and it became a help and a brace in the daily strife. The Skeptics, the Stoics, and especially the Epicureans, contributed more to the happiness of the human race than all other philosophical schools combined; so did the Buddhists in the Orient.

## II. Stress management in Skepticism and Buddhism

Skepticism has nothing to do with "universal doubt." It refers only to statements that claim to be "absolutely true," the ones ancient skeptics called dogmatic. Applying doubt to such statements is a very healthy attitude. All big crimes in human history have been perpetrated by fanatic believers in absolute truths.

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[9] David Sedley, "The Motivation of Greek Skepticism," in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 9-29.

It is interesting to compare the epoché (εποχή), meaning the suspension of judgement, the act of abstaining from affirmation or negation on any matter with the Buddhist philosophers who followed Buddha like Nagasena, author of the *Madhyamaka*, or Chandrakirti who introduced the notion of emptiness (sunyata), an analog of the Greek "epoché."[10]

Pyrrho did not leave a single sentence behind. However, his followers wrote a lot. This is especially true for Sextus Empiricus, who bequeathed us four volumes of skeptical thought. As an experiment, I translated some excerpts from early Buddhist Sutras and printed them alongside texts from Sextus. They matched perfectly.

In the meantime, many scholars from all over the world worked on the subject I had just touched in my book. The association of Greek Philosophy with Indian thought was seen from many aspects. One element that the Greeks had probably not noticed and not copied was the element of meditation – a practice unknown in the West, but very important as the culmination of deep thinking in the East.

Even technology has been used to measure the effects of tranquility.[11] A younger scholar concludes his lengthy essay with a skeptic statement:

> Taken together, the studies are a modest attempt to start an empirical investigation of Pyrrhonian Skepticism. Much remains to be done. That said, the present results counsel us to treat Sextus' claims with skepticism.[12]

## III. Thirty-one years later

My book was published in 1984 and to my surprise was a success; six printings were a rare feat for a book consecrated to philosophy and art. It is still available in bookstores.

Imagine my surprise when 31 years later, I was informed that a book with the same title and subject appeared in the United States.

Of course, there could be no comparison. I ordered the book from Amazon. The American book extends to 295 pages. The author, Professor Christopher I. Beckwith, is a distinguished scholar (Indiana University) with

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[10] Adrian Kuzminski, "Pyrrhonism and the Mā dhyamaka," *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 4 (2007): 482-511.

[11] Shukan Okanoa, and Kozen Takeuchi, "Effects of Japanese Esoteric Buddhist Meditation on Stress Management in Humans," in *Proceedings of 4th IIAE International Conference on Industrial Application Engineering* (2016), 382-385.

[12] Mario Attie-Picker, "Does Skepticism lead to Tranquility? Exploring a Pyrrhonian Theme," in *Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy*, vol. 3, eds. Tania Lombrozo, Joshua Knobe, and Shaun Nichols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 97-125.

degrees in Tibetan and Chinese and many pages of mentions in scholarly indexes and reviews. The book has been published by Princeton Press.

Although the two books have the same title and the same subject (the full title of the American book runs: *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*) they differ in content and method. I must admit that I learned a lot of new things from Professor Beckwith.

He inserted a short note mentioning the existence of my book (a Greek colleague informed him about it). I would ask him, in a future reprint to correct a basic mistake. My book does not "concern the influences of Hellenism on Buddhism," but exactly the opposite. Actually, his book is the in depth elaboration of my basic idea. I am thankful for this elaboration – it converted a fleeting inspiration in a solid treatise.

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# Stoic Cognitive Theories and Contemporary Neuropsychological Treatments

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**Abstract**

*During the Hellenistic period the value of philosophical systems was to be judged by a meta-philosophical criterion, i.e., by their ability to lead practitioners towards the pursuit of good or happiness, albeit treating pain and sorrow, since all human beings are supposed to be able to reach the state of happiness via their own efforts. By emphasizing the role of thoughts or judgments, Stoics placed cognition in the intermediate phase between an event and the reaction that somebody has due to the event, rendering it both the cause and the cure of emotional disorders. This viewpoint is also fundamental in modern cognitive psychotherapy, although the parallelism goes beyond theory to the practical character in both approaches. Rational and non-rational aspects of human psychology cannot be isolated from each other, allowing thus adults to actively engage in their moral development by altering their beliefs. In this frame, cognitive distancing, the practice of awareness, attention to the present moment, and the Socratic dialogue become valuable tools in structuring emotional self-regulation.*

**Keywords:** *Stoics; psyche; mind; reason; emotions; philosophical exercises; cognitive therapy*

## I. Introduction

In recent times, philosophers' interest in empirical approaches and neuropsychologists' engagement in using philosophical theories to assess well-being and happiness has been growing. Cognitive factors are enjoying an increasingly important role in understanding and treating psychological symptoms. This healing procedure often addresses the cognitive impairments associated with each illness.

The cognitive theory, ethics and physics developed by philosophers of the Hellenistic period have been studied in modern era to reveal the relevance of Hellenistic thought to contemporary issues, including psychotherapy.[1] Stoic philosophy in particular, has experienced great popularity with an increasing number of reports suggesting that the "art of life" cultivated by the tenets of this school may be an important component in combating the stress imposed by modern life. A parallel between the modern psychotherapist and the ancient Stoic philosopher has been drawn; both recognise reason as a mediator between environmental stimuli and human emotional responses.[2]

While eudaimonia was one of the themes that preoccupied philosophers of the 4th century BC, the search for personal salvation became more dominant and persistent in the Hellenistic period. The Stoics and Epicureans emphasized the treatment of pain and sorrow over the pursuit of good or happiness,[3] leading to the birth of psychiatry.[4] One could describe that time with patients on waiting lists for emotional healing outside philosophical schools, waiting for a quick cure.[5]

Hellenistic philosophers also spoke for ataraxia and apathy, both integral parts of eudaimonia. Ataraxia and apathy call for the transcendence of desire, passion or commitment. They also indicated that the process of transcendence that remains inherent does not seek human perfection at a supernatural level. The path to ataraxia is the elevation above a state of unhappiness and despair, with all Hellenistic schools to seek for the creator of this unhappiness not in external circumstances, but within the individual. Thus, ataraxia and apathy require self-confidence and fortitude which become necessary conditions for moral action.[6]

Rhetorical arguments can only formulate abstract theories, and are of actual value only when they persuade the individual to engage in psychological activities. The philosophical act transcends the order of knowledge and passes into the order of *self* and *being*. On this basis, the philosopher's work is sizeable and multifaceted.

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[1] Kelly Arenson, *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2-8.

[2] Andrea Cavanna, "Back to the Future: Stoic Wisdom and Psychotherapy for Neuropsychiatric Conditions," *Future Neurology* 14, no. 1 (2019): 2.

[3] For a quite similar Aristotelian approach see Purissima Emelda Egbekpalu, "Aristotelian Concept of Happiness (Eudaimonia) and Its Conative Role in Human Existence: A Critical Evaluation," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 75-86.

[4] Iason Xenakis, *Epictetus: Philosopher-Therapist* (New York: Springer Publishing, 1969).

[5] David Sedley, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[6] Pascal Massie, "Ataraxia: Tranquillity at the End," in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, eds. Sean D. Kirkland, and Eric Sanday, 245-262 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018).

The Stoics attach great importance to practical logical ability. Philosophy, taking the role of a compassionate doctor, should respect the rational capacities of the individual. In this way, the patient has an active role, becoming his own therapist. According to the Stoics, a human subject has the ability to choose because it possesses the "divine" element of rationality.

Thus, it turns out that the essential aim of the philosopher is the liberation from every pain that affects the soul. Otherwise, philosophical activity proves to be meaningless, since it does not contribute to human mental health. Health, therefore, concerns not only the body but also the soul, and this recognition, together with the importance of philosophical practice, places medicine and philosophy on parallel paths sharing goals of healing both physical illnesses and soul wounds. Ethics, as a branch of Philosophy is not limited to the recognition of the principles governing moral choices, but constitute an educational and existential path towards the transformation of individual identity.

## II. Cognitive therapy

In the international literature, the relationship between Stoicism and psychotherapy has been repeatedly noted.[7] More specifically, modern psychology's cognitive theories converge with the ones that Stoics have expressed for emotions and passions. To that extent, the Stoics place enormous value on the practical reasoning ability of each individual and this approach provides the guideline for Stoic therapy. Healing possesses a cognitive nature and is sufficient to remove disease.

The study of mind functions (in this context, also of the soul, Greek: psyche) begins in ancient philosophy, especially in Hellenistic philosophy, although, as a separate discipline, psychology was established at the end of 19th century.[8] Recently, developments in the field of psychology had as a result the emergence of a new interdisciplinary field known as cognitive science. Psychologists, philosophers, linguists, neuroscientists, and computer scientists are all implicated in this field and deal with distinct or overlapping cognitive processes related to sensory perception and knowledge. Cognitive scientists consider the human mind as a complex system that receives, stores,

[7] Robert Montgomery, "The Ancient Origins of Cognitive Therapy: The Re-emergence of Stoicism," *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy* 7, no. 1 (1993): 5-19; Arthur Still, and Windy Dryden, "The Place of Rationality in Stoicism and REBT," *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy* 17 (1999): 143; Donald Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy* (London: Karnac Books, 2010); Andrea E. Cavanna. "Back to the Future: Stoic Wisdom and Psychotherapy for Neuropsychiatric Conditions," *Future Neurology* 14, no. 1 (2019).

[8] Gary Hatfield, "Psychology, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of Experimental Psychology," *Mind & Language* 17, no. 3 (2002): 207.

retrieves, transforms, and transmits information. The historical origins of cognitive science include the interest of the ancient Greek philosophers in productive reasoning.[9]

Cognitions can be described as future-oriented expectations, past-oriented causal determinations, attitudes towards the world, estimates of inputs and outputs, and finally aspirations. They are neither information nor processes but are "constructs" and "knowledge." They have the ability to direct and intensify behaviour, anticipating goals and purposes.

The basic assumption of the cognitive therapeutic approach is that cognitive parameters mediate the influence of external stimuli and contribute to the development of emotional and behavioural disorders. Hence, it is thoughts rather than external events that influence the way one feels or behaves. Epictetus' much-quoted work illustrates the close relationship between Stoicism and modern cognitive therapy: "It is not things themselves that trouble people, but their opinions about things."[10]

Aaron Beck, who has been called the father of Cognitive Therapy, has openly acknowledged the Stoic origin of this theory, citing Zeno, Chrysippus, Seneca, Cicero, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.[11] Albert Ellis identified the ancient philosophers as the inspiration for the therapeutic value of logic, as a cognitive mediator between environmental challenges and emotional responses. He also claimed that one of the key philosophical aspects of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) is its emphasis on hedonism and eudaimonia, with the main therapeutic goal being to minimize irrational anxiety, depression, and anger. At the same time, he argued that the therapist following REBT should encourage each patient to adopt the view that living well is good for the self and to decide to continuously strive for more pleasure than pain.[12]

Maladaptive cognitions involve general beliefs and generate specific and automatic thoughts about situations. The feedback that individuals get from

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[9] Paul Thagard, "Cognitive Science," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/cognitive-science/.

[10] Anthony A. Long, *Epictetus: Encheiridion. How to be Free: An Ancient Guide to the Stoic Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 11. See also Anthony A. Long, and Despina Vertzagia, "Antiquity Revisited: A Discussion with Anthony Arthur Long," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 111-122.

[11] Donald Robertson, and Trent R. Codd, "Stoic Philosophy as a Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy," *The Behavior Therapist* 42, no. 2 (2019): 5.

[12] Albert Ellis, *Humanistic Psychotherapy: The Rational-emotive Approach* (New York: The Julian Press, 1973), 23; Maurits Kwee, and Albert Ellis, "The Interface between Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Zen," *Journal of Rational-emotive and Cognitive-behavior Therapy* 16 (1998): 15.

themselves and their environment plays an important role in their vulnerability when they are confronted with psychologically complex situations. According to cognitive theory, thoughts exist at the margins of our consciousness that are the results of direct interpretation of each situation and that occur both spontaneously and instantaneously. These are called automatic thoughts and are different from the normal flow, which takes place in reflective thinking or free association. Most of the times, the presence of automatic thoughts is not something we are aware of, unless we are trained to be able to monitor and identify them. The basic model suggests that treatment protocols for maladaptive cognitions ultimately modify emotional disturbance and problem behaviours.[13]

Cognitive factors are gaining an ever-increasing role in understanding and treating psychotic disorders. For many human subjects, treatment involves the cognitive impairments associated with each disease. Cognitive behaviour therapy for psychosis, of which early guidelines instructed the use of automatic thoughts for the change of symptoms, is strongly acknowledged by scientific and professional bodies.[14]

Rational and non-rational beliefs are also considered deep knowledge, similar to schemas or nuclear beliefs, which are difficult to access consciously. They are complex structures that represent a person's constructed conceptions of reality,[15] and also their behavioural responses to that reality.[16] Schemas are beliefs and rules (the most solid and durable part of the mind's construct). Mostly they are not visible and they reside in the unconscious. Additionally, they are products of genetic predispositions coupled with acquired learning processes.

Negative bias patterns, as well as patterns that contribute to the development of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, generate through a complex process involving genetic factors, selective allocation of attention, storage in memory, and adverse events during life.[17] The fact that the patterns – residing at the subconscious – are difficult to identify and determine, brings limitations to patients' treatment. Schemas are so nuclear

[13] Stefan G. Hofmann, et al., "The Efficacy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: A Review of Meta-analyses," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 36, no. 5 (2012): 427-440.

[14] Steffen Moritz, et al., "Psychosis: Metacognitive and Cognitive-Behavorial Interventions," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 21, no. 3 (2019): 311.

[15] For an out-of-the-box discussion on the processes involved in the construction of several among even the most 'inner' realities of ours, see David Menčik, "Identity Theft: A Thought Experiment on the Fragility of Identity," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 71-83.

[16] Daniel David, et al., "A Synopsis of Rational-emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT): Fundamental and Applied Research," *Journal of Rational-emotive & Cognitive-behavior Therapy* 23 (2005): 180.

[17] Aaron T. Beck, and Emily A. P. Haigh, "Advances in Cognitive Therapy: The Generic Cognitive Model," *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 10 (2014): 1-24.

in the individual's perception that they often cannot be verbally expressed.[18] However, as with cognitive therapy, schemas can be identified and modified through more accessible cognitions. This therapeutic "intervention" is the methodology followed by Stoicism; the therapeutic effect comes through the rational judgments which are part of the functions of the ruling faculty (hegemonikon). Passions or emotions are inextricably related to beliefs or reasoned judgments and involve conceptual constructs from the person's interpretation of the impressions (phantasiai) presented through the senses.

Patients can be taught to recognize distorted thoughts and instruct them to tests in order to correct and replace them with new adaptive thoughts. Nuclear beliefs and cognitive distortions are treated similarly, although cognitions respond better in the short term since they are easier to access and less reinforced through time. In contrast, schemas persist and require more time to change, since cognitive distortions operate aiming to maintain and reinforce the initial signal.[19]

In this therapeutic framework, suffering becomes *per se* irrational, while the aspiration is essential to address the question "what constitutes a good life?" Therefore, the patient follows the path of a long-term type of hedonism, whereby instant gratifications are abandoned for the favour of future benefits, in accordance with the philosophical values. Psychotherapy is the product of philosophic thought, intimately linked to human emotional, mental, and moral suffering. Psychotherapists are called upon to offer rational explanations for suffering but also to counsel on how someone can achieve happiness in life.[20]

## III. Potential for logical remodelling

The scope of Stoic psychology is closely related to the theory that no separation exists between the rational and non-rational parts of human psychology. This means that emotions and desires can be continuously shaped via changes in beliefs. It is this possibility that provides the capacity for moral development over a person's lifetime, and this is independent of differences in inherent tendencies or the upbringing.

Rational beliefs produce positive emotional outcomes while irrational beliefs produce the opposite, which is psychological distress potentially involving

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[18] Stefan G. Hofmann, and Mark A. Reinecke, *Cognitive-behavioral Therapy with Adults. A Guide to Empirically-informed Assessment and Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

[19] Keith Milligan, *Cognitive Distortions as a Mediator Between Early Maladaptive Schema and Hopelessness* (PhD diss., Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, 2013), 27.

[20] Edwin E. Gantt, "Hedonism, Suffering, and Redemption: The Challenge of Christian Psychotherapy," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* 24, no. 1 (1999): 61-62.

– among others – anxiety or depression. Irrational beliefs are pathological factors within this system, and therapeutic techniques are aimed to challenge these "elements" and replace them with more logical ones, so that a new emotional outcome can be generated.[21]

The impression is more than solely raw data. It is a sensory experience, already placed in a propositional context. This experience can be external when perceived by the senses, or internal when it arises from memories. For Stoics, the proper use of impressions requires a true appreciation of the impression supplemented with a correct judgment of it. Impressions alone cannot lead to happiness neither distance ourselves from it.

Individuals, as they pass through life, form opinions about the world around them based on both previous experiences and previous beliefs. This process ends up becoming so integrated with the personal existence, making it difficult to reject an impression/representation. It is precisely this point that philosophy can amend. For Stoics, an impression/representation with propositional content is not a sufficient condition of consequent consent and action. The job of the philosopher is to urge the individual to turn his gaze inward, to defer the usual reaction to any external stimulus, and to carefully and critically analyse each impression received. The psychological interaction is deep and involves memories, fears, and habits that define the way each one perceives.[22]

Philosophical practice of good life is a life-long effort in order to reconstruct the use of impressions as well as of cognitive and behavioural habits. The goal has two axes: to react to the maladaptive pattern of thoughts resulting from the misuse of impressions and to practice their correct use to develop adaptive habits.

Hellenistic philosophy is not limited to finding answers for the nature of the world but is, first and foremost, a way of living, aiming to differentiate the way one perceives him/herself existence. Wisdom is thus personalised and requires subjective transformation. In Stoic philosophy, what is of value is living outside the boundaries of individuality, as part of a Cosmos which is governed by Reason (Greek: logos). In this frame, philosophy becomes significant when it has a therapeutic role. Spiritual exercises become catalytic in achieving the therapeutic purpose. In order to describe this trend, scholars have used the terms spiritual exercises (Pierre Hadot), art of living (Michel Foucault),[23] therapy of emotion (Martha Nussbaum), and spiritual guidance (Paul Rabbow, and Ilstraut Hadot).

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[21] Don Woolen Jr., "A Preliminary Study of Stoic Philosophy as Psychotherapy," *Frontiers of Philosophy in Practice* 6, no. 2 (2003): 31-42.

[22] Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 367-370.

[23] For a brief, but quite informative, analysis on Foucault's view on the art of living, but also for Nehamas' very own approach, see Alexander Nehamas, et al., "A Good Life: Friendship, Art and Truth," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2017): 115-121, especially 119ff.

## IV. Questioning

Epictetus uses Socratic 'control' in a 'positive,' creative, and regulative form, with the primary aim to encourage students applying control to themselves. Since knowledge for the Stoics is a fixed unwavering set of cognitive apprehensions (katalepsis), the person who assumes that knows something, cannot be forced – in the course of the dialectic method – to consent to what contradicts the things he knows. That is, the Stoic notion of knowledge itself diligently reflects the "survival" from a Socratic dialogue. Today, the Socratic method of questioning is considered a powerful tool in cognitive psychotherapy. The therapist asks a series of gradual questions with the goal of having the examinee develop and apply skills that focus on the therapeutic outcome, such as developing alternative responses to negative automatic thoughts.[24]

Through the use of Socratic control, the therapist avoids the simple didactic method of convincing the examinee which course should take, and instead instils in him/her a sense of curiosity through a sequence of questions that leads him/her to consider alternative scenarios of thoughts and behaviours, develop new perspectives and eventually find answers on his/her own, based on existing experience.[25] The interaction between therapist and examinee therefore has benefits in the context of persuasion and negotiation.

The Socratic method of dialogue aimed at confronting, challenging, and denying beliefs by the human subject is not possible if he or she cannot firmly support own beliefs. Testing helps to direct with slow and steady steps the individual towards discovery and new knowledge. This method fosters the individual in active engagement and critical thinking, cultivating a collaborative relationship and helping in the process of guided discovery.

## V. Cognitive distancing (decentralization)

The quote from Epictetus "men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things" is but a technique of separating judgments from

[24] Harlene Anderson, and Harold Goolishian, "The Client is the Expert: A Not-knowing Approach to Therapy," in *Therapy as Social Construction*, eds. Sheila McNamee, and Keneth J. Gergen, 25-39 (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 29-30. See also, Donald, Meichenbaum, "Stress Inoculation Training: A Preventative and Treatment Approach," in *Principles and Practice of Stress Management*, eds. Paul M. Lehrer, Robert L. Woolfolk, and Wesley E. Sime (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007), 502; Justin D. Braun, et al., "Therapist Use of Socratic Questioning Predicts Session-to-session Symptom Change in Cognitive Therapy for Depression," *Behavior Research and Therapy* 70 (2015): 32-37; Anthony Roth, and Stephen Pilling, "The Competences Required to Deliver Effective Cognitive and Behavioural Therapy for People with Depression and with Anxiety Disorders," *Semantic Scholar*, September 2007.

[25] James C. Overholser, "Collaborative Empiricism, Guided Discovery, and the Socratic Method: Core Processes for Effective Cognitive Therapy," *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 18 (2011): 64.

the facts themselves. This technique proposed by Epictetus is the starting point to the other therapeutic strategies of Stoic philosophy. Having first taken the initial step backwards to gain a psychological distance from our thoughts, we can then adopt a philosophical attitude towards them and – through reason – challenge them. In modern psychology, it has been argued for decades that the process of distancing oneself from personal experiences and examining them from a distance is important for mental health.[26] This metacognitive capacity was described by Beck as "cognitive detachment," which is the individual's ability to treat his/her own thoughts as assumptions, thus taking a step back and observing his or her thoughts from a distance. In a later publication, Beck has defined distancing as a metacognitive process, a transition to a level of awareness that involves "thinking about thinking."[27]

Similarly, in many 'third wave' therapeutic CBT approaches, such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), or Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), it is emphasized that decentering is a prerequisite in order for therapeutic approach to actually have an impact.[28] The concept of decentering has also been expressed as cognitive defusion, meta-cognitive awareness, distancing. Common among these terms is the ability to control and think of mental processes as well as finding ways to develop them. When individuals adopt the objective self-perspective, they stop inner events from influencing emotions at a disproportional rate.[29]

In the Stoic philosophy, the technique of decentering initiates when the individual is aware of the subjective experience of the present moment, regardless of the content of thoughts active. Attention is directed towards the experience itself, posing the subject as an observer. In this way, the opinions formed about certain events are treated only as interpretations, thus having a reduced impact on the emotional status. Cognitive detachment is also directly linked to an additional exercise known as the "view from

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[26] Andrea E. Cavanna, "Stoic Philosophy and Psychotherapy: Implications for Neuropsychiatric Conditions," *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2010): 15-16; Amit Bernstein, et al., "Decentering and Related Constructs: A Critical Review and Metacognitive Processes Model," *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* 10, no. 5 (2015): 599.

[27] Ibid., 142.

[28] Zindel V. Segal, et al., *Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy For Depression: A New Approach To Preventing Relapse* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 36; John D. Tesdale, et al., "Metacognitive Awareness and Prevention of Relapse in Depression: Empirical Evidence," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 70, no. 2 (2002): 275-277; Ozlem Ayduk, and Ethan Kross, "From a Distance: Implications of Spontaneous Self-distancing for Adaptive Self-reflection," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98, no. 5 (2010): 811.

[29] Marc P. Bennett, et al., "Decentering as a Core Component in the Psychological Treatment and Prevention of Youth Anxiety and Depression: A Narrative Review and Insight Report," *Translational Psychiatry* 11, no. 188 (2021): 1.

above." In this exercise, individuals are encouraged to re-evaluate their lives and actions as if presented from a magnified, cosmic perspective, so as to counteract the false importance that personal interest and passions attach to particular events.[30]

## VI. Attention

Attention has been described as the fundamental spiritual exercise of the Stoics.[31] It is about constant readiness, contemplation in the present moment, and accompanies virtually every spiritual practice. Attention is a constantly vigilant self-consciousness, a spiritual readiness, a constant intensity of mind.[32] It is essentially what allows the philosopher and each apprentice to apply the fundamental philosophical principles to every event that may occur in life. It is the unceasing attention of the individual, regardless of the particular task he is performing, that enables him to always have philosophical principles "ready for use."

The goal of applying these principles is for the individual to be autonomous and free, essentially to live a good life. The absence of practice in developing attention can lead to mental disorders, in which external events have the power to upset the emotional stability of the individual. [33]

The Stoic philosophers' "attention" is paralleled to concentration in the present moment and has been characterised the precursor to modern "mindfulness."[34] Similarly, it has been suggested that Stoicism is a philosophy of the "here and now" centred on the notion of attention to the self, which can also be expressed as mindfulness or self-awareness.[35] In modern cognitive psychology, attention refers to the means by which we select information available to us through our senses, or stored in our memory, and through our other cognitive functions. This selection allows a direct and accurate response to the stimuli of interest.

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[30] Federico Testa, "The Great Cycle of the World: Foucault and Hadot on the Cosmic Perspective and the Care of the Self." In *The Late Foucault. Ethical and Political Questions*, eds. Marta Faustino, and Gianfranco Ferraro, 53-72 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 64-65.

[31] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 84.

[32] Ibid.

[33] John Sellars, "Roman Stoic Mindfulness: An Ancient Technology of the Self," in *Ethics and Self-cultivation Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Matthew Dennis, and Sander Werkhoven (New York: Routledge, 2018), 11.

[34] Cavanna, "Back to the Future."

[35] Donald Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive-behavioural Therapy* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), 153.

On the basis of the Stoic model of human action, mental representation is distinguished from consent to it. Consent is a complex process that spans the entire mental spectrum from the moment the representation is imprinted until it is fully appropriated by the mind. For philosophical teaching to be available in practice at any time and under any circumstance, it must become part of the individual himself. It must infuse the individual through repetition. Just as the human body can be strengthened by repeated exercise, so the *psyche* can be healthy and strong. Beliefs, desires and urges are the subject of psychic exercise. If, therefore, we exercise our *psyche* by controlling our desires (and performing our duties), the *psyche* improves. The eradication of passions, ideally, should be a habit, some kind of addiction for the philosopher. Addiction is the process by which the physicality of the soul is changed, and improved if a person consistently exercises control over his desires and the performance of his duties.[36]

## VII. Focusing on here-and-now

This exercise is closely related to attention, since it essentially refers to attention in the present moment. It is an exercise that suggests the synergy between two cognitive functions: attention and vigilance (inward, introspective). Omitting of course questions about the entity of the present moment and whether reality actually consists of discrete parts (past, present, future), the focus on the here-and-now for the purposes of this analysis is related to the ethical implications of such an attitude.

The Stoics argued that eudaimonia can be sought in the present moment and cannot be postponed for another. In other words, happiness lies in the acceptance of the inevitable.[37] For the Stoics, the present moment is the only one that matters because it is what we control, since the future is yet to come, and the past is now a given. Only in the present can we act in accord with nature, accepting providence and immanent reason.

The importance of the here-and-now is reflected in the CBT approach where the therapist focuses on the problems faced by the individual at the present time, ignoring the past experiences.[38] Moreover, it reflects the observation that immediate, pressing demands of disturbing passions are all responses to worries about either future or past actions (guilt, shame, or anxiety about how others perceive our words or actions). However, the only

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[36] Peter A. Brunt, *Studies in Stoicism*, eds. Miriam Griffin, and Alison Samuels (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24.

[37] Hadot, 217-237.

[38] British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies, "What Is CBT?" https://babcp.com/What-is-CBT.

thing one can accomplish is located in the present moment, where decision, action, and freedom are found. Consequently, passions, or their immediate demands, are non-rational. This reasoning forms the basis of Stoic teachings concerning the non-rationality of the passions. We must learn to quiet our passions down so that we can clearly appreciate what is happening in each moment, correct our intentions, and calmly accept what happens regardless of our will.[39]

Orientation in the present moment can be defined in psychology, especially cognitive psychology, as hedonism. Individuals with a hedonistic focus on the here-and-now are able to take advantage of changes in their environment to maximize pleasure and individual benefits. This behaviour results from a lack of thoughtfulness toward the past and future. They do not try to intervene in the changes taking place and are determined to avoid stress. The philosophy of "here-and-now" also implies an increased awareness of what the individual is experiencing and the value of the present moment.[40]

The activated concentration and focus on the senses lead to the perception of a much richer reality. Individuals who adopt such an attitude examine the past only from the lenses of the present, freeing themselves from the burden of the past. Moreover, it facilitates future planning. A person who is able to focus on what he or she feels and desires is now more likely to choose goals that will be rewarding and that he or she prefers to achieve. In addition, he/she will experience negative emotions, especially fear, less often and will be able to interact more effectively with other people since he/she will be able to better interpret behaviours and interpret their emotions.[41]

## VIII. Concluding remarks

Philosophy has undoubtedly played a clear role within the discipline of psychology with many recent direct incorporations into therapeutic approaches, such as CBT or MBCT. Hellenistic philosophers acknowledged the gravity of emotional disturbances and their contribution in man's psychological health. Philosophy extends beyond theoretical discussion on the nature of knowledge and existence, towards being a guide to living a good life. Cognition becomes central in understanding emotions and the development of cognitive faculties goes hand-in-hand with ethical character.

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[39] Matthew Sharpe, "Pierre Hadot," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/hadot/#SH5.

[40] Malgorzata Sobol-Kwapińska, "Hedonism, Fatalism and 'Carpe Diem': Profiles of Attitudes Towards the Present Time," *Time & Society* 22, no. 3 (2013): 374.

[41] Ibid., 374.

Stoic psychology is fundamental to Stoicism as a whole. The Stoic approach towards cognition has drawn direct comparisons highlighting the benefits of integrating the philosophical doctrines when seeking to address psychological diseases and related conditions. Stoic psychology acknowledges no non-rational components of the adult mind, thus rendering such conditions as erroneous arrangements of the vicious agent's rationality.

If attention plays an important role in how we describe to ourselves and others, how things are, and what we know about them, then the way of understanding and distributing our attention represents a critical ethical issue. The Stoic stance on "attention to self" was about examining thoughts so that the content and nature of consciousness is not subject to repression by desire, anger or anxiety. One advantage of Stoicism is that it refers to an inner settlement of man with himself and not to an arrangement with the external environment. Being essentially a philosophy of life, Stoicism promotes a life-long process in which the individual is responsible for using reason, a power offered by the central commanding faculty, *hegemonikon*. Rational and non-rational aspects of human psychology are not separate, thereby permitting active engagement in logical remodeling and moral development.

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# II. Social dimensions

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# Back to Eudaimonia as a Social Relation: What Does the Covid Crisis Teach Us about Individualism and its Limits?

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**Abstract**

*The current health crisis that has spread worldwide has raised many questions regarding our relations to the Other and to ourselves. Through isolating people, Covid-19 has demonstrated the need we face, as human beings, to socialize and to get in contact, physically speaking, with others. As Aristotle stated, human beings are political animals, meaning social animals that can flourish only in the polis through the process of interacting with each other in quest of eudaimonia, i.e. happiness. Along with the rise of socio-physical distancing imposed due to the pandemic, people around the world have experienced isolation and the lack of human contact and interaction. In the Western world this isolation has led to an increase in mental health issues, and this fact has to be taken into consideration by the government when making decisions regarding the reinforcement or the slackening of measures in the context of Covid. The pandemic has shed a light on the limits of individualism as it has developed in some places. The quest for happiness has slowly led some societies to create a kind of a solipsistic world in which there would exist no reality, no truth outside individuals' perceptions. Consequently, each human being is considered as "the measure of all things," as Protagoras noted. This unique experience could then give us the grounds to question our relations to each other, to investigate our understanding of eudaimonia, and to revisit what it means to live in a society.*

**Keywords:** *ethics; individualism; happiness; society; knowledge*

## I. Introduction

It seems that with the Covid-19 crisis we have entered troubled times. Yet, looking deeper into the current situation, the pandemic is nothing but a new reason for feeling anxious about the world we live in. What is different about it is that it can impact anyone anywhere on the planet and that it concerns both our present and our future. While environmental issues

or terrorism are actual threats, it seems that people do not realise the reality of these threats the way they do the risks associated to Covid-19. It obviously is a matter of perception, since terrorism and climate change do impact us in a heavier way than Covid.

Nonetheless, even if some people feel they are not concerned with environmental issues and terrorism, it seems that most of us feel concerned about the pandemic. This perception currently makes the health crisis much more vivid than any other threats. Along with the political focus on the subject as emphasized by the continuous media coverage, the pandemic has a much greater influence on our psychology than any other problem the world is facing.

In an interesting way, it seems that the Covid crisis has stressed the need for social relations, whether in the workplace or during one's leisure time, alongside colleagues or friends and family; physical isolation resulting from the health crisis has shed light on something we may have forgotten: human beings are social animals.

Indeed, the quest for happiness has led us to some kind of egocentrism. The hedonistic societies we live in, particularly in the Western world, have reified the individual and made personal satisfaction an end in itself. In an unexpected way, therefore, the pandemic has brought in the foreground the excesses of our individualistic hedonistic societies.

In this paper we will contend that the current health crisis demonstrates that we have slowly and unconsciously lost sight of our social character. We will then argue that we now live in solipsistic societies where the Self has become a deity. Eventually, we will call for a return to philosophy as a solution to our existential torments.

