

Trauma, Healing and Philosophy – Three Schools of Thought in Regards to Resilience-Building

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This contribution explores how three philosophical schools - Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Nihilism - offer meta-ethical frameworks for understanding and responding to psychological trauma. Long before modern psychology defined trauma in clinical terms, philosophy engaged with pain, loss, fear, and existential rupture not as pathology, but as fundamental conditions of human life. The Stoics propose resilience through rational reframing; the Epicureans through emotional autonomy and the reclamation of bodily agency; and Nihilism through a radical critique of societal norms as sources of harm. Drawing on historical figures such as Epictetus, Epicurus, Meister Eckhart, Ninon de Lenclos, and Friedrich Nietzsche, this contribution demonstrates how each school articulates a distinct response to trauma - ranging from cognitive detachment to the dismantling of toxic social roles. These perspectives are mapped onto five modern trauma categories, highlighting their continued relevance. This paper explores how philosophical traditions both conceptualize trauma and offer frameworks for resilience-building and thus serve as a meta-psychological framework for making suffering intelligible, fostering reorientation, and strengthening selfhood in a fragmented world.

Keywords: Trauma, therapy, psychology, philosophy, stoicism, epicureanism, nihilism

Philosophy as Pre-therapeutic Life Guidance

Centuries before the clinical concept of ‘trauma’ was formalized within psychological science, philosophy had already offered profound reflections on pain, loss, fear, and emotional injury – not as anomalies, but as essential features of the human condition. From antiquity onward, suffering was not only acknowledged, but explored as a structural element of existence, prompting thinkers such as Seneca to write with compassion: *‘There is nothing as fragile as a human being.’*¹ In this light, philosophical thought functioned as an early form of existential orientation – a way of living with vulnerability rather than pathologizing it.

As Pierre Hadot reminds us, *‘Ancient philosophy was a way of life, not a theory. It was a method of spiritual exercise to transform one’s vision of the world’*² and this was especially true when dealing with borderline experiences that shook supposed certainties.

The term “trauma” – from the Greek for ‘wound’ (τραῦμα) – means not only individual suffering, but often also a disturbance in one’s relationship to the world,

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¹Seneca, *On Providence*, p. 19.

²Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, 1995, p. 265.

to oneself, to meaning. Trauma shakes the trust that forms the basis of human relationships and therefore also limits the individual's ability to interact with the community, making it a deeply communal problem, as Bessel van de Kolk explains: *'Trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain, and body.'*³

While contemporary psychotraumatology correctly, but provisionally, describes trauma encoded in the body as an acute, chronic or systemic event, philosophical schools from antiquity and early modern times already point to deeper structures of suffering and ways of processing it, which are now once again seen as inspiration for innovative research.⁴ This article presents three important philosophical traditions that each offer their own perspectives on psychological injury – Stoicism, Epicureanism and Nihilism – and which can still be understood today as philosophical models of resilience. They have a long tradition and, thanks to their intellectual influence, may have an even more significant role to play in the present and future.

What is Trauma? Five Forms, Five Challenges

Modern psychology distinguishes between five different types of trauma: acute trauma – a single massive shock (e.g. an accident), chronic trauma – repeated, prolonged suffering (e.g. neglect), relational trauma or attachment trauma – injury caused by caregivers (e.g. attachment disruption), complex trauma – multiple early childhood trauma, and secondary trauma – witnessing someone else's trauma and transference in helping professions (e.g. therapists).⁵

In practice, there are often overlaps and combinations of trauma types in individuals, but collectives can also be traumatised (e.g. war), which in turn highlights the strong national, historical and age-related significance of trauma as a communal event. Psychologist Bryce Davis points out that *'culture plays a significant role in susceptibility to, experience of, and recovery from psychological distress, including interpersonal trauma.'*⁶ It can also happen that certain types of trauma occur more frequently in certain eras and less in others, which may be associated with changing trends in child rearing, schooling, intra-family relationships and societal tolerance thresholds for violence. Without going into these aspects, which are undoubtedly interesting for further research, it should just be mentioned that philosophical schools respond to the collective consciousness of their respective eras and cultures and therefore seem more suitable for addressing certain forms of trauma.

