

Confronting dark academia: A Stoic strategy of acceptance and resistance

Abstract

Neoliberal annexation of universities results in 'dark academia', a state associated with stress, anxiety, exhaustion, guilt, fear and burnout. Accounting's professional commitments and narrow teaching render our discipline especially culpable. Although prior research tends to describe the *cause* (neoliberalism) and *effect* (deleterious mental health) of dark academia, I argue for a nuanced and novel characterization of its *nature*. Specifically, I identify and describe its five 'values', namely *individualism*, *illusion*, *inequality*, *isomorphism* and *infinite*. I then argue how Stoic philosophy can be deployed to confront these values. Specifically, in the autoethnographic tradition and mobilizing the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, I show how academics can *accept* and yet also *resist* dark academia's values. I also challenge prior conceptualization of Stoicism as an impractical and self-centered philosophy by examining how it can realistically and pro-socially benefit the academic community in general. This research may be especially timely for marginalized members of our community, such as junior faculty and PhD students. It illuminates the untapped potential of Stoic philosophy to better understand and confront individual and community crises.

Keywords Accounting academia; neoliberalism; Stoicism; Marcus Aurelius; autoethnography.

1. Introduction

Academia comprises a noble and privileged calling. As academics, we can help others, give back to our discipline, and interact with like-minded colleagues (Lindsay, 2020). We are paid, often handsomely, for activities that many of us would happily do anyway, for instance, reading and writing about interesting topics, and communicating our findings to audiences such as students and fellow scholars. Our business schools enjoy significant influence within universities (Fleming, 2020), and for those of us in accounting departments, our students appreciate the varied job opportunities, good earnings potential, and intellectual fulfilment associated with a career in accounting (Brink, Eaton, & Heitger, 2021). However, despite these ostensibly auspicious tailwinds, many universities, and in particular our business schools, harbor something troubling, which Fleming (2020, p. 1305) terms “dark academia.”

Dark academia refers to a sense of despair and hopelessness in higher education. We see its echoes across the scholarly literature. Gill (2016) describes an academic working life permeated by insecurity and guilt, whilst Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen (2016, p. 168) report “unhealthy levels of anxiety and stress in the academy.” Shen and Slater (2021) describe how stress levels among academics have dramatically grown over the past decade. Acknowledgement of these malfunctions has also spilled over to the popular media. For instance, *The Guardian* describes how UK academics are isolated, ill, and not sleeping, and how 40% want to leave the profession (Fazackerley, 2019), whilst *The Conversation* reports job satisfaction levels of 11% amongst UK academics (Erickson, Walker, & Hanna, 2021).

What animates dark academia? From where does it spring? Fleming (2020) connects it to neoliberalism and excessive commercialization, whereby universities, and in particular business schools, embrace and mimic private enterprise through veneration of steep hierarchies, treatment of students as ‘customers’, KPIs, excessive auditing, and careerism. Dissenting views are shut down in these corporate simulacra, and academics live “a schizophrenic existence, displaying the trappings of a corporate persona while inwardly cherishing the ‘old’ values” (Fleming, 2020, p. 1309). These old values comprise exactly what drew many of us to academia, such as “collegiality, reading/writing books, questioning society, research for its own sake” (Fleming, 2020,

p. 1308). These concerns likely manifest to varying degrees in different institutions, being mediated, for instance, by local culture (Becker & Lukka, 2022). Nonetheless, readers likely recognize at least some of the issues raised, and the accounting literature confirms this tale of neoliberal annexation of our institutions, for instance in the form of prioritization of the needs of industry (Humphrey & Gendron, 2015), excessive focus on measurement and rankings (Picard, Durocher, & Gendron, 2019), and corporate-like short-termism (Humphrey & Gendron, 2015).

We can thus assert that dark academia's main *cause* is neoliberal takeover of our institutions (Fleming, 2020), and its *effect* entails stress, anxiety, exhaustion, hurt, guilt, fear and burnout (Fleming, 2020; Gill, 2016). However, I argue that the literature contains a blind spot by not considering its *nature*. In this paper, my first aim is to consider: what *is* dark academia? Prior work tends to describe it in a manner synonymous with its *cause*, i.e., as a state of excessive, neoliberally infused, commercialization. However, I argue for a more granular treatment of dark academia that posits its nature as being more nuanced than its cause. Specifically, after detailing its neoliberal origins, and drawing on the literature and my prior experience, I ascribe to dark academia five 'values', namely (1) *Individualism*; (2) *Illusion*; (3) *Inequality*; (4) *Isomorphism*; and (5) *Infinitude*. Disaggregating dark academia into its constituent values renders it less immutable than if we continue to focus on the behemoth of 'neoliberalism'. My second aim builds on this conceptual rupturing of dark academia by showing how we can deploy Stoicism, one of the major Hellenistic philosophies, to *confront* dark academia's values. Stoicism prioritizes "acting for the good of the community" (Hadot, 1998, p. 210) rather than for one's narrow self-interest. It helps us focus on what is controllable, thus showing how to avoid "anxiety, frustration, fear, disappointment, anger, general discontent" (Sellars, 2019, p. 1), emotions endemic in dark academia. My research question is thus expressed as follows: *How can Stoicism be mobilized to confront the values of dark academia?*

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I set out the origins and values of dark academia. In Section 3, I discuss Stoic philosophy and my analytical approach. Section 4 describes application of Stoic values against the values of dark academia,

and Section 5 provides a discussion, alongside some possible future research avenues. Section 6 concludes.