## II. The quest of happiness

The current health crisis has shed a light on the importance of social relations. Working from home, social and physical distancing, wearing masks and the closing down of social venues such as restaurants, sport facilities and cultural and entertainment venues, have confirmed what Aristotle has already stated twenty-five centuries ago: "man is by nature a political animal."[1]

What the great philosopher wanted to stress was that human beings are meant to live in a *polis*, namely a city-state, within a society. For the Stagirite, "a social instinct is implanted in all men by nature,"[2] which gives them a natural sociability that is located at the foundation of the state. The Master of the Lyceum goes as far as to assert that "he who is unable to live

[1] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

[2] Ibid., 1253a 29-30.

in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god."[3]

Then, the natural environment for human beings is a society in which they can flourish and realize their natural end, namely the 'good life' (*eu zên*), in a social context. In his *Eudemian Ethics*, on which his authoritative and more mature *Nichomachean Ethics* was based, Aristotle stressed the value of pleasure not only as part of a happy life, but mainly as the highest end humans aim at, namely *eudaimonia* or happiness, for "happiness is at once the most beautiful and best of all things and also the pleasantest."[4]

In that Aristotelian context, virtues are social skills that help individuals live in harmony with each other. They are at the foundation of Ethics and are considered as a mediator between the *ethos*, the Self, and the *pathos*, the Other.[5]

Yet, it appears that we have lost sight of this relational dimension of Ethics and of the importance of virtues as a source of balance and collective satisfaction. The pursuit of happiness, seen as a means for a greater social end, has turned to a more egocentric quest for self-satisfaction, for a very personal kind of well-being, in parallel to freeing oneself, to the greatest extent from pain and suffering, nay from death. Individualism has thus slowly taken over a more collectivist tropism. However, this assessment must be nuanced since it cannot be applied universally. Indeed, some cultures, in Asia and Africa, for instance, are still community-focused.

Individualism pervades Western societies, where the utilitarian perspective on the maximization of satisfaction is considered as the outcome of individuals' satisfaction. But, contrary to some beliefs, this tendency to give preeminence to individuals over the group is not specific to utilitarianism and can also be found in Kantian deontology where imperatives are rooted in individuals' volition and then applied widely, if considered universalizable.[6]

Whatever the philosophical roots of this withdrawal into the Self are, it has led to the creation of atomistic societies where individuals are aggregated as an "organic solidarity"[7] based on a functional specialization.[8] In this kind of societies, well-being is mainly understood as the maximization

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[3] Ibid., 1253a 27-29.

[4] Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1214a.

[5] Michel Meyer, "L'éthique selon la vertu: d'Aristote à Comte-Sponville," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 4, no. 258 (2011): 57-66.

[6] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[7] Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), 111-133.

[8] Ibid.

of satisfaction, namely of profits and property. Thus, each and every single individual is committed to their own satisfaction in an egoistic way. This does not mean that relations between individuals have disappeared, but that people are much more self-centred than they were when living in societies built on a mechanical solidarity.[9]

The pandemic has reminded us that we live in a community which extends beyond our Selves and, all the more so, beyond our own *polis*. We are rediscovering that in some ways we can be linked by a common fate but also that we all need each other in order to overcome this ordeal, that we cannot live isolated from one another for a long period of time. The reality of our sociability and our necessary interrelations has unexpectedly blown up in our faces.

Falling into individualism we have convinced ourselves that we are no longer cogs in a bigger ecosystem, but rather self-sufficient sentient beings deserving to be at the center of the universe. If this belief is still significant, it appears that there cannot be several centers of one same universe, and that at some point we have to think in terms of our interactions and interdependences. In other words, the Self is a social process.[10]

Covid-19 is challenging our convictions by putting us in front of a dilemma consisting in moving back and forth between our egocentrism and our social tropism. This difficulty to take a stance is illustrated by the coexistence of a strong demand for a return to normal life, that is a social life, and those egoistic behaviors regarding showing respect to the social distancing or mask wearing demands, which we feel are in opposition to our individual satisfaction without taking into consideration their impact on the community. On the one hand, people are asking for more social relations, on the other hand they remain self-centered. On both, they still favour their individual desires over the collective interest.

Deeply convinced that "man is the measure of all things," as Protagoras stated,[11] we have entered an era of mistrust accentuated by the so-called new technologies of information and communication.

Our journey to well-being and happiness has led us to the belief that we could improve our lives in such a way that we could eradicate pain and suffering, and even postpone or abolish death. With this aim in mind, human beings have started to create objects that would help them get control over their fate, namely through *technē*, that is technique. This desire to control

[9] Ibid., 70-110.

[10] George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972).

[11] Protagoras, *On Truth*, quoted in Kathleen Freeman, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Companion to Diels,* Fragmente der Vorsokratiker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), 346-347.

our environment has increased in such a way that technical objects, initially created "for the sake of an end"[12] somehow essential, have become objects of consumption aiming at the satisfaction of nonessential needs. We have thus moved from *technē* as a system of knowledge that "partly completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and partly imitates her,"[13] to technology as a mere way to increase pleasure and to live a better life.

In turn, technologies and their promises have fostered this trend towards egocentrism giving individuals both the means to improve their well-being and to make their life easier, and the means to isolate from each other. Stuck in front of keyboards and screens we no longer need to go out in order to discover the world, for the world, or rather its appearance, is itself coming to each of us.

In this world where the individual is the alpha and the omega of *eudaimonia*, the need for social relations highlighted by the pandemic disturbs our self-centered convictions. The solipsistic society we have created in the Western world is now confronted with the social imperative for resilience.

## III. The solipsistic society

Armed with the conviction that *eudaimonia* is to be reached at an individual level, we have abolished any doubts about our centrality and rejected the importance of our social nature. Paradoxically, by falling into the trap of the Self we have espoused distrust as a philosophy of life. That is to say that the Covid-19 crisis is symptomatic of our defiance towards not only public authorities, but also science, and of our absolute certainty regarding our legitimacy to appraise both recommendations made by specialists and political decisions.

Everything goes as if no truth deserves consideration outside of our individual opinion. The idea that the only acceptable truth is our inner conviction is creating a solipsistic society, in which there cannot be any kind of truth, no reality outside of individual perception.

Revealing the ego through his famous statement "*cogito ergo sum*,"[14] ("I think therefore I am") French rationalist philosopher René Descartes introduced methodic and radical doubt, whilst opening the door to further distrust and solipsism. According to Descartes "one cannot conceive a thing so well and make it one's own when one learns it from someone else as one

[12] Aristotle, *Physics*, 199a 18.

[13] Ibid., 199a 16-17.

[14] René Descartes, "Meditation One and Meditation Two," in *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 59-69.

can when one discovers it for oneself."[15] Consequently, the only thing that one cannot doubt is one's own opinions. This conclusion is mainly due to Descartes' very egocentric tropism regarding the quest for truth which gave birth to modern skepticism.

Unfortunately, on the basis of a methodology aiming at studying nature and the limits of knowledge, cartesian doubt has turned into a permanent challenge of reality, slowly leading to the unconscious but deeply rooted belief that truth can only stem from one's own perceptions based on one's inner experience and, as a consequence, that there is nothing real outside of one's Self.

So, the world out there would be a mere representation, as Arthur Schopenhauer asserts,[16] a measure of one's will. "The world is my representation" wrote Schopenhauer, since "no truth is more certain, more independent of all others, and less in need of proof than this, namely that everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word representation."[17]

This philosophical stance can be reinforced by the sociological works of constructivist scholars. According to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, perceptions have a decisive role in the appreciation agents have of their environment.[18] Indeed, constructivism insists on the role of intersubjectivity as the founding element of ideas and beliefs. It is in this constructed environment that agents will refine their perceptions and construct a reality that will condition their identities, and further their behaviors. Then according to social constructivists, shared perceptions lead to schemes of thought that are common to several agents that once routinized will be institutionalized,[19] and then made real. In this process, as Berger and Luckmann emphasize, language is "essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life" and participate in the building of reality.[20] Incidentally, following on Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Austin's works, John Searle later postulated that social reality is intrinsically related to the observer and that objective reality is nothing else than a social construct supported by speech acts, that is by declarations bringing things into existence. Thus, some facts are "only facts

[15] Ibid., 39.

[16] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969).

[17] Ibid., 3.

[18] Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1966).

[19] Ibid., 65-109.

[20] Ibid., 52.

by human agreement," and some things "exist only because we believe them to exist."[21]

In this general framework, individuals will develop both their identity and their social identity and act in accordance to what they think is expected by others.[22]

In this regard, reality can be totally constructed by individuals outside any rationality or objectivity. If reality is a social construction based on individual perception, then each individual becomes the unique holder of their reality. Obviously, it may occur that some individuals will share common perspectives and will then socialize and build norms and institutions that will stabilize their behaviors.

As a result, the idea that there is no truth outside of one's mind has grown in importance making the real world the mere projection of our representations. Doubting everything has led us to doubt even the undoubtable, namely the fact that we are social beings and that our identity, our very existence, depends on others.

Technologies such as the Internet, the media, and social networks have added a new dimension to our journey towards the solipsistic society. Giving us access to an infinite quantity of data, it has flattered our egos, making us think that we have enough knowledge to assert our own opinions as general truths.

Yet, opinion is not knowledge as Plato stresses. In his *Republic*, Plato relates that discussing about opinion and knowledge with Glaucon, Socrates asked: "Haven't you noticed that opinions without knowledge are shameful and ugly things? At the best of them are blind – or do you think that those who express a true opinion without understanding are any different from blind people who happen to travel the right road?"[23] Clearly, for the philosopher, opinion is intermediate, "darker than knowledge but clearer than ignorance,"[24] but opinion cannot be knowledge as knowledge indicates distinct spheres or subject matters.

With solipsism we have reached the point where we take data for information and opinions for knowledge. This knowledge coming from one's inner perceptions, is consequently considered as necessarily providing one with all required tools to assert one's truth. We have all been gathering data regarding Covid-19, and we have built opinions upon these motley elements until we felt that our opinions, which are basically poorly supported ideas, are

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[21] John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 1.

[22] Jan E. Stets, and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224-237.

[23] Plato, *Republic*, 506c.

[24] Ibid., 478c.

actual knowledge worth being expressed, and that, even more, whatever can be said by scientists or public authorities must be mistrusted, if not rejected. We live in Plato's cave believing that the shadows projected in the wall in front of us are the reality. We think, not unlike Gorgias, that nothing exists outside of one's mind,[25] assuming that individuals have a sufficient knowledge to hold the truth.

Nonetheless, even if we do not want to admit it, we feel the limits of our opinions in time of crisis. Doubt leads to uncertainty and uncertainty to anxiety. Doubting everything can be very uncomfortable and lead to mental health issues.

The aim here is to stress the importance of questioning our own certitudes to be open to others' ideas, and to enter into a rational, challenging and fruitful debate. By doing so, instead of being stuck in our own aporias and falling into schizophrenia, we could learn with and from others and move from opinion to knowledge.

As Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote it in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "[t]he limits of my language mean the limits of my world."[26] Therefore, if one wants to widen one's world one needs to enrich one's language. This can be done only through contact with others. Here again, philosophy is a tool-of-choice in order to open up new perspectives; to discover the limits of our knowledge and the extent of our ignorance; to become humbler; and to eventually open up to others and reconcile with our social nature, rediscovering that *eudaimonia* is relational. Philosophy is not a panacea, but one of the paths towards happiness.

## IV. Back to philosophy

In these uncertain times, where things appear to elude our understanding, the need for knowledge seems particularly vivid. Philosophy, in its strictest sense, that is the love of wisdom as Pythagoras defined it in the 6 century BCE[27], can undoubtedly help us approach our current and future existential concerns. Obviously, the point is not to do philosophy for the sake of philosophy. The aim of philosophical reflection would be to reopen the door to knowledge and most of all to questioning. Stuck in our deeply anchored opinions, we are relentlessly watching the shadows projected on the wall in front of our inner

[25] Gorgias, *Concerning the Non-existent* or *Concerning Nature*, quoted in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 35.

[26] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd, 1922), 74.

[27] Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. C. D. Yonge (New York: Harper and Brother Publishers, 1877), 166.

selves' caves with the conviction that they are the reality, the only possible one. As Plato showed it, the perspective from inside the cave is misleading.

Denying any truth that derives from our perceptions is dangerous for it closes us out of otherness. If it is legitimate to question reality, then it must be done through Cartesian reasonable doubt not through solipsism. Philosophers of intersubjectivity, such as Paul Ricoeur[28] or Emmanuel Levinas,[29] could help us renew our relations with others, understand that we are what we are, not only because we think as Descartes asserts,[30] but also because of the others, because of the look they take at us, because of the interactions we have with them.

Certainly, philosophy can be scary when used for its own sake and taught through ethereal concepts that seem distant from the reality of our everyday lives. Yet, philosophy is helpful when it comes to reflecting on our existence and when it is anchored into real ordeals. The problems humanity is currently facing, some of them existential, like environmental degradation, terrorism, the advent of intelligent machines, are ideal fields for philosophical investigations. These threats to our permanence offer us a unique occasion to renew ourselves through reflection, to question our certitudes, to challenge them via new perspectives.

To do so we need to escape from Cosm-Ethics, namely the reassuring narrative based on chosen wording referring to ethics without doing ethics.[31] Cosm-Ethics is as threatening as the topics it pretends to tackle. This artificially built narrative is misguiding for it makes us believe that things are easy when in reality they are complex, hiding the intricacies of real ethics behind a veil of words that is slowly turning into a tyranny, a "despotism of discourse."[32]

Bringing the debate back to philosophy would allow us to reconnect with knowledge and, hopefully, with freedom. Freedom can be worrying since it implies responsibility and to a certain extent the distress of our conviction.

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[28] Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990).

[29] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007); Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et infini* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

[30] René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. Ivan Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[31] *Cosm-Ethics* refers to the communication strategy consisting in the use of ethical vocabulary without doing ethics. Just as cosmetics helps to adorn faces, Cosm-Ethics has taken over Ethics to make the crude reality more beautiful. Emmanuel R. Goffi, "De l'éthique à la cosm-éthique (1): ce que l'éthique n'est pas," *Institutsapiens*, published December 27, 2019, https://www.institutsapiens.fr/de-lethique-a-la-cosm-ethique-ce-que-lethique-nest-pas/; Emmanuel R. Goffi, "De l'éthique à la cosm-éthique (2): ce qu'est l'éthique," *Institutsapiens*, published December 30, 2019, https://www.institutsapiens.fr/de-lethique-a-la-cosm-ethique-2-ce-quest-lethique/.

[32] Emmanuel R. Goffi, "Ethique et confiance: la tyrannie des mots, le despotisme du discours," *Journaldunet*, published October 7, 2020, https://www.journaldunet.com/solutions/dsi/1494467-ethique-et-confiance-la-tyrannie-des-mots-le-despotisme-du-discours/.

Adequate knowledge would clearly pull us out of our comfort zone and, at the same time, it would reduce the gap between the perception of simplicity carried by Cosm-Ethics and the complexity we all experience when looking at the world we live in.

Regarding this, ancient Greek philosophy should be 'summoned,' so to speak. Going back to the basics would be beneficial in that it would attenuate some concerns we might have regarding humanity and our role as individuals.

The study of Presocratic philosophers would, for instance, help us put critical debate and reason back in the spotlight. Obviously, within this group of "men of widely differing interests and profession,"[33] this Sophists' stance must be nuanced in order to avoid the pitfalls of nonsense. But the teaching of debate through reasoned arguments would allow us to liberate ourselves from confrontations based on polarized stances grounded on subjective convictions.

What the Presocratics could help us with is the questioning of our firm beliefs through which we are able to access any kind of objective knowledge. In doing so they would invite us to display some reasonable doubt about our knowledge. As an example, in 6th century BCE, Thales of Miletus started inquiring into the nature of reality through a pragmatic and empirical approach, that is through rational thought. Later, asserting that "*all is but a woven web of guesses*,"[34] Xenophanes denied "the possibility of absolute and objective knowledge,"[35] and deeply influenced metaphysics through his work on the nature of knowledge and of gods. Individualism has led to the reification of the individual, making each one of us our own deity. This recourse to rationale is even more necessary in today's world where information is easily accessible but too often fake or biased. Presocractic philosophy could usefully shake our conviction regarding our individual god-like omniscience.

As Socrates asserted it, there is "only one good, namely, knowledge, and only one evil, namely, ignorance."[36] Then, the first step in order to free ourselves from existential fears would be to admit our ignorance in order to venture into the path to knowledge, although limited and imperfect, but nonetheless knowledge. Studying Presocratic philosophers like Xenophanes or Thales might therefore raise some questions about both our knowledge and the very subjective way we have promoted ourselves to the rank of gods.

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[33] Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocractic Philosophers* (London, and New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

[34] Xenophanes, *Fragments* (DK, B 18; 35; 34). See, Karl A. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 152-153.

[35] Freeman, 97.

[36] As quoted in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1915), 68-69.

Thus, with the Presocratics we could experience a new "Springs of Reason" rediscovering the "art of thinking."[37]

Knowing is doubting. We have reached a point where doubt is the only option to save us from the fatal collapse of our societies. But doubt is uncomfortable. Yet, accepting doubt as part of the reality of our world is also helpful in understanding that, since we cannot comprehend the humongous complexity of the world, the quest for truth is vain. That this quest is leading us to reduce complexity to an apparent misleading simplicity. Admittedly, seeing the world through a simplification lens makes us believe that we have reached a certain knowledge that gives us some control over it. More than that, our appetence for silver-bullet thinking makes us potential victims for communicators and other narrative builders, not unlike the so-called demagogues mocked by Aristophanes in *The Knights*.

But doubt is not mistrust. Doubt is the thorough and necessary examination of life for an "*unexamined life is not worth living*" according to Socrates.[38] For the great philosopher, to make better people one must teach them how to think, and not what to think. People must be made knowledgeable and capable of thinking by themselves. So, knowledge is demanding, as it requires effort and commitment. It cannot content itself with superficial opinions based on simplified perspectives. It entails the acceptance of uncertainty, the will to get freed from ignorance since the first step towards knowledge is admitting ignorance.

The illusion of knowledge can be reassuring. Yet, facing uncertainties and the apparent contradictions and absurdities of the world, it becomes problematic.

This is where ignorance can help, namely through encouraging us to question all the opinions we have raised to the rank of knowledge and hence to the status of truths. Socrates, by stating that teachers are meant to teach people how to think through maieutic, must serve as an example in the context of the pandemic specifically, but in a larger spectrum of risks, doubts, threats and loss of sense in some societies. The very difference between knowledge (epistēmē) and opinion (doxa), as presented in Plato's *Republic*[39] and illustrated in Plato's *Meno*, provides us with interesting, even if not perfect, tools to examine our convictions and our tendency to think we know something while we are ignorant, since, once again, the elusiveness of the world is difficult to grasp for most of us.

Unfortunately, it seems that with individualism, the interest in debating has moved on to those opposing postures that are denying the possibility

[37] Barnes, 2.

[38] Plato, *Apology*, 38a.

[39] Plato, *Republic*, 476c-480a.

of constructive interactions and compromises. The refusal of our ignorance (agnosia) is putting us in front of the gap that separates us form knowledge.

Yet, the quest for happiness, *eudaimonia*, the one defended by Aristotle, but also by later philosophers such as Ricoeur, is vain if we remain self-centred and anchored in the conviction that we know while we actually are ignorant, and that what we individually know is of greater importance than what others know. Moving back to Aristotelian ethics, which founds *eudaimonia* on relations between humans, might help us overcome our concerns and anguishes.

Interestingly, Ancient Greek philosophy is not the only way to relieve us. Looking at other ethical perspectives grounded in other cultures would be useful. Lots of other philosophies, structures of wisdoms or spiritualities stress the importance the relation to others has regarding our intellectual stability and mental health. Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism in Asia, Ubuntu and Animism in Africa, aboriginal wisdom in Australia, New Zealand and North America could shed a light on the essential, if not existential, character of interactions not only with others, but also with nature at large.

These perspectives would be beneficial in challenging individualism, its drifts, and undesirable consequences. They would also be beneficial in that they offer us new ways of thinking that could free us from our convictions and reconcile us with others, and, consequently, with our Selves.

## V. Conclusion

We are, mostly in the Western world, experiencing a very unique situation where we have reached the limits of individualism. Facing the absurdity of the world we live in, our certitudes are shaken, plunging us in metaphysical doubt. The pandemic is stressing our inability to reconcile our egocentrism with the need for social interaction, causing mental distress and societal issues.

Surely, governments have taken the measure of the situation. Surely, companies, or at least some of them, are aware of the psychological outcomes of this situation. Some initiatives and decisions have been made to address these issues. Nonetheless, the way to recovery does not rest only on solutions coming form others. It also lies on our individual ability to reassess ourselves. This is exactly where philosophy, and particularly, but not exclusively, ancient Greek philosophy is to be considered not as a panacea, but as a guide.

The only way to avoid stress and anxiety is not to wait for help, but to deeply question our convictions and beliefs. Introspection is one of the key practices, and certainly the most complicated one for it implies the questioning of our mode of thinking.

Managing stress is, then, not only related to the improvement of individuals' environment and providing them with solutions. It is also to teach

them, through philosophy, to challenge themselves, to confront others, and to reconnect with *eudaimonia* through social relations.

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# Aesthetics, Psyche and Media: A Manifold of Mimesis in the Age of Simulation

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**Abstract**

*Within a dialogue with various authors, it seems that there can't be just one universal reflection that allows us to comprehend the rising dynamism of new media. For example, Baudrillard declared the end of the traditional way of thinking about contemporary media and showed their role in the process of the endless simulation of truth. It has been shown that the contemporary world of media can be considered in dialogue with the philosophical tradition, and be evaluated in the phenomenological psychopathology (Fuchs) evaluation horizon. In this consideration, the notion of variation (Manovich), plays a key role in replacing the traditionally understood notion of mimesis. Artistic practice is precisely the main exemplar that shows the influence of new media on identity construction (simulated versions of personal identity), as well as the relationship between the artistic original and the copy. Although new digital media allows maintenance of desired (identity) simulations, its great potential is evident in enabling subjects to express their individuality, as well as in searching for new ways to improve their quality of life. This context opens a new problem, namely the one of avatar – a selected photo or image that defines the identity of entities present in the fields of the virtual agora (Baudrillard) and private chat rooms of the social media. Avatar`s function is being problematized by asking whether they represent the reduction and closure of the width of a person's beingness within the set image, or whether they facilitate and stimulate its realization by depriving them of the stress and discomfort that is caused by physical confrontation and intercourse with other persons in the living space. The given issue inevitably points to the problem of the general narcissism of our culture (Lasch), calling upon philosophical orientation to enter the discussion.*

**Keywords:** *digitalization; media; narcissism; phenomenological psychopathology; education; variation*

## I. Introduction: Overcoming the traditional differentiation between mimesis and reproduction

The traditional role of art in philosophical reflections was understood through the question of the relation between the highest truth of Being and artistic world creations. In the new contemporary technological and industrial reorganization of the sensible, this role has been eliminated. In the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, where the traditional forms of knowledge transfer through education were disabled, the world is forced to face an alternative form of new media as the main mechanism for teaching.[1] For now, these experimental media have managed to replace the traditional forms of learning, but the question of the quality of education being received is surely one of the primary problems. This is the reason why most schools are practicing the combined model of teaching: one the one hand, there is the traditional teaching in classrooms coupled with traditional ways of examinations, but on the other hand, there are new forms of media in online teaching praxis. Universities are predominantly using the online model believing that students are independent enough to organize themselves. This crisis raised many questions about the traditional concept of learning and the role that new media can have in the contemporary educational processes.

Rancière showed that the traditional concept of education does not necessarily have to be the only possible path for studying.[2] He managed to use one of the experiments in the late 18th century to prove that language can be learned in more than just one traditional way. This was the experiment of Joseph Jacotot, a Frenchman who taught in Belgium without the knowledge of his students' native language (Flemish). The goal of this experiment was to show how the traditional role of the process of education has changed in the process of liberation, by underlining manifold ways in which the content of knowledge can be acquired. In this way, we can see that there can be numerous schemata in which teaching can be shown to be successful. Historically, the Romantic movement challenged the traditional educational systems. This is the reason why Romanticism is considered to be a *movement*, not a school in the traditional form. There is not only one *differentia specifica* between a school and a movement. A school is traditionally seen as having its origin in the scholastic ways of teaching (Greek. *σχολεῖον* – leisure; lat. *schola* – school). A *school* implies authorities, a clear system, the reproduction of

[1] Which opens the door for wide panel of mental health challenges, raising the need of philosophical critical approach usage as the orientation tool.

[2] Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Redwook City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 14.

the content, a formalism, the respect for tradition, the idea of conservation of content, etc. On the contrary, a *movement* implies no authorities; but fragmentation, innovation, vitality, the criticism of tradition, the idea of liberation from the old, etc. The contemporary forms of education certainly found themselves forced to mediate between these two.

Although Humboldt's idea of reformation has some Romantic motifs, its achievements in the Bologna Process are open for questioning. After the romanticist influence, history has faced numerous fundamental processes, such as the rise of the technological culture, the crises caused by world wars, the process of globalization, etc. All of this had a strong impact on the process of education. The similarity between many contemporary theories and romanticism is reflected in their critical attitude towards tradition, and the desire to overcome the old forms of knowledge transfer. The new culture became more and more unified through these liberating processes, which brought into question the role of the State in the process of education. As some of the authors from the critical position managed to show, the tradition should not be outright rejected. Instead, we should engage in a dialogue with some of its authors to preserve its valuable achievements. In this way, Adorno placed dialectical movement at the center of his new methodology to preserve its negative and critical function in the times of affirmative culture. The idea of *a critic* must become one of the fundamental themes in education, which also becomes an extension of a one-dimensional culture. The blade of criticism is certainly blunted because its primary task in changing reality has been forgotten:

The lack of conflict which in mass culture stems from the all-encompassing concerns of the monopoly can ever be seen today in great art within those very works which most resolutely resist cultural monopoly.[3]

From his standpoint, only avant-garde movements can be the antithesis of the mass culture. But the question of their political engagement has always been difficult bearing in mind that their critique stays in the domain of intellectualism. New forms of education must aspire not only to share knowledge but to change the reality itself. This idea has its root in Plato's consideration of the art which for him has its specific place in the political hierarchies.

In Plato's philosophical reflection we can find an important differentiation between the world of ideas and the world of things, the latter being mere copies of the real ontological fundamentals. This distinction made a big impact on different philosophical concepts, but here we focus on the notion of *mimesis* to show how the mediation between these two worlds is possible.

[3] Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London, and New York: Routledge, 2001), 73.

One of the fundamental problems for Plato was to show how the world of copies participates in the world of ideas. This is not only a problem in Plato's philosophy of art, but also the main problem in his own ontological considerations. We can say that for Plato, the world of art and the world of politics are not possible to understand without ontology, which it is applicable to the mental issue treatment domain as well. His ontological considerations are a necessary foundation for understanding all other particular spheres of reality. Although Plato never managed to show the ontological role of *mimesis*, within his explorations of its role in the world of art and politics, he laid the ground for Aristotle to accomplish this task.

Already in Book IX of *The Republic,* Plato explains the differentiation between "the-thing-in-itself" and fiction and different ways of approaching it.[4] This distinction becomes the main foundation for the examination of poetry in the subsequent book. To explain the differentiation between the real art that can fulfill the ontological *télos* of the community and the mimetic art, Plato used the notion of *mimesis* for every act that negates the order of the righteous state, even going so far as to compare the mimetic poetry with sophistic actions.[5] In this way, he puts art at the lowest level of the ontological hierarchy by attributing to it the same destructive role that sophistic activities occupy in the community. Thus, the notion of *mimesis* has an extremely negative meaning in Platonic philosophy. Plato showed that most of the existing art and poetry also had negative effects. Assigning a positive function to *mimesis* shall be later the task for Aristotle, but Plato was the first to show its active role in the community and its potential for changing reality.[6]

Unlike Plato, Aristotle showed the positive role of *mimesis* in the constitution of education and community.

> First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated [...] Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature.[7]

According to this thesis, *mimesis* or imitation is a constitutive part of the human being, and it is part of an integral process of constituting community

[4] Plato, *The Republic,* 582b.

[5] Ibid., 596d.

[6] Other authors will later put focus primarily on its positive aspect. Compare Tom Cohen, *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8.

[7] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b 5-23.

by "learning from a model." Men, unlike animals, do not have just one natural predisposition. Their main characteristic is the possibility of becoming something else to fulfill their purpose in the community. In this way, *mimesis* plays an active role in the educational process, not only in a theoretical sense, but also in the world of praxis. This is the reason why *mimesis* or imitation has manifold roles in the Aristotelian philosophy. We can find its role in the theoretical, poetic, and practical spheres of life. Accordingly, the notion of *mimesis* took on a much higher place in Aristotle's ontology than it did in Plato's .

Modern philosophical reflections concentrated on the aesthetic role of imitation, finding its foundation in the subjective forms of apprehension, delivering a new idea of *mimesis* found in the notion of reproduction. Kant and other Idealists tried to find the meditative role of the aesthetic in the sphere of absolute forms of knowledge. Hegel was the first who showed that the field of aesthetics was going to change its status in the new contemporary world. Idealism showed as well that knowledge, in a wider sense, is not a copy of reality, but that the subject has a mediating role in the epistemological process. The problem of originality and reproduction later lost its integral meaning because the aesthetic itself no longer had the task of reaching the highest truth of Being.[8] Hegel's diagnosis proved to be correct. The Romantic Movement already brought into question the traditional way of understanding the truth, especially in the domain of the philosophy of art. However, from the beginning of the 20th century, this distinction came to the fore even more strongly. Husserl's *Crisis* puts into question modern methodological positions, and the fundamental formalistic designations of the positive science. He showed that we need to go back to the source of all knowledge, back to the Aristotelian philosophical reflections to win back the universal methodology for approaching the truth. He did not apply an integral and systematic approach to the question of imitation and reproduction, but his considerations of phantasy (Phantasie) and imagination (Vorstellung) are very valuable for understanding the contemporary status of art and media.

For Husserl, the notion of reproduction does not necessarily have a negative meaning. Almost every kind of phantasy apprehension of a work of art is a sort of representation of re-production. In simple terms, this means that every time we need to reflect on an artistic object, we form an image of another image.[9] We do not have an original grasp of perceptual reality, but we apprehend the object through a series of images that have a mediating role in

[8] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold Vincent Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 637.

[9] Edmund Husserl, "Phantasy, Image, Consciousness and Memory (1898-1925)," in Edmund Husserl, *Collected Works*, vol. XI, trans. John B. Brough (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 182.

the cognitive processes. Moreover, Husserl showed that reproduction has its role not just in the apprehension of the works of art, but in the representational memory in a wider sense as well. This means that reproduction is an integral part of knowledge itself, it is constitutive of the creation of forms of reality. The process of remembering includes a necessary representation which is the reproduction of sensory data.[10] In this way, like Aristotle's *mimesis*, Husserl's reproduction has multiple roles, which are not necessarily negative in all spheres of knowledge. Reproduction is, in a way, the opposite of impression and sensation, but this is the reason why it has its role in re-presentation and phantasy apprehension. While perception and impression belong to the original forms of experience, re-production represents only a modification of its original basis.[11] The idea of modification and variation are closely linked to the concept of reproduction. Husserl found the inspiration for these in researching the relation between mathematics and logic.

In particular, Husserl showed that there must be a difference between a particular phenomenon and its intuitive essence, which means that the process of modification is only conditionally opened. But on the other side, the phenomenological method is an unfinished task that always calls for new answers within new experiences. In this way, the avant-garde movements have shown similarities with the phenomenological methodology.[12] For most of them, the idea of reproduction is not necessarily negative. They find the old traditional idea of "original" work which contains an elevated truth highly questionable. This is the reason why many authors such as Marcel Duchamp used ready-made objects to criticize traditional ideas and value systems. For them, reproduction does not necessarily have to be a copy, but it can take on a new life of its own in the present circumstances if we give the old object a new sense and function. In this way, they criticized not only individual pieces of art, but the entire tradition, and its false representations of history and the world.

The idea of the abolition of differentiation between reality and illusion has its origin in Nietzsche's philosophy. His proclamation of the death of God was understood and interpreted in different ways throughout history. In the contemporary incarnation, this idea does not only have the aesthetic but also ontological consequences. Baudrillard's *The Perfect Crime,* one of the most significant works that reflect on the new media, was written in the Nietzschean framework. Baudrillard showed that the difference between the real and

[10] Ibid., 307.

[11] Ibid., 403.

[12] More on this similarity see in: Dragan Prole, *Jednakost Nejednakog* [*Equality of the Unequal*] (Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 2018), 99.

the illusory world is only fictional.[13] This means that the world of media is not just a reproduction or a mimetic re-presentation of reality.[14] The new media represent the *extension of reality*. This means that every critique, every affirmation, every truth, and every lie, immediately enters into the common area of intervention. There is no neutral content because every new piece of data produces new fields of action. Reproduction and repetition are just ways in which the new media operates. And there is certainly an open question as to whether there is such a thing as the true reality or whether everything is a simulacrum of our thoughts and perceptions. However, what is most important here, is that the new media have an impact not only on the way we perceive the world but also on our emotional and practical attitude towards it. If world of media already changes the way we perceive reality, than we can conclude that this world is mostly the world of manipulation because the subject always has an option to choose between already established schemes.

For other authors, the new media represent not only a simulation of reality, but also the new field of expression, with their own language, because their objects are fundamentally different from any other traditional objects of re-presentation. Benjamin showed that although in the original periods of civilization, there were manual forms of reproduction, the new mechanical reproduction had changed the core of art and media.[15] The role of new media was clearly defined by Manovich who showed that they can give a completely different function to the same object of tradition:

Database becomes the center of the creative process in the computer age. Historically, the artist made a unique work within a particular medium. Therefore, the interface and the work were the same; in other words, the level of an interface did not exist. With new media, the content of the work and the interface become separate. It is, therefore, possible to create different interfaces to the same material.[16]

Moreover, he showed that with the new computer era, we have entered into quantitative, numerical processing of content that was previously captured primarily in a qualitative and typological fashion. This goes in parallel with Husserl's insights into the world of the new scientific era which strives to calculate and control all aspects of reality. However, in

[13] "Hiding" it's not negligible repercussions in the context of enhanced appearance of the psychotic delusions symptoms worldwide, which we will turn to in the following chapters of the article.

