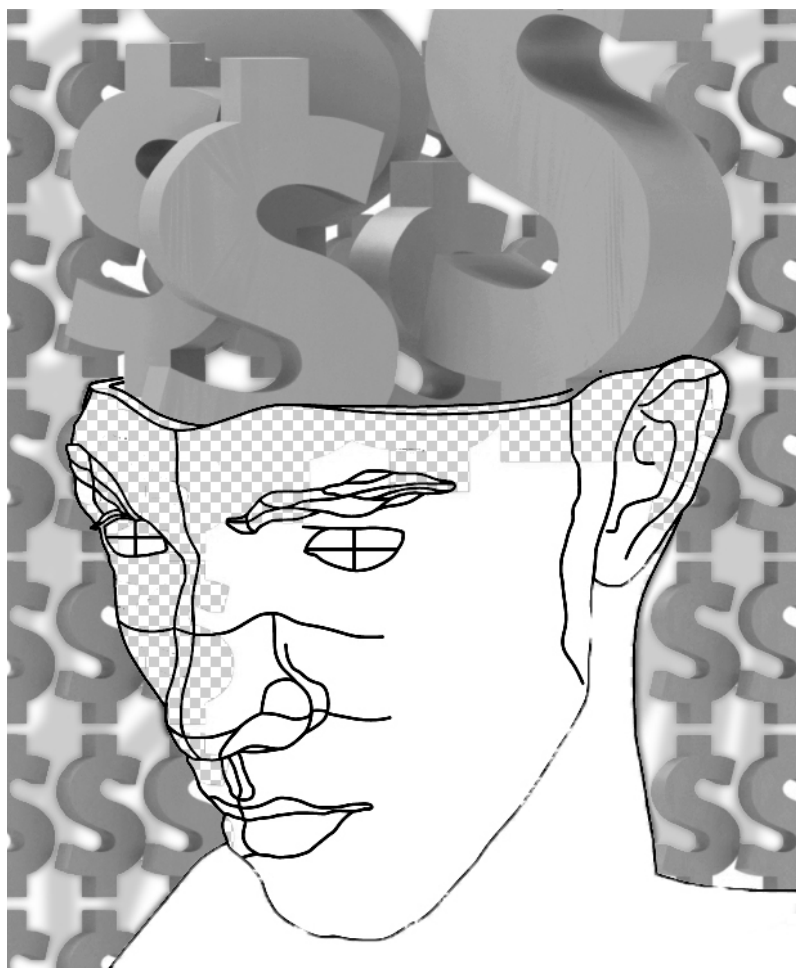


# GOAL ACHIEVEMENT IN CLASSICAL STOICISM AND MODERN \$TOICISM



NATHAN PHILLIPS

## ABSTRACT

Many claim the philosophy of Stoicism is useful for goal achievement, suggesting it is conducive to productivity and success. However, classical Stoicism is directly opposed to goal-achievement mentalities. While Stoicism focuses primarily on developing a certain standard of moral character regardless of external circumstances, this modern goal-orientation focuses exclusively on external achievements, most often toward financial ends. Thus, I distinguish the two as Stoicism in the former and \$toicism in the latter. I discuss key differences in how the two views approach goal achievement, revealing that modern \$toicism is not a revival but a misrepresentation of classical Stoicism.

DOI: 10.33043/R6rZPcAb



## I. INTRODUCTION

Today, we witness an intersection of self-work and goal achievement in which people attempt to transform themselves to pursue their goals. The idea is that changing oneself can make one more competitive. Many now claim to adopt Stoic philosophy as a goal-achievement tool. Proponents of this mindset display intense motivation and perseverance in adversity. They attribute these traits to Stoicism, suggesting it offers a mindset conducive to productivity and success. However, I argue that this goal-achievement ideology is antithetical to Stoicism. While it incorporates one aspect of classical Stoicism (i.e., resilience), it rejects others (i.e., temperance, indifference), consequently making the two views incompatible.