2. Dark academia: origins and values

As Fleming (2020) explains, dark academia can be traced to neoliberalism. I now outline the origins and nature of neoliberalism, describe how it permeated universities and thus beget dark academia, and set out the five values of dark academia.

2.1 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an economic theory that promotes markets, self-regulation and shareholder wealth, and takes an amoral and asocial view of business (Taylor, 2017). The term ‘neoliberalism’ emerged in the 1930s, as an economic response to the impact of World War I and the Great Depression (Slobodian, 2018). Early thought was spearheaded by European intellectuals, primarily at the Geneva School, who were seeking to safeguard the freedom and mobility of capital. They saw national sovereignty, emboldened by the end of empire, as a threat to wealth. They thus conceptualized not one world but two, namely *imperium*, which referred to democratic national territories, and *dominium*, referring to money and property. This split would protect capital (*dominium*) from the vagaries, short-termism, redistributive equality and labor rights associated with *imperium*. To construct and safeguard this dual structure, they needed supranational institutions, initially the International Chamber of Commerce, and later the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the European Court of Justice, that would “override national legislation that might disrupt the global rights of capital” (Slobodian, 2018, p. 13).¹ The national state was not to be replaced, but rather subordinated to the supranational. It was in the 1970s, a period of high inflation and unemployment, that neoliberalism gained major economic, political and social traction. Keynesian-style government interventions, which had dominated the US and UK since the 1940s, were now being problematized. The role of society, government, and social safety nets began to be downplayed, to be replaced by “individual effort and the wellbeing of an individual’s family as the sole responsibility of members of society” (Taylor, 2017, p. 112). Neoliberalism’s ideological ‘success’ became for many

¹ We thus see how neoliberalism is not so much about shrinking governance, as commonly perceived, but rather mobilizing it at “at the level of the world” (Slobodian, 2018, p. 58).

encapsulated in the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and prominent thinkers advocated that it was the logical end point for all societies (Fukuyama, 2020). However, the neoliberal story is not one of unimpeded success but rather of ongoing struggle. For instance, trade unions and tariffs, both anathema to the neoliberal project, persist. Neoliberalism was also implicated in the 2008 global financial crisis, and challenged by rising opposing ideologies, most prominently in the form of China. Nonetheless, “like a creeping cancer neoliberal practice is able to resurface” (Aalbers, 2013, p. 1089). One of the new(er) sites in which neoliberalism presents is in our universities and especially our business schools.

2.2 Neoliberalism and the business school

European universities of the middle-ages mostly taught liberal arts to the nobility. Towards the end of the 19th century, industrialization prompted a shift towards ‘practical’ subjects such as business (Taylor, 2017). The historical aim of business schools was to produce an “elite professional body, bound by the standards of professional conduct”, that could flourish in the newly industrialized world (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015, p. 564). These graduates were considered socially embedded actors, guided by professional and moral standards and by theorists such as Drucker who emphasized the societal role of management (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015). However, these aims and ideals became threatened during the afore-mentioned economic crises of the 1970s, when universities could no longer rely on government subsidies and instead turned to tuition fees for their funding, which added a new commercial impetus to their activities. This was accelerated in the 1980s, where the fashionable concept of ‘value for taxpayer money’ compelled nonprofit institutions to act like private firms (Fleming & Harley, 2024). For neoliberals, “the fact that colleges were not run like businesses meant they were inefficient and in need of market reforms” (Taylor, 2017, p. 113). Neoliberal market-induced pressures forced administrators to prioritize corporate-style goals, such as increasing revenue and decreasing costs (Taylor, 2017). This shift was mirrored in our classrooms, which have become “the conduit of neoliberal ideology” (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015, p. 564). Teaching in business schools relies on “reductive, impoverished and simplistically ‘pure’ economic concepts” and propagates neoliberalism’s amoral and asocial view of business (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015, p. 565). Neoliberal takeover of our universities can also be viewed through the

lens of Priestland (2013). He identifies three historically dominant groups (merchants, sages, and warriors), and describes how 'sages' (which includes *inter alia* academics), who value ideas rather than wealth, have lost control of universities to commercially oriented 'merchants'. Priestland (2013, p. 201) surmises how "the corrosive effects of markets on education have been entirely predictable", citing for instance how universities lower standards and deploy aggressive sales techniques to retain students.

