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A STOIC APPROACH TO BUSINESS ANTIFRAGILITY

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ABSTRACT. *Alongside many studies on adoption efforts for antifragility practices in business, there is a research gap related to using Stoic principles. This study identifies five approaches derived from Stoic philosophy and examines them in the context of business antifragility. The dichotomy of control, the discipline of thought, responsibility for the future, calm*

in the face of chaos, and fear as a tool for growth are analyzed based on previous research and examples of entrepreneurial practice. The antifragility concept gained growing attention in research and practice with the pandemic, the economic situation related to the Ukrainian conflict, and the growing influence of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, cloud computing, and big data analytics. However, the literature lacks studies on Stoic approaches to antifragility. We extend knowledge of the emerging antifragility field by mixing it with the ideas of the Stoic philosophy.

KEYWORDS: *entrepreneurship, management, antifragility, stoicism.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *Q57, L26.*

INTRODUCTION

More and more researchers and futurologists are saying that in the middle of the 21st century, the model of human development, which has been observed for the past 4 billion years, will change [1, 2]. The singularity that Ray Kurzweil talks about, referring to the Austrian physicist Heinz von Forster equation, is just around the corner [3]. A qualitative restructuring of reality will entail metamorphoses of various spheres of life [4, 5].

In a world where the waves of change have become more frequent and uncontrollable, entrepreneurs must have a proven strategy that helps them act when there is no way to influence external factors - new trends, technologies, and force majeure. In his cycle *Incerto* (lat. "indefinite"), Nassim Taleb tried to provide approaches to uncertainty and the functioning of complex systems [6]. Today, his ideas are becoming more and more popular. However, everything new is well-forgotten old. Thousands of years before Taleb, Stoic philosophers were thinking the same thing [7].

In this regard, business thinkers are increasingly talking not even about strategy but about tools for managing complexity as an "antidote to chaos" [8]. However, the role of an antidote can also be taken by time-tested recipes - principles and methods of thinking that have long shown their effectiveness. Unfortunately, people often deal with their unwitting reinvention in today's world.

Our predecessors were familiar with uncertainty and instability, devastating wars and civil strife, epidemics, natural disasters, and the fight against dissent and class restrictions. Under these conditions, Zeno of Kita and his students asked relevant questions even today, more than two thousand years ago, walking along the portico gallery, which later became known as the painted standing (Greek Στόά - "portico") [9]. It was there, in Athens, that the ideas of stoicism were formed - the ancient philosophical school whose ideas turned out to be so in tune with the modern world [10].

In the former soviet countries, despite all the difficulties, a particular layer of entrepreneurs has formed who work with uncertainty as a resource. They are united by the desire to revise the fundamental business models for their industry and offer a new vision for the functioning of the business. At the same time, they most often have to act in spite of market conditions and perpetual crises.

An example of such "industry visionaries" include the Agrohelfer [11] service and the Emex [12] auto components platform. Each of these projects intends to "rewrite" the rules within their markets. In the first case, we are talking about introducing a digital product in the field of agricultural production - one of the most rigid and conservative. The second is the formation of an information technology supplier, which begins to talk in terms of conversion and UX/CX instead of auto components delivery and shipments.

Industry visionaries understand that although entrepreneurs cannot influence the fluctuations of the external environment in any way, it is in their power to create and develop value (service/brand/technology) already [13, 14]. At the same time, a business strategy is an essential tool for finding opportunities for development and adaptation [15]. The experience of joint project work shows that industry visionaries introduce many stoic practices and principles into their activities, albeit not always consciously.

In the next section, we will look closely at the ideas that help their business grow against all odds.

2. STOIC APPROACHES FOR ANTIFRAGILE ENTERPRISE MANAGEMENT

2.1. Dichotomy of Control

Seneca wrote “In our imagination, we suffer much more often than in reality” [16]. This principle became central to Stoicism, on which the fundamental principle of control is based. The Stoics advise letting go of what is not affected by our efforts and focusing on what we can change and influence [16]. For example, a pandemic is a common misfortune, and everyone finds themselves in approximately similar conditions in a paused economy. Nevertheless, we can still look for opportunities.

No Concern



Figure 1. Circles of Control - A modified Stoic theory based on the ideas of Stephen Covey

Source: adapted from [17-19].

Subsequently, the theory was significantly strengthened: first by Stephen Covey [17] and then by his followers [18, 19], who proposed, in addition to the zone of control, other territories - the zone of influence and the zone of interest. The critical point here is that we can manage the main thing - our interest and the ability to move within the levels. What yesterday was beyond our control, having fallen into the zone of our interests, becomes the subject of research and then conscious influence.

Concrete conclusion: a businessman cannot control the state's investment policy but can clearly understand macro trends and consistently implement them (digitalization, cognitive technologies) even in very traditional niches. A good example is the Moldovan Mimi Winery and Castle [20]. By becoming an industry leader, the company starts to create trends, thereby influencing the national wine industry.

2.2. Discipline of Thought

"There is no system, but the function is performed" is not only the central mantra of the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving (TRIZ), it is also the essential principle of the stoic approach to business [21]. Innovation is just an attempt to answer the question "what is wrong with" - and offer its solution. In this case, all other factors may not play any role.