Social media influencer Andrew Tate exemplifies this misinterpretation. He espouses his so-called Stoicism as offering “unlimited energy.”<sup>1</sup> We can reframe negative events as opportunities for success. By becoming enraged at negative things that befall us, we can “put the energy somewhere” to be productive.<sup>2</sup> His Stoicism means channeling bad experiences into material success. By portraying this so-called Stoicism as a general remedy for one’s problems, people that are seeking success financially, socially, or romantically are drawn to it.<sup>3</sup> Now, Tate does not completely misrepresent Stoicism. On the contrary, he ingeniously tailors it to suit a goal-oriented mindset. Stoicism is about reframing one’s perspective and coping with adversity, but it does not do so in the way he suggests. It is not about channeling rage or achieving material success. Yet these are the things being emphasized as the utility of Stoicism. While classical Stoicism develops a certain moral character regardless of external circumstances, the new success-driven mentality develops a certain character to facilitate external achievements. The former focuses inward, while the latter focuses outward. This is the fundamental opposition to be explored in this paper. These two attitudes inform irreconcilable perspectives. As such, this modern success-driven mentality represents a rejection of Stoic values, rather than a revival, and therefore fails as a form of Stoicism.

1 Patrick Bet-David, “Exclusive: Andrew Tate UNCENSORED Interview with Patrick Bet-David,” September 13, 2022, in *PBD Podcast*, produced by Valuetainment Media, podcast, Youtube, 1:53:53 to 1:53:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iv-C4CVGk28&t=0s>.

2 Bet-David, “Tate Interview,” 1:55:33 to 1:55:35.

3 Marcus Maloney, Callum Jones, and Steven Roberts, “‘I Can Choose to be a Good Man Even if I Got a Raw Deal’: Neoliberal Heteromascularity as Manosphere Counter Narrative in r/Stoicism,” *Social Media + Society* 10, no. 3 (2024): 5, 8, 10.1177/20563051241274677.

In §2, I name the modern mindset \$toicism to distinguish it from classical Stoicism. In §3, I explore Stoicism as presented by the ancient Stoics. This section highlights the first essential difference: the conflicting ways that Stoics and \$toics approach adversity. In §4, I discuss the second difference: how the two views approach personal satisfaction. Stoicism is not a tool to achieve goals like the \$toics believe but rather a set of intrinsically satisfying moral guidelines. §5 summarizes these differences using Seneca’s notion of a balanced life. Modern \$toicism’s obsession with goal achievement will let us conclude that it is an incompatible misrepresentation of the original Stoicism it claims to be.

## II. \$TOICISM

Stoicism began reemerging in the late 20th century, prompting certain authors to coin terms like “modern Stoicism”<sup>4</sup> or “popular Stoicism.”<sup>5</sup> These names attempt to define relatively faithful revivals of Stoicism. As such, these names will not serve our discussion. Using variations of the term “Stoicism” to describe the obsessive goal achievement view would suggest it is a legitimate successor to classical Stoicism, but it is not. Because we are dealing with a misrepresentation, we should avoid names explicitly using the word “Stoicism.” Still, we must somehow associate these two views to prove how different they are; thus, I suggest the new ideology be called “\$toicism.” This fits the goal achievement orientation—which is often financial—while hinting at some connection to Stoicism without suggesting it is a faithful revival. We must carefully avoid comparing one to the other except to differentiate them.

## III. ADVERSITY IN CLASSICAL STOICISM AND MODERN \$TOICISM

Stoics train themselves to accept whatever happens to them with equanimity by recognizing they control very few things. By concerning

4 Kátia Brunetti, “Why is Stoicism so Popular?,” *Medium* (blog), August 23, 2020, <https://katiabrunetti2.medium.com/why-is-stoicism-so-popular-f2f15f6df98a>.

5 Renata Dopierała, “Popular Stoicism in the Face of Social Uncertainty,” *Qualitative Sociology Review* 18, no. 4 (2022): 156.



ourselves only with what we can control, we can be at ease with adversity, living “free, unrestrained, and unhindered” lives.<sup>6</sup> Stoics do not compete with their environment, and they do not wrestle with their circumstances to control every aspect of their lives. But that is how most people operate. We try to prevent adversity by increasing our wealth, power, or status. This, turned up to the extreme, is the modern \$toic approach. In contrast to the Stoic, the \$toic only considers a life free, unrestrained, and unhindered if adversity is utterly absent. Thus, they feel the need to control their environment to avoid adversity. The trouble with this method is that we overestimate what is controllable. This leads to frustration when we fail to obtain what we desire or fail to avoid what we are averse to.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the modern salaryman chasing a promotion exhibits the \$toic goal orientation. If, despite his best efforts, he does not get promoted, this will come as a major emotional blow because of the importance he places on that goal. In contrast, the Stoics argue we only control our judgments about events. Stoics choose to value only their judgments rather than outcomes, ensuring they control what they value.