The neoliberal turn in our business schools is perhaps unsurprising. Our schools are not islands and are situated in a society that "has been constantly inundated with the endless virtues of the free market", and for much of the public, "a university education is simply one more transaction" (Taylor, 2017, p. 109). Education is no longer considered an unpriceable 'externality' and instead has been brought into the net of market forces. As neoliberalism disdains the common good, "the traditional academic mission of the university to create and disseminate knowledge is subsumed by the market and its demands" (Taylor, 2017, p. 115). Neoliberalism's dominance is reinforced by university leadership structures, where governing boards are often comprised of businesspeople. This pressurizes administrations to run universities in an autocratic manner that largely ignores faculty. Other commercially-focused practices include deploying hiring consultants, increasing administrators' pay, and linking compensation to revenue (Taylor, 2017).

Because of these various factors, neoliberalism has "become a dominant ideology of business schools" (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015, p. 559), thus begetting the condition of dark academia. If neoliberalism can be identified as dark academia's *cause*, we also know dark academia's *effects*, which include stress, anxiety, exhaustion, fear and burnout (Fleming, 2020; Gill, 2016). But what of dark academia itself? I posit that it privileges five 'values': (1) *Individualism*; (2) *Illusion*; (3) *Inequality*; (4) *Isomorphism*; and (5) *Infinitude*. I now discuss each of these values.

(1) *Individualism*:

For neoliberalism, "individualism is supreme" (Taylor, 2017, p. 126). Under the neoliberal worldview, a person is an atomized, asocial and self-sufficient individual,

free to live without concern for others. They must be responsible, self-governing and entrepreneurial to survive in the neoliberal world of “radical individualism and a social Darwinian ethos” (Saltman, 2014, p. 251). In dark academia, individualism also prevails, to the detriment of the wider community. As Berg and Seeber (2016, p. 18) bluntly surmise, “it seems that in the corporate university it’s every academic for himself.” Individuality is compounded by extreme use of metrics, which pit us against each other and often torment early career academics (Fleming & Harley, 2024). Individuality also permeates our students’ mindset, who consider and appraise higher education as a private investment. As Saltman (2014, p. 251) describes, “neoliberal ideology sees education not as a public good ideally serving a democratic society but as a private good primarily useful for preparing workers and consumers for the economy.” Graduate students are also told “that you’ll only be the best if you focus on yourself” (Snodgrass, 2021, para. 24).

(2) Illusion:

The ‘freedom’ associated with neoliberalism is illusory, being in reality largely tethered to market-led principles and algorithmic quantification (Tirapani & Willmott, 2023). Similarly, scholarly ‘freedom’ in dark academia masks our captivity to certain orthodoxies. Just as neoliberalism turns its subjects into “rules-following animals” (Slobodian, 2018, p. 231), dark academia imposes decrees regarding what to publish, where to publish, what to teach, and so on. These restrictions often stem from coercive forces such as university administrators (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000), accreditation agencies (Lund Dean, Fornaciari, Bento, & Asarta, 2020) and powerful academic donors (Strauss, 2014). With these constraints in place, scholarly freedom becomes illusory. Additionally, just as neoliberalism’s economic self-interestedness incentivizes corporations to manipulate perceptions of achievement, universities use “illusion tricks” (Lund Dean et al., 2020, p. 494) to attract students (Wood, 2011), enhance reported academic outcomes (Golden, 2014) and promote “good organizational citizenship” (Fleming & Harley, 2024, p. 182).

It is perhaps unsurprising that illusion pervades dark academia, as illusion thrives in conditions of opacity. Similar to the ‘markets’ revered by neoliberalism (Slobodian, 2018), academia’s inputs (e.g., our curricula) and outputs (e.g., student ‘success’) are

opaque and complex. Opacity and complexity of organizational environments are ideal antecedents for illusion, as claims made are difficult to prove or disprove. Opacity also characterizes much mainstream accounting research, which has been somewhat colonized by subject areas such as statistics, mathematics and economics², thus generating research not (perceptibly) relevant or accessible to practitioners (Panozzo, 1997). This patina of ‘scientific rigor’ captures the real world of accounting only partially and is often uncritical and thus illusory. However, this state doubtless benefits both accounting academia, which can justify its presence amongst more traditionally ‘scientific’ disciplines, and the profession, whereby firms cite such research to justify their behavior, for instance at government inquiries (Dunne, Brennan, & Kirwan, 2023).

(3) Inequality:

Neoliberalism’s meritocratic premise propels and condones “social inequality by attributing the presence of social hierarchy to innate or learned personal qualities” (Bettache, Chiu, & Beattie, 2020, p. 217). Neoliberal policies invariably result in income and health inequality (Schrecker, 2016) and reduced social mobility (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015). In dark academia, our universities are often drivers of inequality. For instance, we inculcate future CEOs with the importance of generating returns that accrue to only the most wealthy (Reich, 2014). The economic ‘prosperity’ that we teach reinforces the “differential outcomes of wealth and opportunity that neoliberalism produces” (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015, p. 559). Accounting is especially problematic here. Accounting is not objective but rather “a partisan practice that is implicated in *distributive* transfers of wealth between social classes” (Arnold, 2009, p. 805, italics in original).

