

The Simplicity and Complexity of Philosophical Discourse

Two Different Ways of Reasoning about the Stoic Postulate of Premeditation of Evils (Praemeditatio malorum)

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Abstract

Stoic philosophers (Epictetus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and others) regarded the strategy of premeditatedly brooding on the evil that might befall us, “premeditation of evils” (*praemeditatio malorum*), as one of the ways of safeguarding ourselves against evil. Before misfortune strikes – they postulated – imagine it clearly with all its details, and then it will be less destructive. In this work, the author presents two methodologically different ways of justifying the postulate of *praemeditatio malorum*: a literary-persuasive and an analytical one. Both of them are characterized by their simplicity, but that very term, in each of these approaches, has a different meaning when taken on its own. In the first instance, simplicity means “ease of understanding a philosophical text”, whereas in the second it designates “stylistic asceticism”. Which simplicity should we choose? Each of the two approaches has its shortcomings: readily understandable reasoning is not always the same as logically coherent stylistic asceticism, while a dry, quasi-mathematical style limits the potential number of readers a text may have. The author, despite all his own objections, implicitly supports the second method.

Keywords

stoic philosophy – premeditation of evils – logical argumentation

I will present and compare two contemporary ways of reasoning of the Stoic postulate of premeditation of evils. One of them by P. Stankiewicz (2014, pp. 219–235) is of literary-persuasive nature, and the other one (my own) – is an attempt at analytical reasoning. I will show the advantages and disadvantages of each argumentation separately in the context of the theme question of this volume that is complexity and simplicity. I will analyze the meaning of

two nominal groups, namely *the complexity of the philosophical text* and *the simplicity of the philosophical text*. By “simplicity” in this article, I understand “the easiness of understanding a philosophical text”, whereas by “complexity” I understand “the difficulty in understanding a philosophical text”. I will answer the following question: which way of reasoning (literary-persuasive or analytical) is simpler/more complex and I will show the price of that simplicity/complexity.

1 The Premeditation of Evils in Stoic Philosophy

Ancient Stoic philosophers put ethics at the center of their interests. They understood it as theoretical science about “what happiness is” and as “the art of living”. They believed that it indicated “by what means it [happiness M.K.] can be achieved” (Reale, 2010, p. 394).

In that second practical understanding ethics became a set of advice, didactical examples and spiritual exercises, presented to all those who wanted to live happily. One of those exercises was daily meditation which consisted of imagining various (also negative) life events. Amongst others, its aim was to prepare yourself for “the moment when unexpected circumstances occur, maybe dramatic ones” (Hadot, 2003, p. 20).

That was the premeditation of evils (*praemeditatio malorum*; hereinafter I will use the PM abbreviation) recommended by Stoics in order to avoid surprise and face difficult situations (Hadot, 2003, p. 148). Let that mental exercise be characterized now by one of the most renowned Roman Stoics Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Moral Letters to Lucilius 91, 3–4. 8; in: Seneca, 1961, pp. 435–437):

for it is the unexpected that puts the heaviest load upon us. Strangeness adds to the weight of calamities, and every mortal feels the greater pain as a result of that which also brings surprise. Therefore, nothing ought to be unexpected by us. Our minds should be sent forward in advance to meet all problems, and we should consider, not what is wont to happen, but what can happen [...] Exile, the torture of disease, wars, shipwreck, – we must think on these [...] Let us place before our eyes in its entirety the nature of man’s lot, and if we would not be overwhelmed, or even dazed, by those unwonted evils, as if they were novel, let us summon to our minds beforehand, not as great an evil as oftentimes happens, but the very greatest evil that possibly can happen. We must reflect upon fortune fully and completely. (http://www.stoics.com/seneca_epistles_book_2.html. Translated by Richard M. Gummere)

The result is the feeling of mental power and bravery (Seneca, *On Anger* 3, 37, 3; in: Seneca, 1989, p. 388):

Make up your mind that there are many things which you must bear. Is any one surprised that he is cold in winter? That he is sick at sea? That he is jolted about on the highroad? The mind will meet bravely everything for which it has been prepared. (http://www.stoics.com/seneca_essays_book_1.html#ANGER1. Translated by John W. Basore)

Along with the renaissance of the stoicism of which we are witnesses (compare Becker, 1999; Irvine, 2009, 2013; Fabjański, 2010, 2014; Mazur, 2010, 2014; Stankiewicz, 2014), it is desirable, in my opinion, to provide a convincing substantiation of PM as an appropriate strategy of conduct in everyday life.