The three philosophical schools presented here – Stoicism, Epicureanism and Nihilism – can each shed light on specific aspects of these consequences of trauma and serve not as a substitute for therapy, but as metaethical interpretations of

³van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, 2014, p. 21.

⁴See Brown & Potter, *Integrating the Philosophy and Psychology of Well-Being: An Opinionated Overview*. Journal of Happiness Studies 2024, open source.

⁵American Psychological Association, *Clinical Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in adults*, 2023. The classification used here follows APA and DSM-5 typologies.

⁶Bryant-Davis, *The Cultural Context of Trauma Recovery: Considering the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Practice Guideline and Intersectionality*, 2005, p. 343.

suffering and self-determination. This comes close to Hadot's definition of philosophising as a healing change of perspective: *'The philosophical act consists in placing oneself in a different perspective on the world, breaking with familiar habits of thought.'*⁷ In comparison, it will become apparent that each of the schools of thought mentioned has its own merits in dealing with trauma and can provide valuable insights that can be further developed in an interdisciplinary manner today.

Stoicism: Reframing as a Virtue

Stoic philosophy is one of the most influential schools of thought in antiquity and has repeatedly experienced powerful revivals up to the present day, as its views of the world and humanity are considered by experts and informed laypeople alike to offer valuable advice.

Stoicism is a complex ethical doctrine with a strong cosmological and metaphysical backbone: the world is a creation of the gods, humans own nothing, not even their bodies, which they must return upon death, and ultimately they can only rely on themselves. *'Free will and voluntary self-determination'*⁸ are the moral principles according to which a just person must live and which set them free. Marcus Aurelius describes Stoic self-sufficiency as control over one's thoughts: *'You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realise this, and you will find strength.'*⁹ Wisdom, justice, moderation and courage are therefore the ethical virtues that Stoics should strive for throughout their lives and, in the event of success, build resilience, for example by weighing up possible courses of action, by renouncing anger and revenge, by balancing one's own activities and by being determined when it comes to shaping one's own life circumstances. However, the goal of Stoicism is not happiness in the sense of external factors such as fame and wealth, but rather the strongly intrinsically defined concept of ataraxia (ἀταραξία), peace of mind or inner imperturbability, derived from the constant practice of reason, moderation and self-discipline, which should lead to apatheia (ἀπάθεια), equanimity. According to the Stoics, the world cannot be controlled – but our reaction to it can, which for Epictetus means, *'It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.'*¹⁰ Guiding principles such as *'memento mori'* (remember that you are mortal), *'initii obsta'* (resist the beginnings) or *'nil mirari'* (do not be surprised by anything) also mean that happiness lies in the careful acceptance of what is given and the development of one's own strengths.

The Stoics' relationship to trauma is radical and existential in this respect: they do not see human suffering as failure, but as an inevitable fact of life, which is changeable per se and in many respects beyond individual control.¹¹ This gives rise to a piece of life advice that sees trauma not only as something unavoidable, but also

⁷Hadot, 1995, p. 103.

⁸Dorchain, *Das Leben hält niemanden – Seneca und der Freitod mit einem Rekurs auf die Aktualität der Stoa in der Postmoderne*, 2021, p. 161.

⁹Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book 6.8.

¹⁰Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, §5.