Outside the classroom, intra-faculty competition has been heightened, to the extent that we see a two-tier unequal system of winners and losers, the latter being “the ones who never get tenured or permanent jobs, they are the ones who get fired for lack of “productivity” in a system of constant surveillance and measurement of academic “production,” and if they are fortunate enough to avoid precarity, then they are the ones whose salaries stagnate (or drop) in real terms over time” (Berg et al., 2016, p. 172). Marginalized actors, such as PhD students, post-docs, and early career

² Ravenscroft and Williams (2021, p. 3) describe accounting’s status as being “a mere sub-sub-sub-sub discipline of applied mathematics.”

researchers, often face much higher teaching loads (including enormous undergraduate classes) and much lower compensation relative to senior faculty (Gill, 2016). Status inequality can beget mental, physical and sexual abuse by bad actors. Snodgrass (2021, para. 22) describes seeing “graduate students be reduced to puddles while a senior faculty member belittled them with words like “stupid,” “loser,” “incompetent” and “a waste of time.” Adjunct/contingent faculty are also vulnerable to inequality in dark academia. Taylor (2017, p. 122) describes how “use of contingent faculty and working conditions for them is a lingering effect of neoliberal corporatization of the university.” They cost less and are usually not unionized. Finally, we also see *task inequality* in dark academia. Neoliberalism “ignores less glamorous aspects of work or business activity, such as the ones concerned with caring and the collective production of public good” (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015, p. 565). Similarly, in dark academia, less glamorous work, for instance teaching, is subordinated to more visible and ‘countable’ tasks such as publishing.

(4) Isomorphism

Homogeneity is a key characteristic of neoliberalism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 148) observe “startling homogeneity of organizational forms and practices”, which increases as organizational fields become more mature. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) refer to this homogeneity as institutional isomorphism and identify three variants thereof. Coercive isomorphism stems from external sources such as government, regulatory or societal expectations, mimetic isomorphism involves imitating rivals, and normative isomorphism concerns convergence to professional norms. Lund Dean et al. (2020) describe how all three types of isomorphism affect the modern university. Accounting is especially implicated in the context of *coercive* isomorphism. Unlike other disciplines, “accounting is not just a field of study. It is also a profession” (Zeff, 2019, p. 176). Its professional status beholds the accounting discipline to accreditation from professional accounting bodies. Accreditation relegates course design to a ‘tick box’ process whereby courses in different universities become almost identical. So although business schools in general follow a “standardized set of predominantly economic criteria” (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015, p. 565), accounting education is even more homogenized. Isomorphism results in a partial education biased towards neoliberal ideals. In accounting, for instance, dominance is afforded to neoliberal concerns such

as shareholder wealth, profitability, tax avoidance and fair value. Unthinking adherence to accounting's neoliberal concerns tethers us to a profession that is deeply implicated in issues of excessive commercialization (Willmott & Sikka, 1997). Accreditation-driven isomorphism crowds out precious space and time at the altar of a "neoliberal model of education ... that emphasizes narrow technical skills and saleability over critical reflection and human emancipation" (Varman, Saha, & Skållén, 2011, p. 1167).

(5) Infinitude

Perhaps the defining condition of neoliberalism is a sense that work never stops, and everything is always 'on'. This state of perpetual activity is amplified by developments in technology, and leads to exhaustion, anxiety and burnout. Just as work never ends, nor do our wants. Neoliberalism propagates a set of desires that "are infinitely elastic and incapable of being fundamentally satisfied" (Fukuyama, p. 83). Happiness is always one step away, yet just out of reach. Infinitude also permeates dark academia. Nothing ever seems good enough or finished. It is no longer enough to 'merely' fulfil the traditional function of higher education, i.e., to educate our students and create and disseminate knowledge. Wood (2011, p. 210) describes how, "on any given day of the week, it is easy to find at least one new way in which higher education sets out to divert itself from the task of teaching undergraduates the knowledge and skills they ought to learn." Academics are more likely than any other group to do unpaid overtime, and function creep causes a unending need for updating and upskilling (Gill, 2016). Administrators require faculty to constantly 'innovate', a neoliberal term that is often synonymous with abrupt change and faculty layoffs (Taylor, 2017), and is not well suited to academia. Should innovation fail in a business, it can be viewed as an externality; whereas, as Taylor (2017, p. 118) describes, "the failure of an educational 'innovation' such as a new program could have a serious impact on students who choose the new program, or professors who join the university to teach the program."

Gill (2016, p. 49) describes "fast academia", whereby we must "adapt to new calls for papers, new funding streams and fit in with every changing fashion." It is no longer sufficient to publish – what matters now is "what you publish, where you publish it, how often it is cited, what 'impact factor' the journal has" (Gill, 2016, p. 49). This sense of

urgency sits poorly alongside the classic academic tendency towards deliberation and discussion (Taylor, 2017). Protests against this unending size and scope of our task are often met with unhelpful and demoralizing variants of “if it’s too hot, get out of the kitchen” (Gill, 2016, p. 46). This call to ‘toughen up’ shows how dark academia mimics the “financial alpha males of the neoliberal era” (Maclean, 2016, p. 433), wherein to protest is to show weakness. Infinitude means that we are never ‘complete’. Just as the work is never done, we as inhabitants of dark academia are never complete. We must perpetually prove ourselves (Snodgrass, 2021).