But why must Stoics fully control what they value? Is it purely from a desire to avoid adversity? To answer this, we must see how Stoics distinguish between two tiers of “good”:

1. *Primary good*: Virtuous moral character. This includes our judgments and the virtues that inform them.
2. *Preferred indifferents*: Uncontrollable goods contingent on external things. They are good only insofar as they help us pursue primary good.<sup>8</sup>

This distinction places primary good at the center of Stoic life. Stoics value their judgments not only to avoid adversity but also as the primary good defining virtuous moral character. Conversely, health, shelter, and food are examples of preferred indifferents as they do not contribute to the pursuit of virtue in themselves but put us in a more secure position to pursue virtue. Thus, they are instrumentally valuable, and having them can be preferred to lacking them, as long as we do not pursue them to the point of compromising our moral character. But they are ultimately indifferent because we can cultivate moral character—the only meaningful thing—without them. So, Stoics

prefer being well-fed, wealthy, and comfortable because it makes it easier to focus on developing moral character. Yet, they are perfectly content to go without these things.

Since typically desirable or aversive events (e.g., health, wealth, poverty, injury) are not in our control, they do not inform our character and therefore cannot be harmful. Consider the aspiring artist: If he fails to gain fame and wealth from his art, we do not hold that against his character. We ask questions like “Did he try his best? Did he do everything he could?” rather than judging his character based on his material success. Likewise, the Stoics judge themselves only on the content of their character: whether they did their best, acted nobly, and accepted the results with equanimity. Only what degrades our moral character should be thought harmful, and only what we control (i.e. our judgments and virtues) can degrade our character.

Now contrast the Stoic view with modern \$toicism. The \$toic is primarily concerned with the outcomes of external events. The typical \$toic is motivated by the anticipated satisfaction from achieving a goal. He is not satisfied with the mere attempt. He must succeed. In this case, our aspiring artist would not be content in the knowledge of his effort. He only finds satisfaction in material rewards that come from selling his art. Thus, if he fails to do so, he feels the emotional strain of personal insufficiency. He does not feel he is enough. Only his results make him feel he is enough. Conversely, the classical Stoic meets failure with indifference because it does not tarnish his moral character as long as he acts according to Stoic values. The Stoic does not need external success because his character makes him enough. Stoics may prefer success, but failure is not harmful. But for the \$toic, who bases his satisfaction on the goal he seeks, his happiness depends entirely on success or failure—things he cannot control.

The first difference between the two views reveals itself. Stoicism focuses on managing judgments to accept whatever happens with equanimity. On the other hand, \$toicism tries to guarantee positive outcomes because it can only accept outcomes deemed successful.

A great example of the \$toic aversion to adversity ironically comes from the most famous modern champion of Stoicism, Ryan Holiday. Holiday is a writer who has published many books on Stoicism. He is a more earnest interpreter of Stoicism than someone like Andrew Tate, but he also falls victim to the goal achievement mindset. His interpretation is perhaps more dangerous to our understanding for its greater subtlety. Holiday’s book, *The Obstacle is the Way*, showcases

6 Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, trans. Elizabeth Carter (Internet Classics Archive, 2009), <https://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html>.

7 Epictetus, *Enchiridion*.

8 Donald Robertson, *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Life: Embrace Perseverance, Strength, and Happiness with Stoic Philosophy* (John Murray Press, 2018), 42–43.



how certain hyper-successful people have applied Stoic principles to overcome adversity and get what they want.<sup>9</sup> From John D. Rockefeller to Steve Jobs, the book details cases of exceptionally resilient people achieving success. Therein lies the problem. It is principally a book about material success only packaged in Stoicism. But as we know, classical Stoics accept adversity with equanimity. It is the \$toic who depends on success. It becomes clear early on that Holiday is not interested in promoting Stoicism but rather in using Stoic ideas to facilitate goal achievement. In other words, he is interested in \$toicism.