¹¹Dorchain, *Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) on Anxiety and Fear of Loss*, 2016, open source.

as an opportunity for ethical consolidation – the motto ‘crisis as a moment of growth’ is stoic in its thinking, even if it may seem postmodern. Contemporary psychological research even sees a significant connection between pragmatic Stoicism and behavioural therapy, as Donald Robertson notes: *‘The philosophy of cognitive behavioural therapy is deeply rooted in Stoic philosophy.’*¹²

The level-headed and disciplined attitude of the Stoics, who also sought to live with maximum personal responsibility, found particular resonance in the Middle Ages, as the philosophers of that era, most of whom were also theologians, constantly sought to harmoniously combine Christian and ‘pagan’ ethics. The philosophy of the Stoa, whose representatives such as Seneca (4 BC – 65 AD), Epictetus (55 AD – 135 AD) and Marcus Aurelius (121 AD – 180 AD) were often referred to appreciatively as ‘pagan masters’ in medieval treatises,¹³ was a kind of pre-Christian riverbed through which biblically based advice on how to live could flow – for, like Christianity, Stoicism was ascetic and fundamentally spiritual, not worldly. We find a strong echo of these ideas in Meister Eckhart's (1260-1328) ‘Little Book of Consolation,’ which is intended to comfort the grieving Queen Agnes of Hungary after the political assassination of her husband and her retreat to a convent. Eckhart suggests reinterpreting these shocking events and viewing them not from the perspective of loss but of preservation: *‘Do not think of what you have lost, but of what you were given before.’*¹⁴ He even goes so far as to interpret losing something as a privilege and to make a social downward comparison. Ultimately, Eckhart's stoic advice culminates in the idea that all good things in life are only borrowed, since humans do not existentially belong to themselves – a reframing of the trauma experienced that changes the proportionality of every loss in relation to death: *‘Death is not the end, but the transition to a higher state of being.’*¹⁵ Stoic resilience lies in realigning one's inner world order, which has historically proven particularly helpful in acute or chronic trauma. Stoicism, with its emphasis on self-control rather than external control and its deep acceptance of suffering as something inevitable, was compatible with a medieval worldview that understood life as a test.

In psychosocial contexts – such as palliative care or grief counselling – Stoic thinking can help to overcome emotional crises through cognitive reframing techniques. A therapist can, for example, reflect with the client on which aspects of a traumatic event were beyond their control – thereby reducing feelings of guilt. The Stoic maxim ‘It is not what happens, but how we react to it’ can be used in modern cognitive behavioural therapy as an intervention strategy for self-regulation. In coaching situations, such as post-traumatic career stagnation, the idea of self-determination as an inner attitude can also contribute to reorientation. In group settings – e.g. with nurses or first responders – Stoic ethics can help to deal with secondary traumatisations.

¹²Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 2010, p. 3.

¹³Dorchain, *Grund und Erkennen in deutschen Predigten Meister Eckharts*, 2005, p.177.

¹⁴Eckhart, *Liber benedictum*, part 2.

¹⁵Ibid.

Epicureanism: Disidentification from Roles

Epicureanism is another highly influential school of thought in antiquity, which at times stood in bitter conflict with the Stoics and historically and systematically generated many enemies, but also many friends and even more misunderstandings. The reason for this is that Epicureanism is a hedonistic philosophy for which the principle of life as the motive for human action was already a given assumption more than 2200 years before the invention of psychoanalysis, as the eponym of this school of thought, Epicurus, says: *'Pleasure is the beginning and the goal of a blessed life.'*

¹⁶ However, pleasure in the Epicurean canon has often been misunderstood in the history of its reception as blind lust, whereas in truth it is to be understood as a wise search for pleasure through the avoidance of pain and fear. Epicurus of Samos (341 BC – 270 BC) was a hedonist, but in an enlightened and radical sense: the goal of his philosophy of joy is self-sufficiency (αὐτάρκεια), inner independence from superstition, social pressure and moral manipulation. The decisive factor here is his atheistic-materialistic worldview, from which it follows that in his teaching there is no God, no judgement, no afterlife, and from this a fearlessness of death, guilt, hell and ideology is derived. *'Death is nothing to us, since when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist.'*¹⁷

Epicureanism becomes particularly interesting when read from a therapeutic and trauma psychology perspective: the reappropriation of the body, pleasure and friendship are repair mechanisms for relational trauma, especially in the context of guilt, shame or narcissistic manipulation. With regard to the school of Samos, Martha Nussbaum appreciatively notes the potential calming and stress-reducing effect: *"The Epicureans saw philosophy as a medicine for the soul, aiming to cure fear, anxiety, and irrational desire."*¹⁸