That burning need comes from the fact that PM in a natural way contradicts the view very popular since the 50s and still advocated on the effectiveness of the *power of positive thinking* – which is the title of a famous psychological self-help book by Pastor Norman Vincent Peale. Necessarily, argumentation in favor of PM has to take into consideration the main theses of the supporters of the competitive idea of positive thinking (which I call here ‘imagined premeditation of fortunate events’, *praemeditatio bonorum*, abbreviated to PB).

2 Literary-Persuasive Substantiation of PM

The book by P. Stankiewicz (2014) has features of a psychological-philosophical handbook and it is written in a style adequate for the aim which was formulated *expressis verbis* in its very beginning: “The book you are holding in your hands has a simple yet ambitious aim: to teach you how to live happily” (Stankiewicz, 2014, p. 5).

That clear declaration in the Introduction suggests that the reader will, later on, be educated and essentially encouraged to carry out appropriate conduct. And it actually is that way. The author consistently tends to convince the reader about the benefits which come from a stoical way of life and one of the means leading to that is subsequent persuasion given in a brilliant, literary form, full of various rhetorical tricks. That is why the substantiation of P. Stankiewicz I call “literary-persuasive”.

The philosopher devotes an entire chapter to the issue of PM which he calls “premeditation of evils” (Stankiewicz, 2014, pp. 219–235). Due to the to

the space limitations, I do not quote the whole text by P. Stankiewicz but I limit myself to presenting an argumentation outline (see more on that topic in Kisielewicz, 2014, pp. 172–191), presented in schematic narration. It is divided into theses (sometimes supported by additional presuppositions) which are followed by arguments supporting the theses. Stankiewicz also presents anti-theses and counter-arguments by which these anti-theses are overturned. The outline is as follows.

Thesis I: We have to foresee each evil or a worse variant of a possible situation (for example in a ‘win-lose’ situation I chose the second variant, amongst many variants I chose the worst one) because

Six arguments to support Thesis I:

1. we will not be surprised by evil,
2. we will ‘disarm’ evil in advance,
3. surprise may only be positive (a black scenario will either come true and we will avoid the surprise or it will not come true and we will be pleasantly surprised),
4. we will avoid the feeling of biting uncertainty and the pain of awaiting the finale,
5. PM is a passive defense against the predominating forces of fate and defense is more effective if we are ready for attack (Additional presumption: life is a battle, the favorite metaphor of ancient stoics), and
6. PM is an active defense against the predominating forces of fate, and the defense is more effective if we exercise in it often and we use it preventively (Additional presumption: life is a battle; see above).

Additional thesis I: You should imagine only painful and only probable evil because:

Two arguments supporting the additional thesis I:

1. it is impossible to imagine all possibilities,
2. an unlike (of small likelihood) event does not really worry us that much, and if we do not worry in advance that PM will not work *ex definitione*.

Additional thesis II: We imagine misfortune by visualizing them ‘concretely and in detail’ because only then PM will work.

Additional thesis II is not substantiated by any arguments.

Sub-thesis of the Additional thesis II: The effectiveness of PM is directly proportional to the efforts of imagination.

Sub-thesis of the Additional thesis II is not substantiated by any arguments.

Additional thesis III: PM also means creating emergency plans (I call it ‘chess-player’s strategy’). Chess-player’s strategy is effective.

Additional thesis III is not substantiated by any arguments.

Anti-thesis I: PM is being a doomsayer and a pessimist, which infests our lives and is an excessive cost of PM.

Argument overthrowing anti-thesis I: being a doomsayer is different than PM in (1) the aim (a doomsayer is sad just to be sad and a stoic is sad for mental exercise), (2) control (a doomsayer on the contrary to a stoic does not control sadness), and (3) time scale of deliberations (a doomsayer unlike a stoic, does often, all the time, and one bad projection is driven by another).

Anti-thesis II: PM is ‘speaking of the devil’ and a bad projection can come true.

Argument overthrowing anti-thesis II: There’s no cause-and-effect relationship between the projection and the actual, projected event happening.

Anti-thesis III: If I a misfortune will happen for sure, all I have left is waiting for death.

Argument overthrowing anti-thesis III: That belief is a caricature. PM does not cancel the rule of rational planning in accordance with the rules of probability. If the probability of a positive event is overwhelming, we plan our moves accordingly to that potential positive event, however, we have to remember all the time (although without a lot of worries) about its less probable (negative) alternative.