To be clear, that is his intention. Holiday does not willfully misinterpret Stoicism. Rather, he tailors it to suit his message. But that epitomizes the \$toicism problem. His work inadvertently and subtly skews our understanding of Stoicism toward \$toicism. He uses the writings of the Stoic Marcus Aurelius to teach readers how to brave adversity to “get to where you need to go.”<sup>10</sup> The problem this presents for our understanding is that the true Stoic doesn’t “need to go” anywhere. He is content in himself as long as his character is virtuous. By applying Stoic ideas to a \$toic goal-achievement mindset, one utterly rejects the Stoic principle that material success is not inherently valuable. The \$toic attempt to change one’s environment to avoid adversity rather than change oneself to accept adversity is fundamentally incompatible with Stoicism.

So, Stoicism facilitates contentment and equanimity in adversity. The possibility of goal failure becomes insignificant when the only thing that matters (i.e., moral character) is entirely under control and can be reliably achieved. Through Stoicism, we do not avoid adversity but learn to view it such that it cannot harm us. We bring our judgments into agreement with events as they are.<sup>11</sup> However, the \$toic ethos is the opposite: one must avoid adversity by pursuing external success rather than viewing adversity as indifferent. Stoics do not argue that people with material wealth and security cannot live happy and tranquil lives, but they recognize that such circumstances are not necessary because one’s character is enough. Conversely, \$toics pursue these external circumstances because of their great need for material success on the assumption that they themselves are not enough.

But what, if anything, motivates the Stoic? We know \$toics are motivated by the anticipated benefits of achieving goals. But if Stoics are indifferent to external outcomes and instead prioritize moral character, how do they derive the satisfaction that justifies their philosophy?

<sup>9</sup> Ryan Holiday, *The Obstacle is the Way: The Ancient Art of Turning Adversity to Advantage* (Profile Books, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Holiday, *Obstacle*, xiv.

<sup>11</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*.

## IV. STOIC SATISFACTION

### A. STOIC ATTITUDE TOWARD GOAL ACHIEVEMENT

Stoics refuse to value the outcomes of events, rejecting the notion of satisfaction through external goals. Epictetus goes so far as to say valuing externals is to have “ruined your scheme of life.”<sup>12</sup> This point is best illustrated by the prime example of a Stoic goal, the “Stoic Sage.”

Stoics aspire to be like the Stoic Sage: an ideal figure who flawlessly exhibits Stoic principles. A sage is emotionally and intellectually perfect, the most equanimous, the most virtuous, the most rational, and the wisest. If satisfaction is gained by achieving goals as the \$toic believes and the Stoic aspires to sagehood, we might think the goal of Stoicism is achieving sagehood. However, this line of thinking is misguided. Stoics cannot make sagehood their ultimate goal because this is a form of external goal achievement. Attaining sagehood is not in our control. Epictetus suggests certain degrees of character are beyond our reach and that we should not assume a role we cannot fulfill.<sup>13</sup> Some people may be able to reach higher degrees of moral character than others, but the Stoic Sage is not a goal meant to be reached by anyone. It is an ideal meant to inspire Stoics toward a particular lifestyle with the expectation that it will never be reached. Given that Stoics reject the notion of satisfaction through goal achievement and that the Stoic Sage is an example of such a goal, a Stoic cannot derive satisfaction from attaining sagehood without undermining their doctrine. This attitude toward sagehood extends to any external goal a Stoic pursues. One may prefer certain external circumstances insofar as they aid the pursuit of virtuous moral character, but one must ultimately recognize external things as indifferent because they are beyond control. Goals achieved do not impact one’s character but are merely preferred indifferents. Therefore, goal achievement is not an acceptable measure of satisfaction for Stoics.

### B. STOICISM AS A SET OF GUIDELINES

If Stoics cannot be satisfied through external goals, why practice the philosophy? What does it offer? We should understand it as a prescriptive set of guidelines that facilitate a fulfilling lifestyle rather than a roadmap to achieving goals. The Stoic Sage is a purely theoretical yardstick that helps one measure their Stoic virtue. It is a hypothetical ideal that has never been realized in history precisely because it was

<sup>12</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*.