2.3 Confronting dark academia’s values

If we conflate the nature of dark academia with its *cause*, i.e., excessive neoliberally infused commercialization, it will continue to seem daunting and immutable. In contrast, disaggregating dark academia into the preceding five values is a more targeted problematization that enables a more targeted response. In this paper, I argue that Stoicism can be a key element of this response. I now set out the core aspects of Stoic philosophy.

3. Stoic philosophy

I begin this section by describing the origins of Stoicism, its principles, and its enduring influence on modern life. I then discuss Marcus Aurelius, the most prominent Stoic philosopher, whose *Meditations* comprise the analytical focal point for this paper.

3.1 Stoicism: origins, principles, and influence

Stoicism was founded around 300 BC by a Cypriot merchant named Zeno, who lectured its tenets from the *Stoa Poikile* of Athens’ city center. Stoicism fused three philosophical traditions, namely the Socratic ethics of prioritizing moral virtue, the Heraclitean notion of a universe in perennial flux, and the dialectical tradition advocated by Aristotelianism (Hadot, 1998). The sack of Athens (88-86 BC) drove philosophical schools to other areas, including Rome, and it is the work of the Roman Stoics (most prominently Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius) that has survived to the present day (Sellars, 2019). Stoicism’s three principles are as follows: (1) *The primacy of virtue*: To the Stoics, the only item of value is virtue, or moral character. Everything else (e.g., wealth, fame, power) is secondary; (2) *The importance of*

reason: We should apply logic and reason to our lives, and not blindly follow our first impressions (*propatheia*) of situations. First impressions, for instance fear or anger, though natural, must be viewed with indifference. Our reasoned response to them is what matters; (3) *Dichotomy of control*: We ought to focus only on what is under our control, and not worry about uncontrollable external outcomes, which the Stoics call ‘indifferents’. However, the Stoics distinguish between *preferred* and *dispreferred* indifferents (Pigliucci, 2017). For instance, although your health may be outside your control (an indifferent), *good* health would be a *preferred* indifferent.

Stoicism has influenced philosophers such as Erasmus, Montaigne, Bacon, Descartes and Spinoza (Pigliucci, 2017). It has also impacted business, most explicitly in the work of the Stoic senator Cicero, who argued that “lasting wealth did not come from greed, or from profiting from another, but from the common bond of goodwill” (Soll, 2022, p. 16). Cicero’s arguments influenced thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-François Melon, David Hume, and, most famously, Scottish philosopher and Stoic professor, Adam Smith, whose “central project was a reworking of ancient [Stoic] philosophy for a new commercial age” (Soll, 2022, p. 214). According to Hadot (1998), Stoicism also birthed human rights, an assertion he relates to Epictetus’ fierce defense of slaves. Stoic ideas prevail because “human nature has not changed a bit since Roman times” (Pigliucci, 2017, p. 96). Its ongoing popularity is reflected in numerous books (e.g., Becker, 2017; Hadot, 1998; Holiday & Hanselman, 2016; Pigliucci, 2017; Robertson, 2019; Sellars, 2019) and podcasts (e.g., *Daily Stoic*, *Stoic Solutions* and *Practical Stoicism*). However, it is Marcus Aurelius that is “arguably the most famous Stoic of all time” (Pigliucci, 2017, p. 14).

3.2 Marcus Aurelius: the philosopher-emperor

Born in 121, his status as a Roman emperor ensures we know more about Marcus than other philosophers of his era (Robertson, 2019). His father died when Marcus was three years old, and he was raised by his mother and paternal grandfather. At 17, he was adopted by the emperor Antoninus Pius. Marcus embraced education, and his philosophy classes led him to Stoicism. Despite his advantaged upbringing, and his ascension to the role of emperor in 161, Marcus had a difficult life. Only six of his 13 children reached adulthood, he was plagued with ill health, and he had a “tormented

reign” as emperor, enduring war, political strife, and natural disasters (Hadot, 1998, p. 3). Towards the end of his life, while at war in modern-day Austria, Marcus wrote *Meditations*. This text, which largely focused on Marcus’ experience as a human rather than as an emperor, was meant as a self-reminder rather than a philosophical argumentation for external readers; indeed, an alternative title in antiquity was *To Himself* (Pigliucci, 2017). How it survived is unclear, but a sixteenth-century printed version brought it to a wider audience (Hadot, 1998), and it remains a key touchstone of Stoic philosophy (Robertson, 2019). Sellars (2019, p. 40) traces its enduring relevance to the fact that readers can relate with Marcus, who, despite his lofty station, “comes across as all too human, grappling with the pressures of daily life, workplace responsibilities and social gatherings.” *Meditations* comprises twelve books, each containing a set of discrete numbered passages. Most of the books, which read as journal entries rather than traditional ‘books’, detail Marcus’ experiences, learnings, and contemplative practices. Book I is different, being a thank-you to his various role models, including his adoptive father Antoninus Pius, his philosophy teacher Junius Rusticus, and his fellow Stoic Epictetus. *Meditations* has attained bestseller-status and informed research in various domains, such as law (Kerrigan, 2022), ethics (Jones, 2010), medicine (Papadimos, 2004) and psychology (Ochsner & Gross, 2005). However, the applicability of Marcus’ “inexhaustible source of wisdom” (Hadot, 1998, p. vii) to academic life remains unexplored.