Epicurus' worldly and pleasure-oriented philosophy, which was always subtly subversive, was never a friend of Christian institutions and thinkers, unlike the ascetic Stoics, who turned their backs on the world. Rather, it was a negative projection screen, and so it is not surprising that even Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) banished the Epicureans to the circle of hell, where even the graves burn: *'The Epicureans, who make the soul die with the body, are among these.'*¹⁹ However, in the Baroque era, the trend began to reverse and Epicurean ideas first reached the independently minded nobility, then the wealthy bourgeoisie. The reason was that the Reformation had called the dogmas of the Church into question, the age of invention was dawning, and people longed for new norms, also because they realised that the old value system caused unnecessary suffering. An impressive example is Ninon de Lenclos (1620–1705), the famous salonnière and Epicurean of the 17th century. Her posthumous fame is based not only on her witty letters and philosophical dialogues, but also on a symbolic gesture: she left the young Voltaire (1694–1778) money to buy books. Her writings and her lived philosophy of emotional autonomy in the masquerade of court life shaped an entire generation of the early Enlightenment.

¹⁶Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, p.29.

¹⁷Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, §2.

¹⁸Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, 1994, p. 35.

¹⁹Dante, *Inferno*, Canto X, v. 14–1.

Her often-quoted dictum, *'If a man needs a religion to conduct himself properly in this world, it is a sign that he has either a limited mind or a corrupt heart,'*²⁰ sharply summarises her attitude towards dogma and moral hypocrisy. Although she did not leave behind a complete philosophical system, in her numerous letters – a typical means of expression for intellectuals of her time – she provided practical guidance for people of the world who were navigating social expectations, relationship problems and attachment trauma. In her remarkable instructions to the young Marquis de Sévigné, she advises radical role distance: *'Play your role – but never believe that you are the role.'*²¹ Furthermore, this progressive 17th-century thinker deconstructed gender roles as outdated acts of training, sexuality as a vital freedom, and social rules as conditioning through shame and fear that should be seen through and circumvented. This attitude allows what we now call disidentification with dysfunctional social expectations – a central element of modern trauma healing. Epicureanism is a helpful framework for distancing oneself from the emotional and social entanglements in which many people, especially those traumatised by attachment, find themselves.

Epicurean thinking offers a valuable resource in psychotherapeutic work with people who have experienced relational or shame-based trauma. The conscious recovery of physical sensations and joy – for example through mindfulness, movement or creative activity – can highlight the relevance of pleasure as a means of reorientation. Epicurean concepts such as friendship as a fear-free connection or the renunciation of dogmas can be used in the context of group therapy and trauma-informed pedagogy. In the supervision of helping professions, the maxim 'don't believe in the role you play' can help to resolve role conflicts and over-identification with painful situations. Especially in contexts with highly standardised expectations – such as nursing, social work or school – Epicureanism can teach the ability to distance oneself.

Nihilism: Rethinking Normopathy

Nihilism – from the Latin 'nihil' (nothing) is an ideological development of the philosophy of the Enlightenment as a 'way out of self-imposed immaturity',²² as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) put it, with its radical demand to question all supposed truths, to use one's own reason and not to accept any institution – be it the church, the state or the media – unquestioningly. As a radical exaggeration of classical scepticism, which doubted everything, nihilism, which goes even further than mere doubt by rejecting values, can take many different forms. It can be epistemological – rejecting the ability to know – ethical – disputing the purposefulness of values – or metaphysical – denying any meaning – or even a combination of all forms. The moralist Albert Camus (1913-1960) sums up the extreme exaggeration of the denial of all values as a horizon of freedom: *'If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance.'*²³ However, a contradiction inherent in nihilism is the fact that an

²⁰de Lenclos, *Letters*, paraphrased.

²¹Ibid.

²²Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* 1784, p. 481

²³Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 1951, p.5.

apodictic assertion such as the denial of all values claims to be an absolute truth – which is not supposed to be true.