[14] Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London, and New York: Verso, 1996), 76.

15 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Media and Cultural Studies*, eds. Meenakshi Durham, and Douglas M. Keller, 18-41 (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

[16] Lev Manovich, "Database as a Genre of New Media," *AI & Society* 14, no. 2 (2000): 176-183.

the remainder of this text, a question is raised: whether a new form of art mediated through the new media has originality and an intrinsic value or there is merely an endless process of simulation that cannot provide the artists with their traditional independent status. At this point, we need to emphasize that the contemporary period is characterized by the liberalization of the process of education. In this process, traditional notions such as a *copy* (mimesis) and the *original* are redefined. The phenomenological method reveals that their differences are not fundamental but only relative; they can only exist in their relation to the subject.[17] The phenomenological examination of the structures of subjectivity should also explain how the identities of the new forms of personality are shaped in this digital era. This article emphasizes as well the way through which the traditional concept of the "Truth" leads to the new concept of "post-truth."

## II. Artwork as a copy of consumer and media culture

Early avant-garde artists provoked traditional concepts of art and artwork with their anti-artistic attitudes and techniques. For Boris Groys, Duchamp is the first artist who, instead of being an exclusive producer, became a consumer of things that "are constantly circulating in our cultural networks."[18]

Many years later, in the age of late capitalism, Postmodern art continued to explore the position of the artist as a consumer. The art technique being used is appropriation. The term was approved in the 1980s and was invented to capture the artistic practices that include existing objects from art and culture. Robert Nelson states that the term *appropriation,* also has more sinister connotations, implying improper and even abduction or theft. Taken positively or pejoratively, appropriation is not passive, objective, or disinterested, but active, and motivated.[19]

At the beginning of the 21st century, the French curator, Nicholas Bourriaud, used the term "post-production." He argued that the distinctions between "creation and copy, readymade and original work"[20] were erased. Post-production artists "re-edit historical or ideological narratives, inserting the elements that compose them into alternative scenarios."[21] The

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[17] This article, *inter alia*, shows how these traditional terms are used in some forms of contemporary art and media and what their contributions to new forms of education are.

[18] Boris Groys, "The Artist as Consumer," *Strozzina*, last accessed in November 15, 2022, www.strozzina.org/artpriceandvalue/catalogue_groys.html.

[19] Robert S. Nelson, and Richard Shiff, *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 210.

[20] Nicolas Bourriuad, *Postproduction*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas and Sterriberg, 2002), 13.

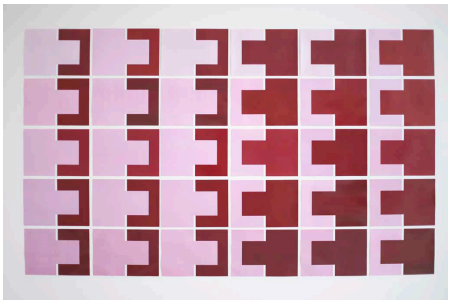
[21] Ibid., 45.

contemporary artist in this evolution of a copy is someone who operates in the world of the old that can be combined into something new.

Sherrie Levine, After Marcel Duchamp, 1991

But what happens with digital art whose pure essence lies in the code? Boris Groys considers the ability of digital images to "originate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves through the open fields of contemporary means of communication."[22] What is characteristic of the digital image is that it is constantly multiplying. The digital image is like a "Byzantine icon – as a visible copy of invisible God."[23] Hence, the origin of the digital image is the code. A digital image, like all other code visualizations, is a type of performance that also depends on the context in which it appears. It can be set as wallpaper on a mobile phone or printed on a home printer, while the quality and characteristics of the materialized digital image depend on the technical capacity of the device.

Referring to Walter Benjamin's text "A Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Boris Groys concludes that in the context of the digital image, Benjamin's assumption about the copy as being identical to the original is no longer true. However, each variation of the digital image is different from another, and technological development has flowed in the direction of "the diversification of the conditions under which a copy is produced and distributed and, accordingly, the diversification of the resulting visual images."[24]



Vanja Novaković, Pink and Red, 2019

A collection of artworks titled "Pink and Red" can be taken as a case study of the materialization of the digital. The original artwork, i.e. the first two samples of "Pink and Red," are two digital images. Both are reproduced on different materials: canvas, glass, paper, and digital TV screens. The focus of this methodology is the imitation of the mass production process and the materialization of the digital code. In addition to being reproduced on TV screens, each sample was reproduced on about twenty different printers. Each variation includes "errors," similarities,

[22] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 83.

[23] Ibid., 91.

[24] Ibid., 85.

Vanja Novaković, Pink and Red, 2019

and differences between each printed copy. Two different artists painted two paintings, so individual traces can be seen on each one. Finally, the reproduced image on the gallery window packs the entire space and completes the story of the elusiveness of the original.

## III. (Digital) copies of reality and identities

Social media networks are a platform for communication and for performing and constructing identity. Also, they are a place for corporations to perform surveillance and control over customers. Therefore, social networks are a space in which the great crisis of privacy is present. They represent a kind of virtual Panopticon with three dimensions. Those three dimensions that fuel the virtual Panopticon are algorithmic processing of personal data, inter-watching between users, and self-observation.

Personal data, such as user activities, are archived and analyzed to predict any future activity. Therefore, everything that is displayed is based on the past. Also, many platforms monitor the attention given to the presented content. By measuring time, they know the user's preferences, and consequently, they offer similar content in the future. Each user has their version of reality. The value of personal data has increased in the last ten years, and corporations have gained power by selling it. Personal data is being analyzed to make advertising more personalized. Baudrillard predicted this transformation claiming that the power of advertisement has been taken from it by another type of language that is even more simplified and thus more functional: the languages of computer science.[25]

A lot of attention is paid to interface design. Design is the result of continuous research in the domains of marketing and psychology, and because of that, the final product becomes more addictive. On their profiles individual users can design and present their lifestyles, physical appearances, and express their opinions and emotions by using language, photography, video, or sound. This digital narration is a combination of specific symbolic exchange, representation, and communication. Therefore, digital identity can be seen as a construct that fits into different roles in the digital and virtual world where reality often vanishes, while the simulation is set as the original.

## IV. New media and education – Elements of art

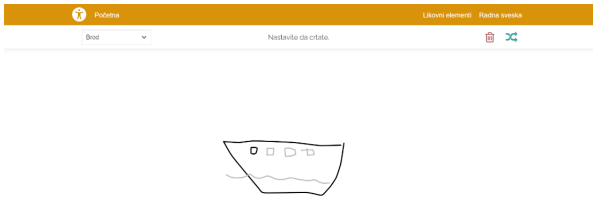
The media and other factors such as peers, schools, and families participate in the education of young people. The use of language and books has always

[25] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 89.

been the foundation and pillar of education. New media are more personalized than traditional media, and they enable better interaction between the media and the user. However, the question that arises concerns the role of new media in teaching and education as well as its advantages and disadvantages.

"Art Elements"[26] is an educational, interactive, and inclusive web application. It consists of two parts: a theoretical one that introduces children to the basic elements of art; and a workbook, where users can draw with the help of artificial intelligence. This web application is intended to be an aid in art class, but it also has broader applications. When a certain shape is selected, after the user starts drawing, the artificial intelligence system responds by showing a few possible further moves. The drawing can be created independently or with the help of AI that gives different solutions and nurtures children's approach to drawing. This application points to the positive sides of the new media and can guide a person through the process of drawing. There is an idea that AI and teachers will work together in the future. Even though the educational system needs to follow technological improvements, it is important to educate teachers and pupils on its negative sides. Maybe the solution lies in creating a new school subject that provides students with the basic knowledge on the advantages and disadvantages of the new media.

Dr. A. W. Bates asserts that "new technologies are fundamentally changing the nature of knowledge."[27] Generations born after 2000 interact with new media, such as phones and tablets from an early age. Education must follow technical progress and the evolution of human consciousness for the quality of education to be satisfactory. Because new media can represent something through interaction and multimedia content, they can be of great help for teachers. In the beginning, CDs, PowerPoint presentations, video, and audio were used, while today websites, digital textbooks, virtual classrooms, and designed educational tools are mostly used. This does not only concern learning particular content, but also digital literacy. However, the teacher should be a person who, in cooperation with the media, transfers knowledge to the student, i.e., the teacher cannot be completely




Vanja Novaković, Web Application, Elements of Art, 2019

[26] Vanja Novaković, *Web Application*, last accessed November 15, 2022, https://likovni-elementi.com/.

[27] A. W. T. Bates, *The Impact of New Media on Academic Knowledge* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia, 1999), http://sdcc.vn/template/5298_knowledge.pdf.

replaceable. Also, an editorial policy is needed to ensure the truthfulness and credibility of the data.[28]

A study conducted at Stanford University between 2015 and 2016 showed that students generally do not have the skills and the desire to evaluate the authenticity of the information.[29] Therefore, the task of teachers and professors is to encourage pupils and students to look for sources of information and examine their accuracy, by enforcing with this way young people's critical thinking in the so-called "information age." In the following sections, we will emphasize how the old concept of "Truth" is transformed through the virtual area into a new media space and outline some of the new ways in which it shapes the individual's psyche.

## V. From "post-truth" to the "virtual psyche"?

Baudrillard suggests that the contemporary age of the image, screens, and e-circuits, through which social networks and digital media integrate and transcend the human psychic phenomenological spaces, transmute our society into relational spheres of simulacra that become seemingly more realistic than the empirical domains of direct physical correlation and dialogue.[30]

This raises an important issue of the "edges" of the human psychological identity being processed through the social networks and digital media by the *avatarization* and *technicalization* of the human being. This has direct consequences for the domain of mental health, especially when it comes to issues such as delusions, hallucinations, and narcissistic disorder.[31]

Developing this line of argument further, we need to explore whether the "online agora platform" can enable and actualize an individual's inherent *telos* to develop as dynamic, integrated, and free beings. The alternative is, of course, that it merely takes us further into the domains of the technical psyche – passivized and alienated from the evolutionary, historical, and world community.[32]

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[28] In the era of the Internet there has been an expansion of fake news and information that are often perceived as true. Post-truth is interpreted as an adjective referring to "a communication paradigm in the 21st century in which: "I think, therefore, I exist" is replaced by "I believe, therefore I am right." Lejla Turčilo, and Belma Buljubašić, *Who (Really) Creates The Media Agenda* [*Ko (stvarno) kreira agendu medija?*] (Sarajevo: 2018), www.safejournalists.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ko-stvarno-kreira-agendu-medija_BHS.pdf.

[29] Stanford History Education Group, "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning," https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:fv751yt5934/SHEG%20Evaluating%20Information%20Online.pdf.

[30] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 4.

[31] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013).

[32] Luka Janeš, "Biopolitical Laboratory and the Genetic Modification of the Psyche," *Jahr* 10, no. 2 (2019): 341-360.

As a basic problem of the successful ontic realization of the person, we notice the fact that the initial "appearance body" of a person within social networks (i.e., an avatar and a collection of photos) is mainly constructed according to the stiff, settled, common propositions regarding the normality and acceptability dictated by the target group one wishes to appeal to. We claim that this points to the lack of one's free choice at the core of this virtual relation process, possibly further delayering and alienating one's personhood within the network of virtual relationships. At the same time, it opens an important question about the degree to which it constrains (aporizes) the self as a unique, layered, integrated living entity on the path towards affirmation and individuation determined.[33]

Therefore, in the earlier passage, we propaedeutically included Baudrillard's significant hypothesis of simulacrum and virtual reality, as well as the issue of ontic copies as a byproduct of *hyper-avatarization* of human persons, within a computer-defined module of social networks, portals, and other virtual agoras. At this point, we direct a critical evaluation of the "virtual image dominance" to the possibility of one's feeling of aliveness, observing it as essentially linked to the issue at hand.

In accordance with this line of reasoning, T. S. Hoffmann writes on the empirical inaccessibility of the totality of life-phenomena:

> Some readers might find speaking of life as something non-empirical to be odd, but we should keep in mind the fact that none of us has ever been in contact with life as a whole or a totality, and that 'life,' as a singularia tantum, as a concept of a whole existing uniquely, could never be an empirical concept, for the principle of the empirical is plurality.[34]

## VI. Livingness of the Avatar between the Körper and Leib

We find the question of the livingness of one's image to be closely linked to the question of intercorporeality[35] within the psycho-phenomenological field of *Lebenswelt*. Thus, in this section, we will further develop the introductory notes on psychopathology, with our research aim focused on the semantic transmutation of one's bodily appearance into an image and the image into an idea.

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[33] Carl G. Jung, *The Symbolic Life. Miscellaneous Writings*, eds., and trans. Gerhard Adler, and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1953), 123.

[34] Thomas Sorren Hoffman, "The Philosophical Concept of Life and its Role in the Foundation of an Integrative Bioethics," *Synthesis Philosphica* 30, no. 1 (2015): 6.

[35] Dermot Moran, "Intercorporeality and Intersubjectivity: A Phenomenological Exploration of Embodiment," in *Embodiment, Enaction and Culture: Investigating the Construction of the Shared World*, eds. Christoph Durt, Thomas Fuchs, and Christian Tewes, 25-46 (London: MIT Press, 2017), 25.

More precisely, we put forth the hypothesis that this process forms a kind of "inverted loop," and evaluate the presented argument with the help of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of *embodiment*.[36] We believe that it is a valuable argumentation platform to view a person's subject, within the framework of the simulacrum, as the *avatar* – as a kind of motionless "uniform self" shaped into a motionless image.[37]

Merleau-Ponty divides the body phenomenon into *Körper* and *Leib*, into a biological body and a living, experiencing (subjective) body. It is precisely the latter that is identified with consciousness, which moves between the dynamics of the intersubjectivity of the body, in the psycho-phenomenological space that constitutes consciousness and the world of social space.

Regarding this position, Merleau-Ponty states:

> [...] with regard to our own body, what is true of all perceived things: that the perception of space and the perception of a thing, the spatiality of the thing and its being as a thing are not two distinct problems. To be a body is to be tied to a certain world, as we have seen, our body is not primarily in space: it is of it.[38]

Furthermore, focused on intentionality within the frame of his phenomenological project, and in relation to Husserl's "rigid" transcendental eidetic position, Merleau-Ponty redirects his interest precisely to the living body (*Leib*) – a body in motion whose self-individuation is happening *in-the-world* and *towards-the-world*,[39] essentially shaping, figuratively speaking – "a mereological cosmic body of the *Lebenswelt*." The shaping process in question implies the mutual correlation and realization of the human existence in the social space, which, in addition to the problem related to the phenomenological synthesis, inevitably invokes ethical, bioethical attention when applied to the social media space, i.e. the *simulacra life-domain*.

Conclusively the distinction between living (*Leben*) and experiencing body (*Erleben*), which occupies an important segment of Merleau-Ponty's existential-phenomenological approach, is being emphasized in light of the

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[36] Thomas Fuchs, and Jan E. Schlimme, "Embodiment and Psychopatology: A Phenomenological Perspective," *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 22, no. 6 (2009): 148.

[37] In this context, we will draw an analogy between the *Körper/Leib* and *Leben/Erleben* on the one hand, and between the *image-avatar* and *psyche-living* person on the other. Also, in the following chapters we will question whether one`s avatar stimulate person`s ontic realization by depriving them of the stress and discomfort that is caused by physical confrontation and intercourse with other persons in the living space.

[38] Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1981), 148.

[39] Ibid., 350.

fact that exclusively through linking the given two elements in question to the ontological amalgam of one's self, a human person can be constellationally in relation to the natural and social environment.

## VII. The question of consciousness

It is significant to put the question of consciousness in the following existential and phenomenological context. Thomas Fuchs claims that from the very beginning, consciousness must be perceived as an *embodied and extended consciousness*, and it represents the living organism in its entirety, not just the phenomenon encapsulated in the brain. He writes:

> [...] consciousness cannot be envisaged as an invisible chamber that is literally contained in the head and concealed behind the sensory organs. Indeed, it is not contained at all "in the physical body," but rather is *embodied*: conscious acts are particular, integral activities of a living, self-sustaining, sensory-receptive, and mobile organism. Therefore, the primary dimension of consciousness is the reciprocal, homeostatic, sensorimotor, and active-receptive relationship of the living organism and the environment.[40]

Following Fuchs' thesis, we suggest a hypothesis that this kind of entanglement between the organism and the environment is not quite possible in the domain of simulacra, or more precisely, it is blocked and antagonized in many ways.

By taking the above into account – what can we claim regarding the existential-phenomenological (dis)placement[41] of the "avatarized" living person raised within the virtual *simulacra* environment? We propose that it is marked primarily by the teleological void and emptiness depleted of *virtue* in its rudimentary meaning.[42]

Before developing the argumentation further, we want to focus on the etymology of the word "virtual," which originates from the Latin word "virtus" (in Greek *arete*), virtue. For this investigationthe following question is raised: how much virtue do the current technical simulacra actually offer? Moreover, to what

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[40] Thomas Fuchs, *Ecology of the Brain. The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford Univesity Press, 2017), 69.

[41] Shaun Gallagher, "Intersubjectivity and Psychopatology," in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Psychiatry*, eds. K. W. M Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard Gipps, George Graham, John Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, and Tim Thornton, 258-274 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 258-274.

[42] In *Cambridge Dictionary* (online version, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/virtue, last visited March 28, 2021), under the word "virtue" stands: "good moral quality in a person, or the general quality of being morally good."

extent do they offer a fruitful field for a scientific, spiritual and cultural development of a living person? Based and built on the virtues of the noetic openness, critical rectitude, but also of the integrative and inclusive attitude, extended in the space of endless diversity of life manifestations and accidentals.

We propose the hypothesis that the embodiment transmuted to the image that society creates for the subject, potentially inhabits the underlying problem of the various psychological issues, such as the narcissistic personality disorder, and psychosis, i.e., delusions and hallucinations, as we already noted in the preceding discussion. We will also hypothesize that the physical distance from the realm of concrete suffering, essentially nullifies the empathic capacities of being, once more as a consequence of the delusional way of grasping the worldliness of general phenomenality.

## VIII. Issues of the psyche technicalization

Technology is generally understood as an extension of the human being and a tool to increase the quality of one's life.[43] One example would be the reduction of space and time needed to gather avatars from all over the world in virtual chat rooms or groups. Likewise, it facilitates the exchange of data and speeds up its circulation from point A to point B. Moreover, technology makes communication easier for an introverted person by reducing the anxiety related to social interactions.

On the other side, it is interesting to notice that it often figures as a regressive tool, especially in the context of the social media simulacra and the generalized "screen omnipresence." We will refer to this issue as the "technicalization of the psyche." Yet, as it has become a kind of common mark of the "technical human of the future," what is often understood as an extension is mutating into a possible source of alienation.

Hypothetically speaking, positioned in the domain of external instrumentality, persons are often reduced to a heteronomous instrument of a kind of closed causality. Whereas the possibility for autonomous "onto-orientation" and acting is being left to dwell in the closed horizon of the more or less likable posts, comments, and other reactions of the social media utilities.

Let us consider Ricœur's conception of *oneself as another*, in analogy to the critical notions presented in the previous paragraphs. Ricœur writes:

> *Oneself as another* suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead, one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms. To 'as' I should like to attach a strong meaning, not only that of

[43] Janeš, 343.

> comparison (oneself similar to another) but indeed that of an implication (oneself in as much as being other).[44]

Therefore, Ricœur views the self-structure of a person primarily as a medium, that is, an affirmative backbone and a link between oneself and another. Perhaps this would be an effective philosophical cure for the treatment of the "ontic plague" of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and irresponsibility. It could also function as a general orientation tool for stepping in and residing in the virtual simulacrum.

What is essential for understanding Ricœur's claim in the given context is his original hermeneutic approach, in which he clearly distinguishes the "self" and "identity, " the "self" and "otherness."[45] Furthermore, Ricœur discusses how the actions of the self cannot be understood from the position of pure subjectivity because the question of motives is a question of personality that is always a concrete historical subject. The crucial point in the understanding of selfhood is showing how the self understands itself in the chain of intersubjective relations.[46]

## IX. Edges of the psycho-phenomenology space within simulacra domain

Following the preceding remarks, let us examine the chain of intersubjective relations in the frame of the virtual, i.e., the simulacra-space[47]. In particular, what are the ways in which intersubjective relations are being transmuted within the, ironically put "paradox of the free choice platform" such as, for example, the cases of accepting the virtual "friendship" on social networks as the common, general social framework? Moreover, do these new intersubjective relations contribute to the growth of our narcissistic features?

As well, we question whether the "avatar issue" represents the reduction and closure of the width of a person's beingness within the set image, or whether it facilitates and stimulates its realization by depriving them of the stress and discomfort that is caused by physical confrontation and intercourse with other persons in the living space?

We claim that while residing in the sphere of *simulacra*, one should not perceive it as an alternative escape from the "actual" reality of physical relations. We put forth the hypothesis that hiding from the intersubjective

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[44] Paul Ricœur, *Onself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

[45] Ibid., 16.

[46] Tanja Todorović, "Tumačenje sebstva. Paul Ricœur," [Interpretating the Selfhood. Paul Ricœur] *Filozofska istraživanja* 29, no. 1 (2019): 17-31.

[47] Which is, due to Baudrillard`s notions, more real than the common reality.

reality "chains" oneself behind the visual "avatar towers and concrete walls." Namely, while exhibiting algorithmically enabled signs and characteristics of personhood, one is, at the same time, being deprived of some fundamental elements of personality dwelling in the physical sphere (e.g., the responsibility regarding the consequences of one's actions and their causes).

However, at the same time, it raises one's awareness regarding the universal phenomenological space and its edges, in which one's life circulates and through which it receives orientation regarding its phenomenological position in the chain of intersubjective relations. In many cases, it is symptomatically manifested in the emergence of the ontological insecurity[48] and hyper-sensible reactions, while facing other living beings phenomenon as a kind of mirror or measure of one's value and a grasp of teleology. One can find research analogous in Kohut`s notion regarding the mirroring self-object.[49]

The premises of this argument imply that one's avatar should be perceived as a communicative relational form of a person who is not previously separated from themselves in the sense of "having" one's self.[50]

Having this in mind, we must raise an important question of the responsibility range of the person who ontically splits into a winding hierarchy of various *mimetic* living models. We claim that a person, via *avatarization*, hence *technicalization* of their own psyche usually endeavors to overcome complexes, yet in doing so, they inevitably falsify their existence in the context of the lack of authenticity and autonomy of self-orientation.

One problematic issue that we recognize related to this point is that by stepping into the public sphere[51], into the socio-political relation space of the social network (i.e. space of the political action and attitude), one acts mainly by using the *like* symbol as the dominant module of the communication.[52] Without expressing their exact opinion, namely without grasping their own acts and impacts within the open phenomenological field, one becomes incapable of noticing the edges, relations, and centers within one's mutual entanglement (i.e. one is incapable of knowing what the exact reality is at all).

Let us ask ourselves whether the level of one's social responsibility and awareness degrades in the context of hypothesis that the created avatar exists

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[48] Ronald David Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin, 1965), 39.

[49] Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 10; 216.

[50] All that if we embrace that the phenomenological space of virtual reality should not be understood as inferior to the common one, in the means of not dwelling in a permanent state of mild, colorful delusion and dreams, induced by the neuro-marketing models of happiness.

[51] Alice E. Marwick, "The Public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life," *Surveillance & Society* 9, no. 4 (2012): 378-393.

[52] Which possibly narrows the width of ones' critical dialogue scope propulsion.

in the social media consumer's consciousness only as a kind of fictional game character? The problem we observe is that in the psychological sense, the framework of a person's real-life action and their avatar are not bifurcated from the legal restriction of one's unique political subject.

The virtual reality of simulacra presents a real-time space of action but with a different formal phenomenality. Yet, the consequences of relationships and actions are equally realistic, whether they occur in the "virtual" or the "common" reality. Namely, the space and time representation and positioning[53] are equated with the ones of the simulacra.

At this point, it is noteworthy to mention the issue of frequent violence and virtual abuse as a "normal" and, therefore, accepted state, which, until it is accompanied by a physical act of violence, is not restricted by almost any regulation, remaining in the domain of a self-regulated custom.

There is no call of conscience if a person always simulates the state of being right or brings current problems of the society to absurdity (e.g., in trolling). In doing so, a person reacts in a narcissistic manner[54] – destructively to anything other than a "likable-self-avatar."

Customs and norms constructed by n-virtual entities deprived of the ontic contextual positioning have as its by-product the relativity of moral actions. We conclude that the arbitrariness of one's positioning in the psycho-phenomenological space of virtual agoras in many ways opens the door for the (bio)ethical sensibility entropy,[55] mostly in the form of not noticing and/or accepting the needs of the *Others*.

## X. Towards the conclusion – on usage of philosophy as the orientation tool

This paper is based on the hypothesis that as active participants, i.e. sub-elements of the global virtual "simulacra game" (marked with the clear, consistent set of rules and restrictions), we are becoming socially raised up mostly by externally induced behavioral axioms. Underlining the lack of critical thinking within this problematic domain, we propose philosophical integrative thinking as the potential "antidote" for the issue in question.[56]

Furthermore, we claim that the fundamental attribute of philosophy[57] could

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[53] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Pure Reason*, eds and trans Paul Guyer, and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 157.

[54] Cristopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 31.

[55] Kristina Dilica, "Is There a Need for Bioethical Education in the Academic Community?" *Panoniana* 5, no. 1 (2021): 61-76.

[56] On curative potential of philosophy see Lou Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac!: Applying Eternal Wisdom to Everyday Problems* (Quill: London, 2000).

[57] Philosophy observed as the most propulsive "tool" for extension of the horizon of critical

be found in the flexibilization of the rigid propositional forms and the semantic relations of the reality (even in its "virtual" form). As well as in the possibility of encouraging and raising awareness of the onto-epistemic orientation of ones` free dwelling and acting in the *simulacra* space.

Namely, the "alchemical-hermeneutic" nature of the philosophical constructive, maieutic approach to the mutual co-meaning and correlations of the various segments of *Lebenswelt*, offers a firm hope of overturning the instrumentational aim of the social media. From the domain of instrumental techne-closeness of the, often narcissistic avatar-like onto-heteronomy, to the educational form marked primarily by the communicative value of affirmation, individuation, and integratedness of the person.

In other words, we see philosophy as a tool for affording integration, constitutionality, and synthesis, as opposed to bifurcation, animosity, dualism, and stagnation. In addition, philosophy could be very useful in overcoming one's weaknesses and dissatisfactions caused by the lack of prevention of narcissistic tendencies[58] in their initial stages.

We claim that the given issues are noticeable, especially in one's inability to carry the weight of one's own image, an image that is effectively blurred through the "Avatar Agora." Germinated mostly by one's laziness and avoidance of stress of physical confrontation with others in person, but also through enforced social distancing as the byproduct of the pandemic, for example. Namely, these problems result from the failure to immerse oneself into actual socio-historical events at the micro and macro level and relativity preventing the dialectical synthesis of the choice to model and create our self-image autonomously.

The phenomenological method, which is highlighted in this paper, perhaps reveals in the best way the deep connection of these processes in a common virtual space although they act separately. This means that new identities are created in a chain of intersubjective relations[59] in which the questions of truth and falsehood, simulacrum and simulation, such as the differences between original and the copy content are left aside in these considerations. In this new age, emphasis is placed on important ways in which singular identity interferes with others, while traditional ontological questions are left aside.

Although this is one of the reasons why there is no unified media theory (because there is no unified ontology to establish it), in the end, it can be concluded that trying to think about the world in its processuality may not necessarily

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thinking.

[58] On narcissistic tendencies in the frame of epidemy of "narcissism epidemic" see Jean M. Twenge, and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitelment* (New York: Atria Books, 2010).

[59] On intersubjective relations see Gallagher, 258-274.

be wrong, although we never come to final. Like all phenomenologists, the researcher always tries to move from the phenomenon, from the identity to the thing itself, which we often miss in the process of research itself. Therefore, we can conclude that new forms of education that operate through these new media and virtual spaces cannot necessarily be labeled as something negative overall but that all their effects should be examined in relation to the contextual situations in which they operate. And could definitely be upgraded with the help of philosophical critical thinking endorsement, in order to preserve mental health of the digital media consumers, as one of the induction examples.

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# Pornography and Stress

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**Abstract**

*Pornography, especially in its compulsive form of viewing, is closely linked to ways of managing and reducing stress. Pornographic realism, which is the contemporary form of pornographic representation, is based on technological innovations such as photographic and digital recording of sexual reality. The description of the character of the two forms of recording demonstrates the historical development of pornographic realism. Moving away from pure psychology, we can discern in the field of human sciences the specificity of the relations between pornography and stress reduction through the distinction between the Principle of Pleasure (Lustprinzip) and the Principle of Reality (Realitätsprinzip) at the collective level or otherwise in the space of the co-being (Mitsein). On the other hand, the distance of sexual need from hunger and the plasticity of the former makes pornography a practicable way of dealing with the contradictions of ordinary existence. In sum, the above articulation explains how pornography makes the world of sexual satisfaction go hand in hand with coping with and managing stress.*

**Keywords:** *pornography; stress; photographic realism; digital body; pleasure principle; reality principle; psychoanalysis*

## I. Introduction

In the following article I propose to study pornography in relation to stress. Increasingly, the viewing of pornographic images, especially through digital media and on the internet, is becoming an object of great obsessive fixation. Beyond the ethical, social, gendered, political, economic and other dimensions of the phenomenon, here I intend to examine the weight of the specific factor of representation in relation to stress and its alleviation through pornographic viewing by individuals. The realism of

images is a key element in pornographic verisimilitude and what we are witnessing nowadays is an evolution in realistic imagery from photographic to digital illustration.

The digital flesh that is made real in this way will be subjected here to a comparative effort with psycho-social considerations as to the particular objective significance of the images. Stress, in view of the analysis, will be related to the double character of the ego, which consists in repelling the threatening element and in reconciling with it by processes of mental relaxation that are socially specific and coherently presented by Erich Fromm.

## II. Dr. Behrens and Dr. Klossowski: Pleasure and stress

As it is said, the digital age is proper for compulsory viewing pornography strongly associated with the decrease of stress.[1] The relevant process can be seen in the relation of pleasure and pain in the obtainment of the first by the diminution of tension in Freudian psychoanalysis. Thus according to Freud:

> In the theory of psychoanalysis we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure-principle. We believe, that is to say, that the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension – that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure.[2]

According to Thomas Szaz who quotes the passage above, "it is simply the pleasure-principle which draws up the programme of life's purpose."[3] And he refers to the following Freudian specification:

> Its [i.e., the ego's] activities are governed by considerations of the tensions produced by stimuli present within it or introduced into it. The raising of these tensions is in general

[1] See Beáta Bőthe, István Tóth-Király, Ágnes Zsila, Mark D. Griffiths, Zsolt Demetrovics, and Gábor Orosz, "The Development of the Problematic Pornography Consumption Scale (PPCS)," *The Journal of Sex Research* 55, no. 3 (2017): 2.

[2] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 7.

[3] Thomas Szaz, *Pain and Pleasure. A Study of Bodily Feelings* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 189.

> felt as *unpleasure* and their lowering as *pleasure*. It is probable, however, that what is felt as pleasure or unpleasure is not the absolute degree of the tensions but something in the rhythm of their changes. The ego pursues pleasure and seeks to avoid unpleasure.[4]

In Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924),[5] we see the concept of symptom on three different levels: the symptoms of the tuberculosis that have gathered the heroes of the novel in the sanatorium, also the symptoms of the hysterical behaviour that is probably discernible through their relationships in the place of their confinement, and the symptoms of the cultural decline in Europe, a depressing idea that runs throughout the novel.

As regards the first two, the positions of two doctors in the novel are typical. Thus Dr. Behrens believes that the disease is entirely organic and refuses to attribute any other dimension to it. In contrast, Dr. Krokowski believes that the symptoms are nothing but transformations of the power of love. This position obviously echoes Freudian views and, as is well known, Thomas Mann held the work of the father of psychoanalysis in high esteem.

It is certain that Freud insisted for decades on proving the biological underpinnings of the phenomena he studied. Hence a degree of positivism that persists in his work. In this context, Karl Jung's rebellion is rather understandable; despite his "loose science," Jung has a certain right in his insistence on the autonomy of psychic phenomena and in his critique of reductionism in Freud's work, a reductionism linked to the special physiognomy of the libido that the latter advocates. However, the modern psychoanalysis is, for its part, right in arguing that the father of psychoanalysis abandoned biological reductionism, adopting a more structural and therefore more autonomous conception of his psychological and cultural analyses. On this latter point, one can read in Freud the following lines:

> Although the act of repression demonstrates the strength of the ego, in one particular it reveals the ego's powerlessness [...]. For the mental process which has been turned into a symptom owing to repression maintains its existence outside the organization of the ego [...]. It does sometimes happen that the defensive struggle against an unwelcome instinctual impulse is brought to an end with the formation of a symptom [...]. But usually the outcome is different. The initial act of repression is followed by

[4] Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), 15-16.

[5] Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (London: Penguin, 1996), chapter III.14.