3.3 Analytical approach

In this research, I draw parallels between Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and dark academia. I locate my approach in the autoethnographic tradition (Fox, 2018). Autoethnography entails a “dual role as a member in the social world under study and as a researcher of that world” (Anderson, 2006, p. 384). Anderson (2006) describes three features of autoethnographic research. First, the researcher must be a member of the social world being studied, and such membership must precede the research. I have been a full-time academic for almost twenty years, so my membership is *occupational*.³ Second, Anderson (2006) describes how the researcher’s experiences and impressions serve as data for understanding the social world being studied. It was

³ Other paths to group membership include being born into the group, being randomly cast into it, recreational participation in it, or converting to it (Anderson, 2006).

my own experiences and concerns that prompted this paper and serve as an empirical springboard for better understanding the (academic) world under observation. Finally, an auto-ethnographic study requires the researcher to transcend merely describing ‘what is going on’, and instead develop “theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena” (Anderson, 2006, p. 373). Rather than offering a purely descriptive report of accounting academia’s ills, I filter them through the lens of Stoic theory, and thus offer conclusions that can be abstracted to other academic and organizational settings.

To understand how Stoicism, and Marcus Aurelius in particular, may help us confront dark academia, I conducted multiple close-readings (Amernic, Craig, & Tourish, 2007) of *Meditations*.⁴ To supplement and contextualize my conclusions, I attended Stoic workshops organized by *Modern Stoicism*⁵, read extensively the other two major Roman Stoics (i.e., Seneca and Epictetus), consulted contemporary commentaries (e.g., Becker, 2017; Hadot, 1998; Holiday & Hanselman, 2016; Pigliucci, 2017; Robertson, 2019; Sellars, 2019), and subscribed to Stoic podcasts (*Daily Stoic*, *Stoic Solutions* and *Practical Stoicism*).

I mobilize Stoic concepts to further delineate what is meant by my call to ‘confront’ dark academia’s values. Specifically, I propose that to *confront* these values is to both *accept* and *resist* them. To accept *and* to resist is a seemingly counterintuitive proposition that is best understood through a Stoic lens. For Stoics, *acceptance* entails not meek acquiescence or surrender, but rather identification of what we can control and what we cannot. My readings suggested that the concept of acceptance dominates *Meditations*. I interrogated this inference by consulting the 17 themes that Hammond identifies in *Meditations* (Aurelius, 2006). Close analysis of these themes, and rereading of the related aspects of *Meditations*, suggested that the majority (11/17) of Hammond’s themes refer to acceptance of some form.⁶ Table 1 sets out the 11 themes related to acceptance, as well as my explanation of each, and a reference

⁴ There are many translations of *Meditations*. I relied on the Wiley (Aurelius, 2020) and Penguin Classics (Aurelius, 2006) volumes.

⁵ *Modern Stoicism* is a collective that organizes Stoic events, listed at <https://modernstoicism.com/events-calendar/> (accessed 18 April 2025).

⁶ Hammond’s remaining six themes concern interconnectivity (“the kinship of all men”), truth (“the duty of truthfulness”) and monitoring thoughts (“all is as thinking makes it so”) (Aurelius, 2006, pp. 132-133).

to an illustrative meditation. These 11 themes all concern *acceptance* of some external uncontrollable, such as impermanence (themes 2, 7 and 8), death (themes 4 and 11), our enemies (theme 10) and that which ‘Nature’⁷ sends us (themes (1, 3 and 5).

Table 1: Themes from <i>Meditations</i> related to acceptance.	
Theme (Aurelius, 2006, pp. 132 - 133)	Explanation (illustrative book, passage number)
1. The divinity within us	Our individual natures emanate from Nature. We should thus accept all that Nature sends us (II, 17).
2. The subordination of body to mind, passion to reason	Thoughtful reason, rather than ill-founded or excessive passion, leads us to accept that everything will pass, including the memory of such things (II, 12).
3. The need to accept one’s lot	We should welcome all that Nature sends us (XII, 26).
4. The shortness of life, and of opportunity	Our lives comprise a minute part of time and will end (VI, 59).
5. The beneficence of ‘god’/the gods/nature	Nature wants only the best for us, so we should accept all it offers (II, 11).
6. The ‘indifferent’ nature of externals	We should be indifferent to (i.e., accept equally) uncontrollable ‘externals’, such as money, success, or reputation, as they do not affect our moral virtue (II, 7).
7. The futility and tawdriness of things temporal	Nothing lasts forever; everything changes and then vanishes (IV, 36).
8. The nature and evanescence of fame	Fame and glory are empty and ephemeral. We will be forgotten, as will our legacies (II, 17).
9. The eternal sameness of things	All people, no matter how long they live, lose only the present moment. Accept that we own neither the past nor the future, so they cannot be taken from us (II, 14).
10. The true nature of good and evil	Evil stems from unwitting ignorance of moral virtue. Accept that wrongdoers harm only themselves and deserve compassion rather than opprobrium (IX, 4).
11. No cause for fear of death	Death is an inevitable and natural part of life and should be faced with courage (II, 17).