According to Kulyabin, founder of Emex, "where one button is enough, we will not make three" [12]. Where it is possible to do without "tools" when solving a problem, it is better to do it. There is no point in creating a cargo cult of methodologies, be it SCRUM, Kanban, JTBD, or business model canvas. A properly executed A/B test is enough to understand what is really important.

However, what does "correct" mean? The Stoics offer the Theory of Preferential Indifference [22] - is it when, for example, people do not have enough for a vacation, they decide what is better: not buying a new car or refusing to go to a resort? However, they do not consider the option of selling their daughter and using this money to go on vacation. This is how a person, in our case, an entrepreneur sets up an internal coordinate system - economists call them "lexicographic preferences," emphasizing that goods from categories A and B are not comparable [23]. In contrast, the choice within the category can and should be made.

2.3. Taking Responsibility for the Future

There are two types of thinking about the future: the expert and the entrepreneur. An expert is one who predicts the future, engages in scenario planning, and tries to predict trends based on analysis and past experience. An entrepreneur attempts and acts in such a way as to shape this future. That is why everyone is an entrepreneur in relation to their lives: we do not just predict but purposefully act - to build a house on the coast, go on a trip around the world, learn a new language, change a profession or move to another country.

There is a good foresight technique, which is called the "Merlin principle" [24] (the term was introduced by the American researcher Charles Smith and refers to the legend of the wizard Merlin from the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table [25]) - to look at the present from the perspective of the future in order to make the most correct tactical decisions in the present moment and not hesitate to do what can bring us closer to this future.

We can think like a magician only in one case - if, as Taleb writes, we risk our own skin and avoid asymmetry in relations with people [26]. Honesty, fairness, responsibility, and mutual benefit - all that is usually considered to be among the stoic virtues - we need not just for abstract reasons of morality but in order to shape our better future. Long-term goals are always based on values.

2.4. Calm in the Face of Chaos

The intelligently managed chaos can be profitable. The logic of antifragility is simple: a business needs to constantly get a little stress so that the more significant stress, which will happen sooner or later, does not become a death sentence [27]. An example is an adaptive business environment, where testing hypotheses and quickly launching product prototypes is a prerequisite for survival. This is usually referred to as a minimum viable product (MVP) - or even a "soft MVP" when we strive to minimize the consequences of mistakes, which are inevitable for long-range survival [28]. It is not only possible to make mistakes but also necessary, but it is desirable to do without fatal consequences.

A good example can be the creation of a hub, platform, or marketplace in the niche of supplying engineering equipment (pipes or wells) and engineering solutions. This market may be waiting for its Software as a service (SaaS) revolution. Brian Robertson writes in books about holacracy¹³: "Strategy is not a plan and rules but principles and the desire to stay on the course, no matter what it takes. Strategy is what needs to be done right now" [29]. Taleb echoes him: "We can't plan anything because we don't understand the future. But that doesn't mean you don't need to plan. You just have to keep in mind the possible limitations" [27].

Dynamic change, of course, is the most critical metaphor in understanding strategy [30]. People are constantly adjusting their actions in light of the genuine feedback they receive from the environment, and their movement becomes more organic and spontaneous. The closest analogy is cycling: it is useless to predict here; it is much more important to understand management principles and apply them.

Therefore, in holacracy, the concept of management closest to stoicism, preference is given to projects (literally "throw ahead") rather than forecasts ("pro" - forward, "gnosis" - knowledge) [29]. Simply put, a person needs not know but act "ahead." And mistakes are just corrective feedback.

¹³ Holacracy is a social technology or organization management system in which the authority and responsibility for decision-making are distributed throughout the holarchy of self-organizing teams, instead of a managerial hierarchy.

2.5. Fear as a Tool for Growth

Intuition in Stoicism manifests itself as a result of meaningful work with a person's beliefs and "mental shells." To gain "supervision" and the ability to immediately penetrate the essence of things and make the right strategic choice, we need to get rid of fears.

Entrepreneurs often have to take risks, and the best recipe is not to dismiss phobias but to imagine the worst possible scenario. Thus, our strategy will take into account possible force majeure. By understanding our fears, we are better in control of the present. This technique is called "negative visualization" in cognitive psychology [31].

This issue was well developed by Robert Keegan and Lacey Lahey, who proposed the concept of the emotional immune system [32]. Literally, the question they asked sounds paradoxical: "What are you doing so that your dreams will never come true"?

Subsequently, based on this model, Robert Keegan, in collaboration with business consultant Bill Torbert, formed a model of vertical development, which helps to manage people's progress [33]. Passing from level to level, people consistently expand the picture of the world and get rid of the attitudes that limit them.

CONCLUSIONS

There are growing studies and reported practices of antifragility, particularly in the last decade, but research on Stoicism and antifragility is lacking in the literature. This study examines the Stoic approaches for antifragile enterprise management. It complements and extends the literature on antifragility, emphasizing the value of Stoic principles for the managers of antifragile enterprises. This study provides the first step to understanding such direction and promoting theoretical development for antifragility adoption in today's ever-changing world.

From our literature findings, Stoic approaches appear to benefit antifragility implementation and performance outcomes, which is consistent with previous studies on Stoic entrepreneurship [34, 35]. Practically, this study helps managers better understand the Stoic and antifragility concepts and approaches, realize the potential for their company, and promote antifragility adoption in the workplace. More research efforts on the applications and value of antifragility are encouraged to unravel the contribution to organizational performance.

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