> tedious and often interminable *manoeuvres* in which the struggle against the instinctual impulse is prolonged into a struggle against the symptom.
>
> In this secondary defensive struggle the ego faces two ways. The one line of behaviour it adopts springs from the fact that its very nature obliges it to make what must be regarded as an attempt at restoration or reconciliation. The ego is an organization. It is based upon the maintenance of free intercourse and of the possibility of reciprocal influence between all its parts. [...]. The ego now proceeds to behave as though it recognized that the symptom had come to stay and that the only thing to do was to accept the situation in good part and draw as much advantage from it as possible. [...]. In this way the symptom gradually grows to be the representative of important interests; it is found to be useful for the maintenance of the self and becomes more and more closely merged with the ego and more and more indispensable to it.[6]

The symptom, in other words, becomes an element of personality, and this is, certainly and if anything, an idea extremely suitable for understanding the compulsory viewing of pornography.

## III. The photographic body and modern pornography

André Bazin sees mummification as one of the origins of the visual arts.[7] This process was a kind of preservation against the ravages of time and Egyptian art is a reflection of this desire. The preservation of form through the work of mummification signifies the attempt to preserve what is real through its appearances. Therefore, along with the deceased, the Egyptians bury the objects that accompany them in an attempt to preserve what they were before death. The ulterior progress of the visual arts has led to their separation from this Ancient beginning.

Of course, pornography has a tradition of its own which largely demonstrates an interconnection with the realm of the sacred. This sacred pornography is found in many different cultures in conjunction with the phenomenon of sacred prostitution. Only in China, we do not see the presence of sacred prostitution and pornographic pleasure has to do with

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[6] Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (London: Hogarth Press, 1949), 97-99.

[7] See André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 4-9.

the realm of the profane. In ancient Athens, the pornographers were the ones who took care of the beautification of the prostitutes and not the ones who were engaged in representing voluptuous scenes.[8] In Western Europe since the Renaissance and at least up to Neo-classicism the representations of erotic scenes (satyrs, fauns, nymphs) were strongly combined with the discourse of institutions: thanks to this official pornographic discourse, institutions appear not as cultural constructions but rather generated from Antiquity like almost physical creations.[9]

Nowadays, the phenomenality of a thing does not lead to the identification of the model and its representation as in Egyptian art; through representation we try to salvage the represented from oblivion and spiritual death that ultimately points to anxiety. The work of representation leads to a stage of idealization where a whole visual world is produced as an image of reality, beyond any anthropocentric utilitarianism (such as that of mummification). Realism, according to Bazin, is the psychological basis of virtual representation before any possible aesthetic evaluation.

Film thus appears as a stage of an evolution, in particular the path towards realism that occurs in painting after the Renaissance and in the midst of a crisis of representation. In other words, the sociology of photography and cinema focuses on the impasse of realistic representation that their emergence caused in the realistic representation of painting. At this point, we see both a rupture and continuity. Photography and cinema both challenge the painted realism, inaugurated during the Renaissance and at the same time continue and extend it.

Western painting had progressively moved from the spiritual realism of medieval painting to a more faithful imitation of the surrounding world, thanks also to the technique of perspective, which was both a mechanical and a scientific conquest. Due to perspective, painting was able to convey the illusion of three-dimensional space. Thus, painting oscillated between two opposing directions: the desire, on the one hand, to depict spiritual truths and, on the other, a second desire to render a copy of the real world. This second need for illusion completely absorbed painting after the Renaissance.

However, the Renaissance perspective covered only a part of the need for illusion since it rendered the relationships of forms in space but failed to represent movement. The copy of the real world was frozen. The need to extend realism towards movement meant the need for the dramatic expression inherent in movement. In the end, the need for illusion is not an aesthetic

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[8] Peter Hesse, "La prostitution," in *La sexualité* II, eds. Dr. Willy, and C. Jamont, 303-313 (Verviers: Marabout, 1964), 304-306.

[9] Lyombe Eko, *The Regulation of Sex-Themed Visual Imagery. From Clay Tablets to Tablet Computers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 51-62.

need per se but a psychological requirement that links the creation of a copy of reality with magic, understood as the magical omnipotence of creation. This psychological need was created by the new technological possibilities in Europe.

With photography, the reproduction of the external world from a painting technique moved into the world of technological immediacy. Photography gives the copy of the world in the moment. Satisfaction was greater, insofar as the reproduction of the world was not done through a painting technique that involved the artist but was mechanical and therefore more value-neutral (more objective). With the discovery of photography, painting is freed from the project of realism and moves, first of all, towards impressionism. The faithful reproduction of the world, the photographic, becomes now massive, it is for the satisfaction of the masses. The connoisseurs of pictorial art are turning to other modes of expression. This evolution reflects also the development of modern pornography.

The originality of photography lies in its essential objectivity. Between the external, objective world and its faithful representation another object (the camera) is inserted, for the first time in history. Reproduction obeys an absolute necessity (determinism), the technological, mechanistic one, while the human operator of the machine intervenes only secondarily (in the choice of the direction of vision, in the size of the frame, etc.). Photographic realism is fulfilled by the absence of the human factor in its production. Photographic realism, though mechanical, affects us as a natural phenomenon, like "a flower or a snow crystal" as Bazin writes.

Photographic representation has a huge psychological impact, it attracts the belief in the objectivity of the subject more than anything else. We can really speak of a transfusion of reality into the photographic image; it is literally an irrational force. Painting has now lost its realistically representational ambitions, yielding to the omnipotence of photography. The latter not only gives a faithful image of reality but freezes time, the moment-in-itself. Photography does not carry the ambitions that painting had, to depict or symbolize eternity. It suffices to rescue the moment (of photographic capture) from the ravages of time. This is the reason for its special charm, as we see in family photo albums. In this sense, film completes photographic objectivity in time, as it captures the very duration of things, a kind of embalming of the alternation of phenomena.

The aesthetic ambitions of photography always have to do with the revealing depiction of the real. Rather than the artist imitating objectivity, it is objectivity that imitates the artist in terms of creative productivity. To the extent that the reproduction of the real involves part of reality as testimony or evidence, photography also surpasses the artist.

With what has been mentioned above, it becomes obvious that realism in pornography is highlighted according to its position in the systems of representation of a historical era. Pornographic realism, on the other hand, is directly subject to pressures that have to do with the technique and economy of the medium in use. The inherent realism of a film, its very style, is the result of a series of "battles" fought between various factors of production and the efficiency, skill and vision of its director-creator. In this way, film is an exemplary art of modernism, as it falls neither into a popular tradition of creation (it is the result of a perfectly sophisticated technology and not of popular inspiration) nor into the profane idea of the sexual act (as the economic element cannot be overlooked in technological representation). We have seen that, often, realism in cinema tends to mean social realism. But the idea that the camera lens can by itself perceive both the external surface of things and the conditions of their reality is a misleading exaggeration.

## IV. The digital body and postmodern pornography

What are the special effects in cinema, in our digital age? The presentation of the transition of a person (actor/role) in an imaginary space that consists of: (a) realistic elements that do not exist in front of the camera but we can imagine and represent what they would be like if they really existed, and (b), unrealistic forces and elements that appear as figures without knowing if this representation corresponds to something real.

What distinguishes today's special effects from simple animation is the presence of the human body, which serves as a point of validation of "realism" or, better, the realistic contingency of what is happening on the screen. But this human body, whether floating in space or traversing potential environments, is not the body of realistic cinema. More specifically, it is not the body-idea that has been realistically depicted on film, endowed with the ontological fluency of the realistic depiction of the world. The alibi-body of digital special effects is a second body into which the existence of the actor's physical body has been transfused. This is clearly shown in the title and theme of James Cameron's recent film, *Avatar* (2009). The word avatar comes from the Sanskrit *avatara* meaning "transition into a new flesh," in other words, reincarnation.

The special effects' reincarnation is made possible by three characteristics of the media in our time: (a) the apotheosis of technological culture, (b) the attraction for an esoteric-scientific knowledge and (c) the possibility of representing certain pseudo-spiritual forms. The difference with previous media is that the latter are now engaged in an apology for the above characteristics which is based on a set of "new age" beliefs originating in

California, USA.[10] These doctrines allow the representation of a potential body which is, however, identifiable and personal (i.e., it bears the form of this or that precise actor). It is a digital body, created on the ultra-powerful computers of the special effects laboratories. The body resulting from this processing is the product of a participatory anatomy or, even, a "disembodied body." The seamless expression of this bodily potentiality was made possible by a total suspension of critical philosophies.

The recall of the critical attitude towards digital reality as alienation led to the apotheosis of *personae digitalis*. It is certain that the whole issue lies in a cultural politics of the body. As we said, it is not the body-idea of the old cinema which was the result of the play of desire and fantasy. Here we have the positive creation of an additional body. The positivity of this creation indifferently transcends critiques aimed at demystification while its artificial character is not subject to the category of false consciousness. In essence, it is a new condition of corporeality, the anti-flesh, the embodiment of a body without flesh through a re-evaluation of the mechanistic spirit of the digital age.

A new practice of corporeality and a new corporeal existence emerge with strong mythological elements and on the basis of a medical-scientific, technical discourse. Corresponding to this new corporeality is the rise of ambivalence and monstrosity (human and mechanical body in mixture). An intense mystical motif is added to this composite in an attempted transition from the physical to the electronic frontier of corporeality combined with an intense technological *enthusiasm*, considered etymologically (= from "enthousiazein," i.e. be inspired or possessed by a god, be rapt, be in ecstasy; and from *entheos,* i.e. the divinely inspired, possessed by a god – from *en* = in + *theos* = god). We ought to speak here of New-age spiritualism where the disembodiment of the physical body is achieved in cyberspace which resembles the Platonic transcendent country. In other words, it is a techno-spiritualism that does not constitute a renunciation of the body according to the ascetic spirit, but a digitalisation of the body. The cyberspace body obeys a body philosophy and a meta-physiology. Mechanism, theosophy and sci-fi culture intertwine and coexist while cyberculture moves from counter-culture to mythical reductionism and techno-mysticism.

It is an idealization of the archaic imaginary, of exoticism and gross generalizations in an atmosphere of syncretic changes and transpositions. In the digital space, virtual immateriality is combined with the ontic identity of the body through a discourse that invokes myths. It is a decontextualized and narcissistic reinvention of the themes of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

[10] See Mark B. N. Hansen, "Seeing with the Body: The Digital Image in Postphotography," *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001): 54-84; Catherine Bernard, "Bodies and Digital Utopia," *Art Journal* 59, no. 4 (2000): 26-31.

electricity as a magical force expressed in strange radiations that create new bodies. This constitutes the new form of dealing with anxiety through pornography. The mythical dimension of digital bodies facilitates the anti-stress magic. Thus, technology appears as an anti-stress warrant through pornography.

## V. Pornography, stress and critique

Psychoanalysis as a type of critique claims to be both materialistic and scientific.[11] The initial insight is that the psyche is driven by libidinal movements (Triebregungen) and by (blind) needs that have a physiological background but are defined by mental structures. Consciousness is limited by the mere fact that many drives are not conscious. Ideologies are consequently driven by needs or desires founded on the drives and by motives (ideal and moral) that are hidden and rationalized manifestations of the drives.

Here we see a first reference to reason in relation to a theory of motivation. Motivation is neither subjective nor psychological; it is, therefore, objective and rationalized. Freud is consistent with the popular classification of drives into hunger and love and his analysis is therefore characterized by commonality. There are two kinds of drives: (a) self-preservation (see, in this connection, the thought of Baruch Spinoza) and (b) sexuality. The latter drives are structured by an energy called libido, and the mental acts subject to the above energy are called libidinal. Sexual urges are generalized, not only referring to the genitals but to areas of de-escalation of tension characterized as voluptuous. These areas are called "erogenous zones." From here we can deduce the Pleasure Principle, which means the maximum de-escalation of the urges and thus the reduction of stress.

The Pleasure Principle is subject to the modifications imposed by the Reality Principle. In essence, it is a manipulation of time in order to avoid dissatisfaction or to obtain greater pleasure at a later time. The decisive factors in the structuring of the drives are (a) the organic constitution from birth and (b), the existential destiny (das Lebenschicksal). The *Leben* of the above term has the meaning of biography (historical and individual of existence) referring to individual lives. *Schicksal* (destiny) is that of the first childhood. Organic constitution and lived experience are complementary or, more precisely, constitute a complementary series. The psychoanalytic method, then, is a historical method and the libidinal construction is not universal but must be understood in relation to a singular destiny. Ultimately, normality and

[11] Erich Fromm, "Über Methode und Aufgaben einer analytischen Sozialpsychologie,ā *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1 (1932): 28-54. Published in English as "The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology in Erich Fromm," *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx and Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 110-134.

pathology are distinguished by optimal adaptation to the actual needs of an existence while maladaptation leads to neurosis.

Some clarifications are needed here: rationalization (Rationalisierung) always comes a posteriori and is pseudo-rational, therefore ideological. The real here (Reel) is understood as the opposite of the imaginary, the delusional, the de-realization process. It is therefore psychological, based on the Principle of Reality and distinct from the philosophical real (Wirklich). Another distinction is that between the individual which constitutes the objects and the personal which is based on the social interaction and, above all, that between psychoanalyst and analysand. The personal, therefore, is always due to be understood within a specific context and not as universally ontological.

Sexual drives are distinguished from self-preservation drives in that they are adaptable and malleable and thus more susceptible to representation, including pornography. Self-preservation urges are compelling, physiologically unbearable, and failure to satisfy them leads to death. This is not to say that self-preservation drives in situations of internal personality conflict emerge without doubt more powerful. Another difference between the two kinds of drives is that sexual drives may be repressed in the unconscious (Verdraenbar) while self-preservation drives are ever-present in consciousness; furthermore, sexual drives can be idealized (Sublimierbar).

Idealization means that the satisfaction of the initial sexual targeting can be removed through a rationalizing calculation combined with some ego excellence (performance) and thus substitute immediate satisfaction. In contrast, self-preservation cannot be idealized and its satisfaction is always in need of real means in the sense of *Wirklich*. The satisfaction of sexual drives can be imaginary, de-realized pornography. More specifically, a drive like sadism can be satisfied by murder or the re-enactment of murder (in the Roman arenas, for example). Finally, expressions of sexual urges are interchangeable with each other and are shifted in time within a process of seeking possible satisfactions of sexual urges. Sexual drives are of course adaptable, but to what end? The adaptability of sexual drives is the central idea of psychoanalysis and thus the beginning of a rational psychology but, at the same time, it explains irrationality in social life. Rational psychology does not deal with individuals but with socialized individuals, i.e. the social Being as the sum of such individuals.

The problem of the family context or, in other words, the "family novel" of psychoanalysis is, for Fromm, a pseudo-problem. The family refers always to the social structure from which it derives. The family is the psychological representation of society. The family, then, as I understand Fromm, is emblematic of the social structure and, thus, the expressions of the libido

have a double meaning: they are personal as drives but socio-familial as expressions. In order to move from psychoanalysis to critique, one must:

> - see how the bourgeois family turned out to be humanly typical and physiologically absolute.
> - demonstrate that the interpersonal is neither social nor familial – it is either therapeutic or revolutionary (as it happens with technological revolution).

Here, the libidinal structure becomes a universal foundation. However, individual destiny is played out on an accidental and socio-personal level. The task of critique is to discover the libidinal attachments (Bindungen) of persons. From individual therapeutics, this discovery is used in analytical thinking. The term "analytic" is understood here as an abandonment of analogical expression in science, that is, the use of analogies instead of an analysis of the co-Being. Analysis, instead of analogy, insists on the accidental, the personal and the historical elements.

For Fromm, the oedipal complex is typical only of the patriarchal society. It does not constitute a human universality at all, and on this point Freud for him has committed an error. However, we can move from an initial error to a fruitful analysis. Libidinal structure is adaptable only contextually, that is, in relation to its environment and to its characteristic limits. Material production is much less adaptive than libidinal momenta. Thus pornography is subject to technological determinism and mentally relaxing for the existing anxieties. The instinct of pornographic relaxation, in fact, refers to narcissistic needs that are among the most elementary and powerful, dependent on the given structure of a society.

Fromm seeks the language of real life, the intellectual relations (der geistige Verkehr). Consciousness is none other than the conscious human being. The irrationality of social life springs from historical life just as the inversion of objects in the retina of the eye springs from a natural process. For Fromm, material conditions can only be ascertained by the experimental method and the historical work consists in examining the physical foundations and their transformation. Psychoanalysis offers the knowledge of the mental constitution of man. Here, the libidinal structure is the physical foundation but not in general, as some axiomatic theory, but rather as a biological primordial form (Urform) that is always socially framed. From these observations, only one conclusion can be drawn: "human nature cannot be identified." Thus it is construed and can be technologically articulated even during sexual intimacy.

The technological condition of the subject is transferred to the spirit through the passions, a position almost classically philosophical, a transfer

that can be achieved, according to Freud, through (a) the organization of the ego or (b) idealization. Nature, in either case, is the interiority of man and ideology is founded on the unconscious. Through psychoanalysis, one can put forward the idea that ideas are rationalized impulses. This completes the reduction of the ideal, the ideal motives (Bewegruende) to their earthly core, but without avoiding the technological determination. The absence of a rational psychology had led to an idealistic psychology of the social instinct, which is none other than the innate moral axiom. But the nature of man is a natural force. More simply, we would say, it is a force. Ideology does not operate and its function cannot be explained without an understanding of the structure of libido. Thus, we cannot overlook the unconscious element at the theoretical level where one understands "perfectly" the phenomenon of the production of ideologies.

For example, the problem of social cohesion cannot be explained only by the use of coercion. There are also the feelings of (a) solidarity and (b) submission and domination. The libidinal appetite of common people is added to coercion. Sovereignty is not only the product of cunning or deceit as the Enlightenment wrongly held; it is therefore by no means a conspiracy alone. Fromm seems to desire a substantial extension of the Enlightenment project whereby libidinal adaptation is added to the science of submission. The pornographic relaxation can be extended to collective anti-stress strategies. During libidinal adaptation, the psychological foundation is added to the technological superimposition; this latter means, above all else, the attitude towards the father. Attention must be paid to the fact that the true father is not identified with the patriarchal society *in toto* and that, therefore, the true father is different from the social father. Patriarchal society ascribes to existence the meaning of obedience to the father as moral obligation. The cultural mechanism refers to socially required behaviour. Fromm attacks, at the axiomatic level, any idea of *pater familias* like most liberal thought before him (see John Locke's tolerance as an anti-authoritarian – anti-patriarchal – strategy).[12]

Despite the above general observations, every society has its own libidinal structure.[13] Therefore, any research must be related to given societies. The present path is from technology to the libidinal structure and to the intellectual sphere. The libidinal structure is changing as the technological structures do.

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[12] Fromm's detachment from psychoanalysis is evident in the way he assesses positively – like an Enlightenment intellectual – Freud's book *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and the critique of religion attempted there while criticizing the work *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) and its condemnation of culture. Fromm sees here a real contradiction between Freud's two books.

[13] For example, in regard to the libidinal structure of Western modernity and Kantian erotica, see Murat Mümtaz Kök, "The Masturbator and the Ban," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (2020): 47-64.

## VI. Conclusion

The libidinal structure of pornography cannot be identified with the libidinal economy of prostitution. Pornography is related to stress inasmuch as this last is at the origin of the first, while feelings of anxiety are the result of what we would call the hedonic failures that contaminate a social Being or a co-Being. One could match and balance the progression from photographic to digital verisimilitude by specifying the methods of diffusion of resistance or manipulation of stress that occur during the ascent from modern (photographic) realism to postmodern (digital) realism. The above specificity is important in order to understand the non-unified and ultimately multiple character of the pornographic phenomenon, which is not homogeneous but proportional to the stress that triggers it according to the analysis of Erich Fromm. Realism appears thus as a factor of stress management in the form of pornography.

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# Care and Empathy as a Crucial Quality for Social Change

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**Abstract**

*Suppose the contemporary man of the 21st century puts under control one of the most significant issues of humankind, like the shortage of food or hunger, epidemics of contagious diseases, and wars. Then remains the question which man first encountered at the dawn of the third millennium; it is a question of what to do with yourself. This question becomes extremely important if we consider biotechnology and information technology's immense growing power. What to do with so much power? Nevertheless, the most obvious question is whether a man has become better and more moral, empathetic and caring than he was. What seems to concern contemporary man includes happiness, divinity, and ultimately his improvement as a moral agent and his immortality. We will try to answer these and many other questions through the paradigm of ethics of care, closely related to the question of empathy. The paper will discuss and highlight empathy and care as crucial means for social change. Therefore, the main aim of such ethics is to alleviate human suffering and anxiety and promote human well-being and happiness. Can care, compassion, and empathy ethics provide us with some answers and become a path to a more moral world?*

**Keywords:** *empathy; ethics of care; human nature; global consciousness; ethical awareness*

## I. Introduction

When we talk about the most urgent issues of contemporary society and humankind, we want to emphasise that they are, as seen by authors like Yuval N. Harari, the following three: climate change, high inequality, and poverty tightly connected with lack and deficiency of care and kind praxis toward Other, nature and Earth in general. Harari asserts that we managed to contain the three problems of ancient and modern society at the dawn of the third millennium: food shortage, epidemics, and wars. Indeed, he claims, in contemporary society, for the first time, more people die of surplus and not from a shortage of food, more people die from diseases related to age and not from infectious diseases, and more people commit suicide than being killed in the war, or by gun.[1] Nevertheless, Harari wondered, what will be left on top of human priority if we finally manage to control hunger, conflicts, and infectious diseases?[2] What will get more attention from us in a healthy and prosperous society? That question is more important if we consider the great new power of biotechnology and IT technology. What will we do with those sources of immense power?

Nevertheless, we would say that this kind of assertion and thesis may sound like an assault or even senselessness and may show a lack of care for those who suffer from hunger and lack of means of subsistence. Billions of people live on the margins, on edge, or below the poverty line.

Harari claims that knowledge is the primary source of wealth and richness.[3] First, however, we ask, what kind of knowledge?

Philosopher Heidegger was sad that we live in a time of Oblivion of Being and utterly meaninglessness. Here, it should be emphasised that the positive sciences, as Heidegger calls them, the ontic sciences or the sciences of being have lost sight of the meaning of being, of the whole being, and consequently, of sense. According to Heidegger, we live in a time of oblivion and absence of the relationship with the human being, and that absence leaves the human being exclusive to the being so that the human being is almost abandoned by that relationship from its truth, its meaning. Heidegger emphasizes the importance of language in which, according to him, the abandonment of meaning and truth occurs, and consequently the possible finding of meaning and truth also occurs in language.

We need a new kind of knowledge, a new paradigm of so-called integrative, orientational knowledge, and a new type of sensitivity, which is bioethical sensibility. To speak of that in bioethics, we can mention

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[1] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tommorrow* (London: Vintage, 2017), 8.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 21.

the paradigm of care and empathy that will be discussed in the following exposition and interpretation. Therefore, this paper highlights the importance of ethics of care and empathy. What is important to note at this point is the related terms of compassion, kindness, and sympathy. Considering the wideness and broadness of the topic, that goes far beyond the domain of this paper, we will emphasise the importance of care and empathy.

The question that will capture our attention is whether a man has become better and more moral, empathetic, and more caring than is assumed. What seems more apparent is that the contemporary man is more concerned with questions of immortality, happiness, and divinity, and ultimately his improvement as a moral agent. We will try to answer these and many other questions in the paper by highlighting the importance of ethics of care. Can care, compassion, and empathy ethics provide us with some answers and become a path to a more moral world?

## II. What are the basic drives of human nature?

The main question from which we will start is the question of human nature in itself. Are we humans inherently selfish and aggressive beings, or are we more likely empathic, tender, and careful? More and more findings present a new interpretation of the history of civilisation by looking at the empathic evolution of the human race and nature and the profound ways it has shaped our development.

Recent discoveries in brain science and child development present new views that challenge us to rethink the long-held belief that humans are, by nature, only aggressive, materialistic, selfish, or self-intrested. Instead, the emerging knowledge that we are a fundamentally and inherently empathic species has profound and far-reaching consequences for society.[4]

Maria Sinaci highlights that the most recent challenge to ethicists is represented by moral enhancement, proposed by some as a solution to humanity's severe moral and ethical problems. For example, authors such as Savulescu and Persson argue for the necessity of the moral enhancement of human moral behaviour because people are not psychologically and morally prepared to face contemporary global issues.[5] Therefore, emphasising Sinaci, they affirm the necessity of moral enhancement methods such as pharmaceutical products, neurostimulation, genetic editing, and other

[4] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 2.

[5] Ingmar Persson, and Julian Savulescu, *Unit for the Future. The Need for Moral Enhancement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ingmar Persson, and Julian Savulescu, "Getting Moral Enhancement Right: The Desirability of Moral Bioenhancement," *Bioethics* 27 (2013): 124-131.

biological processes that can be used. Generally, there is hope among those who support moral enhancement that new biotechnologies could contribute to reasoning, increase of pro-social behaviour and empathy, and strengthen moral virtues.[6]

The ethical and philosophical implications, which appeared within the context of scientific discoveries such as neurobiology, neuropsychology, neurosociology, neurosciences, pharmacology, and medical biotechnologies, according to Sinaci, led to the birth of a new field of science, namely neuroethics. This term was initially used to indicate ethical aspects present in clinical neurology and brain research. Neuroethics investigates empirically the biological basis of ethical thought and behaviour, how it can be interpreted and influence ethical theory, and how the brain generates thought and moral action. In addition, it explains philosophical notions such as the basics of human nature, free will, personal identity, intentions, altruism, empathy, and value judgment.

For example, Karim Jebari understands moral enhancement as an improvement of empathy.[7] Persson and Savulescu consider that moral enhancement encompasses several factors, such as emotions, empathy, and reasoning.[8]

## III. Empathy and sympathy

That led us to the first crucial question of this paper: the question of empathy. We ask, is there a biological basis for morality? Is human nature inherently good, ethical and moral, or has it become one? Contemporary research exploring the connections between the brain and morality proves that the idea of a biological basis of morality has to be considered, as Aristotle and Epicurus taught, by observing human nature.[9]

Patricia Churchland is the most prominent supporter of the idea that morality is rooted in the biology of the brain. She aims to demonstrate that

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[6] Maria Sinaci, "Neuroethics and Moral Enhancement: The Path to a Moral World?" in *Ethics of Emerging Biotehnologies: From Educating the Young to Engineering Posthumans*, eds. Maria Sinaci, and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (New York: Trident Publishing, 2018), 37.

[7] Karim Jebari, "What to Enhance: Behaviour, Emotion or Disposition?" *Neuroethics* 7, no. 3 (2014): 253-261.

[8] Ingmar Persson, and Julian Savulescu, "The Perils of Cognitive Enhacement and the Urgent Imperative to Enhance the Moral Character of Humanity," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (2008): 162-177.

[9] Toni Fitzpatrick, "The Nature of Nature: Aristotle versus Epicurus," in *International Handbook on Social Policy and the Enviroment*, ed. Toni Fitzpatrick (Cheltenham, and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2014), 419-450; Christos Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics and Molecular Medicine in Epicurean Philosophy," in *History of Human Genetics: Aspects of Its Development and Global Perspectives*, eds. Heike I. Petermann, Peter S. Harper, and Susanne Doetz (Cham: Springer, 2017), 41-57.

morality is not innate, universal or a matter of appealing to a higher authority, be it God or Reason. Instead, the brain has evolved to "value" attachment, bonding, and trust. These values tighten and confirm social ties because that is the best way for the species to survive. She argues that morality is formed in a neurobiological frame that was submitted and designed through evolutionary and cultural processes, shaped by the local ecology, and modified by cultural developments through interconnected cerebral processes, eventually leading to moral behaviour.[10]

According to Sinaci, the dimensions of this neurobiological frame are the following: care, which is rooted in biological attachment towards family and closest friends – in addition, recognising psychological states, empathy and emotional intelligence, resolving issues in a social context, and learning social practices.

However, what is empathy? Jeremy Rifkin emphasises that the paradoxical relationship between empathy and entropy is at the very core of the human narrative. As he suggests:

> The irony is that our growing empathic awareness has been made possible by ever-greater consumption of the Earth's energy and other resources, resulting in a dramatic deterioration of the health of the planet.[11]

What does this mean? Resolving the empathy-entropy paradox would probably be the final test of our species' ability to survive and flourish on Earth in the future. Therefore, we assume that Rifkin argues that the Age of Empathy is eclipsing the Age of Reason.[12]

The awakening sense of selfhood, or self-aware individuals, brought in by the differentiation process, is crucial to developing and extending empathy, emphasises Rifkin. The more individualized and developed the self is, the greater our unique existence is allowing us to empathise with similar existential feelings in others. Moreover, feelings and understanding of self and needs bring more diverse people together, extend our empathic embrace, and expand human consciousness.[13]

Nevertheless, we ask if this kind of growing empathic consciousness is dimmed and comes too late to address the wide range of global problems of contemporary civilization and to face the existing problems.

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[10] Patricia S. Churchland, *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Universitiy Press, 2012).

[11] Rifkin, 2.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 26.

Empathy is the very means by which we create social life and advance civilisation. The precursor to empathy was the word "sympathy," which occurred during the European Enlightenment. Necessary to realise, the term "sympathy" was understood multilayered from the very beginnings of Ancient Greek philosophy, especially by observation of human nature by Aristotelians and Epicureans.[14] During the late 15th and the beginning of the 16th century the word "sympathy" started to be used in philosophical writings. Adam Smith's work on moral sentiment in the 18th century devoted attention to and highlighted the question of human emotions. Sympathy means feeling sorry for another's plight.

In the first place, the term *Empathie* in the German language was introduced by Herman Lotze in 1858 as a synonym for the German word *Einfühlung*. *Empathy* was then coined by Robert Vischer in 1872 and used in German aesthetics. According to Riffkin, the German philosopher and historian Wilhelm Dilthey borrowed the term from aesthetics and the works of Theodor Lipps. They began to use it to describe the mental process by which one person enters into another's being and comes to know how they feel and think.[15] Mark H. Davis emphasised that in 1909 the American psychologist Edward B. Titchener translated *Einfühlung* into a new word, "empathy."[16]

Unlike sympathy, which is more passive, empathy conjures up active engagement. It means the willingness of an observer to become part of another's experience, to share the feeling of the experience. Empathy is an art of an imaginative leap and the art of walking in someone else's shoes, understanding of emotions of other beings and using that understanding for channelling one's behaviours and acts.

## IV. Empathy and socialization

Neuroscientists have identified an "emphatic circle" composed of ten parts. First, evolutionary biologists have demonstrated that human beings are social animals and have a natural ability for empathy and cooperation. That radical turn in understanding what and who we are has led us to different conceptions and possibilities of realising how to create a better society, organise public life, encourage the wave of new paradigmatic perspectives, and better deal with problems of contemporary civilisation.

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[14] William Fortenbaugh, "The Pseudo-Aristotelian Problems on Sympathy," in *Emotions in the Classical World: Methods, Approaches, and Directions*, eds. Douglas Cairns, and Damien Nelis (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017), 125-142; David Konstan, Diskin Clay, Clarence E. Glad, Johan C. Thom, and James Ware, eds., *Philodemus: On Frank Criticism* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 49.3, 79.9-10.

[15] Edward Bradford Titchener, *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of Thought Processes* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909).

[16] Mark H. Davis, *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 5.

Generally speaking, the dramatic decline and reduction of empathy in our civilisation, primarily in the USA and Europe, is obviously present during the last ten years of the 21st century. On the other side, as it can be seen, the level of narcissistic epidemy is increased, and there is a vast amount of fragmented societies, civil engagement is weaker, and the ideology of free market and neoliberal paradigm is stronger than ever. All of these contribute to reducing empathy and the increase of selfishness and individualistic ideology.

There are distinct moments of the collapse of empathy in the history of our society. The enormous amount of violence and intolerance, poverty and hunger, global warming, and diminishing human rights in the past shows the lack of empathy. Nevertheless, it plays a crucial role in building a just society and warm human relations.

There has been broad interest in the import and impact of empathy on consciousness and social development over the past century. As a result, empathy has become the main topic in fields ranging from medical care to human resources management in the past decade. In addition, the biological discovery of mirror neurons, so-called empathy neurons, established the genetic predisposition for empathetic response across some mammalian realms.[17]

Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard biologist, made a paradigmatic shift and turned upside down centuries of thinking about human nature and its relationship to other animals. In his essay on biophilia, he questioned a Christian utilitarian view of humans given the right to domination over the other species (animals) and the enlightenment cartesian paradigm that animals and living creatures are "soulless automatons," namely Bacon's vision of mastering over nature to conquer it.

Wilson argues that human beings have a genetic and innate predisposition to seek empathic affiliation and companionship with other beings and dared to suggest that increasing isolation and loneliness from the rest of nature results in psychological and even physical deprivation with profound consequences for our species.[18]

What does this tell us about human nature? First, Rifkin poses the question of whether it is possible for humans not to be inherently evil or intrinsically self-interested and materialistic. Given this point, human beings are a very different kind of nature, an empathic one. All other drives that we have considered primary, like aggression, violence, selfish behaviour, and acquisitiveness, are secondary drives that flow from repression or denial of our most inner and fundamental nature, a nature to care and nurture.[19]

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[17] Rifkin, 14.

[18] Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[19] Rifkin, 18.

Many of the psychologists of the 1930s and 1940s thought differently than Freud. They ceased to follow his prevailing reflection that socialisation meant repression of basic drives, which he viewed as ultimately self-destructive and antisocial.[20] Instead, Rifkin points out that they argued that children are born with a reality principle to seek affection, companionship, intimacy, and a sense of belonging. The search for belonging is the primary of all needs and drives. However, society often tempers or represses those drives for intimacy and affection, suppressing empathetic strivings to transcend ourselves and serve socially constructive ends. Still, it remains the essential nature of human beings.