Nihilistic schools of thought are interesting in trauma therapy because they are the first to shift the focus away from individual suffering (the Stoic perspective) and social conditioning (Epicureanism) and ask some of the most uncomfortable questions of all: What if our lives are meaningless? What if all values are empty? What if trauma is not only inevitable, not only navigable, but even deliberately cultivated? It was the perspective of nihilism that first revealed that, above and beyond individual case histories and questionable collective role expectations, there is also a social fabrication of trauma, even trauma as an industry.

The most radical perspective on trauma is that developed by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900): it is not the individual who is sick – society is normopathic. Marriage, family, school, religion – these are not neutral institutions, but often vehicles of structural violence disguised as morality. In 'Human, All Too Human', Nietzsche deconstructs romantic love marriage as well as mere utilitarian unions and recognises that many marriages end in trauma – and that children witness and carry this trauma with them. *The family is the germ cell of all misfortune in morality.*²⁴ The nihilistic thinker is thus the first – long before Sigmund Freud – to recognise the child as a symptom of a pathological culture: *'In truth, it is not the child but the marriage that has gone wrong.'*²⁵ This way of thinking is particularly helpful for complex and secondary trauma, as it shifts the shame from the individual to the norm. All normative thinking is relegated to the realm of speculation, because, *'There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena.'*²⁶ Nihilism here is not cynicism, but a form of existential clarity that can help the traumatised to empower themselves where others sought to disempower them. In this sense, Epicureanism and nihilism are similar: instead of accepting unfortunate circumstances (like the Stoics), they propagate a spirit of contradiction that is oriented towards pleasure and the world. However, the Epicurean school still sees hope in a society that is dysfunctional, but one that can be navigated happily if one distances oneself from its role expectations, while nihilism has long since abandoned the theatre of dysfunctional society and sees the trauma of the individual only as a possible symptom of a larger illness of the system.

When dealing with complex or secondary trauma, nihilistic criticism of normative structures can have a relieving effect – for example, when those affected learn to question internalised feelings of guilt and shame or introjects of 'not being enough/not being worthy'. Particularly in contexts of transgenerational trauma, structural discrimination or institutional violence, Nietzsche's radical critique of the system can help to understand individual symptoms as an expression of social normopathy. In counselling or therapy, this can lead to a change of perspective: 'It's not me who's wrong – the system was sick.' This creates space for empowerment and authenticity beyond traditional values. In political-ethical spaces for reflection, e.g. in critical social work or activism, the nihilistic position can also be used as a provocation against dehumanising structures – not destructively, but clarifyingly.

²⁴Nietzsche, *The Dawn*, §179, paraphrased.

²⁵Ibid., §120.

²⁶Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §108.

Three Philosophical Paths, Three Forms of Resilience

With its reframing of traumatic events and placing them in an existential philosophical perspective, Stoic philosophy has historically provided much help in cases of acute or chronic trauma such as loss, illness or the death of a loved one, as Eckhart's 'Book of Consolation' and other works prove. Stoic life coaching has systematically focused on human 'self-determination',²⁷ as Volker Gerhard emphasises, defining it not as arbitrariness but as the result of strong discipline and willpower training – two factors of resilience in their own right.²⁸ Epicureanism, with its disidentification from social expectations in general and roles in particular, has often helped to alleviate relational and chronic trauma, as this school of thought seeks to alleviate the suffering that arises in relationships by resolving emotional entanglements, feelings of alienation and false belief patterns. Nussbaum therefore states that the reclaiming of the senses can contribute to post-traumatic growth, '*Desire must be educated – not repressed. And philosophy is the art of re-education.*'²⁹ Nihilism, with its far-reaching critique of norms, was also able to address complex or secondary trauma, as it was the first to grasp the overall social conditions, not only in a role-specific and atheistic-critical way, but also as deeply normopathic, so that trauma no longer appeared as an exception to a rule, no longer as confirmation of a rule, but as the desired result of a society whose values and norms are not designed for the happiness of the individual. This disillusionment is sobering, not immediate, as Gordon Marino correctly states: '*Existential philosophy doesn't promise happiness – it offers survival. Not comfort, but clarity.*'³⁰ The focus of the three schools of philosophy on trauma is crucial: Stoicism focused on individual suffering, which it related to metaphysical concepts such as the transience of life; Epicureanism focused on collectively generated suffering, which manifests itself individually in relationship trauma and can be alleviated by distancing oneself from roles; nihilism focused on corrupt values, which permeate individuality, roles and norms and should therefore be interpreted as fundamentally supra-individual and political.