<sup>13</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion*.





not meant to be realizable.<sup>14</sup> However, despite being fictitious, the Stoic Sage embodies a set of virtues through which to cultivate moral character. If Stoicism is taken as moral guidelines with no promise of attaining sagehood, Stoics can measure their progress by examining how well they embody these qualities moment-to-moment without having to live up to an unreasonable ideal. Thus, Stoics shift their focus from external goal achievement to something more reliable, striving to exhibit Stoic virtues day-to-day. This perspective engenders a sense of personal development through easily verifiable metrics. Stoics can know they are improving—and derive satisfaction—from how often they display Stoic virtues: coping with adversity, exercising rationality, cultivating wisdom and virtue, and so on.<sup>15</sup> The Stoic can pursue goals just like any \$toic does, but satisfaction does not come from the goal itself, but from the manner in which the Stoic accepts the outcome. This emphasis on conduct rather than outcomes ensures Stoics always keep success in their control.

Focusing on lifestyle cultivation rather than external outcomes generates satisfaction as the Stoic perceives improvements in his character. This satisfaction comes the same way as improving a technical skill. While many athletes or musicians may never attain mastery of their craft, they derive continual satisfaction from the small improvements they make over time. Likewise, the Stoic derives satisfaction from recognizing his improvements regardless of whether he ever attains goals like sagehood. We can compare sagehood for the Stoic to reaching the NBA for a basketball player. It would be unreasonable to assume the only reason a person chooses to play basketball is to reach the NBA. Equally, the Stoic does not need to attain sagehood to be satisfied. Stoics understand gradual improvement as an end in itself and derive satisfaction through it. But note, Stoicism is not to be regarded as a method of deriving satisfaction but instead, a lifestyle that carries the byproduct of satisfaction if continually lived day-to-day, week-to-week, and ultimately throughout a lifetime. Stoic satisfaction is independent of success or failure in external pursuits.

The problem with modern \$toicism claiming to be classical Stoicism is that the former's motivation is directly opposed to the latter. \$toicism's goal is not cultivating moral virtue. Rather, it uses self-cultivation as a means to its true goal of external conquest. We have repeatedly seen how \$toicism under the guise of classical Stoicism is merely a tool to achieve external goals on which all hope is set. Failure is not an option for modern \$toics because all their satisfaction hinges on success. However, for Stoics who accept the notion of preferred

indifferents, failure is ultimately inconsequential and can be met with equanimity because success is already secured by one's effort alone. Thus, the second key difference in goal achievement between the two views is how they derive satisfaction. Stoics have complete control of their satisfaction because it comes from within, while \$toics have no control over their satisfaction because it comes from without. Consequently, the Stoic would never be motivated by the \$toic goal achievement mentality.

### C. A POSSIBLE OBJECTION

At this point, one may object by saying that Stoicism still has a goal even if that goal is not sagehood. The Stoic still wants to achieve the best possible moral character, and it seems their satisfaction is bound to that end. This would put them perilously close to the \$toic mindset. Yes, Stoics still have goals. However, character cultivation is notably distinct from the \$toic type of goal. There is a sense of finality about \$toic goals absent from Stoicism. Since \$toics place their satisfaction on their goals, the implicit assumption is that “achieving X will make me happy.” They place great value on it. Thus, \$toics inadvertently deny themselves satisfaction until achieving that goal. The implicit statement underlying the above assumption is “I am not happy until I achieve X.” They expect final happiness after achievement but never before.

Stoics, on the other hand, do not view their goals in the same way. Recall the concept of preferred indifferents. Stoics can prefer certain circumstances but ultimately recognize them as indifferent. Stoics do not say, “When I achieve better moral character, I will be happy.” Instead, achieving better character is incidental. The Stoic is already satisfied by the practice of Stoicism, so his satisfaction is not contingent on achieving his goal. But \$toics are exactly the opposite. They use their dissatisfaction with their current circumstances as fuel to propel them toward their goals, and only after achieving them will they be satisfied. A \$toic expects final satisfaction after goal achievement while Stoics are continually satisfied by their daily practice with or without achieving an abstract goal.