However, paradoxically, the reality is that each new, more complex energy-consuming civilisation in history increases the pace, flow, and density of human exchange. Furthermore, an increasingly interdependent social milieu creates more connectivity between people and requires more significant differentiation and individuation in specialised talents, roles, and responsibilities. This process pulls individuals away from the collective tribal "we" to an even more individual "I," which becomes the path to selfhood.[21] Rifkin points out that this awakening of a sense of selfhood is crucial to developing and extending empathy. Given these points, the more individualised and developed the self is, the higher our sense of our unique, mortal existence and our existential aloneness are. Rifkin highlights that these feelings in ourselves allow us to empathise with similar existential feelings in others.[22]

Can we then talk about the empathic turn and revolution in our society and history that has challenged our highly individualistic, atomistic, and materialistic cultures? Our culture is more reflective and introspective than it is extrospective and oriented towards out. We need a profound cultural turn, personal revolution, the transformation of the connection in society, and radical transformation on a political level. We need a change of power relations inside the society and just power distribution for those marginalised and excluded from decision-making.

Can empathy help us restore society on a political and public level as we have to do on a personal level? Rifkin argues that a heightened empathic sentiment also allows an increasingly individualised population to affiliate with one another in a more interdependent, expanded, and integrated society.[23] Civilisation is the detribalisation of blood ties and the resocialization

[20] Ibid., 20-21.

[21] Ibid., 23.

[22] Ibid., 24.

[23] Ibid.

of distinct individuals based on associational ties. Empathy itself makes the conversion and transition of society possible.[24]

## V. The empathy/entropy dialectic

What does this mean? The convergence of energy and communications revolutions changes profoundly the human condition for good, refigures society, social roles, relationships, human consciousness itself, and how the human brain comprehends reality.[25] Each more sophisticated communications revolution brings together more diverse people in increasingly more expansive and dense social networks. These processes extend our central nervous system, consciousness, and society in general and as a whole. In that way, communications revolutions, in turn, provide an ever more inclusive playing field for empathy to mature and consciousness to expand. That is the so-called empathy/entropy dialectic.[26] Is our consciousness merely a critical tool at the disposal of complex societies to organise survival far away from equilibrium and an entropic state, or are new energy and communications regimes the vehicles that consciousness uses to expand its horizons?

The flow and energy consumption keeps the system in constant flux. Occasionally, the fluctuations become so high that the system cannot adjust, and positive feedback takes over. In a word, the fluctuation feeds off itself and the amplification can easily overwhelm the whole system, which is happening today as civilisation heads to global peak oil production and real-time climate change impacts. As a result, the system would either collapse or reorganise itself. If it can reorganise itself, the new dissipative structure will often exhibit a higher order of complexity and integration. Some scientists believe that increased complexity creates conditions for evolutionary development.[27] However, new voices in the academic community argue that there is more to life's journey than merely surviving and reproducing. They begin their quest by asking an important question. Why do humans engage in ever more complex and interdependent social structures as a way of life?[28]

The more complex and developed a society is, the more significant economic revolution in history occurs, and the more energy consumption is needed. New energy regimes converge with new communications revolutions.

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Leslie A. White, *The Science of Culture: A Study of Man and Civilization* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1949), 374.

[26] Rifkin, 37.

[27] Ilya Prigogine, and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).

[28] Rifkin, 39.

Mentioned convergence of energy consumption and communications revolution is what changes human relations, reconfigures society and social roles, changes and expands human consciousness itself and thus changes the human condition forever. Those changes provide an ever more inclusive field for empathy to mature and consciousness to expand.[29] Thus the underlying dialectic of human history is the continuous feedback loop between expanding empathy and increasing entropy.

In further exposition, we will try to explain that it is not just our need to survive and reproduce that has driven this dynamic to ever greater complexity and extension. Instead, beneath all these strivings, the yearning and quest for human needs is something much higher and profoundly different.

To put it in another way, we would say that care, which is at the very roots of empathy, is the first step and precondition to empathy that is much more comprehensive and profoundly richer than care. The most compelling fact is that care is a basic structure of human nature present from the very beginning of human life and existence. When we empathise with another being, there is an unconscious understanding that their very existence, like ours, is fragile, made possible by the continuous flow of energy through their being. In other words, empathetic extension is the awareness of the vulnerability we all share and allows an individual to experience another's plight or condition "as though it were one's own" and that involvement itself also loops back to reinforce and deepen one's sense of selfhood because he has been there himself.[30] For example, philosophers Levinas and Buber call this a primordial ethics, the ethics of appeal and the formation and creation of an "I" through the encounter of Other, through Thou.

Human nature is instead predisposed to affection, care, companionship, sociability, tenderness, and empathic extension at a more fundamental level. In that case, there is the possibility that we might yet escape the empathy/entropy dilemma and dialectical turn. Nevertheless, to put it differently, we need another radical ethical turn and moral action, as we will demonstrate in further exposure.

## VI. The ethics of care

That led us to another important question of this paper: a question of care and, related to that, the ethics of care. As can be seen, the ethics of care and care itself did not occupy philosophers until Carol Gilligan's capital work *In a Different Voice*, in 1982.[31] Generally speaking, her work has significantly impacted philosophy since then. For this reason, philosophers started to talk

[29] Ibid., 37.

[30] Ibid., 41.

[31] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

again about the emotional grounds of morality, care, and emotions, not just justice and reason. Significantly, ethics of care addresses the existing asymmetries in power. Ethics of care has the potential to become global ethics that must address differences and exclusions. We would correctly argue that it must address differences by seeing them as constituted in and through relationships. The era of globalisation and neoliberal paradigm is indeed one that is characterised by new connections and profound interdependence on one side.

Nevertheless, the era of globalisation and neoliberal paradigm is profoundly individualistic, selfish and distanced, characterised by radical differences, perceptions of differences affected by power relations and patterns of exclusion.[32] The new ethics for such an era cannot remain at a distance, adopt a "view from outside," or remain behind. An era of global interdependence demands relational ethics, which places the highest value on promoting, restoring, or creating good social and personal relations and prioritises the needs and concerns of "concrete" rather than "generalisable" others.[33] A moral response is not merely a rational act of will but an ability to focus on another and recognise the other as genuine. Such recognition is neither natural nor social but emerges from connections and attachments.[34]

We need a genuine and profound "relational turn" that focuses on the "interpersonal and social contexts in which these and all other human relations occur."[35] All things considered, the ethics of care can give others a different voice than those who cannot speak for themselves.

Virginia Held emphasises that ethics of justice focuses on questions of fairness, equality, individual rights, freedom, abstract principles, and the consistent application of them. Ethics of care focuses on attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations.[36] Ethics of care sees the interests of others as significantly intertwined rather than merely competing, fostering social bonds and cooperation. These are very different emphases of what morality should consider – both deal with what seems of great moral importance. The implication may be that justice and care should not be separated into different ethics but intertwined and connected.

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[32] Fiona Robinson, *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory, and International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[33] Ibid., 46.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Jenny Edkins, "Legality with Vengeance: Famines and Humanitarian Relief in 'Complex Emergencies,'" *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* 25, no. 3 (1996): 573.

[36] Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 15.

In dominant moral theories of the ethics of justice, the values of equality, impartiality, fair distribution, and noninterference are the priority, individual rights are protected, impartial judgments are arrived at, and equal treatment is sought. On the contrary, Held emphasises that the ethics of care, the values of trust, solidarity, mutual concern, and empathetic responsiveness have priority, relationships are cultivated, needs are responded to, and sensitivity is the primary practice.[37]

Demiut Bubeck highlights and "endorses the ethics of care as a system of concepts, values, and ideas, arising from the practice of care as an organic part of this practice and responding to its material requirements, notably the meeting of needs."[38]

Ethics of care and ethics of justice are intertwined, but too much integration will lose sight of these valid differences. An adequate, comprehensive moral theory will have to include insights into both the ethics of care and the ethics of justice. Equitable caring is not necessarily better care, it is fairer caring, and humane justice is not necessarily better justice. It is more caring justice.[39]

The question is still how care and justice are to be intertwined without losing their differing priorities and paradigms in the different realms of society constituting a task always being worked on. Held considers it better to implement and promote care perspectives across continents and the public domain. It is a much more promising way to achieve respect and dissemination of universal human rights than rational recognition.[40] For Held, the argument is straightforward. There can be care without justice, but there can be no justice without care. However, no child or human being would survive without care, and then there would be no persons to respect.[41]

## VII. The social, economic and political relevance of the ethics of care

The main objection to the ethics of care is that it does not provide adequate theoretical resources and ground for dealing with justice issues. However, Sara Ruddick, for example, argues that the ethics of care has relevance in social, economic and political spheres and shows its implications for efforts to achieve peace.[42]

We should be able to see all the deficiencies inside the human relations within society and rethink and reorganise society to be more favourable and hospitable to care, rather than marginalising it.

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[37] Ibid., 16.

[38] Demiut Bubeck, *Care, Gender, and Justic*e (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 11.

[39] Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 16.

[40] Ibid., 17.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

I think that every domain of the public sphere and life needs a transformation in light of the values of care. If we take care seriously, and it becomes the primary concern of society, care would move to the centre of our attention. Instead of being fragmented and abandoning culture to the dictates of the marketplace, we should make it possible for a culture to develop in ways best to enlighten and enrich human life.[43]

Joan Tronto argues for the political implications of the ethics of care, seeing care as a political and moral ideal. She points out that "caring activities are devalued, underpaid, and disproportionately occupied by the relatively powerless in society."[44]

Consequently, many suppose that the ethics of care is family ethics, confined to the private sphere. However, we argue that the ethics of care and its values are even more fundamental and more relevant to the public life of society than that traditionally relied on. Instead of seeing the corporate sector, military strength and government and law as the most critical segments of society deserving the highest levels of wealth and power, a caring society sees the tasks of raising children, educating its members, satisfying basic human needs and preserving the environment as the most important and necessary sectors. The ethics of care is not limited to the private sphere of family and personal relations. Instead, we need to focus on and understand its social and political implications, and when that happens, it is a radical ethic calling for a profound restructuring of society. Then the ethics of care should have the resources for dealing with power and violence.[45]

Most defenders and advocates of the universality of the principles of the ethics of care seek the fundamental and universal experience that should be in the foundation of our consideration of the universality and potentiality of the ethics of care. The primary experience is the experience of caring. Every conscious human being has been cared for as a child, sees the value of the care that shaped him or her, and recognises the moral worth of the caring relations that give them a future. "The ethics of care builds on that experience that all persons share, though they have often been unaware of its embedded values and implications."[46] According to Held, it is becoming apparent that this requires profound changes in how morality is understood, including in international relations and power distribution. We must acknowledge the necessity of

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[43] Virginia Held, "Shaping Feminist Culture," in *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society and Politics,* ed. Virginia Held (Chicago, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 122-134.

[44] Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 113.

[45] Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 16.

[46] Ibid., 21.

rethinking and reconstructing care ethics in the inadequacy of strictly rights-based or justice ethics.

It is obvious how international law has been deeply gendered. Issues traditionally linked to males have been interpreted as general human concerns, whereas women's concerns have been relegated to a particular category, undervalued and marginalised. The public/private distinction and domains were reproduced at the international level to perpetuate and generate different levels and forms of marginalisation and violence against women. In addition, Held emphasizes the merits of feminist moral theorists in pointing out the fact that strictly rights-based or justice ethics is determined by (male) gender, and therefore they reject rights-based or justice ethics and develop ethics of care.[47]

## VIII. Conclusion

What we need is not only transformations of given domains and circumstances that ethics of care requires, domains such as the legal, the economic, the political, the cultural ones within a society, but also a transformation of the relations between such domains and between distributions of power within them in the global context. One of the central concerns of a caring global and comprehensive policy is responsibility for global environmental well-being.[48] Our paper discussed and highlighted the importance of empathy and care as crucial means for this kind of social change. The main aim of such ethics, as we have seen, is to alleviate human suffering and anxiety and promote human well-being and happiness. The globalisation of caring relations would help people of different states and cultures live in peace, respect each other's rights, empathise, care for their environments, and improve their children's lives. As we try to illustrate, the crucial message of this paper is that care, compassion, and empathy ethics can provide us with answers on how to build a more just and moral world.

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[47] Ibid., 166.

[48] Ibid.

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# Epicurean Stability (eustatheia): A Philosophical Approach of Stress Management

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**Abstract**

*Epicurus used an empirical and sensualistic approach to knowledge, creating a consistent, naturalistic, pragmatic and consequentialistic philosophy. The scientific observations of the last centuries have confirmed the basic principles of Epicurean physics, as well the psychotherapeutic approach of Epicurean ethics, which fits human nature. We know from the work "On Frank Criticism" of Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara, that the teaching methodology of Epicureans included psychoeducational counseling through therapeutic criticism based on friendly freedom of speech and aiming at τῆς ψυχῆς θεραπείαν (psychotherapy) and at knowledge of maintaining mental health and well-being. The Epicureans called εὐστάθεια (eustatheia, "stability") the psychosomatic balance (τὸ τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ ψυχῆς εὐσταθὲς κατάστημα), which today we call homeostasis (ὁμοιόστασις), and considered it the basis of true happiness. They recognized empirically the stress that disturbed psychosomatic homeostasis as an agitation of the psyche or a painful feeling of the body and used a number of mental and affective techniques (including the tetrapharmakos) to manage stress at its onset, so that it does not evolve into the particularly troublesome conditions of anxiety and/or depression, which may become chronic psychosomatic disorders with significant social consequences. The article discusses the relation of the main ethical teachings of Epicurus with the biological basis of human brain functions and with the management of stress by cognitive and behavioral psychotherapy.*

**Keywords:** *Epicurus; Epicurean philosophy; homeostasis; stress management; eustatheia; eudaimonia; pursuit of happiness; brain function; biological psychology; cognitive psychotherapy*

## I. Introduction

The teachings of ancient Greek philosophers contribute to the progress of the human civilization, as they are timeless sources of inspiration. In some cases, modern scientific research findings support philosophical views whose ancestral concepts were originally expressed more than two millennia ago. One such example of a major Greek philosopher, for whom there has been a renewed interest in recent decades, is Epicurus the Athenian (341-270 BCE), the founder of the Epicurean School *Κῆπος* (Kepos, Garden). Epicurus used an empirical and sensualistic approach to knowledge, creating a consistent, naturalistic, pragmatic and consequentialistic philosophy. The scientific observations of the last centuries have confirmed the basic principles of Epicurean physics, as well as the psychotherapeutic approach of Epicurean ethics which fits human nature and is effective in stress management. The well-known psychiatrist Irvin Yalom noticed that Epicurus practiced "medical philosophy" to alleviate the root cause of human misery, the omnipresent fear of death, and wrote: "The more I learn about this extraordinary Athenian thinker, the more strongly I recognize Epicurus as the proto-existential psychotherapist."[1]

We know from the work *Περὶ παρρησίας* (*Peri parrhesias*, *On Frank Criticism*) of Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara, that the teaching methodology of Epicureans included psychoeducational counseling through therapeutical criticism based on friendly freedom of speech and aiming at *τῆς ψυχῆς θεραπείαν* (tes psyches therapean, psychotherapy) and at knowledge of maintaining mental health and well-being.[2] The Epicureans called *εὐστάθεια* (eustatheia, "stability") the psychosomatic balance, which today we call homeostasis (ὁμοιόστασις) and considered it as the basis of happiness.[3] They recognized empirically the stress that disturbed psychosomatic homeostasis as an agitation of the psyche or a painful feeling of the body and used a number of mental and affective techniques to manage stress at its onset so that it does not evolve into the particularly troublesome conditions of anxiety or depression, which may become chronic psychosomatic disorders.[4]

The following text attempts to illustrate the fact that the main teachings of the ethical philosophy of Epicurus are grounded on the biological basis

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[1] Irvin D. Yalom, *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 2-3.

[2] David Konstan, Diskin Clay, Clarence E. Glad, Johan C. Thom, and James Ware, eds., *Philodemus: On Frank Criticism* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998).

[3] "εὐστάθειαν ἄνω καὶ κάτω μετερῶντες ἐκ τοῦ σώματος εἰς τὴν ψυχήν." Plutarch, *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum*, 5.

[4] George P. Chrousos, "Stress and Disorders of the Stress System," *Nature Reviews Endocrinology* 5 (2009): 374-381.

of mental functions in humans and on the philosophical approach of stress management by cognitive and behavioral psychotherapy.

## II. A brief history of health concepts regarding stress

Although there have been attempts of treating diseases since prehistoric times, scientific medicine based on empirical observations and rational deductions was first established in the Greek world as a "byproduct" of natural philosophy, which was originally developed by the Ionian philosophers.[5] The most important concepts that relate to health and disease in scientific evidence-based medicine were first introduced and evolved from ancient Greek philosophy and medicine thinkers. The concepts of homeostasis, the state of steady internal physical and chemical condition of a living organism, and stress, the state of threatened or disturbed homeostatic stability, are of particular interest.

In the 6th century BCE, Pythagoras of Samos was the first philosopher to call the dynamic balance of the universe *harmonia* (ἁρμονία, harmony) teaching that this balance is threatened by forces with disruptive tendencies, while it is restored by adaptive forces.[6] Two Pythagorean physicians who lived in the 5th century BCE contributed thoughts on this line. Empedocles of Akragas wrote about two active forces, *neikos* (νεῖκος, strife) and *philotes* (φιλότης, friendship), which disrupt and restore balance, while Alcmaeon of Croton wrote that the human being, as a complex system, is also in harmonious balance, which he called *isonomia* (ἰσονομία, now meaning equality under the law). At the end of the 5th century BCE, also influenced by Pythagorean notions, the father of scientific medicine Hippocrates of Kos proposed that health is a balance of harmonious coexistence of four humors (εὐκρασία, eucrasia), while any disharmony or imbalance (δυσκρασία, dyscrasia) would be the cause of a disease.[7]

In the 4th century BCE, Aristotle of Stagira, son of physician Nicomachus, used the observation method of clinicians and spoke plainly about the unity of body and soul, grounding his ethical theory in human biology and becoming the first philosopher to speak extensively of *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία, a blissful, prolonged, imperturbable state of happiness). Following the empirical observation method and the biological ethics of Aristotle, Epicurus the Athenian in the beginning of the 3rd century BCE

[5] Christos Yapijakis, "Hippocrates of Kos, the Father of Clinical Medicine, and Asclepiades of Bithynia, the Father of Molecular Medicine," *In Vivo* 23, no. 4 (2009): 507-514.

[6] George P. Chrousos, "Systems Biology and the Stress Response: From Pythagoras and the Epicureans to Modern Medicine," *European Journal of Clinical Investigation* 42, s. 1 (2012): 1-3.

[7] Yapijakis, "Hippocrates and Asclepiades," 507-514.

considered philosophy as a means for a dynamic healing of the soul aiming at developing eudaimonia and dealt with the psychosomatic balance of human beings, which he called *eustatheia* (εὐστάθεια, stability) of the flesh and soul. While for Aristotle eudaimonia was the emotional action of a virtuous person, for Epicurus eudaimonia was a pleasurable condition in which there is no mental agitation (ἀταραξία, ataraxia) and no corporeal pain (ἀπονία, aponia). It is worth mentioning that Aristotle believed that the eudaimonic life is pleasant, because the virtuous person enjoys acting virtuously,[8] while Epicurus proposed that a happy life cannot be achieved without virtue.[9]

During the Hellenistic era of the three last centuries BCE, striking advances in the knowledge of human physiology and medicine were achieved, mainly in Alexandria, where famous experimental physicians, such as Herophilus and Erasistratus, laid the foundations for the scientific study of Anatomy and Physiology.[10] In the 1st century BCE, the physician Asclepiades of Bithynia, influenced by Epicurean philosophy, was the first to describe diseases as pathological conditions caused by "molecules' shaping and flowing," proposing a theory with apparent similarities to what is known today as molecular medicine.[11] The Roman Epicurean poet Lucretius described in a long poem the most important scientific work of Epicurus *Περὶ φύσεως* (*On Nature*). In his majestic poem of about 7400 verses entitled *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), Lucretius included many important concepts, such as modes of inheritance and evolution of animals by natural selection, two millennia before Gregor Mendel and Charles Darwin described them.[12] In addition, based on Thucydides' account, the Roman poet described the Plague of classical Athens and named the pathogenic *semina* (sperms) as the cause of the epidemic.[13]

The discovery of Lucretius' lost poem in the 15th century influenced the Italian Gerolamo Fracastoro, who described the *semina* of infectious diseases, laying the foundations of modern scientific study in epidemiology

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[8] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1099a 13-21.

[9] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and opinions of eminent philosophers*, 10: 132).

[10] James M. S. Pearce, "Early Contribution of Alexandria Medical School to the Anatomy, Physiology and Pathology of the Nervous System," *Revue Neurologique* 175, no. 3 (2019): 119-125.

[11] Yapijakis, "Hippocrates and Asclepiades," 507-514.

[12] Christos Yapijakis, "Genetics and Ancient Greek Philosophers: From Myth to Science," in *Hybrid and Extraordinary Beings: Deviations from "Normality" in Ancient Greek Mythology and Modern Medicine*, eds. Panagiotis N. Soucacos, Ariadne Gartziou-Tatti, and Minas Paschopoulos, 269-279 (Athens: Konstadaras Medical Publications, 2017).

[13] Christos Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics and Molecular Medicine in Epicurean Philosophy" in *History of Human Genetics*, eds. Heike I. Petermann, Peter S. Harper, and Susanne Doetz, 41-57 (Cham: Springer, 2017).

and microbiology. Another influence of Lucretius' book was the concept of the differing individual reactions to a disease,[14] that prompted the 17th century English physician Thomas Sydenham to write that the manifestations of a disease are not only due to the pathogenic factor itself, but also to the individual patients' reaction to the stress caused by the disease. This notion has been verified by modern science, as disorders caused by chronic stress, such as anxiety, depression, obesity, metabolic syndrome, etc., derive from the rise of stress mediators, including the hormones cortisol and the catecholamines norepinephrine and epinephrine.[15] In the 19th century, the French physiologist Claude Bernard spoke of the "stability of the internal environment" of the organism, while in the early 20th century the American physiologist Walter Cannon described stress that disrupts this internal balance, which he first named *homeostasis,* using a novel compound Greek word, although, in reality, he redescribed the preexisting terms *isonomia* and *eustatheia,* previously coined respectively by Alcmaeon and Epicurus.[16]

## III. A brief description of the Epicurean philosophy

The Athenian philosopher Epicurus was the first empiricist, humanist and "enlightener" philosopher. He was interested in the study and comprehensive understanding of physical reality with the distinct purpose of achieving peace of mind and happiness: "I constantly dedicate my activity to the scientific study of nature and thus, more than in any other way, I bring peace to my life."[17]

Epicurus had been taught the most important philosophies with conflicting beliefs of his time, including the Platonic idealism, the Aristotelian pragmatism, the Democritean atomism, and the Pyrrhonian skepticism.[18] To objectively evaluate the various philosophical opinions, the Athenian philosopher introduced the "Canon" (Κανὼν), an empirical gnoseological methodology based on observation using the senses and drawing conclusions about unknown phenomena, in analogy to the observed known.[19] Epicurus' physics was influenced

[14] "quod ali cibus est aliis fuat acre venenum." Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 4: 637.

[15] Nicolas C. Nicolaides, Elli E. Kyratzi, Agaristi Lamprokostopoulou, George P. Chrousos, and Evangelia Charmandari, "Stress, the Stress System and the Role of Glucocorticoids," *Neuroimmunomodulation* 22, no. 1-2 (2015): 6-19.

[16] Chrousos, "Systems Biology and the Stress Response," 1-3.

[17] Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*: "παρεγγυῶν τὸ συνεχὲς ἐνέργημα ἐν φυσιολογίᾳ καί τοιούτῳ μάλιστα ἐγγαληνίζων τῷ βίῳ." Laertius, 10: 37.

[18] Laertius, 10: 13-14.

[19] Christos Yapijakis, ed., *Epicurean Philosophy. An Introduction from the "Garden of Athens"* (Athens: Stavrodromi Publications, 2022).

by the atomism of Democritus and his ethics was based on the biological ethics of Aristotle. Epicurus bridged the invisible world of Democritus' atoms with the colorful tangible world of Aristotle through chemistry.[20]

The Athenian philosopher realized that atoms have very few properties, but the way they bond together forming an aggregate (molecule) allows the emergence of new properties, producing the variety of composite bodies of the observable world based on the chemical laws of conservation of matter. The empirical approach Epicurus used made his philosophy naturalistic, comprehensible and extremely consistent, as shown by the fact that it is largely outlined by few authentic sources of Epicurus, which are also short (only three teaching letters and some phrases saved by his biographer Diogenes Laertius). The emerging essence of Epicurus' philosophy is confirmed by the other available sources, such as the texts of the Epicurean philosophers Lucretius, Philodemus and Diogenes of Oenoanda. The basic principles of Epicurean philosophy are extremely compatible with modern scientific findings, more than any other ancient philosophy.[21]

Epicurus observed that humans seek pleasure and avoid pain since childhood, because it is in their nature. As previously mentioned, he taught that eudaimonia is a pleasurable state in which there is no mental agitation (ἀταραξία, ataraxia) and no corporeal pain (ἀπονία, aponia). He maintained that people could exert prudently their free will to avoid useless beliefs and careless acts and to prefer useful opinions based on reality and virtuous acts to achieve a happy life.[22] The Athenian philosopher taught that "there is no pleasant life without prudence, goodness and justice, nor is a life with prudence, goodness and justice without pleasure."[23]

According to Epicurus, "prudence is the beginning and the highest good from which all other virtues derive."[24] Evaluative judgments can be made with prudence, aiming at achieving mental and physical health and a happy life:

> a) The knowledge resulting from the objective observation of nature (φυσιολογία, "study of nature," science) that reassures intelligent people is to be preferred. The belief in unrealistic myths that cause fear and agitation in fools is to be avoided.
> (b) The reasoning based on empirical criteria of truth is preferred. The

[20] Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts," 41-57.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Darrin M. McMahon, *The Pursuit of Happiness: A History from the Greeks to the Present* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

[23] Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, 5.

[24] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*: "πάντων ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν φρόνησις [...] ἐξ ἧς αἱ λοιπαὶ πᾶσαι πεφύκασιν ἀρεταί." Laertius, 10: 132.

dialectic and rhetorical schemes are avoided as disorienting.
c) The virtues are preferred as means for a pleasant life. The wickedness that characterizes a troubled and unhappy life should be avoided.
d) It is preferable to fulfill the natural and necessary desires, otherwise there will be corporeal pain (e.g., thirst for water, when we are thirsty) and to avoid the satisfaction of unnatural and unnecessary desires (e.g., the vain desire for fame or riches), while natural and unnecessary desires (e.g., for a rare delicacy) are occasionally fulfilled, as long as no unnecessary suffering is created.
e) The pleasures that lead to eudaimonia are preferred and the pleasures that may cause pain and agitation are avoided.
f) It is preferable to deal with fears through the knowledge of nature and to avoid superstition, irrational fear of death and the fear of unfulfilled foolish desires.
g) An intellectually and emotionally fulfilling friendship is preferred to a lonely life, which is considered foolish and miserable.

It is obvious that according to Epicurus, the prudent persons will pursue their personal benefit through virtue, friendship and the promotion of social utility, not independently of society, nor to its detriment. Only with actions that benefit them, and their fellow people can they be calm and happy (Figure 1).

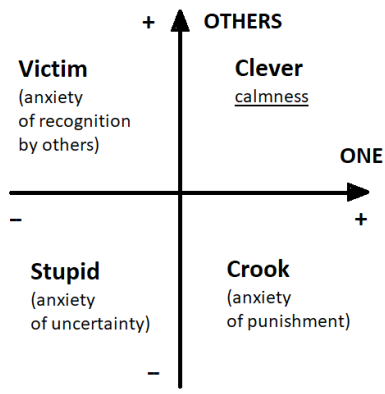


Figure 1. Win-lose diagram of one person's actions versus others [modified from Carlo M. Cipolla, The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity (New York: Doubleday, 2021), and first presented by Christos Yapijakis in the live conversation "Epicurean Philosophy and Modern Science and Life" in 2018: https://edge-growth-maturation.net.technion.ac.il/2018/10/29/epicurean-philosophy-and-modern-science-and-life/]. The horizontal axis corresponds to the action of one person that acts in a positive way for him or her, or in a negative way for him or her, and what influence that action has on others; positive or negative more or less. If one does an action that will cause one to gain but others to lose, that person is a crook. If one does an action that one will lose and others will gain that person is a victim, if does that all the time. If one does something that one will lose and others will lose, that person is stupid. But if one does something so that one and others will gain at the same time, that person is clever. To combine this way of thinking with the possibly corresponding anxiety or the lack of anxiety that Epicurus wants, the only person that remains calm is the clever person who is in the win-win situation. The victim has the anxiety of recognition of his/her "sacrifice." The stupid has the anxiety of uncertainty. The crook has the anxiety of punishment, even if that person escapes a hundred times as Epicurus mentioned. Therefore, the only way to be happy is to always try to act cleverly in win-win situations. As Epicurus emphasized, virtue is the best strategy towards happiness.

## IV. The Epicurean healing of the soul

For about thirty-five years, in his school *Κῆπος* (Kepos, Garden), Epicurus taught men and women of all ages and classes how to live a happy life. The students learned to reason and evaluate opinions using the criteria of truth (Canon), to be aware of the basic facts of nature (physics), as well as to choose wisely their preferences and avoidances in theory and in practice (ethics).

According to Epicurus, the benefit of philosophy depends on the treatment of the diseases of the soul, just as the benefit of medicine depends on the treatment of the diseases of the body. The first four opinions of the Athenian philosopher from his book *Principal Doctrines* were a kind of powerful philosophical antidote to the widespread human fears, the famous τετραφάρμακος (tetrafarmakos, four-part remedy): "God is not fearful, death is not perceived, the good is easily acquired, the bad is easily endured."[25] The Epicurean teachings had a clear orientation to practical psychotherapy as a derivative of basic notions, such as the material composition of the soul, happiness as the primary purpose of a prudent life, friendship as a cohesive social factor, objective observation of human behavior and character and knowledge of history as a means for the foresight of a behavior's future consequences and evolution of personality, and free will and prudence as means of character improvement. According to Epicurus, people are free to choose their thoughts and behavior, but due to this freedom they are at the same time responsible for their actions.

The Epicureans continued for centuries providing psychotherapeutic counseling, as attested by the work *Περὶ παρρησίας* (*Peri parrhesias, On Frank Criticism*) of Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara, who lived two centuries after Epicurus and taught prominent Romans, such as the poets Horace and Virgil.[26] Philodemus affirms that the Epicurean teaching was based on frank expression of opinion and well-intentioned admonition within a friendly environment aiming at *τῆς ψυχῆς θεραπείαν* (*tes psyches therapean*, psychotherapy) and at knowledge of maintaining mental health and well-being.[27] The Kepos felt more like a family of friends than a school, and the teachers were the elder brothers, showing the way to happiness to their younger ones through the experiential improvement of one through

[25] "ἄφοβον ὁ θεὸς, ἀνύποπτον ὁ θάνατος, τ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν εὔκτητον, τὸ δέ δεινὸν εὐεκκαρτέρητον." Philodemus, *Adversus Sophistas*, 1005, 5: 9-14.

[26] Marcello Gigante, *Philodemus in Italy: The Books from Herculaneum* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

[27] David Konstan, Diskin Clay, Clarence E. Glad, Johan C. Thom, and James Ware, eds., *Philodemus: On Frank Criticism* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998).

the others ("save one another").[28] The psycho-pedagogical approach of the Epicurean community seems to have been effective, since admonition through frank criticism was really done with the understanding of a caring friend and "the philanthropic interest of a doctor towards a patient," according to the description of Philodemus.

The Epicurean methodology is extremely reminiscent of modern approaches to cognitive and behavioral psychotherapy.[29] The correspondence with modern practice is obvious, in which the psychologists or psychiatrists undertake psychotherapy themselves by experienced colleagues before starting to help their patients. The Christian mystery of *exomologesis* (confession) also has its roots in Epicureanism.

## V. The Epicurean eustatheia

According to Epicurus, eudaimonia is a hedonistic steady state of being (καταστηματικὴ ἡδονὴ, static hedone) free of agitation and pain. The happy life could be achieved only by prudent people, who on the one hand do not have irrational fears of gods and death, while on the other hand recognize their irrational, unnatural and unnecessary desires and avoid them. People who want to live happily should exercise their practical wisdom to understand the nature of their emotions as criteria of truth, to allow the expression of the useful ones and to control that of the disruptive ones. The Epicureans recognized that it was normal for every person to have some unpleasant emotions, the "δήγματα" (degmata, bites), when something stressful happened upsetting the soul. The bite was a normal unconscious mental reaction to a distressing event that disrupted inner eustatheia, causing a spontaneous primary emotion (anger, sadness, etc.), which Epicureans should then process wisely, so that it would not be allowed to expand excessively and become self- or hetero-catastrophic.

Therefore, the Epicureans aimed at eustatheia, the good psychosomatic balance, since they believed that "the consistently good condition of the flesh and the relating hope for its preservation offer the ultimate and surest joy to those who are able to contemplate it."[30] Epicureans were taught to ascend the scale of pleasure by intensifying its continuity and to control its discontinuity. They became more interested in quality than in quantity by taking into account (συμμέτρησις, symmetrisis) useful and useless pleasures.

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[28] "δι' ἀλλήλων σώζεσθαι." *Philodemus: On Frank Criticism*, 36.

[29] Carlo Strenger, "Mild Epicureanism: Notes toward the Definition of a Therapeutic Attitude," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 62, no. 2 (2008): 1-17.