The three models of Stoicism, Epicureanism and nihilism, with their focus on reframing, disidentification and questioning of normopathic society, do not contradict each other – they can be integrated: Stoicism strengthens through inner order, Epicureanism through self-care and de-ideologisation, and nihilism through the exposure of sick systems. Current psychological and therapeutic research aims to synthesise many of these ideas, which originally stem from philosophy, with a view to '*a more comprehensive understanding of human flourishing by combining normative and empirical perspectives.*'³¹ The idealistic escalation movement of Stoicism, Epicureanism and nihilism can also be read as inspiration for increasingly far-reaching individual sciences: individual therapy, social science, political science.

²⁷Gerhard, *Selbstbestimmung*, 2010, p. 1.

²⁸Dorchain, 2021, p. 161.

²⁹Nussbaum, 1994, p. 154.

³⁰Marino, *The Existentialist's Survival Guide: How to Live Authentically in an Inauthentic Age*, 2004, p. 9.

³¹Brown & Potter, 2024, open source.

Taken together, the three philosophical schools offer complementary forms of resilience: Stoicism builds resilience through rational reframing and ethical clarity; Epicureanism through emotional autonomy, sensual presence, and distancing from oppressive roles; Nihilism through radical insight, norm critique, and the rejection of harmful social expectations. Each school addresses suffering in a different register – metaphysical, interpersonal, and political – and thereby expands the possible terrains of healing and self-empowerment.

Philosophy as a Metapsychological Framework

Although ascetic Stoicism with its self-discipline based on virtues, hedonistic Epicureanism with its role-specific flexibility, and experimental nihilism with its radical deconstruction of values that cause suffering have each made significant contributions to dealing with trauma, none of the three philosophical schools is ‘therapy’ in the narrow sense. However, each of these philosophical methodologies offers a special way of thinking as a metapsychological framework that provides orientation, makes suffering understandable and strengthens self-efficacy – in other words, it can build resilience. Reframing, disidentifying with social roles and rethinking normopathy are powerful mental techniques that draw on fundamental science to grasp and process human and all-too-human experiences such as loss, disruption and betrayal. It is interesting to note that in today's therapy scene, all three techniques, which could be inspired by Stoicism, Epicureanism and nihilism, coexist and sometimes overlap.³² However, it is important to note that philosophy as a means of coping was not only used by classical and modern thinkers in the acute crisis of a traumatic event, but continuously, as Hadot correctly remarks, ‘*Philosophy (...) was a way of life, a spiritual exercise practised at every moment.*’³³ Learning from classical and modern schools of philosophy can therefore open up a wealth of unexplored possibilities for effectively supporting our clients' creativity in dealing with existential experiences and allowing a serene wisdom to emerge where a search for absolute truths may be futile. Resilience, then, is not merely the return to function – it is the restoration of perspective. Philosophical thought enables us to place suffering in a broader frame, to resist reduction, and to recover agency through meaning. In this sense, thinking becomes an ethical act: a refusal to be overwhelmed, and an insistence on coherence amidst fragmentation.

When trauma research and philosophical discussion come together, a synthesis is achieved that helps to meet contemporary needs: in times of social uncertainty, normative crisis and collective vulnerability that repeatedly lead to trauma, we need not only diagnoses – but the art of thinking.

³²See Zlomke & Jeter, *Cognitive Restructuring And Its Role in Resilience: A Review*, 2020, p.123-135.

³³Hadot, 1995, p. 265.

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