Acceptance concerns coming to terms with that which we cannot control, and I theorize how this approach applies to the values of dark academia. Thereafter, I consider that which we *can* control. Specifically, I advocate *resisting* the values. As Sellars (2019, p. 17) advises, “just because we cannot control something does not mean that we ought to ignore it.” Instead, I propose resisting dark academia’s values through that which we *can* control, i.e., our judgments, thoughts, actions and desires.

⁷ Adhering to ‘Nature’ is a prevailing topic in *Meditations*. Becker (2017, p. 46) explains how “following nature means following the facts”, whilst Robertson (2019, p. 38) describes it as being “synonymous with living wisely and virtuously.”

These are connected: our emotional judgments impact our thoughts, which in turn steer our actions and desires. Contrary to popular perception, Stoicism does not entail or suggest shutting down our emotions. This misperception is grounded in confusion of *Stoicism* (uppercase S) with stoicism (lowercase s), the latter referring to mental toughness, whilst the former comprising a school of philosophy (Robertson, 2019). Rather, we can recognize our initial (and often understandable) emotional judgment and then work past it. We will thus base our actions on facts (*phantasia katalēptikē*) rather than emotional value judgments (*hypolēpseis*). Marcus gives the following example: *Suppose that it has been reported to you that a certain person speaks ill of you. This has been reported, but that you have been injured, this has not been reported* (VIII, 49).⁸ Marcus thus distinguishes between the objective fact (someone speaks badly of me) and the subjective value judgment (their speaking badly of me damages me). Stoic calm lets us control our emotions so that we will *no longer be pulled by the strings like a puppet* (II, 2). Academia is characterized by high-stakes pursuits, such as publication, grant bids, tenure application, job interviews and so on. Excessive emotional attachment to the outcome of these external events is potentially ruinous. For each of dark academia's five values, I set out how we can reduce them to their concrete elements, and act accordingly in a manner free from emotional overlay. This is a sort of mental spring cleaning that is the opposite of catastrophizing, whereby we add emotional value judgments to our experiences and imagine the worst outcome as being the most likely.

Resistance may seem incompatible with *acceptance*. However, Stoic acceptance entails accepting things as they are, rather than giving in to them. Acceptance should not be confused with docility. Becker (2017, pp. 46-47) describes how “Stoics have been slaves (and emperors) but have argued against the mistreatment of slaves. Stoics have lived in parochial settings but have argued for cosmopolitan and universal moral norms. Stoics have accepted the facts of oppression and danger for what they are but have fought to the death.” In other words, Stoics accept *and* resist.

⁸ I cite *Meditations* in the same way as Hadot (1998), i.e., book number, passage number.

4. Accepting and resisting dark academia

As described in Section 3, I posit confronting dark academia's values in two Stoic-informed steps, namely *acceptance* and *resistance*. Each of these steps, enacted through individual cognition and behavior, can help leverage the power of Stoicism as a philosophy to reconsider and reshape our institutions. I now detail each step.

4.1 Accepting dark academia's values

As described above, acceptance is a critical aspect of Stoicism. For the Stoics, acceptance means not denying the existence of external events outside our control, whether that is an everyday matter such as problematic work colleagues, or a biological inevitability, such as death. Acceptance of externals first requires understanding that they cannot hurt us, as they sit outside our sphere of influence. Using the above examples, Marcus would argue that difficult people only *do wrong involuntarily* (IV, 3), and that their wrongdoing hurts them, not us: *he who does wrong does wrong against himself. He who acts unjustly acts unjustly to himself, because he makes himself bad* (IX, 4). Regarding mortality, again Marcus says we are unharmed, as all we lose when we die is the present moment: *for a man cannot lose either the past or the future: for what a man has not, how can anyone take this from him?* (II, 14). In other words, no matter your age, all you lose on death is the present moment. The values of dark academia are equally powerless to hurt us; they “are not evils, since they do not depend on us and fall outside the realm of morality” (Hadot, 1998, p. 207).⁹

The second aspect of acceptance is to reconceptualize dark academia's values using the Stoic concept of “accessory phenomena” (Hadot, 1998, p. 170). For instance, the thorns of a rose may seem unpleasant, but they stem from the same source as the rose's pleasant aroma. In other words, the thorns are accessory phenomena. Similarly, death is an accessory phenomenon of living, and having difficult colleagues is an accessory phenomenon of employment. Positive conditions can have difficult consequences. In our universities, consider the values of dark academia as accessory phenomena, which, although ‘negative’, stem from the same source (our academic careers) as the aspects of the job we may enjoy, for instance

⁹ This is limited to the extent that we have no control over dark academia's values. Academics are not entirely unimplicated, as I discuss later.