## V. A BALANCED LIFE

Both the differences discussed—handling adversity and deriving satisfaction—suggest that classical Stoics make sure not to overextend

<sup>14</sup> Robertson, *Stoicism and Happiness*, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Robertson, *Stoicism and Happiness*, 45.



themselves, preferring to accord with the way things are. In quite the opposite way, modern \$toics try to push the limits of what they can achieve because they lack the acceptance and equanimity that define Stoicism. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the Stoic concept of a balanced life. A Stoic manages his judgments with equanimity because he has learned to temper his expectations with the knowledge that outcomes do not affect his character. So, he balances between the excesses of extreme desire and aversion, making it possible to accept any circumstance. Conversely, the \$toic who relentlessly pursues external goals is consumed by that sense of desire and aversion. He is not balanced but overextends one way or the other in pursuit of his goals or flight from his fears. The \$toic is determined to work incessantly toward a goal, while Stoics like Seneca urge us toward a balance of work and rest. The \$toic does not seek balance but rather an all-conquering success that promises lasting satisfaction through external gain. Seneca says this is folly because external goals do not bring lasting satisfaction. They provide only brief satisfaction, and then, we quickly develop new desires.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Stoicism is fundamentally opposed to the aim of \$toicism.

The vast differences between classical Stoicism and modern \$toicism reveal how misguided the latter is in portraying itself as a revival of the former. The ancient Stoics would reject all association with such a goal-oriented mentality, calling it, as Seneca did, “the restless energy of a hunted mind.”<sup>17</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

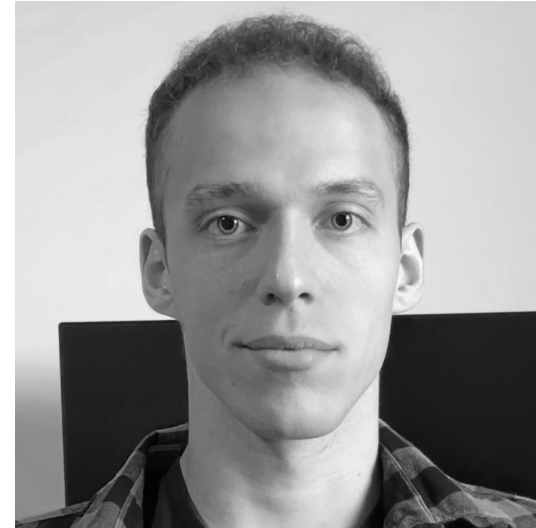
Whether we should choose to live by Stoicism or \$toicism is a topic for another paper. This paper is purely descriptive as it explains why classical Stoicism is fundamentally opposed to modern \$toicism. The former stresses the indifference of things beyond our control, showing equanimity in the face of adversity, and cultivating virtuous moral character that is intrinsically satisfying. The latter promotes pursuing external goals on the assumption that those goals bring lasting satisfaction without which we cannot be content. It precludes the possibility of intrinsic satisfaction, focusing on outcomes rather than efforts. These differences highlight Stoicism’s accepting and balanced attitude toward life that counsels against overextending oneself. On

<sup>16</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, ed., trans., and comp. Robin Campbell (Penguin Classics, 2004), 62.

<sup>17</sup> Seneca, *Letters*, 36.

the other hand, \$toicism presents a combative and ambitious ideology, glorifying overextension. This misrepresentation of Stoicism arises from one shared quality. \$toicism isolates Stoicism’s theme of resilience against adversity and manipulates it to suit goal achievement. It simultaneously omits the themes of acceptance and equanimity that make Stoicism incompatible with intense ambition. Resilience seems to offer a bridge between the two views when equivocated to suit both frameworks. But we now see how different their approaches toward such resilience are. I hope this comparison has painted a picture of two starkly opposed views to make it clear that modern \$toicism is not a revival but rather a misrepresentation of classical Stoicism.





Nathan Phillips (he/him) is a third-year philosophy major at York University in Toronto, Canada. His interests lie in phenomenology, axiology, and philosophy of meaning. When not studying philosophy, he is likely to be found playing sports, reading fiction, or writing.