Anti-thesis IV: There are misfortunes of such slight probability that foreseeing them in accordance with Additional thesis I is a mistake. Nevertheless, when they do happen, we are right to blame PM and we decide that PM has some gaps.

Argument overthrowing anti-thesis IV: Despite everything, let us not forget about less probable misfortunes (for example tsunamis). It is better than being an incurable optimist anyway.

Piotr Stankiewicz did not avoid two lapses.

First of all, he assumed that in the fifth and the sixth argument for the thesis I is an additional presumption (life is a battle) which is very disputable. (What justifies it apart from phrasal tradition?). The author supported it only with the argument of the particular attachment of the ancient stoics to military metaphors (Stankiewicz, 2014, p. 227). That is a typical argument of *ipse dixit* type.

Secondly, he left his two additional theses (the additional thesis II and the additional thesis III) without substantiation.

He did not explain (additional thesis II) why we should “visualize concretely and in detail” our potential misfortunes (Stankiewicz, 2014, p. 224). That thesis is only supported by the subthesis of the additional thesis II which says: “the more we force our imagination the more effectively we will premeditate the misfortune” (Stankiewicz, 2014, p. 224). Once more, that subthesis is left without substantiation.

The thesis about the chess-player's strategy is also not supported by any argumentation (*additional thesis III*) unless – following the rule of kindness (see Kisielewicz, 2014, pp. 174–176) – I accept that it is a particular case of PM and should be added to Thesis I, which then would be more complete:

Thesis I completed: We have to foresee or plan (like a chess-player) each evil event or a worse variant of a possible situation (for example in a situation “I win–I lose” I chose the second variant).

P. Stankiewicz also did not manage to avoid contradictions between *additional thesis I* (we do not take into consideration misfortunes of little possibility) and the *argument overthrowing anti-thesis IV* (remember about misfortunes of little possibility). The contradiction consists of postulates which preclude one another and refer to implausible events (of little plausibility). On the one hand, he postulates to not include such events in PM for two reasons

- it is hard to foresee them (the first argument supporting additional thesis I) (Stankiewicz, 2014, p. 223),
- they do not start the mechanism of PM (the first argument supporting additional thesis I) (Stankiewicz, 2014, p. 225),

and at the same time he states that you mustn't forget about misfortunes of little plausibility (argument overthrowing anti-thesis IV) so despite of everything –also in spite of the above two reasons! – these improbable (of little probability) events should be included in the PM because it is better than being and incurable optimist (Stankiewicz, 2014, pp. 234–235).

The remaining argumentation by P. Stankiewicz is to the point and adequate, although in one place we have to refer to the principle of the charity again (Kisielewicz, 2014, pp. 174–176). In the case of an argument overthrowing anti-thesis I, we have to trust the author that he characterized the differences between a hopeless doomsayer and someone practicing PM accurately (Stankiewicz, 2014, p. 230). We must believe him that his synthesizing sentences are based on solid knowledge.

The rest of the argumentation is in my opinion convincing. The strongest moment is the third argument supporting Thesis I which is the argument of possible surprise which is always positive (Stankiewicz, 2014, p. 226).

The philosophical narration of Piotr Stankiewicz is of literary–persuasive nature typical for the genre to which his book belongs. It is written in an approachable way and rhetorical and stylistic elements lead us closer to the author's objective. In that sense, the text of *The Art of Living According to Stoics* [Sztuka życia według stoików] is praiseworthy for its simplicity which means it is “easily understandable”.

Nevertheless, there are logical costs of that simplicity. The reader has to decide on his/her own whether in the guidebook to a “good living” he or she

looks for impeccable logical argumentation or for an imaginative disquisition that is not logically coherent at every point. In other words, the reader is facing a dilemma: do I build – to quote Pierre Hadot – an “internal fortress”, resistant to logical hits of adversaries or to follow the beauty of persuasion at the cost of leaving gaps in that fortress.

Now I will present an analytical way of substantiating PM. The adjective analytical I understand here as “aiming at clarity, precision and rigorous argumentation” (The Philosophical Gourmet Report 2000–2001; in: Prechtl 2009, p. 11).

3 Analytical Substantiation of PM

Thesis: PM (*praemeditatio malorum*) is a better strategy than PB (*praemeditatio bonorum*).

3.1 I adapt the set of four mental events (=ME) for this study. That set includes: imagined suffering (=IS), suffering which is being currently experienced (in short: current suffering =CS), imagined pleasure (=IP) and pleasure which is being currently experienced (in short: current pleasure =CP), therefore $ME = \{IS, IP, CS, CP\}$.