[30] "τὸ γὰρ εὐσταθὲς σαρκὸς κατάστημα καὶ τὸ περὶ ταύτης πιστὸν ἔλπισμα τὴν ἀκροτάτην χαρὰν καὶ βεβαιοτάτην ἔχειν τοῖς ἐπιλογίζεσθαι δυναμένοις." Plutarch, *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum,* 4.

Equipped with a correct philosophical understanding of the hedone's nature and its lack as a criterion of truth, they pursued the aim of eustatheia, ataraxia and aponia with unshakable moral vigor.

Over the centuries, Epicurus and his disciples firmly supported that only with prudence (φρόνησις, phronesis) and friendly encouragement can people improve their character, behavior and actions to experience eudaimonia, a notion supported by modern research.[31] The Athenian philosopher realized that prudent people with inner eustatheia could contribute to the creation of a better society though a utilitarian approach and good deeds (ὀρθοπραξία, orthopraxia), while in contrast, a foolishly unstable and utterly selfish behavior would bring only misery to them and to their fellow human beings.

## VI. The brain and the Epicurean eustatheia

The human brain is a product of a long evolutionary process and is essentially made up of three different interconnected brains that evolved during evolution. The "reptile brain," which appeared about 300 million years ago, corresponds mainly to the hypothalamus and brainstem and controls the instincts of survival, hunger, thirst etc. The "mammalian brain," which appeared about 100 million years ago, corresponds mainly to the amygdala and the hippocampus and controls the emotions of pleasure, love, hate, anger, fear, etc. that are generated in the reward system of the brain. Finally, the "primate brain," which appeared about 25 million years ago, corresponds mainly to the gray matter of the cerebral neocortex in the telencephalon, constitutes a large part of the total size of the human brain, and controls the higher mental functions, including speech, logical thinking, emotional autoregulation, imagination and autobiographic memory. It seems that human mental functions develop over a prolonged "childhood and adolescent" period amounting to 1/3 of human life, while in other primate mammals, such as the great apes, it is quite short and remains relatively stagnant.

The three "parts" of the human brain are interconnected and interact via synaptic neural networks. For example, the hippocampus in the "mammalian brain," which manages the intermediate-term memory of an experience, interacts with its neighboring amygdala, which emotionally determines whether the experience is positive, neutral or negative. If the experience is strongly positive or strongly negative, then it is stored in the neocortex, i.e., the "brain of primates." In fact, the more often an experience is recalled, and the more one feels the same emotions that she/he had experienced the first time, the more stable it becomes and remains long in storage.

[31] Sasha S. Euler, "Psychological Universals in the Study of Happiness: From Social Psychology to Epicurean Philosophy," *Science Religion and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2019).

This "three-dimensional" neurophysiological brain function, discovered in the 20th century, is very reminiscent of what Epicurus taught after objective observation of human behavior.[32] The Athenian philosopher emphasized that the basis of our nature is the fulfillment of natural needs, which concern our instincts and correspond to natural and necessary desires: "The voice of the flesh asks not to be hungry, not to be thirsty and not to be cold."[33] In addition, Epicurus underlined the great importance of the positive emotion of pleasure, as if he described the selective role of the amygdala when he said: "We know pleasure as a primary good and relative of our nature and thanks to it we decide on every choice and avoidance."[34] According to Epicurus the basis of a happy life rests on the pleasurable emotional state of mental ataraxia and physical aponia.[35]

Above all Epicurus considered the mental process of prudence as the "supervisor" of human behavior. Prudence can maintain psychosomatic balance (eustatheia) by consciously choosing what brings happiness, namely by wise satisfaction of natural and necessary desires – which concern our instincts –, and by wise selection of those pleasures that are useful and not harmful. The Athenian philosopher realized that the right reasoning should rule, because this is the supreme nature of humans as primates, without forgetting their emotions, which also play a most important role in their life, since they are also mammals.

A significant point is that the system of instinct desire (corresponding to the reward system of the "reptile brain" that uses dopamine) and emotional pleasure (corresponding to the "mammalian brain" that uses endorphin and other opioid peptides) have a complex and interconnected biological background, and, consequently, their separated function in humans is an important factor that may cause psychological problems. The average people are not able to predict how the fulfillment of their desires will affect their emotional state, but they imagine that unrealistically big changes will happen for the better, when they obtain what they eagerly want. This is because the average human confuses her/his desire for something with the belief that she/he will be happy by acquiring it.[36]

Epicurus not only separated desire from pleasure, but also turned his attention to the most important issue, to the stable pleasurable condition

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[32] Christos Yapijakis, "Ethical Teachings of Epicurus Based on Human Nature in the Light of Biological Psychology," *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2018): 83-88.

[33] "σαρκὸς φωνὴ τὸ μὴ πεινῆν, τὸ μὴ διψῆν, τὸ μὴ ῥιγοῦν." *Epicurean Vatican Saying,* 33.

[34] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (Laertius, 10: 129).

[35] Pascal Massie, "Ataraxia: Tranquility at the End," in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, eds. Sean D. Kirkland, and Eric Sanday, 383-408 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018).

[36] Yapijakis, "Ethical Teachings of Epicurus," 83-88.

of eustatheia and even eudaimonia. He emphasized the danger of becoming a foolish hunter of countless desires "like someone who drinks a lot but he is always thirsty."[37] He recommended the use of prudence to control the instinctual desire system and to choose the fulfillment of the natural and necessary needs that result in pleasure also by eliminating psychic and somatic pain. Aiming at the psychosomatic eustatheia and the experiencing of eudaimonia, Epicurus advised the constant stimulation of the emotional pleasure system with the enjoyment of all goods one owns and the avoidance of the mental agitation about what one does not possess, "as fools usually do" ("because no fool is satisfied with what he has, but he has more pain for what he does not have").[38] He reasoned that memory should cooperate with prudence, as "we should not destroy what we possess in the present because of our desire for those goods we do not have, but we should think that what we now possess were past desires."[39] He maintained that by constantly recalling pleasant memories, which are deeply etched on our memory, we will not need the endless pursuit of unnecessary pleasures.

Another significant point is that while the instincts and the emotions provide information about a person's inner and outer environment in the present, cognition not only perceives the present, but also can make a pictorial imaginative projection into the past or the future. The misuse of a person's mental abilities based on false beliefs and erroneous assessment of environmental stimuli holds the danger of creating subjective stress experiences that disturb psychosomatic balance.[40] The biological system that controls our fears utilizes the quantitative action of serotonin, a neurotransmitter produced and released by an area in the "mammalian brain." Serotonin is being diffused and bounds to nerve cell receptors over a large area of the the "primate brain," affecting mood, memory, mental processes and sleep. It appears that it is the quantity of serotonin that regulates the balance of the positive and negative emotions reflecting a pleasurable safe environment or a painful insecure environment, correspondingly.

Epicurus taught that through the scientific knowledge of nature and through prudence people can deal with irrational phobias about the unknown, with ideas and feelings of superstition, anxiety about their future death and the fear of not having their foolish desires fulfilled.[41] He focused on differentiating

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[37] Diogenes of Oenoanda, *Great Inscription*, 131.

[38] "οὐδεὶς γὰρ τῶν ἀφρόνων οἷς ἔχει ἀρκεῖται, μᾶλλον δὲ οἷς οὐκ ἔχει ὀδυνᾶται." Epicurus, in Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 27; 30; 26.

[39] *Epicurean Vatican Saying*, 35.

[40] Carlo Strenger, "Paring down Life to the Essentials: An Epicurean Psychodynamics of Midlife Changes," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 26, no. 3 (2009): 246-258.

[41] Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts," 41-57.

the natural fear of something real that causes pain, from something unfounded and imaginary, that we may never encounter, and suggested that it is helpful to be aware of it in order to avoid it. The Athenian philosopher attached special importance to the treatment of the constant anxiety of death ("the most horrible of evils")[42] as a condition for psychosomatic eustatheia.

## VII. The Epicurean treatment of "the anxiety of death"

Epicurus' reasoning for the psychotherapeutic treatment of the fear of death comes from atomic physics, which in his time was as it is today, the only compatible view with the observations of phenomena through our senses. The philosopher realized that death for humans is the destruction of the aggregates of the atoms structuring their integrated material body and soul. Because we perceive with our senses every good and bad, and granted that death is the abolition of the senses, then, according to Epicurus we will never perceive death due to the destruction of our sensory organs. As long as we exist, our death does not exist. When our death occurs, we do not exist. Therefore, it is absurd to be afraid of something that we will never experience.[43]

The Athenian philosopher taught that the certainty of the future coming of death makes life enjoyable, as it urges man not to waste a moment to foolish fears and "to prefer the happiest life instead of the longest, as we prefer the more tasteful food and not the more abundant food."[44] He realized that only under the constant vigilance of prudence can we control the emotional agitation caused by the "irrational part of the soul" (the subconscious), or in other words, manage the subjective stress philosophically using our neocortical functions.

Epicurus believed that man dies as he lives, and each of us will face her/his upcoming death calmly and "with a beautiful song about how well she/he lived," only if she/he has faced her/his fears during her/his lifetime and has achieved eustatheia. Otherwise, she/he will live a frightened and unhappy life until her/his last breath. In agreement with Epicurus, the renowned psychiatrist and psychotherapist Irvin Yalom had stated that people who have not consciously faced the fear of death, do not fully experience their lives and go through many phases of anxiety which derives from subconscious insecurities that are based on the constant fear of death.[45] It has been historically documented that the intrepidity of upcoming death characterized

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[42] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (Laertius, 10: 125).

[43] Ibid.

[44] "ὥσπερ δὲ τὸ σιτίον οὐ τὸ πλεῖον πάντως ἀλλὰ τὸ ἥδιστον αἱρεῖται, οὕτω καὶ χρόνον οὐ τὸν μήκιστον ἀλλὰ τὸν ἥδιστον καρπίζεται." Ibid., 10: 126.

[45] Yalom, 3-5.

the ancient Epicureans, but also many modern materialist philosophers who were influenced by Epicurus, such as Hume, Diderot, Bentham, Mill and Santayana. On the contrary, the great fear of the upcoming death was noted down for many idealistic philosophers, such as Kant, Kierkegaard, Lacan, and Derrida, even though they believed in afterlife and divine providence.[46]

According to Yalom, to face fear of death people have developed subconscious defense mechanisms, including projecting themselves into the future through their children or through their works, developing protective rituals or a steadfast belief in protection from divine or metaphysical forces, avoiding to enjoy life because such an attitude may reduce the pain of the end, as if being "workaholic" or constantly busy would result in them having "no time to die," or by being greedy for power and wealth, because they believe that prominent people may be excluded from the biological restrictions implemented to all other human beings. These subconscious defense mechanisms are not sufficient because the oppressed thoughts come to the surface frequently.[47] It seems that the best psychotherapeutic approach is the Epicurean, which allows the conscious confrontation of the anxiety of death by recognizing the finite biological nature of humans.[48] The message of this therapeutic approach can reach almost anybody because of the enhanced biological plasticity and learning potential of the human brain.

## VIII. The Epicurean management of stress

Like other mammals, humans have evolved to face an acute state of stress, that is, a pressing situation that occurs in their environment and disturbs their normal balance. The acute stress in nature is of limited duration, for example when a gazelle tries to escape a lion (flight reaction) or when a wolf faces another competing predator (fight reaction). In modern times, as a rule, humans do not face such life and death situations, but their reaction to stress, that it is usually psychosocial and chronic, is similar. The chronic stressful stimuli that affect people today include poor socio-economic situations and inequality (being poor or belonging to an oppressed minority in a society), loneliness and lack of friends, exploitation at work and unemployment.

In addition, the caregiving to sick relatives is very stressful due to empathic suffering. Empathy is an automatic and almost unconscious ability of normal people to understand the emotions and thinking of others, using their so-

[46] Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (New York: Vintage Publications, 2009).

[47] Daniel M. Wegner, "How to Think, Say, or Do Precisely the Worst Thing for Any Occasion," *Science* 325, no. 5936 (2009): 48-50.

[48] Christos Yapijakis, Evangelos Protopapadakis, and George P. Chrousos, "Philosophical Management of Stress based on Science and Epicurean Pragmatism: A Pilot Study," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 229-242.

called mirror neurons and rest of their empathy neural network. The morality system a human develops is based precisely on the beginning of empathy in infancy and in early childhood, which is initially associated with the mother and is very important for the development of bonding between humans and for promoting sociability. The small percentage of social psychopaths in our societies with lack of emotional empathy and hence no moral inhibitions, may cause problems in the proper functioning of a social group.

In addition, in modern times there are stressful problems that people did not face in previous centuries. There is the stressful disconnection from our twenty-four-hour rhythm biological clock, granted that nowadays we sleep two hours less than our ancestors did, due of course to the artificial light and to the established work schedules. There is also the so-called "postmodern" stress, which is associated with information overload, while we have developed behavioral addictions in the form of compulsive connection with various devices, such as television, cell phone, computers, etc.

The chronic stress that modern people experience nowadays and the accompanying negative feelings of agitation, fear, anxiety, insecurity and shame are associated with low levels of serotonin. Modern cognitive and behavioral psychotherapy tries to reduce strong negative emotions, by focusing on the identification of specific fears and negative thoughts of a person and on revealing of their irrational nature, and by suggesting the systematic engagement with enjoyable activities. In other words, a similar approach to what Epicurus used twenty-three centuries ago for the psychological stress management and for the restoration of psychosomatic eustatheia (stability).

According to Epicurus, eustatheia is achieved by controlling stress and the quality of life by means of prudence and other virtues, goodwill and friendship. His philosophy was based on the awareness of the nature of humans and of the universe in general, aiming at eudaimonia, which he experienced along with many of his disciples, according to historical testimonies. Numerous modern studies have shown that people feel happy when they have covered their needs for living and have beloved relatives and friends around them, while their financial well-being or social status do not matter so much.[49]

Twenty-three centuries ago, the wise Epicurus perceived the biological basis of human psychology with extraordinary observation and insight. Based on an empirical way of learning and thinking, the Athenian philosopher taught that if people misuse their physical tendencies and their mental functions they could be led to foolish, impulsive and self-destructive behaviors, which may

[49] Christopher Kullenberg, and Gustaf Nelhans, "The Happiness Turn? Mapping the Emergence of 'Happiness Studies' using cited References," *Scientometrics* 103 (2015): 615-630.

end up in misery both for themselves and others (Figure 1).[50] Epicurus dealt with the simple phobias and anxieties of the average person using pertinent and simple reasoning and revealing they were unsubstantiated. The Epicurean psychotherapeutic teaching, as described by Philodemus, helped the students of the Kepos to deal with their personal character's defects, their phobias, and their everyday stress. Considering that philosophy is the cure for mental distress, Epicurus proposed specific philosophical "medicines" for achieving psychosomatic eustatheia and eudaimonia, which are timeless, as long as the biological nature of humans remains the same.

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[50] "ὁ ἀτάραχος ἑαυτῷ καὶ ἑτέρῳ ἀόχλητος" ("He who is not agitated, does not bother himself and others"). *Epicurean Vatican Saying*, 79.

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# III. Empirical pilot studies

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# Living Happily in the Era of COVID-19: Philosophical and Positive Psychology Intervention in Secondary Education

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**Abstract**

*In the coronavirus pandemic crisis, the mental well-being of adolescents was significantly burdened and, in this context, an innovative school intervention program was applied and its effect was investigated. The program involved a structured 11-weeks-long psycho-educational intervention on a sample of 11 Greek high school students (aged 16-17 years), combining principles of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy with Positive Psychology techniques, aiming at promoting their mental well-being and the effective management of the psychological effects of the pandemic crisis. A qualitative methodology was used for data collection, including triangulation and data enrichment, self-referential demographic questionnaires, focus group and group interviews, semi-structured individual oral interviews and written descriptions and narratives. Before the intervention, the students' needs and expectations were investigated through written narratives and, after the intervention, semi-structured individual oral interviews and group interviews recorded their personal experiences and evaluative judgments. The application of positive techniques of meaning in life, optimism, gratitude and the development of positive relationships, combined with a cognitive reconstruction based on the principles of Epicureanism and Stoicism, had beneficial effects on the participating students, including emotional state improvement, mental well-being enhancement, and improved aspects of quality of life, such as subjective health, cognitive and school performance, family and interpersonal relationships. The highlight of the study was the emergence of the supporting role of Philosophy in the effectiveness of the applied techniques of Positive Psychology in the management of the psychological and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.*

**Keywords:** *positive psychology; Epicureanism; Stoicism; school intervention program; COVID-19; mental well-being*

## I. Introduction

The emergence and rapid spread of the new COVID-19 coronavirus disease since March 2020, when the World Health Organization declared it a pandemic, caused a global health crisis, with serious consequences for both physical and mental health, imposing an unprecedented and long-term social isolation with huge psychological and financial problems. Globally, COVID-19 pandemic itself and the measures imposed by governments have caused enormous social changes, exerting suffocating pressure on individuals, causing enormous psychological distress and bringing about an increase in levels of generalized anxiety and stress, emotional and behavioral disorders, including depressive symptoms and panic, sleep problems and post-traumatic stress.[1]

In this pandemic crisis, adolescents are a population group that needs special attention and care, as the changes due to COVID-19 have significantly burdened their mental well-being. The strict confinement at home brought significant changes to daily lives of adolescents, with serious restrictions on interpersonal relationships and social interactions, but also serious concerns about the prevailing health and financial situation. In terms of school life, adolescents have obliged to adapt quickly to new learning environments, distance learning and distance education, with widespread concerns and uncertainties, especially of final year students, about their studies and their immediate academic future.[2] Increased levels of frustration exert a significant negative effect on adolescents' functioning.[3] Based on the existing literature,

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[1] Guanghai Wang, et al., "Mitigate the Effects of Home Confinement on Children during the COVID-19 Outbreak," *The Lancet* 395, no. 10228 (2020): 945-947; Wändi Bruine de Bruin, "Age Differences in COVID-19 Risk Perceptions and Mental Health: Evidence from a National US Survey Conducted in March 2020," *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* 76, no. 2 (2021): e24-e29; Ravi Philip Rajkumar, "COVID-19 and Mental Health: A Review of the Existing Literature," *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 52 (2020): 102066; Joep Van Agteren, et al., "Using Internet-based Psychological Measurement to Capture the Deteriorating Community Mental Health Profile during COVID-19: Observational Study," *Journal of Medical Internet Research Mental Health* 7, no. 6 (2020): e20696; Sarah K. Schäfer, et al., "Impact of COVID-19 on Public Mental Health and the Buffering Effect of a Sense of Coherence," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 89, no. 6 (2020): 386-392; Rodolfo Rossi, et al., "COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown Measures Impact on Mental Health among the General Population in Italy," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2020): 790; Asghar Afshar Jahanshahi, et al., "The Distress of Iranian Adults during the Covid-19 Pandemic – More Distressed than the Chinese and with Different Predictors," *Brain Behavior and Immunity* 87 (2020): 124.

[2] Noelia Muñoz-Fernández, and Ana Rodríguez-Meirinhos, "Adolescents' Concerns, Routines, Peer Activities, Frustration, and Optimism in the Time of COVID-19 Confinement in Spain," *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 10, no. 4 (2021): 798.

[3] Jörg M. Fegert, et al., "Challenges and Burden of the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic for Child and Adolescent Mental Health: A Narrative Review to Highlight Clinical and Research Needs in the Acute Phase and the Long Return to Normality," *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*

the application of Positive Psychology Interventions may contribute to addressing the ever-increasing psychological problems. In this context, a study was realized in order to investigate the effect of an innovative school intervention program, a structured psycho-educational intervention lasting 11 weeks on a sample of Lyceum/Secondary School students, combining Positive Psychology techniques and principles of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy, with the aim of promoting the mental well-being of adolescents and, consequently, the effective management of the psychological effects of the pandemic crisis.

## II. Positive psychology in times of crisis

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, Positive Psychology focuses on positive subjective state related to well-being and pleasure, connected to the satisfaction one derives from the past, the joy and pleasures experienced in the present and the optimism and hope concerning the future.[4] Therefore, through its interventions, Positive Psychology contributes to the optimistic view of life, to the appreciation of the present, to the acceptance of the past, to the adoption of an attitude of gratitude and forgiveness, to the acquisition of a perspective beyond the momentary pleasures and difficulties of life. The results of Positive Psychology interventions have been studied systematically and highlight their positive correlation with mental health and well-being, and also their duration in time.[5]

In times of crisis, fear and uncertainty make people pessimistic about their future and anxiety and stress seriously threaten their mental health. In these times there is necessity to shift the focus from risk factors, related to the cause of psychological discomfort, to protective factors, related to the prevention and management of mental disorders during difficulties, which can reduce the mental effects they cause, improving mental health.[6] In particular, the interventions and techniques of the

*and Mental Health* 14, no. 1 (2020): 1-11; Carlo Buzzi, et al., "The Psycho-Social Effects of COVID-19 on Italian Adolescents' Attitudes and Behaviors," *Italian Journal of Pediatrics* 46, no. 1 (2020): 1-7; Lauren Alvis, et al., "Adolescents' Prosocial Experiences during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Associations with Mental Health and Community Attachments," *PsyArXiv Preprints* (2020); İsmail Seçer, and Sümeyye Ulaş, "An Investigation of the Effect of COVID-19 on OCD in Youth in the Context of Emotional Reactivity, Experiential Avoidance, Depression and Anxiety," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 19, no. 6 (2021): 2306-2319.

[4] Martin E. P. Seligman, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 5-14.

[5] Nancy L. Sin, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, "Enhancing Well-being and Alleviating Depressive Symptoms with Positive Psychology Interventions: A Practice-friendly Meta-analysis," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 65, no. 5 (2009): 467-487.

[6] Gökmen Arslan, and Murat Yildirim, "Coronavirus Stress, Meaningful Living, Optimism, and Depressive Symptoms: A Study of Moderated Mediation Model," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73, no. 2 (2021): 113-124.

new science of Positive Psychology can contribute to the treatment of emerging psychological problems. Mainly positive variables such as meaning in life, optimism, gratitude, positive relationships can help the individuals significantly.[7]

Meaningful living, optimism, gratitude and positive interpersonal relationships of kindness are very important variables for mental health. More specifically, three types of interactions are confirmed by recent research data during the COVID-19 pandemic: (a) buffering, when positive emotions, positive processes, positive conditions and positive relationships are used to reduce or alleviate mental disorder during the crisis, (b) bolstering, when positive emotions, positive processes, positive conditions and relationships act to maintain mental health despite the difficulties of the crisis, and (c) building, when the individual is able to use the crisis in a transformative way, in order to develop new practices and strategies (e.g. greater powers), new processes (e.g. more self-compassion) and new perspectives (e.g. enhanced meaning in life), which can lead to improved mental health in the future.[8]

In the period of COVID-19 and also in the post-pandemic era, it is imperative to search and find positive techniques and strategies that could be implemented in the schools, in order to enhance the mental health and well-being of students. In order to achieve this goal, the present study was focused on Positive Psychology techniques combined with Philosophy offered to 16-17-year-old senior students of the Lyceum (Greek High School), in which the author serves as a philologist. The inspiration and starting point of the study was the formation of the school's participatory Philosophy Workshop, within the context of the Philosophy course, which functioned as a focus group and at the same time as a psycho-educational group.

In the Philosophy Workshop, because of the mental burden of the participating students due to the pandemic crisis, the study of the respective philosophical issues expanded and inevitably evolved into a philosophical

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[7] Seligman, and Csikszentmihalyi, 5-14; Robert A. Emmons, and Michael E. McCullough, "Counting Blessings versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-being in Daily Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 2 (2003): 377; Alex M. Wood, et al., "Gratitude and Well-being: A Review and Theoretical Integration," *Clinical Psychology Review* 30, no. 7 (2010): 890-905; Matthew W. Gallagher, and Shane J. Lopez, "Positive Expectancies and Mental Health: Identifying the Unique Contributions of Hope and Optimism," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4, no. 6 (2009): 548-556; Xanthe Glaw, et al., "Meaning in Life and Meaning of Life in Mental Health Care: An Integrative Literature Review," *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 38, no. 3 (2017): 243-252; John B. Nezlek, et al., "A Daily Diary Study of Relationships between Feelings of Gratitude and Well-being," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 4 (2017): 323-332; Sara B. Algoe, "Positive Interpersonal Processes," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28, no. 2 (2019): 183-188; Da Jiang, "Feeling Gratitude is Associated with Better Well-being Across the Life Span: A Daily Diary Study during the COVID-19 Outbreak," *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* 77, no. 4 (2022): e36-e45; Arslan, and Yildirim, 113-124.

[8] Lea Waters, et al., "Positive Psychology in a Pandemic: Buffering, Bolstering, and Building Mental Health," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 17, no. 3 (2022): 303-323.

consultation, based on the Raabe method.[9] At the same time, the sharing of personal experiences, thoughts and feelings, based on a secure relationship of warmth and mutual trust, created the framework for the implementation of the Positive Psychology Intervention combined with Philosophy.

## III. Hellenistic philosophies of Epicureanism and Stoicism

The combination of Positive Psychology and Philosophy, developed in this study, is a new approach to the teaching and integration of positive variables in the school context, which aims to strengthen the effectiveness of the specific techniques of Positive Psychology with the assistance of Moral Philosophy.

In the present study a connection of Positive Psychology with Philosophy and Philosophical Counseling has been attempted. In particular, the author tried to connect the positive variables and exercises of the Intervention Program applied with the technique of cognitive restructuring, based on Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy, and mainly on the convergences that the two philosophical approaches present. This intention was based on the reasoning that these two philosophical attitudes to life, despite their differences and contradictions, aimed to establish a stable and good life guide with meaning, principles and moral quality. Consequently, they could be cognitively exploited and contribute to the promotion of mental health and well-being not only of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, but also of people of all ages and at every stage of life. Furthermore, as it will be thoroughly discussed below, these two schools of thought exerted the greatest influence on the development not only of Philosophical Counseling but also of modern Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

According to Hadot, "Philosophy is not the construction of a system, but lived experience," which means that it is not an intellectual activity detached from life, it is not just teaching abstracts theories, but it is a constant practical exercise of life.[10] Philosophy, through changing the way of thinking, signals a movement of the self towards self-awareness and understanding of the surrounding world, signals personal fulfillment and self-improvement, allowing the individual to experience inner peace, freedom and bliss, free from turmoil and suffering, caused by human passions, excessive desires, worries and fears. Consequently, philosophy, and especially philosophical counseling, could be a therapeutic method, a therapy for the healing of human mental afflictions. According to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, the purpose of philosophy is actually "healing of the soul."[11]

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[9] Peter B. Raabe, *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publications, 2001).

[10] Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

[11] Ibid., 123; 133.

Epicureanism derived from the philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC), who founded a school of philosophy in Athens called *Kepos* (Garden). A basic principle of Epicureanism was the pursuit and conquest of happiness (eudaimonia). Epicurus rejected determinism and advocated hedonism (pleasure in life) as the highest good and goal, to which all human endeavors naturally aim. However, Epicureanism does not aim at an unbridled hedonism, but at avoiding physical and mental pain and enjoying the simple pleasures of life. In Epicurean Philosophy, mental pleasure was regarded more highly than physical and the ultimate pleasure was held the freedom from anxiety and mental pain, especially that arising from needless fear of death and of the gods, while pleasure that brings pain must be avoided. It is now believed that Epicurus was the one who actually laid the foundations of philosophy as a therapy.[12] Trying to soothe the mental turmoil of humans, which is basically due to the subconscious fear of death, he was the first existential psychotherapist of humanity, who showed that philosophy can help everybody attain peace of mind and balance through rational consideration and resolution of life's problems.[13] Through scientific knowledge and virtue, mainly through reason/prudence that controls emotions, the goal of life and philosophical pursuit is pleasure and peaceful life, calmness (ataraxia) and happiness (eudaimonia).[14] Epicurus argued that "philosophy is empty of content if it does not cure any human passion."[15]

Stoicism was named from the "Poikili Stoa" (Varied Portico) of Athens, the location of the school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium (334-262 BC). The basic principle of Stoicism is that man must accept his fate as designed by divine providence and live virtuously, with moral integrity, temperance, justice, courage and practical wisdom, since his well-being depends on these values. The Stoic man has no dependence on earthly and mortal things, but neither does he deny them. Whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, he simply stands apathetically and impassively towards them, lives with peace of mind, participating, however, at the same time in all aspects of social life; moreover, he would never exchange virtue for the pursuit of pleasure or the avoidance of pain. According to the Stoic philosophers Epictetus, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius philosophy is an art of living well, through teaching ethics and helping a human being to pursue a good life and to manage life's unexpected and

[12] Anthony Arthur Long, *From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 206.

[13] Christos Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics and Molecular Medicine in Epicurean Philosophy," in *History of Human Genetics*, eds. Heike I. Petermann, Peter S. Harper, and Susanne Doetz, 41-57 (Cham: Springer, 2017), 51.

[14] Christos Yapijakis, "Ethical Teachings of Epicurus Based on Human Nature in the Light of Biological Psychology," *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2018): 83-88.

[15] Epicurus, cited in Porphyry, Letter to Marcella, 31; Kathleen O'Brien Wicker, *Porphyry the Philosopher to Marcella* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

dramatic changes, too. With their emphasis on ethics of everyday life, "the Stoics practiced philosophy as an art dedicated to human misery and as a way of examining painful problems."[16] They believed that philosophy can act as a therapeutic method for the mental diseases and the passions of the soul, such as desire, fear, sorrow and pleasure, always through self-control and self-criticism.

The Epicureans and the Stoics, with a different approach and methodology, practiced with their teaching a kind of counseling, dedicated themselves to the study and *diagnosis* of the problems of the *human condition* and proposed ways for "healing of the soul." As a result, these two philosophical systems are from Hellenistic times until today remedies for the problems that beset human lives.[17]

According to Epicurus, the aim of Philosophy, is to cure the diseases of the soul, just as medicine cures the diseases of the body. This is also the aim of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), whose origins lie both in Epicureanism and in Stoicism as well.[18] The Hellenistic philosophy had a practical aim and application in everyday human life. For this reason, modern Psychology, and especially Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, recognizes that it owes its philosophical origins to Hellenistic Philosophy, mainly due to its pragmatic character. The American psychologist Albert Ellis, one of the founders of cognitive behavioral therapies, in 1955, introduced, developed and began to apply a new, more active and directive type of psychotherapy, the Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT).[19] In this model, the therapist tries to help the patient to understand that his personal philosophy may contain beliefs that contribute decisively to his emotional pain. The goal of therapy is for the patient to realize the irrationality of some of his/her/its thoughts and to modify them appropriately. A large part of Ellis's theory "comes from Philosophy rather than Psychology."[20] According to Robertson, Psychology's focus on the function of human thought is perhaps "the most core idea in both Stoics and modern Cognitive Behaviorist."[21]

One of the central/basic principles of CBT is focusing on the present, in the sense of processing and managing a problem in the present, and enjoying the present, which is a basic Epicurean thought. According to the

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[16] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 329.

[17] Bellarmine U. Nneji, "Philosophical Counselling/Therapy: Praxis and Pedagogy," *Working Papers on Culture, Education and Human Development* 9, no. 3 (2013): 4-8.

[18] Raymond A. DiGiuseppe, et al., *A Practitioner's Guide to Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[19] Paulo Knapp, and Aaron T. Beck, "Cognitive Therapy: Foundations, Conceptual Models, Applications and Research," *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry* 30, s. 2 (2008): s54-s64.

[20] Albert Ellis, *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy: A Comprehensive Method of Treating Human Disturbances* (New York: Citadel Press, 1994), 15.

[21] Donald Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT): Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 53.

Epicureans, the enjoyment of the present requires the elimination of any stress of everyday life, wherever it comes from, even the stress that stems from the thought and fear of our imminent death.[22] However, all anxieties are actually directly related to thoughts about the future and, according to Beck, stem from "a projection of ourselves into a future state of danger, which does not currently exist."[23] For this reason, the Epicureans and the Stoics agreed that the present is the only true reality, where a human has the possibility of action and change. The Stoic Seneca preserves the Epicurean thought that "a foolish life is empty of gratitude, full of anxiety and focused entirely on the future."[24]

Ultimately, for both the Epicureans and the Stoics, happiness is found in the acceptance of the inevitability of death. Life is a human's unique property in an indifferent universe (according to the Epicureans) or in a cosmic system of things (according to the Stoics), and the human can experience it, change, shape and improve it.[25] But in order to manage the important present of life, self-awareness is required, which can be strengthened with CBT techniques, such as the management of dysfunctional beliefs.[26]

## IV. Hellenistic philosophies and Positive Psychology

A fundamental principle of Positive Psychology is that emotions are normal/natural, valid and important components of life. The importance of emotions is also emphasized by Epicurean Philosophy. For Epicurus, pleasure-pain feelings (passions) are among the four criteria of truth. The other three criteria concern the senses, the concepts (preconceptions or apprehensions) and the insightful apprehension of mind (imaginary imposition of the intellect). The emotions of pleasure and of pain are safe criteria of truth regarding the stimuli of the natural environment, since everything that pleases us is good for our nature and everything that creates pain and agitation is hostile to us. In addition, emotions are also criteria for choosing the right actions and avoiding the wrong ones, always with the aim of the blissful life.[27]

For the Epicureans, "the most important component of happiness is the

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[22] Robert W. Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics. An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* (London, and New York: Routledge, 2003), 74-76.

[23] Aaron T. Beck, "The Current State of Cognitive Therapy: A 40-year Retrospective," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 62, no. 9 (2005): 953-959.

[24] Yapijakis, "Ethical Teachings of Epicurus," 86.

[25] Sharples, 110; 181.

[26] DiGiuseppe, et al., 33-39.