3.2 The ME set will be arranged intuitively and naturally (terminology after Kraszewski, 2012, p. 106). It is possible because there is an adequate relation ordering each pair of elements, the relation of being preferred by mentally healthy people. From each pair of elements of ME, one element will be preferred by mentally healthy people at the cost of the other. The elements of the ME set create six pairs: IS and IP, IS and CS, IS and CP, IP and CS, IP and CP, CS and CP.

Statement 3.2: A mentally healthy person when given one element to choose instead of the other prefers (chooses): IP from the pair IS and IP, IS from IS and CS, CP from IS and CP, IP from IP and CS, CP from IP and CP as well as CP from CS and CP.

Substantiation 3.2

- a. A mentally healthy person – having to choose to imagine a toothache (IS) or to imagine resting under the palm trees on an exotic island (IP) – will prefer IP over IS.
- b. A mentally healthy person – having to choose to imagine a toothache (IS) or an actual tooth-ache (CS) – will prefer IS over CS.
- c. A mentally healthy person – having to choose to imagine a toothache (IS) or an actual resting under the palm trees on an exotic island (CP) – will prefer CP over IS.

- d. A mentally healthy person – having to choose an actual toothache (CS) or to imagine resting under the palm trees on an exotic island (IP) – will prefer IP over CS.
- e. A mentally healthy person – having to choose to imagine resting under the palm trees on an exotic island (IP) or actually resting under the palm trees on an exotic island (CP) – will prefer CP over IP.
- f. A mentally healthy person – having to choose an actual toothache (CS) or actual resting under the palm trees on an exotic island (CP) – will prefer CP over CS.

3.3 We have six possible relations out of which CP is preferred three times, IP – is preferred twice, IS – is preferred once, CS is not preferred at all. It is shown in the following recording of the relation $P(x, y)$ “x is preferred over y” (where the first argument is the preferred element – which is the ‘winner’ of that relation):

$P(CP, IS)$
 $P(CP, IP)$
 $P(CP, CS)$
 $P(IP, IS)$
 $P(IP, CS)$
 $P(IS, CS)$

3.4 Depending on how many times a given element was preferred we ascribe it a numerical value:

$CP = 3$
 $IP = 2$
 $IS = 1$
 $CS = 0$

3.4.1 In accordance with the theory of the empirical meaning of a sentence by A. Kisielewicz (2014, p. 119) most users of the English language will agree that a mental event of higher value is better than a mental event of a lower value. Therefore most speakers of English will agree that CP is better than IP, IS and CS, IP is better than IS and CS, and IS is better than CS (see also Examples 3.2). If the two-element predicate $B(a, b)$ “a is better than b” we present as the relation of aLb, we will receive a multiple relations

$(CP) B(IP) B(IS) B(CS)$

isomorphic to

$3 > 2 > 1 > 0.$

3.5 The ME set ordered by the relation aLb (see 3.3–3.4.1) is a sequence

(CS, IS, IP, CP)

or – after we substitute numerical values of the mental events from 3.4 – a number sequence

(0, 1, 2, 3).

From now on instead of “mental event of the value of 0, 1, 2 and 3” I will say “0, 1, 2, 3” respectively, also, instead of “CS, IS, IP, CP” I will say “0, 1, 2, 3” respectively.

3.6 These agreements allow for an analytical definition of PM and PB

Definition 3.6.1

- (α) PM is a sequence of two different mental events which:
- (β) do not take place at the same time, one of them takes place in t_1 time, and the other – in t_2 time,
the first of them is 1.

Example 3.6.1

PM, the imagined premeditation of misfortune, assumes an earlier occurrence of 1. After 1 three different mental events may occur: 0, 2 and 3. For example I first imagine a toothache (1), after the act of imagination the following take place: either actual (not imagined) suffering (0), or a more pleasant act of imagination (2), or an actual (not imagined) pleasure (3).

Definition 3.6.2

PB is a sequence of two different mental events which:

- a. do not take place at the same time, one of them takes place in t_1 time, and the other – in t_2 time,
- b. the first of them is 2.

Example 3.6.2

PB, the imagined premeditation of fortunate events, assumes an earlier occurrence of 2. After 2 three different mental events may occur: 0, 1, and 3. For example I first imagine resting under palm trees (2), after that act of imagination the following takes place: either actual (not imagined) suffering for example a toothache (0), or an unpleasant act of imagination (1), or an actual (not imagined) pleasure (3).