[27] Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics;" Yapijakis, "Ethical Teachings of Epicurus," 83-88.

mood, of which only we are sovereign," according to Diogenes of Oenoanda.[28] This position is consistent with Positive Psychology which aims to cultivate a positive way of thinking, with the goal of increasing one's positive emotions and decreasing negative ones. Emotional turmoil, caused by the reasonless part of the soul, can only be dealt with by prudence (practical wisdom), Epicurus points out.

Furthermore, although Stoics disregard emotions as useless and indifferent to virtue, they believe that the emotions are not caused from various external conditions but spring from human thought itself. The difficulties in life are not necessarily sources of stress if our way of thinking does not make them stressful. Epictetus always points out that "people are disturbed not by things, but by their beliefs about things," emphasizing that everything begins in human thought and is connected to the way of thinking. In *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius states: "Today I escaped from all difficult situations. I probably pushed away all the difficult situations. Because they were not outside of me, but within me, in the idea I form about things,"[29] "because everything is as one perceives it."[30]

One of the Positive Psychology strategies Stoicism offers is focusing on what we can control.[31] For the Stoics, a basic condition for a peaceful and undisturbed life is the realization that human life is made up of the things that one can control and those that lie beyond personal control. According to Epictetus, it is practically impossible for us to control all the events of our life, but it is possible for us to control the way we react to them, to control our thoughts and beliefs. Otherwise, the attempt to exert complete control over the external deterministic reality is usually unsuccessful, causing insecurity and anger. Consequently, focusing on what one can control is an effective strategy for reducing stress and negative emotions, and enhancing personal autonomy in crisis situations.

These positions are also in agreement with the Epicureans, who praised the importance of personal freedom and of personal responsibility for human actions and behaviors. Epicurus repeats many times with emphasis that "our behaviors and also the stimuli of the environment sometimes depend only on us and on our perceptions."[32] "In most cases we ourselves are responsible and only in a few cases of life does chance intervene," Diogenes of Oenoanda

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[28] Diogenes of Oenoanda, Fragment 113.

[29] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 9: 13.

[30] Ibid., 2: 15.

[31] William B. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[32] Epicurus, *On Nature*, 25 A 1-15.

states.[33] Epicurus emphasizes that "our life does not need absurdity and foolish opinions, but calmness."[34] People should learn to use their emotions as criteria of truth for real external conditions but also to avoid magnifying negative emotions, by focusing only on the issues they can control and always directing their energies there; besides not feeling anxious about things that are not in our personal control and accepting the past and the present as inevitable, as we cannot change them, but focus instead on the future which depends on us also.

The Epicurean and Stoic concept of the mental preparation to face difficulties in life is found in Positive Psychology in the conceptual framework of mental resilience, which refers to "a dynamic process of positive adaptation to adversity."[35] The Stoics say that humans must always be prepared for the greatest difficulties of life, so that they will not despair, when these difficulties arise. Marcus Aurelius considers that man must be mentally prepared for the unexpected and sudden events of life, "ready and unshakable for those that happen without warning."[36] And one should expect everything in life and not be sorry at all, since "everything that happens is common and familiar like the rose in spring and the fruit in summer; so are sickness and death and everything that makes the fools happy or sad."[37] Stoics point out the value of patience and the brave courage in the face of difficulties, which does not allow one to become mentally alienated from virtue. Marcus Aurelius writes: "Perhaps what is happening to you prevents you from being just, magnanimous, moderate, knowledgeable, careful in judgment, unfeigned, modest, generous?"[38] The Stoic sage must have self-control and self-discipline, courage, moderation and ratio, which will protect him so that he does not succumb to negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, sadness or anger; even when it is necessary to mourn, he will do so in moderation.[39]

The Epicurean philosophy, on the other hand, advises humans of every age not to deal with many things or to attempt difficult things, pushing themselves beyond their capabilities, as all this brings turmoil to human nature.[40] Epicurus

[33] Diogenes of Oenoanda, Fragment 132.

[34] Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles*; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 10: 87; Yapijakis, *Epicurean Philosophy*.

[35] Suniya S. Luthar, et al., "The Construct of Resilience: A Critical Evaluation and Guidelines for Future Work," *Child Development* 71, no. 3 (2000): 547.

[36] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 7: 61.

[37] Ibid., 4: 43.

[38] Ibid., 4: 49.

[39] Irvine, 8.

[40] Diogenes of Oenoanda, Fragment 113.

exhorts humans not to be competitive neither indulge in rivalries, as "there is no need of unnatural and unnecessary things obtained by rivalries." On the contrary, "whoever has understood the limits of life, knows well how attainable are all those things that drive away the pain of deprivation and make life perfect in its entirety."[41] "The good is easily acquired," Philodemus of Gadara reminds us in the four-part remedy *tetrapharmakos*.[42]

In any case, the human virtues recommended by both the Epicureans and the Stoics for a happy and peaceful life are included in Positive Psychology's elements (6 virtues and 24 potentials), described in the Values in Action-Classification of Strengths and Virtues.[43] Between the virtues and the potentials are knowledge and wisdom, broad-mindedness, courage and bravery, integrity, humanity, friendship and caring for others, love, kindness and social intelligence, justice, temperance, forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation and self-control, i.e., controlling our instincts and behaviors, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope and a sense of purpose.

Regarding the pleasures of life, Positive Psychology, as already mentioned, does not advocate an unrestrained hedonism, a position with which Epicurean Philosophy agrees. Epicurus reminds us that "no pleasure is bad itself, but the results of some pleasures bring much more trouble than pleasures."[44] For that reason, sometimes we have to choose to avoid a pleasure if we foresee that it will lead to greater pain, or we choose a pain, if we predict that it will lead to greater pleasure. Epicurus characteristically says: "We do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we avoid many pleasures, when they result in more discomfort for us (than pleasure)."[45] For a happy life, according to the Epicureans, the *tetrapharmakos* (τετραφάρμακος) must be applied: "God is not fearful, death is not perceived, good is easily obtained, evil is easily endured."[46]

## V. Methodology of the Positive Psychology intervention combined with philosophy

A structured psycho-educational intervention named "Living Happily in the Era of COVID-19," and based on Positive Psychology and Philosophy

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[41] Epicurus. *Principal Doctrines*, 21.

[42] Philodemus. *To Sophists*, 4: 7.

[43] Christopher Peterson, "The Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths," in *A Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology*, eds. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi, 29-48 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[44] Epicurus. *Principal Doctrines*, 8.

[45] Epicurus. *Letter to Menoeceus*. Diogenes Laertius, 10: 129.

[46] Philodemus, *To Sophists*, 4: 7.

was applied as a qualitative study research to 16-17-year-old students of a Lyceum (Greek High School) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was implemented for the fulfillment of the requirement of a thesis for the Master degree program "Mental Health Promotion – Prevention of Psychiatric Disorders" in the Department of Psychiatry at the School of Medicine of the National Kapodistrian University of Athens.

The purpose of that research was to detect the effect promoting the students' mental well-being by answering the following questions:

- How do the students who participated in the positive intervention evaluate the necessity of the intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to their individual needs, goals, expectations, and also their experience of participating in it?
- How do they evaluate the impact of the intervention on their mental well-being?
- How do they evaluate the impact of the intervention on key aspects of their quality of life, such as physical health, way of thinking, cognitive domain and school performance, interpersonal relationships, family and social life?
- What specific benefits do they feel they have gained from participating in the intervention both in dealing with the current pandemic and in managing potential difficulties in the future?

The positive intervention was implemented in the period January-March 2021 and lasted 11 weeks.[47] Because of the COVID-19, the schools were closed, so the intervention was implemented online via Webex. It was preceded by the basic ethical principle of informed consent in research signed by the student's parents after appropriate discussion.[48]

The present research based on a qualitative methodology as more appropriate and advantageous, in accordance with the specific research issue and purpose.[49] The study used a combination of (a) convenience sampling and

[47] Sin, and Lyubomirsky, 467-487; Sonja Lyubomirsky, et al., "Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change," *Review of General Psychology* 9, no. 2 (2005): 111-131; Amanda Fenwick-Smith, et al., "Systematic Review of Resilience-enhancing, Universal, Primary School-based Mental Health Promotion Programs," *BMC Psychology* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1-17.

[48] John W. Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002); Colin Robson, *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

[49] Philip Darbyshire, et al., "Multiple Methods in Qualitative Research with Children: More Insight or just More?" *Qualitative Research* 5, no. 4 (2005): 417-436; Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.

(b) purposive homogenous sampling criterion.[50] According to the research plan, the Positive Intervention was applied to a focus group and its effect was investigated by capturing the experiences of group members.[51] The initial sample of participants in the study consisted of 13 students, 2 boys, who eventually dropped out, and 11 girls. The sample was selected with eligibility criteria: (a) attending the Second Grade of Lyceum (16-17 years old) and (b) voluntary participation in the school Philosophy Workshop, which was set up under the supervision of the researcher, in the context of the Philosophy course. In the present study, the school's participatory Philosophy Workshop, in which the intervention was implemented, functioned as both an intervention group and a focus group, while no control group was used.

In the study, multiple data collection tools and multiple assessment methods were used for the better evaluation of the school intervention program, for the triangulation and enrichment of research data.[52] Particularly, they were used: (1) a self-report questionnaire to record the demographic characteristics of the female students in the sample, (2) a focus group and group interviews (3) semi-structured individual interviews before the intervention and after the intervention to evaluate its effectiveness, (4) written descriptions and narratives.[53]

The interviews, the written descriptions and narratives before the intervention they aimed to capture: (1) the emotional state of female students during the pandemic, ongoing confinement and social isolation, (2) the effects of the pandemic on key aspects of their quality of life, such as physical health, cognitive domain and school performance, way of thinking, interpersonal relationships, family and social life, (3) the ways and strategies of managing the pandemic and social isolation, (4) the needs and expectations of female students from their participation in the intervention.

After the completion of the intervention program, it was evaluated by the 11 participating female students, through semi-structured individual interviews as well as group interviews-discussions in the focus group, where the personal experiences and evaluations of the female students regarding the results of the intervention were recorded. The questions of the interviews were grouped into four thematic axes, according to the research questions: (a) questions related to the general evaluation of the positive intervention, (b) investigation and recording of the opinions of the female students on the effect of the intervention on their emotional state, (c) questions about the effect of

[50] Creswell; Robson.

[51] David L. Morgan, and Richard A. Krueger, *The Focus Group Guidebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998); Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.

[52] Darbyshire, et al., 417-436; Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.

[53] Morgan, and Krueger; Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17; Robson.

the intervention on key aspects of their quality of life and (d) questions about the benefits the female students had obtained from their participation in the intervention. The questions were based on the WHOQOL-100 questionnaire regarding physical, mental, emotional and social well-being/well-being.[54] The semi-structured oral one-on-one interviews were conducted online via Skype or Webex and lasted approximately 50-60 minutes on average.

After granting relevant permission by the students' parents, the interviews were audio recorded, relevant observations of the researcher were recorded in an interview data recording protocol, and, subsequently, transcribed verbatim, to ensure the accuracy and validity of the research process. This was followed by the processing of the oral and written data, their tabulation based on the questions of the interview guide, the detailed coding and thematic analysis of the content of all written and oral texts, their detailed presentation and interpretation. All the necessary conditions were strictly observed, in order to ensure and strengthen the reliability and validity of the present research.[55]

## VI. Implementation of the Positive Psychology intervention program

The Positive Psychology Intervention Program was implemented in a Philosophy Workshop of the school, in which 11 female students voluntarily participated. Because of the pandemic, the positive program was: (a) focused, with specific targeting, and not holistic, applied to the whole school or to a school class, (b) structured, (c) adapted to the contemporary situation of the pandemic, (d) a combination of different positive psychological variables and exercises.

In the Philosophy Workshop, gradually the study of philosophical issues had expanded and inevitably evolved into a philosophical counseling process, largely based on the method of Philosophical Counseling of Raabe's 5 stages.[56] In this context, the ideal condition was created, cognitively and emotionally, for the integration of the Positive Psychology Intervention framed by Epicureanism and Stoicism. The positive intervention was preeminently based on Positive Education model of the Geelong Grammar School, which suggests the Embedding Positive Education in teaching the subjects of the school curriculum.[57] Based on this model, the Positive Psychology Intervention in

[54] "WHOQOL: Measuring Quality of Life," *World Health Organization*, accessed November 15, 2022, https://www.who.int/tools/whoqol.

[55] Robson.

[56] Raabe.

[57] Martin E. P. Seligman, et al., "Positive Education: Positive Psychology and Classroom Interventions," *Oxford Review of Education* 35, no. 3 (2009): 293-311; Dianne A. Vella-Brodrick, et al., *An Evaluation of Positive Education at Geelong Grammar School: A Snapshot of 2013* (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne, 2014).

the Philosophy Workshop was integrated into Moral Philosophy, which is a thematic unit of the Philosophy course of the Lyceum 2nd grade class.

Specifically, the female students in the philosophy group were asked to explore the relationship of Ethical Philosophy to eudaimonia, studying the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophical approach, in light of recent research on the human brain, pleasure and altruism, but also under the crisis of the pandemic and its consequences on mental health. Thus, in the Philosophy Workshop a fruitful connection was made between Positive Psychology interventions and techniques, with the timeless, existential and ethical, philosophical issues dealt with by the two most important schools of thought of ancient Greek philosophy, Epicureanism and Stoicism. In particular, the Workshop was structured around the four main themes-variables and techniques of Positive Psychology, related to the meaning of life, enjoyment, gratitude, optimism and positive relationships, which are also highlighted in the Moral Philosophy of the Epicureans and the Stoics.

The intervention was implemented in 11 weekly online meetings via Webex, with basic teaching and learning techniques: (a) counseling, (b) presentation, (c) goal-directed and organized discussion, (d) questioning, (e) writing texts and (f) artistic creation. Table 1 shows the content of the 11 weekly online meetings.

## VII. Results of the Positive Psychology intervention program

The Positive Psychology Intervention Program combined with Philosophy was highly successful based on its overall evaluation by the students, its impact on mental well-being, its impact on quality of life (way of thinking, physical-subjective health, cognitive and academic performance, interpersonal relationships in family and social life), as well as the utility of the philosophical framing of Positive Psychology intervention. An analysis of the results follows.

**1. Evaluation of the Positive Intervention program**. All 11 participating female students unanimously recognized the necessity and importance of the Intervention in the "pressing" and "sad" period of COVID-19. With a feeling of satisfaction, they characterized the intervention as a "break," a "breath of rest, joy, safety and calm," which helped them to "endure the second quarantine," positively affecting their thinking and emotional state. A common point of the responses of 9 girls was that the Program, through the combination of Philosophy and Psychology, had generally responded to their needs and had fulfilled their initial goals and expectations, acting supportive, reinforcing, liberating and psychotherapeutic, but also as a means of self-awareness: "I liked the program, because it combined lessons, discussion

philosophy and psychotherapy," "it helped me to be strong," "it taught me where to find support," "I wanted to get rid of all that pandemic anxiety and pressure, and I largely succeeded it."

Grading the program on a scale of 1-5, 7 students expressed their absolute satisfaction with a 5, 2 scored a 4, while 2 scored a 3. The final average score of the Program was 4.3.

**2. Impact on mental well-being**. Before the Intervention, a wide range of negative emotions were recorded in the written texts of all the girls. Specifically, the students had reported anxiety, fear and stress, but also frustration, pessimism, melancholy, sadness, sometimes anger or guilt, and, consistently, a lack of satisfaction with life. After the Intervention, a common point of their answers was that a positive effect was on their psychology, contributing to their mental strengthening in the midst of the pandemic and the ongoing restrictions. Most of them admitted that the negative emotions they had reported before the Intervention had been reduced, subsided and, in many cases, had been changed and replaced by positive emotions or simply controlled by rational thinking.

The 7 female students, who had evaluated the intervention with grade 5, admitted that they were "happy," "regardless of the difficult situation," "trying to remain as unaffected as possible," "optimistic," "strong" and "committed to their goals." The same students felt that the program had helped them to have "more positive emotions, and less negative ones," "thinking more optimistically about life," and "feeling that they could do better" in the difficulties they faced in the midst of a pandemic. In fact, they felt that they were "happier and stronger compared to most of their peers," as well as "compared to the period of incarceration before the intervention." One of the answers is representative: "Yes, I am happy with who I am and what I have at the moment."

Of the remaining 4 female students, 2, although they were skeptical about the concept and the presence of 'happiness' in their lives, recognized the positive effect of the Intervention in improving their mental mood compared to the previous situation and their peers: "I'm in a better psychological state than the others," "I'm definitely in a better mood, I do more pleasant things, I enjoy more beautiful moments, but I don't know if this should be called 'happiness,'" "I feel stronger and more optimistic, I've started to appreciate a lot of things I previously took for granted, but I think I'm a long way from being 'happy.'"

The remaining 2 female students considered that the Program's effect on their mental state was sometimes positive and "helpful," and sometimes "neutral" or "a little."

In most cases the emotions of worry, anxiety and fear, although they did not completely eliminate and sometimes were still present, nevertheless showed qualitative and quantitative reduction, which was more related to mental processing and rationalization: "I don't need to worry about

something I can't control myself," "now I try not to think negatively, I try to think something pleasant," "I can't keep thinking about what will happen in the future and lose the present [...]. I realized that my anxiety had created more problems for myself and others, and I could not solve anyone [...]," "I was worried about a lot, about myself, about my studies, about my family, but now I don't feel so anxious and I'm less afraid."

Regarding the negative emotions of disappointment, frustration, pessimism and sadness, which the students had described before the intervention, their answers showed that these emotions had subsided, decreased and, in some cases, had been eliminated. And, although the negative feelings still existed, these ones were framed by rational thoughts and had qualitatively changed: "I don't get upset like before," "it's not the end of the world," "I don't feel the sadness I used to feel, I'm fine."

Negative emotions in most cases had been replaced by positive emotions. Mainly the positive emotions that female students reported experiencing were "deep satisfaction with life," "optimism," "adequacy" and "fullness," "enjoyment," and "joy for all that is good in life," "balance," "tranquility" and "happiness." In addition, the intense feeling of unfreedom and oppression that they had experienced strongly before, due to remote education and restrictions, had subsided after the Intervention, while their adaptability to the existing situation had improved: "The quarantine and all the prohibitions bother me, but I sometimes think that I have no reason to feel imprisoned when I have so much to do, so many choices," "I'm handling all this pressure much better [...] it's the least I can do when so many people are sick and dying around me [...], at least I have my family and my friends."

Out of the total of 11 female students, only 4 reported that they still had difficulty controlling their anxieties and fears despite trying to rationalize these feelings, repeatedly capturing the difficulty of rationally processing the emotion. In addition, despite the improvement in their psychology, sometimes they felt pessimistic and sad: "I've been helped enough, I definitely think differently, but I can't help but feel sad when. [...]," "when I feel anxious or sad, I try to think positively, to think of what we've learned, but it's not always easy [...], I'm generally in a better mood, but sometimes it gets me down."

**3. Impact on quality of life.** The Intervention had a significant effect on all studied aspects of quality of life of the female students (way of thinking, physical-subjective health, cognitive and academic performance, interpersonal relationships in family and social life). More specifically:

(a) The way of thinking. The results of the cognitive restructuring were impressive as the 11 students admitted that their way of thinking had changed

a lot, although the Intervention had not affected them emotionally to the same extent and it did not have the same positive effects on all of them. Even the female students who had been somewhat skeptical of the positive effects of the Intervention Program on their psychology admitted its positive effect on their way of thinking. All the girls, regardless of the emotional impact of the Positive Intervention, had internalized that how one thinks inevitably affects one's emotions and behavior. They had learned to focus and appreciate what they have and not to focus on what they have lost, and above all to be prepared for the changes in life, trying to rationalize the things that happen and especially the adverse situations: "I have changed my way of thinking," "I understood that everything I feel comes from my mind," "it depends on me what I feel and I try to control it, to see it in a different way," "we have to be prepared for life difficulties," "now I think I have everything I need, while other people have lost more," "I was very unhappy before but I'm not anymore, because I am thinking that my problems are not more serious than the problems of others."

Some female students mainly referred to the issue of personal freedom and choice as a basic condition for their personal happiness: "I am very influenced mainly by the philosophical idea of personal freedom and choice, that we cannot always avoid pain or fear, but we can choose not to dwell on them and go further," "it is up to us to look for the pleasure, the positive element, the positive feeling, the positive thought, especially when we face difficulties, instead of being sad, we can choose to live with joy, with optimism, with calmness, I think that was the most important lesson."

Some other female students addressed the issue of happiness, referring to a personal understanding of both what happiness is and how to pursue and achieve it by focusing on the truly important and meaningful things in life, which requires mature thinking and prudence; female students reiterated that happiness is a personal *decision*, it depends on the way of thinking and beliefs, and it concerns the individual's personal disposition to shape the social environment and not to be influenced by it: "I understood what it means to be happy and how we can be happy. I learned that our happiness depends on our beliefs, so if we change the way of thinking, we'll change our beliefs about what is important or not, in this way it's not difficult to be happy," "I decided to appreciate, to recognize the full worth of what I have and not desire what I don't have, it's good to have dreams and desires, but not for unnecessary and useless things," "I think that most of us have in our life the most important things," "with the program I learned how to feel freer from anxiety, fear, distress, and how to be happier," "if I get rid of useless things, useless people, useless desires, useless thoughts, I think then I will be very happy, it's the only way," "I don't have to wait to get rich to be happy, nor to get good grades,

to get excellent in all subjects, to be loved by everyone," "everything changes and it can upset and stress us, but we can't to connect our good mood always with what is happening in our environment, we must have a stability, otherwise we will always be unhappy."

(b) Physical-subjective health. Before the Intervention, in their written narratives all the female students had mentioned physical discomforts and symptoms, which they experienced more or less frequently, with greater or lesser duration and intensity. These symptoms were mainly fatigue, insomnia or poor-quality sleep with bad dreams and nightmares, headaches, back and lower back pain, abdominal pain, tachycardia, sweating and shortness of breath.

After the Intervention, according to the answers of the students, an improvement was observed in their subjective health, a reduction of physical discomforts or even their elimination in some cases. The students reported that the quality of sleep had improved, they did not have frequent bad dreams, nor did they wake up suddenly during the night. However, regardless of the improvement in sleep quality, they still experienced a constant "fatigue." Headaches and backaches remained bothersome to almost all of the students, who attributed them to the long hours of online classes and the fatigue caused by distance learning. However, after the Positive Intervention none of them reported abdominal pain, tachycardia, sweating or shortness of breath, and, according to their reports, headaches had decreased in frequency.

(c) Cognitive field and academic performance. Before the Positive Psychology Intervention Program, the narratives of the female students showed that the pandemic with the social restrictions and distance education had very seriously affected the cognitive domain as well as their school performance. All students confessed to experiencing lack of concentration and distraction, memory problems, lack of clarity of thought, inability to do school homework and solve problems, sleepiness in the class or withdrawing from it and preoccupation with something else, such as Facebook, lack of interest in school, and also lower performance compared to the previous school year.

After the Positive Psychology Intervention Program, the female students realized that their memory and the level of attention and concentration in the school lessons had improved, while they had gained greater clarity in thinking and generally greater interest in school and learning: "I attend the school lessons more systematically," "I am more focused on the school," "I am not so absent-minded/abstracted like before."

Also, it is noteworthy that 3 students began to deal more with "extracurricular" reading, choosing literary and philosophical texts, even though they would follow science and not humanity studies.

In general, the girls reported that they were "doing better in school than before." Even some female students, who were just processing their school

obligations/duties without any particular academic goals, declared that they "began to be more interested" in the course of Philosophy, and also in Modern Greek Language and Literature. In addition, there were responses that showed a new commitment to academic goals, confidence in individual strengths and a more optimistic outlook on the future: "I found myself again, I remembered what I want to achieve and I will work hard for it," "I started again to read," "the pandemic one day will pass and I don't want to have lost opportunities because of my weakness."

(d) Interpersonal relationships, family and social life. Before the Positive Intervention Program, the schoolgirls as a whole had reported discomfort and problems from the prolonged, daily, forced coexistence in the same places with the other family members. The limitation of freedom of movement and the absence of living space and privacy, according to the students, often caused tension and conflicts, burdening the already existing psychological problems.

After the Intervention, the responses showed an emotional shift, a mood of greater tolerance and an effort on the part of the majority of girls to positively frame, understand and justify some attitudes and behaviors of their parents. Some responses show the girls' appreciation for their parents' contribution, but also the effort to take advantage of the opportunity to get closer and share experiences: "They have their own problems," "I don't want to burden them with more worries, theirs are arriving," "I saw that it was an opportunity for us to get closer," "they are trying to offer me everything they can, to support me, to give me courage."

Generally, most schoolgirls reported that they had "developed new ways of communicating with their family," they were talking more with their parents and siblings, "they were hugging a little more often" and "many times a day," although "things weren't perfect" and "sometimes there were fights, too." Some students attributed their change in behavior to Gratitude Letters they had written to family members. One student admitted that "the quarantine was very difficult" for her and added:

> Before I felt lonely, but I didn't want at all to leave my room and meet anyone of my family, I didn't even want to talk to them [...], now everything is definitely better, we spend more quality time together, playing board games and telling jokes, we are laughing more, we even dance on Saturday night with the music programs on television, and we have a good time.

Another student commented that the Positive Intervention Program had helped her "significantly," saying that:

> I am bothered by many things at home, but I realized that it is very important that I am not alone, I have my parents and my siblings in my life, so I'm not complaining as much as before.

Another one acknowledged that her relationship with her parents had improved: "I stopped taking out my stress on others, especially on my parents, we are generally communicating better."

Some female students "taught," as they said, the other family members the positive exercises, which they had applied themselves during the Intervention, or shared with them many of the experiences they had in the participatory Philosophy Workshop. Their answers showed that all these activities worked as feedback for themselves: "When I give courage to my sister, I also feel more optimistic and stronger," "she gives me self-confidence." Nevertheless, there were 2 students, whose responses showed that there was not any improvement in relations with parents or siblings, and testified to the existence of fatigue, the absence of any tolerance and endurance for coexistence in the home.

In terms of relationships with peers, friends and classmates, the responses converged on the fact that "despite the quarantine," the girls remained connected, still communicating digitally and sharing activities, lessons, exchanging messages on mobiles and social media. However, from their answers it was found that the Intervention had an effect on all 11 girls, which contributed to a qualitative differentiation in the relationships with their peers.

More specifically, some students said that the intervention had influenced the conversations with their friends, enriching and deepening their topics. At the same time they recognized a qualitative change in their interpersonal relationships, which made these relationships deeper and more meaningful: "We are talking about other things besides of school, more essentially, topics we had not been concerned with in the past, such as philosophy, the meaning of life, death," "we are talking about the lessons we've learned from the pandemic, about our feelings and our thoughts," "I think we got to know each other better."

Also, some other answers show the intellectual and emotional maturation of the girls, which had an impact on the revision of their interpersonal relationships: "I think that I suddenly grew up and the jokes we made between us are not enough for me," "some of my friends seem not adequate for me and my needs," "I've started to distance myself from toxic people who haven't noticed what's going on around them and I wonder how we hung out so much before, we have nothing in common."

In addition, some students reported that they were trying to give courage, strength and optimism to their friends, giving them, as well as their family, to

do some of the positive exercises, while at the same time sharing with them, as with the family, many of the experiences they had in the participatory Philosophy Workshop.

**4. Utility of the philosophical framing of Positive Intervention Program.** All the students admitted that they had gained some benefits, such as: positive emotions ("I try to see the positive, optimistic and cheerful side of things," "we can see opportunities in difficulties"), self-awareness ("I got to know better me and the others around me," "I realized that in fact I cause my negative emotions, it is my fault"), self-confidence ("I believe more in my own strengths," "I realized that, if I want to, I can be strong"), self-efficacy ("I think I can cope better what happens"), mental resilience, rational thinking, better management and control of things ("I've learned to manage everything that happens with rationale and calm"), adaptability abilities "to changes and difficulties," but also a strong sense of purpose ("in the Program I learned that even in difficult times I have to set goals, to focus on them and to try hard to achieve them, this is the only way I can control my life and manage negative emotions"). In addition, some girls repeated that they could deal more effectively with situations that caused anxiety, stress or depressive symptoms ("I can deal with both the anxiety and sadness I used to feel," "I can focus on the things I love even when there is pressure around me," "I am very happy that I participated in the Program, because in this crisis and depression I put my thoughts and feelings in order, and I feel both calm and happy about it").

As for the usefulness of positive techniques and exercises of the Intervention, the students generally expressed only positive views. All 11 focused on the importance of the positive techniques Gratitude Letter, Letter from the Future and Three Good Things/Positive Events. Nine referred to Mental Abstraction, 8 to the Gratitude Diary and Positive Past Moments, 5 referred to the Smart Goals and Acts of Kindness, and there were 3 references to the exercises One Door Closes Another Door Opens and The Best Possible Self/The Best Future Self.

About the necessity of Philosophy in the implementation of Positive Intervention Program, all the answers were remarkable. The students considered that it is absolutely necessary to connect Philosophy with Psychology, as they realized their basic common principles. They emphasized the great correlation of psychological and philosophical topics and problems, and mainly the common goals, which concern the pursuit and achievement of human happiness. Also, they referred to the relationship between Philosophy and Science, to the philosophical origins of Positive Psychology, to the cognitive role of Philosophy and to the cognitive reconstruction achieved through it, to the practical and experiential application of philosophical

principles through Positive Psychology. In general, they emphasized the reinforcing role of Philosophy in the effectiveness of Positive Psychology techniques.

More specifically, regarding Philosophy the students mentioned: "I realized that Philosophy and Psychology are related to each other, they are not two different things, they have a connection, there is an interdependence between them," "with Philosophy I understood the reason why positive exercises are done, what they are based upon, what Psychology is generally based on," "Philosophy is about our beliefs, and if we change our beliefs, our psychology changes too," "I don't know if the Program would be better or worse without Philosophy, but certainly the philosophical topics we discussed made me understand how things work in the human mind," "Philosophy gave me explanations about how the positive techniques work; without Philosophy I think that these techniques would work mechanically like gymnastics, like the habits we have, without knowing why we have them, what exactly they do," "I've learned Philosophy in practice, experientially, and not theoretically," "I think the connection of Philosophy and Psychology was useful, we didn't just memorize some philosophical theories, but we tried to put into practice with the positive exercises the philosophy of happiness," "I can't tell what helped me more, Philosophy or Positive Psychology, because Hellenistic Philosophy we were taught and Positive Psychology have the same goal, the human happiness," "with positive exercises only, I don't know if I would understand what is the meaning of life or what are my basic needs or what are the important things in my life and what are the unimportant ones [...]. I appreciated the value of Philosophy more," "I liked that we had many discussions about the meaning of happiness, the meaning of life, humanism, kindness, friendship. They are philosophical issues, but also issues of Psychology and this impressed me," "I realized that Psychology is also based on Philosophy, they are not two different boxes, and if someone explains to you philosophically why you should do each positive technique, this is even more helpful, because it helps you manage better situations very painful for us and for others," "the Philosophy we were taught has a scientific basis and I liked that, Positive Psychology is also based on Science; we can be and feel well, if what we learn and we apply have to do with human nature, as Science investigates it. I agree with Epicurus, it is not possible to get rid of our fears, if we don't know our nature, it is not possible to be happy and enjoy our life without scientific knowledge. That's why it was useful the connection of Philosophy with Psychology."

Regarding the ways in which the students could use the knowledge, techniques and skills they had acquired to deal with both the pandemic crisis and any emerging difficulties, making a positive change in their lives, the responses

revealed a wide range of approaches, which highlights the deep cognitive impact of the Positive Intervention Program. Realizing the real basic needs and most important things in life, limiting desires, enjoying every moment of the existence and not only the pleasure that comes from achieving goals, facing situations in their true dimensions, mental preparing for changes, adapting to them and treating them as opportunities, realizing that everything is natural and expected in life, realizing the self-worth of human existence and the value of personal control over things, always focusing on the positive side and the benefits of difficulties and not focusing exclusively on losses, and in general the realization that happiness is a matter of personal choice and therefore accessible and attainable, all these highlight the profound positive effect of the Program and the achievement of the goal of cognitive reconstruction. Here is a typical response from a student, in order to accurately convey the range of her thinking:

> Through the Program I understood that our desires lead us to anxiety, to stress, to bad mood, to disappointment. We want things, we set goals and we keep trying to achieve them, and when we achieve one goal, we move on to the next and this effort never ends. And if we don't get our goals, we get upset. And we have stress and pressure and all these emotions. But our happiness is not only our goals. They are all the little pleasures of every moment and we should give importance to them. Personally, for so many years I've been studying and preparing continuously to enter the university, considering that only then I would be happy. Unfortunately, now I feel that I have lost a very large part of my life, many happy moments, many small daily pleasures. And I have decided from now on to enjoy every moment just because I exist, and not just to set goals.

However, among the responses was the admission of some students that although they had learned and understood what they needed to do to manage problems and difficulties, as well as the accompanying negative emotions, anxiety and stress, they nevertheless felt that is not always easy, but requires constant effort:

> It is not always easy to put into practice what I have learned, because every day I face difficulties, like all of us. I may think rationally, saying to myself e.g. 'nothing terrible will happen,' and that makes me feel good, but not for long. Then again I feel the same and I have to think again about what I have learned. The knowledge doesn't function automatically.

## VIII. Discussion

The key findings of the present study are the significant benefits for mental well-being of all students participating in a Positive Intervention School Program implemented during the period of COVID-19, which combined Positive Psychology and Philosophy. The Intervention had a positive effect in the way of thinking and in the emotional state of the majority of participating female students, enhancing their happiness. Consequently, it affected their quality of life, improving their subjective health, increasing interest in school and learning, making commitment to academic goals, improving interpersonal relationships. These changes confirm the basic principles of both Positive Psychology and Cognitive Psychotherapy as well as of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophy, which advocate that the modification of the way of thinking changes both emotions and behavior.[58] The positive differentiation of the way of thinking is due to the impressive results of the cognitive reconstruction that was achieved in three months, despite the fact that some answers showed difficulties in mental control and in the rationale processing of emotions.