3.6.1 The PM strategy – in accordance with definition 3.6.1 and example 3.6.1 – may be presented in the form of three different functions:

	$f_1(x)$		$f_2(x)$		$f_3(x)$	
x	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2
y	1	0	1	2	1	3

3.6.2 The PB strategy – in accordance with definition 3.6.2 and example 3.6.2 – may be presented in the form of three different functions:

	$f_4(x)$		$f_5(x)$		$f_6(x)$	
x	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2
y	2	0	2	1	2	3

3.7 Amongst the six different functions $f_1(x)$ - $f_6(x)$ from 3.6.1–3.6.2 three of them are increasing functions (where along with the increase of the argument the function increases) and three decreasing functions (where along with the decrease of the argument the function decreases). The increasing functions are:

	$f_2(x)$		$f_3(x)$		$f_6(x)$	
x	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2
y	1	2	1	3	2	3

and the decreasing functions are:

	$f_1(x)$		$f_4(x)$		$f_5(x)$	
x	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2
y	1	0	2	0	2	1

Definition 3.7.1

The increment of the function value in accordance with 3.4.1 we call *mental improvement*, and the decrement of the function value in accordance with 3.4.1 we call *mental deterioration*.

Definition 3.7.2

The value of mental improvement and mental deterioration is (symbol “ \uparrow ” and “ \downarrow ” respectively) the difference of the higher function value and the lower function value.

3.8 After adapting these definitions we state that mental improvement of the total value of 4 occurred in:

	$f_2(x)$		$f_3(x)$		$f_6(x)$	
x	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2
y	1	2	1	3	2	3
Value↑	1		2		1	
Total			1+2+1=4			

whereas deterioration of a mental event of a total value of 4 occurred in:

	$f_1(x)$		$f_4(x)$		$f_5(x)$	
x	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2
y	1	0	2	0	2	1
Value↓	1		2		1	
Total			1+2+1=4			

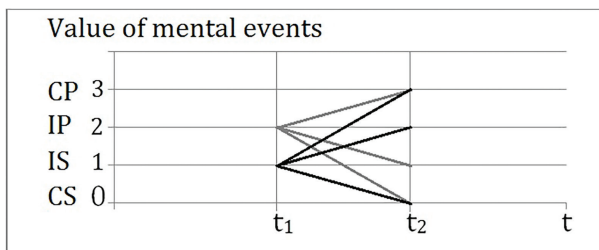
3.9 In accordance with definition 3.6.1 and definition 3.6.2 we substitute $f_n(x)$ in tables from 3.8 with PM and PB and we receive a table of improvements

	PM		PM		PB	
x	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2
y	1	2	1	3	2	3
Value ↑	1		2		1	
Total			1+2=3		1	

and a table of deteriorations

	PM		PB		PB	
x	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2	t_1	t_2
y	1	0	2	0	2	1
Value ↓	1		2		1	
Total	1				3	

which can be presented in this graph



Conclusion. PM is better than PB, because

- PM (color black) includes two improvements of a total value of 3, whereas PB (color grey) – one improvement of a total value of 1,
- PM (color black) includes one deterioration of a total value of 1, whereas PB (color grey) has two deteriorations of a total value of 3.

Quod erat demonstrandum

4 Conclusions

In this article, I presented two philosophical narrations – the traditional one (persuasive-literary) and the analytical one. I correlated them in search for the answer to the question: what are the costs of simplicity and complexity (complications) of philosophical discourse? Does a simple philosophical text (easily understandable, full of rhetoric tricks and literary panache) have to lose the coherence of logical argumentation? Is a complex philosophical text (complicated, difficult to understand, requiring effort during reading, full of internal references) deprived of literary charm? These are the conclusions.

The literary persuasion of P. Stankiewicz is fuller than my analysis. The philosopher presents more aspects of PM while I only correlated PM with PB and I drew a conclusion from that correlation that PM is superior to its opponent PB. The argumentation of P. Stankiewicz might have logical gaps here and there, but is beautiful in its literariness, what the readers of his book may see for themselves (Stankiewicz, 2014). My explanations have no claims towards the literary panache but the argumentation coherence is missing – I hope – larger logical breaches. However the essential question is inevitable here: does a dry, quasi-mathematical style, deprived of ornaments and rhetorical power, have the capability to persuade a person who is looking for a piece of spiritual advice, for the answer to the question about decent and quiet life?

I am not able to solve that query. While not hiding my analytical leaning, I leave that task to the reader.

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