The positive effects on mental well-being of the exercises "Letter of Gratitude," "Letter from the Future," "The Best Possible Self / The Best Future Self," "Three Good Things," "Gratitude Diary," "Positive Past Moments," "Acts of Kindness" confirm the findings of corresponding studies in adolescents and adults.[59] Also, the findings regarding the positive effect

[58] DiGiuseppe, et al.; Yapijakis, "Ethical Teachings of Epicurus," 83-88.

[59] Laura A. King, "The Health Benefits of Writing about Life Goals," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27, no. 7 (2001): 798-807; Emmons, and McCullough, 377; Kristin, S. Layous, et al., "Kindness Counts: Prompting Prosocial Behavior in Preadolescents Boosts Peer Acceptance and Well-being," *PLOS One* 7, no. 12 (2012): e51380; Keiko Otake, et al., "Happy People Become Happier through Kindness: A Counting Kindness Intervention," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 7 (2006): 361-375; Kennon M. Sheldon, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, "How to Increase and Sustain Positive Emotion: The Effects of Expressing Gratitude and Visualizing Best Possible Selves," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 1, no. 2 (2006): 73-82; Chad M. Burton, and Laura A. King, "Effects of (very) Brief Writing on Health: The Two Minute Miracle," *British Journal of Health Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2008): 9-14; Jeffrey J. Froh, et al., "Who Benefits the Most from a Gratitude Intervention in Children and Adolescents? Examining Positive Affect as a Moderator," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4, no. 5 (2009): 408-422; Julieta Galante, et al., "Effect of Kindness-based Meditation on Health and Well-being: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 82, no. 6 (2014): 1101; Sarah D. Pressman, et al., "It's Good to Do Good and Receive Good: The Impact of a 'Pay it Forward' Style Kindness Intervention on Giver and Receiver Well-being," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 10, no. 4 (2015): 293-302; Nezlek, et al., 323-332; Brenda H. O'Connell, et al., "Feeling Thanks and Saying Thanks: A Randomized Controlled Trial Examining if and how Socially Oriented Gratitude Journals Work," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 73, no. 10 (2017): 1280-1300; Algoe, 183-188; Jiang, e36-e45; Yuta Chishima, et al., "Temporal Distancing during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Letter Writing with Future Self Can Mitigate Negative Affect," *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* 13, no. 2 (2021): 406-418.

of the "Mental Abstraction Exercise" correspond to those of Koo et al.[60] The results of exercise "One Door Closes, Another Door Opens" confirmed corresponding findings.[61]

One of the key findings of the study was the highlighting of the necessity and effectiveness of the philosophical framing of the applied Positive Intervention. The highlighting of the reinforcing role of Hellenistic Philosophy in the effectiveness of the applied techniques of Positive Psychology, or, in other words, the practical and experiential application of philosophical principles through the applied techniques of Positive Psychology, is a novel finding in the existing literature. The references of the students to the knowledge and skills they acquired to deal with the pandemic crisis and any emerging difficulty, highlight the profound cognitive effect of the Positive Intervention Program, through the successful combination of Philosophy and Positive Psychology.

All female students referred with emphasis as the most positively influencing in dealing with stress and pressure mainly the Epicurean *tetrapharmakos* and the Epicurean principles generally, avoiding negative thoughts of fear of death and obtaining peace of mind in the midst of the pandemic. The students' referral to personal freedom and choice as the basic condition of personal happiness, the deep understanding of the concept of happiness and how to achieve it enjoying every moment and focusing on the really important and essential things in life, the understanding of the real human needs and the distinction of them, the realization of the individual's ability to shape his environment and not be negatively affected by it, echo Epicurean thoughts and mainly the Epicurean prudence (practical wisdom).

In general, all the answers about limiting desires, enjoying existence itself and every moment, facing situations in their true dimensions, mentally preparing for changes, adapting to them and seeing them as opportunities, understanding that everything in life and universe is natural and expected, always focusing on the positives and benefits of difficulties and not exclusively on losses, and generally realizing that happiness is a matter of personal choice and, for this reason, accessible and feasible, all these thoughts echo principles mainly of Epicurean Philosophy but also of Stoicism. At the same time, they highlight the achievement of a deep cognitive reconstruction and the

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[60] Minkyung Koo, et al., "It's a Wonderful Life: Mentally Subtracting Positive Events Improves People's Affective States, Contrary to Their Affective Forecasts," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 5 (2008): 1217.

[61] Tayyab Rashid, and Afroze Anjum, "Positive Psychotherapy for Young Adults and Children," in *Handbook of Depression in Children and Adolescents*, eds. John R. Z. Abela, and Benjamin L. Hankin, 250-287 (New York: Guilford Press, 2008); Fabian Gander, et al., "Strength-based Positive Interventions: Further Evidence for their Potential in Enhancing Well-being and Alleviating Depression," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 14, no. 4 (2013): 1241-1259.

profound positive and cognitive effect of the Positive Intervention Program.

A key difficulty in the study was the online implementation of the Positive Intervention Program due to COVID-19. The pandemic did not allow the implementation of the Intervention in an entire school class. In addition, a qualitative methodology was used with all the associated limitations and potential biases that accompany qualitative studies.[62] The Intervention was based on a small sample of convenience, without a control group. For this reason it is difficult to establish any causal relationship between the Intervention and the extracted outcomes/results.[63] An additional limitation due to the conditions of the pandemic and the use of the qualitative method is the absence of measurements with weighted and validated psychometric tools and scales, as well as the absence of consistent criteria for determining the dimensions of well-being, which would provide greater objectivity in the evaluation of Intervention and would further strengthen the extracted results.

Potential biases in the study were addressed by cross-checking the data through triangulation by the use of two data collection tools, the individual interview and the focus group interview, which contributed to more secure results. The intentional overlapping of the questions of the interview guide contributed to checking the consistency of the students' answers and, consequently, to increasing their reliability.[64] It should be mentioned that the qualitative methodology, as an interpretive process, with subjectivity in the planning, recording and analysis of the data, and the limited sample with its specific characteristics, could not lead to the derivation of representative conclusions nor provide the possibility of their generalization for the entire population of Lyceum students. Moreover, an intervention program that may be highly beneficial for one group of children or adolescents may present disadvantages and inefficiencies for another group with some other characteristics.[65]

Due to the methodological limitations already been mentioned, a necessity arises for the validation of the findings and their possible transferability to other similar school environments, as well as their generalization, in the sense of the possibility of their utilization for the development of a broader theory. Future research should be implemented with multiple qualitative and quantitative methods, in different school environments, with expanded samples and with control groups, with weighted psychometric tools and multi-item scales to control more variables, which may affect the effectiveness

[62] Creswell.

[63] Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.

[64] Robson.

[65] Fenwick-Smith, et al., 1-17.

of the intervention, in order to strengthen the validity, generalizability and transferability of the data of the present study. Among the new research needs that arise is the measurement of the degree of effect on the mental well-being of adolescents of each technique of Positive Psychology applied, on the one hand, and the degree of effect of Philosophy and the philosophical framing of the positive intervention, on the other hand, which were difficult to assess separately in present work, in order to highlight their effectiveness in a measurable and distinct way.

In conclusion, the Positive Intervention School Program implemented during the period of COVID-19, which combined Positive Psychology and Philosophy, had significant benefits for mental well-being. The Intervention had a remarkably positive effect in the way of thinking and in the emotional state of all participating female students, enhancing their happiness and improving aspects of the quality of life.

Despite some methodological limitations, the present study has produced important research data, which highlighted the positive effect of the philosophical interventions on the mental well-being of adolescents. The study showed the necessity and effectiveness of the philosophical framing of the applied Positive Intervention. It showed the reinforcing role of Hellenistic Philosophy, especially Epicurean but also Stoic, in the effectiveness of the applied Positive Psychology. The references of the students highlight the profound cognitive effect of the Positive Intervention Program, through the successful combination of Philosophy and Positive Psychology.

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Table 1. Structure of the Positive Intervention in the weekly meetings

| Weeks | Content of program "Living Happily in the Era of COVID-19" |
|---|---|
| 1 | • Consolidation of a positive climate of trust and cooperation<br>• Projection video *Your Secret* by Jean Sebastien-Monzani (https://vimeo.com/12890334)<br>• Record and present 3 goals of each student<br>• Discussion on the concept of *happiness-bliss* (eudaimonia) based on the personal beliefs and experiences of the female students<br>• Homework: write down *Three Positive Events* at the end of each day for the entire next week |

| | |
|---|---|
| 2 | • Discussion of the concept of *happiness-bliss* (eudaimonia), according to the Epicurean philosophical approach, sharing relevant passages from texts of Epicurean philosophers<br>• Discussion *of savoring techniques*<br>• Examining activities to increase positive emotions as well as ways to enjoy past, present, and future experiences<br>• Homework: daily practice of the students in their own *savoring techniques* |
| 3 | • Focus on the concept of *gratitude* and the positive feelings that come from it<br>• Homework: (a) creating and keeping a weekly *Gratitude Diary*, (b) exercise-positive technique: *One Door Closes, another Door Opens* |
| 4 | • Discussion of the meaning and purpose of life – *Meaningful Dialogue about Meaning*<br>• Reading excerpt on *The Meaning of Life* from Irvin Yalom's "Religion and Psychiatry" (2002)<br>• Record positions and approaches<br>• Search the internet for related texts<br>• Homework: write about *Your Best Possible Self* or alternatively *Your Best Future Self* |
| 5 | • Discussion of the meaning and purpose of life according to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophical approach<br>• Sharing relevant quotes about *meaning* and *purpose* of life from writings of Epicureans and Stoic philosophers and focus group discussion<br>• Presentation and implementation of the *Smart Goals* technique<br>• Homework: complete the individual *Smart Goals* |
| 6 | • Focus on *positive relationships through expressing gratitude*<br>• Exploring ways to have more positive social interactions<br>• Homework exercises: (a) *Letter of Gratitude*, (b) choosing and sharing with relatives applied positivity exercises |
| 7 | • Focusing on the concepts of *kindness*, *friendship*, *humanitarianism* and *altruism* in the light of Epicurean philosophy and the Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mill<br>• Link to recent findings of modern scientific research<br>• Homework: *Acts of Kindness* |
| 8 | • Narratives of intense positive experiences – *happy moments in the past* and focusing on the emotions experienced and the thoughts that accompanied them<br>• Homework: write a *Letter from the future* |
| 9 | • Program recap<br>• More extensive exploration of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophical systems as timeless but also topical "answers" to many philosophical and existential questions, but also to specific concerns of female students in the midst of the pandemic<br>• Creation of personal plans for the prevention of "relapse" in the former psychological state<br>• Homework: redefining future goals |
| 10 | • Presentation and discussion of the students' personal plans and goals<br>• Homework Review: Your Best Future Self |
| 11 | • Comparison of the contents of the exercise The Best Future Self of the 4th and 10th sessions to identify similarities and differences, and discuss them<br>• Evaluation of the intervention for the degree of fulfillment of the three objectives of the female students of the 1st session<br>• Production of written texts by female students about their emotions, their physical health, their school performance, their social life, the ways-techniques of managing the health crisis and social isolation<br>• Planning to re-conduct individual oral interviews<br>• Completion of Intervention |

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# Philosophical Management of Stress based on Science and Epicurean Pragmatism: A Pilot Study

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**Abstract**

*In the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, we created and implemented from November 2020 to February 2021 a monthly educational pilot program of philosophical management of stress based on Science, Humanism and Epicurean Pragmatism, which was offered to employees of 26 municipalities in the Prefecture of Attica, Greece. The program named "Philosophical Distress Management Operation System" (Philo.Di.M.O.S.) is novel and unique in its kind, as it combines a certain Greek philosophical tradition (Epicurean) that concurs with modern scientific knowledge. The program was designed to be implemented in a period of crisis; therefore, it used a fast-paced, easy to learn and practice philosophical approach to stress management, based on cognitive psychotherapy. The philosophical approach to stress management has the advantage that it can be offered to most people, regardless of age and educational level. The pilot program was effective in achieving its objectives, shown by statistical comparisons of the trainees' responses to anonymous questionnaires before and after the month-long training. The successful Philo.Di.M.O.S. program, thus, based on a solid scientific and philosophical basis, offers a paradigm of stress management during crises and could be useful in Greece and internationally.*

**Keywords:** *stress management; applied philosophy; science; brain function; biological psychology; Epicurus; Epicurean philosophy; pursuit of happiness; meaning of life; scientific humanism*

The unprecedented coronavirus pandemic and the associated great psychosocial stress being experienced by all humankind since 2020, have revealed the need for better emotional shielding of society in stressful situations. In the first months of the pandemic, we created and implemented a month-long educational program of Philosophical Management of Stress based on Science, Humanism and Epicurean Pragmatism, which was funded by the Prefecture of Attica, Greece.

We foresaw that a possibly prolonged psychological pressure during the pandemic would be particularly painful for the Greeks who are characterized by inability to cope with stress. According to the Gallup Global Emotions survey published in April 2019, the Greeks claimed to be the most stressed people of the planet among 140 countries, including areas with civil conflict, such as Libya, Somalia, and Syria.[1] The stress experienced by Greeks seemed to be based mostly on subjective beliefs and perceptions, and not so much on objective difficulties. Moreover, this observation highlights the fact that most Greeks do not know how to manage everyday stress.

Due to the emergency health crisis, the Prefecture of Attica decided it was imperative to address the increased local public health needs and the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, by supporting the training of the staff of its supervised social structures in Philosophical Management of Stress to better assist people in need during this period of crisis, as well as the ones that may follow in the future. Following an open call, a team, led by the Applied Philosophy Research Laboratory of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), that included experts from both the School of Philosophy and the School of Medicine of the NKUA, undertook the task of implementing a pilot educational program on philosophical stress management supported by the Regional Development Fund of the Prefecture of Attica as an EU co-financed project (European Social Fund).

The object of the action "Educational Process of Pilot Implementation of the Philosophical Stress Management Program in selected structures of the European Social Fund" was the synchronous and asynchronous online training for staff members and executives working at several of the 240 selected co-financed social structures of the Operational Program *Attica 2014-2020* in three monthly seminar cycles on the philosophical management of stress. Here we present the main characteristics of the program we named Philosophical Distress Management Operation System (Philo.Di.M.O.S.), as well as the empirical results of its pilot implementation.

[1] Gallup Inc, *Gallup Global Emotions*, 2019, http://cdn.cnn.com/cnn/2019/images/04/25/globalstateofemotions_wp_report_041719v7_dd.pdf.

## I. Philosophical and scientific basis of Philo.Di.M.O.S.

The program Philo.Di.M.O.S. was innovative and unique in its kind worldwide, as it combined the Greek philosophical legacy (mainly the Epicurean tradition) that concurs with modern scientific knowledge.[2] The program was tailored for crisis periods, so it used a fast-paced, easy to learn and practice philosophical approach to stress management, based on cognitive psychotherapy, as well as on solid scientific knowledge of neuropsychological and biological mechanisms of stress in brain and body.[3] The philosophical approach to stress management comes hand in hand with feasibility, effectiveness, and applicability: it can be offered to everyone, regardless one's age and educational level. We decided that the key philosophical perspective of this program had to be Epicurean pragmatism (epistemologically) and humanism (morally).

Pragmatism is the philosophical outlook that focuses on objective reality, and considers important what may be practically useful. As a consequentialist tradition, pragmatism assumes that stressful thoughts stem from real-life problems, to which practical solutions should be proposed. Any theory or aim should be judged according to criteria such as applicability, practicality and utility. The major figures in this tradition are William James and John Dewey.[4]

Humanism, in turn, holds that humanity, that is, being human, constitutes the ultimate value, and assumes that the ultimate end of any law-abiding civilized society is to defend basic human rights such as life, freedom, and happiness (eudaimonia). The declared objective of humanism is to defend the dignity and personality of every human, and facilitate the development of our capabilities in such way, as to live harmoniously in any given society, emphasizing that the actual meaning of life consists in the pursuit of happiness. The elaborated moral status of this notion, happiness, can be traced back to the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition, while it has also maintained its dominant status during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and Modernity. Among the major representatives of Humanism are usually listed Epicurus,

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[2] Christos Yapijakis, "Ethical Teachings of Epicurus Based on Human Nature in the Light of Biological Psychology," *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2018): 83-88.

[3] George P. Chrousos, "Stress and Disorders of the Stress System," *Nature Reviews Endocrinology* 5, no. 7 (2009): 374-381; George P. Chrousos, "Empathy, Stress and Compassion: Resonance between the Caring and the Cared," in *Providing Compassionate Healthcare: Challenges in Policy and Practice*, eds. Sue Shea, Robin Wynward, and Christos Lionis, 35-39 (London: Routledge, 2014).

[4] John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1935); John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989); William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995).

Erasmus, Voltaire, as well as the American statesman Thomas Jefferson.[5] On the other hand, happiness – or, eudaimonia – has been celebrated by the Utilitarians as the only good that may rightfully be desirable *per se*.[6]

The key conceptual features of Philo.Di.M.O.S. include the scientific and empirical acceptance of physical reality and stress (pressure) as a natural phenomenon, the realization that stress may be objective (due to objective stressors) or subjective (due to an idiosyncratic way of thinking), the biological and neuropsychological capabilities of the human brain,[7] the philosophical way of thinking that may, or may not, correspond to physical reality, and the effectiveness of philosophical management of stress, aiming for peace of mind and tranquility (mental health).

Absence of mental agitation (ataraxia) combined with absence of physical pain (aponia) are the core elements of happiness as a permanent, stable state of mind (eudaimonia), according to Epicurus.[8] Contemporary utilitarian ethicists also consider the absence of mental and physical pain the core-element of happiness,[9] while to others the pursuit of happiness by means of eliminating pain, physical and mental alike, is a mandate of common sense.[10] The Epicurean account of happiness is echoed in the definition of

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[5] Christos Yapijakis, "Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics and Molecular Medicine in Epicurean Philosophy," in *History of Human Genetics*, eds. Heike L. Petermann, Peter S. Harper, and Suzanne Doetz, 41-57 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017); Jan Papy, "Erasmus, Europe and Cosmopolitanism: The Humanist Image and Message in his Letters," in *Erasmus of Rotterdam and European Culture*, eds. Enrico Pasini, and Pietro B. Rossi, 27-42 (Florence: SISMEL, 2008); Peter Gay, *The Bridge of Criticism. Dialogues among Lucian, Erasmus, and Voltaire on the Enlightenment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Panagiotis Panagiotopoulos, *Thomas Jefferson 'I am also an Epicurean' His life and his Inspiration from the Ancient Greeks* (Athens: Independent Publication, 2021).

[6] Jeremy Bentham, *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham: An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, eds. James H. Burns, and Herbert Lionel Adolphus Hart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002); Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1874).

[7] Christos Yapijakis, "Ethical Teachings of Epicurus Based on Human Nature in the Light of Biological Psychology," *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2018): 83-88.

[8] Christos Yapijakis, and George P. Chrousos, "Epicurean (Eustatheia): A Philosophical Approach of Stress Management," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 173-190; Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, "'Death is Nothing to Us:' A Critical Analysis of the Epicurean Views Concerning the Dread of Death," *Antiquity and Modern World: Interpretations of Antiquity* 8 (2014): 316-323.

[9] Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[10] Julian Savulescu, and Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, "'Ethical Minefields' and the Voice of Common Sense: A Discussion with Julian Savulescu," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2019): 125; Christos Yapijakis, "The Need of the Epicurean Concept of 'the Pursuit of Happiness' in the European Union," http://www.epicuros.gr/arthra/Yapijakis_EU_Happiness_Need.pdf.

health as provided by the World Health Organization (WHO 1948), that is, "A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."[11]

## II. Investigation of the effectiveness of Philo.Di.M.O.S.

The purpose of the pilot educational program of Philosophical Management of Stress (Philo.Di.M.O.S.) has been the investigation of its potential effectiveness. As far as we know this was the first time worldwide that a fast-track, monthly training process of stress management combined the Greek philosophical tradition (mainly Epicurean), that is in accordance, with both modern scientific knowledge, and the cognitive psychotherapeutic approach. The program was designed in such a way as to be offered to every person of the general population, who just had to speak Greek and to have completed, at least, secondary education.

The research questions, which the pilot educational program aimed to objectively answer, were:

1) Can Applied Philosophy be applicable to stress management?
2) Can Science be effective when combined with Epicurean Pragmatic Philosophy, which is based on the observation of reality, and not on intellectual constructions?
3) Can basic concepts of the Science and Medicine of stress be taught in a simple way to any individual of the general population?
4) Similarly, can basic concepts of Philosophy be taught in a simple way to any individual of the general population?
5) Can some basic brain functions be taught in a simple way to any individual of the general population?
6) Can some basic methods of Philosophical Management of Stress be taught in a simple way to any individual of the general population?
7) Can all of the above be taught in one month and have an effect on stress management by individuals of the general population?

We applied mixed methods of research conducting traditional qualitative and quantitative research and using pragmatism as a philosophical framework.[12] It was decided that the putative effectiveness of the pilot program would be evaluated based on specific criteria. The pilot program would be considered to be effective if it would objectively achieve two criteria:

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[11] World Health Organization. *Constitution of the World Health Organization – Basic Documents*, 45th edition (Geneva, 2006).

[12] R. Burke Johnson, and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, "Mixed Methods Research: A Research Paradigm Whose Time Has Come," *Educational Researcher* 33, no. 7 (2004): 14-26.

a) A statistically significant increase of the level of the trainees' knowledge on stress and its management,
b) A statistically significant reduction in the subjective perceived stress of the trainees in conjunction with the simultaneous stability of the objective stress.

If both criteria could be met, it would follow that knowledge acquired by the pilot educational program could be used by the trainees to manage their everyday stress. The reduction of the subjective perceived stress may be apparently considered as an indirect indicator of the effective management of stress.

The investigation of the possible effectiveness of the pilot program "Philosophical Management of Stress" was done using anonymous questionnaires, which were given to the trainees at the beginning and at the end of the educational process. The investigation was carried out in accordance with the General Personal Data Protection Regulation (2016/679) of the European Union[13] and the four key bioethical principles,[14] respecting the privacy and individual rights of the trainees.

Before and after the one-month educational program, the trainees anonymously answered questionnaires containing:

a) Six questions regarding their knowledge of stress as a natural phenomenon, the possibility of stress management, humanism, correlation of philosophy and science,
b) Twelve questions regarding their stress due to objective factors (personal illness, illness or death of a close relative or close friend, dismissal or severe problems at workplace, severe financial problems, separation from a longtime relationship, recent marriage, or recent birth of a child, etc.),
c) Fourteen questions regarding their perceived stress in the last month (how often they felt stressed, nervous, angry, hopeless), as well as their perceived ability to manage stressful situations.

Due to the preservation of anonymity, the comparative statistical analysis of the answers was not done per person but in the total cohort of trainees.

[13] Council of the European Union, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Protection of Individuals with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data and on the Free Movement of such Data* (Brussels: 2015), https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9565-2015-INIT/en/pdf.

[14] Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, *From Dawn till Dusk: Bioethical Insights into the Beginning and the End of Life* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2019).

The answers for each knowledge question were grouped into the correct group on one hand and the group of all incorrect ones, and Fischer exact test was used to compare statistically the trainees' response numbers in the two groups, before and after the one-month educational program. The answers for the objective and perceived stress were grouped into three groups (never/almost never, sometimes, often/very often) and Fischer exact probability test of 2X3 tables was used for statistical comparison of the trainees' numbers of responses in the three groups, at the beginning and at the end of the educational process. The level of statistically significant test result was set for probability value less than 0.05.

## III. Implementation of Philo.Di.M.O.S.

The pilot educational program of Philosophical Management of Stress (Philo.Di.M.O.S.) was designed to take place during the pandemic of coronavirus, therefore, the training was scheduled to take place through videotaped one-hour lessons and live online discussions. The duration of the educational process was four weeks long. The program took place in three monthly cycles (November 2020, December 2020 and February 2021) with three different groups of trainees. After publicized calls of the Prefecture of Attica, the first 100 applicant employees of 55 social structures located in 37 of the most populous municipalities of Attica, were accepted as trainees without any further selection.

The trainees were employed in social structures of the Prefecture of Attica and belonged to a wide range of staff members, including psychologists, sociologists, social workers, teachers, pharmacists, nurses, physical therapists, speech therapists, financial executives, administrative employees, and technicians. They worked in community centers, hostels for abused women, counseling centers for women, day care centers for elderly people, day centers and dormitories for homeless people, as well as social structures for provision of basic goods (social grocery stores, pharmacies, free meals, etc.).

The wide spectrum of trainees regarding age, education level and specialty, created the imperative of collecting some demographic information for research purposes, therefore, an anonymous self-referential questionnaire was completed by the trainees during their registration in the pilot educational program of Philosophical Management of Stress (Philo.Di.M.O.S.). Furthermore, the trainees also answered the anonymous questionnaire regarding their knowledge in stress and philosophy, as well as their objective and perceived stress status before attending the program.

The pilot educational program included a gradual process of training with a different thematic focus each week on issues of:

a) Philosophy (Aim of Philosophy, Pragmatism, Humanism, Applied Philosophy),
b) Stress (Science of Stress, Brain function and Stress, Medicine and Stress, Psychology and Stress),
c) Philosophical Management of Stress on a Personal Level (Various Philosophical Approaches of Stress Management, Epicurean Cognitive Management of Stress, Behavioral Management of Stress, Philosophical aspects of Brain function),
d) Philosophical Management of Stress on an Interpersonal Level (Mental Health and the Biopsychosocial Model, Diet and Mental Health, Philosophical aspects of Social Behavior, Experiential approach to Living according to Nature).

Each week, the trainees were able to log in a special website (https://philodimos.net) and to watch four videotaped one-hour PowerPoint presentations, as well to read some supplementary texts. After watching a presentation, the trainees had to answer correctly three relative multiple-choice questions per hour, which were saved under their name as a proof of the course attendance. At the end of the week, there was a two-hour live online discussion with one or two of the educators regarding the weekly presentations. During the discussion, some experiences from everyday life were used as examples for illustration of basic issues and counselling of stress management.

The trainees had an age range of 26-64 years (median 39 years), therefore, adult education techniques were applied, such as repetition of some basic concepts and information, interactive weekly discussions, and consolidation of new knowledge based on existing experience, counselling for simulated everyday stressful situations, encouraging active participation, and development of critical thinking. The repetition of some basic information about stress management was semantically connected at the level of physical reality, neurobiology, psychology, sociology and philosophy.

In order for trainees to be considered as having successfully completed the educational process and to receive a certificate of attendance, they had to answer correctly at least 36 of the 48 multiple-choice questions (at least 75%). The trainees received a certificate of the educational program, which has been certified by the Center of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens with 2.4 credits of the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET).

## IV. Results of the pilot program Philo.Di.M.O.S.

The educational program of Philosophical Management of Stress (Philo. Di.M.O.S.) was applied in three monthly training courses. Out of 100 initial employees from structures of 37 municipalities of Attica, in the end, 62 employees successfully completed the educational process and received a certificate of attendance. The common characteristic of the successful trainees was a high interest in the program, while they had a wide range of age (26-64 years), education (from high school graduates to postgraduate degree holders) and profession (technicians, administrative officers, teachers, health professionals, social workers and psychologists). They originated from 26 large municipalities of the Prefecture of Attica (Athens, Acharnes, Aghios Dimitrios, Amarousion, Aspropyrgos, Byron, Daphne, Glyfada, Hellenikon-Argyroupolis, Helioupolis, Heraklion, Kallithea, Keratsini-Drapetsona, Lykovrysi-Pefki, Megara, Metamorphosis, Moschato-Tavros, Nea Smyrne, Nikea-Aghios Redis, Pallini, Peania, Penteli, Peristeri, Petroupolis, Spata-Artemis, Fyli), reflecting the possible effective dissemination of the pilot program.

The pilot program was proved to be effective in achieving its objectives, based on the set evaluation criteria. Comparison of the trainees' responses of the anonymous questionnaires before and after the monthly training revealed:

a) that due to the educational program there was statistically significant difference in knowledge of stress ($P=0.00011$) and stress management in general ($P=0.004$), and in personal confidence to manage stress ($P=0.003$); at the same time, there was no statistical difference in knowledge about Humanism, and about the fact that Science is closely related to Pragmatism and not to Idealism,

b) that there was a statistically significant difference in some parameters related to the subjective perceived stress of the trainees, such as minimal surprise by stressful events ($P=0.008$), confidence of controlling oneself ($P=0.02$), and minimal anger response to stressful events ($P=0.02$), while their objective stress remained constant and did not differ significantly over the period of one month ($P>0.05$); furthermore, there was no statistical difference in experiencing stressful events in everyday life, in recognizing that many times stressful situations are not avoidable and in feeling overwhelmed by stressful events.

These observations were indirect evidence that most trainees learned to consider the occurrence of stressful events as part of life, and at the same time to effectively manage their perceived stress. They learned they should not

respond to stressful events with surprise or anger, but instead to anticipate them and be confident that they are resilient in stressful conditions.

The validity of the obtained results is enhanced by the fact that completion of questionnaires before and after the educational process was anonymous out of respect for personal data. This allowed the trainees to report information of objective stressful situations (e.g., illness, death of a close relative, or divorce), but also to honestly express their subjective perceptions regarding stress and their confidence to cope with it.

Most trainees expressed their satisfaction from the program, mainly because their expectations regarding the acquisition of new knowledge and skills were met. The majority of the trainees answered that they completely or very much agreed (75.4%) that they acquired new knowledge and that they benefited completely or very much (82%) from the "Philosophical Management of Stress" program. Approximately half of the trainees felt that they learned completely or very much to manage perceived stress (52.5%), while a further 37.7% said that they gained a moderate ability to manage perceived stress. Furthermore, about half said that they learned completely or very much to advise others to manage their subjective perceived stress (45.9%), and as many (44.3%) stated that they acquired a moderate ability to advise others to manage their subjective perceived stress.

The qualitative analysis of some characteristic phrases of the trainees during online discussions showed a progressive advancement of learning and awareness of philosophical management of stress per week of educational process. In the first week, they commented on the experience of stress in everyday life, their great interest in the program, and some thoughts on how philosophical thinking could contribute to stress management. In the second week, the trainees expressed their amazement regarding the increased risk of chronic noncommunicable diseases among people that do not manage their stress, the acceptance of objective stressors as part of life, and their understanding of the importance of managing subjective perceived stress, but some expressed doubts on how it is possible that they may not be affected by perceived stress or that it is possible to manage it. In the third week, some trainees expressed the view that they understand what they need to do to manage stress, but found it difficult to actually do it, while others said that they were able to manage their perceived stress. In the last week, some trainees stated that they still found it somewhat difficult to manage their perceived stress, even though they knew what to do, while others said they knew how to manage stress and apply it successfully. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the trainees learned that in order to be helpful to others in stressful situations, they first have to manage their own personal perceived stress.

Two characteristic comments of trainees during online discussions are worth mentioning. A female social worker reported: "A person with special needs in our structure became very angry because he thought that he did not receive some information because of impatient colleagues. While he was very angry, I talked to him with empathy and composure and explained to him in detail as many times as he needed to understand something. I offered to help and spend all the time he needed in order to understand. Finally, the man relaxed, we were able to communicate and all tension and fuss stopped." A male philologist with a Master's degree remarked: "I have learned in this seminar to try to manage things in a cool way and not to create stressful scenarios in my head. I have been trained in humanities, but I had learned only superficially what the philosophers taught. Only now I have understood what Epicurus said about serenity, about happiness. A seminar that lasted so little time has covered six years of education and I finally comprehended all the essentials."

In an evaluation feedback, most of the participating educators expressed their enthusiasm for the innovative program, and suggested the need for more interactive experiential workshops and better diffusion of the program in the future. The trainees also expressed suggestions for future improvement of the program, with more prominent among them to increase the number of experiential exercises and practical applications, as well as to develop longer duration seminars and lifelong learning.

## V. Conclusions

The pilot educational program of Philosophical Management of Stress (Philo. Di.M.O.S.) has proven quite successful and answered affirmatively questions that were raised and researched. It seems that Science could be effectively combined with Pragmatism and Epicurean Philosophy, which are based on the observation of reality and not on intellectual constructions. Applied Philosophy can be practically used in stress management. The basics of the Science and Medicine of Stress, as well as basic concepts of Philosophy were offered in a simple manner to interested people from the general population of a wide variety of age, education, and occupation. Some basic functions of the brain can be taught and some basic methods of Philosophical Management of Stress may be presented in a simple manner to most people, in the tradition initiated by Epicurus. Moreover, all these matters can be taught in a month and can produce results in stress management by people from the general population.

The successful implementation of the pilot program of Philosophical Management of Stress verified the initial assumption that cognitive restructuring with philosophical psychotherapy is feasible even when taught

to a heterogeneous group of people within a month. Basic requirements for such an educational program are to, first, provide real scientific data, so that trainees can be convinced that there is a need to manage stress to prevent psychosomatic health problems, and second, to follow a clear pragmatic Epicurean approach in the management of perceived stress, which someone can learn to apply in every real-life situation.

The program has many innovative features that create a unique content worldwide, combining certain Greek philosophical traditions that concur with modern scientific knowledge. The innovative Philosophical Distress Management Operation System (Philo.Di.M.O.S.) is based on a solid scientific and philosophical background and offers a public utility paradigm in the Greek society and internationally, especially at times of crises.

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