teaching, reading, sharing ideas with colleagues and so on. If we happily accept the pleasing aspects of the job, we can accept *all* aspects of it. The concept of accessory phenomena helps us to see 'negative' externals in a new light, i.e., as being something stemming from that which we love, and thus contextualize and reconceptualize them. To instantiate this notion, Marcus uses the example of fruit: *figs, when they are quite ripe, gape open; and in the ripe olives the very circumstance of their being near to rottenness adds a peculiar beauty to the fruit* (III, 2). On its own, the concept of near-rotten fruit appears off-putting; but when reconsidered as part of the same process that creates the beautiful produce, it can be reconsidered. This is not to say that the values of dark academia are by themselves beautiful, but to recognize that there may be fragments of virtue contained therein if we appreciate the context. For instance, *individualism* is more forgivable when we consider it as a byproduct (or 'accessory phenomenon') of individuals' desire to thrive and remain in this academic world we find ourselves in. *Isomorphism* is often a reaction to accreditation measures that may improve our courses and help our students make optimal choices. And even *illusion* comes from caring how others perceive us. The Stoic concept of accessory phenomena thus demonstrates how the 'good' and the 'bad' are inextricably linked and can help us more readily accept the 'bad'.

The third aspect of acceptance entails using dark academia's values as *motivation*. As described earlier, Marcus had to accept many difficulties, including ill health, bereavement, and war. He accepted these uncontrollable external obstacles, but didn't succumb to them. Instead, he recast them as motivators rather than hindrances: *the mind converts and changes every hindrance to its activity into an aid* (V, 20). This is not always easy, as some developments can seem unrelentingly negative, and thus difficult to accept and recast as motivators. Here, we can monitor the subjective overlay that we add to these developments. Marcus advises that we must follow *the first appearances, and add nothing yourself from within, and then nothing happens to you* (VIII, 49). In other words, we are best served by dispassionately observing and accepting all developments as concrete 'indifferents', rather than adding our abstract judgment to the 'first appearances', remembering that *if you are pained by any external thing, it is not this thing that disturbs you, but your own judgment about it* (VIII, 47). For instance, an especially 'negative' development in our field is rejection from a journal.

In that scenario, we can focus on the concrete ‘thing’, i.e., a small number of peers did not think the paper fitted the journal. As Marcus advises, *everything is opinion* (XII, 8). Rather than dwelling on an initial (and perhaps understandable) *propatheiai* of anger or despair, we can focus on the concrete next steps (for instance, using reviewer comments to improve the work and submit it to another journal).

Dark academia’s values can also be recast as motivators. For example, understanding *individualism* may motivate us to reach out to colleagues. Knowing what we know about *inequality* in our institutions may prompt us to offer to help a junior colleague with grading. The issue of *isomorphism* alerts us to the need to broaden our courses. We thus see how recasting the problem as a motivator to act better helps us reconceptualize and thus accept the problem. Just like fire *makes a material for itself out of that which opposes it* (IV, 1), we can learn and grow from seemingly negative contexts. In this way, acceptance is not the destination, but rather a starting point towards the next step, which in our case is resistance of dark academia’s values.

4.2 Resisting dark academia’s values

As discussed, Stoic *acceptance* of dark academia’s values entails understanding they cannot hurt us, reconceptualizing them as accessory phenomena, and focusing on their power to motivate. I turn now to *resisting* each of the values.

(1) Individualism:

Despite individualism’s grip on dark academia, many of us intuitively understand the power of connection. Through the governing faculty of reason, Stoicism provides a sharper perspective on the concepts of individualism and connectedness. Marcus calls us *to look to nothing else, not even for a moment, except to reason* (I, 8). Following reason means prioritizing the common interest (Hadot, 1998): *recall to your mind this conclusion: that rational animals exist for one another* (IV, 3). As Sellars (2019, p. 57) explains, “as we develop our rationality, we shall come to see ourselves as members of a single, global community of all human kind.” Using reason, we thus treat others’ concerns with the same primacy as our own individual issues. However, reason is fragile. It “may become corrupted, and we must therefore take care to

preserve it against every attack” (Hadot, 1998, p. 124). We can thus conceptualize individualism as an attack on reason’s orientation towards the common good.

We are not as self-sufficient as individualism would profess, and we forget the *value everything has with reference to the whole* (III, 11). No matter how great our individual attainment, it depends on the food grown for us, the technology we use, the roads we travel on, and so on, all bestowed by others. Moreover, chasing individual glory in academia is ultimately folly. Even setting aside that it contravenes education’s essence as “a collective action pursued for the common good” (Taylor, 2017, p. 126), any glory that accrues to us, whether current or posthumous, is short lived – see *how soon everything is forgotten* (IV, 3). And it is also small. Academia, like any area of employment, tends to overestimate its own importance. It remains relatively niche, and accounting academia is a niche within a niche¹⁰, with doubts, for example, over whether practitioners even read our research (Rutherford, 2011). Humility and perspective thus tempers individualism; *for the whole earth is a point, and how small a nook in it is this your dwelling, and how few are there in it* (IV, 3).

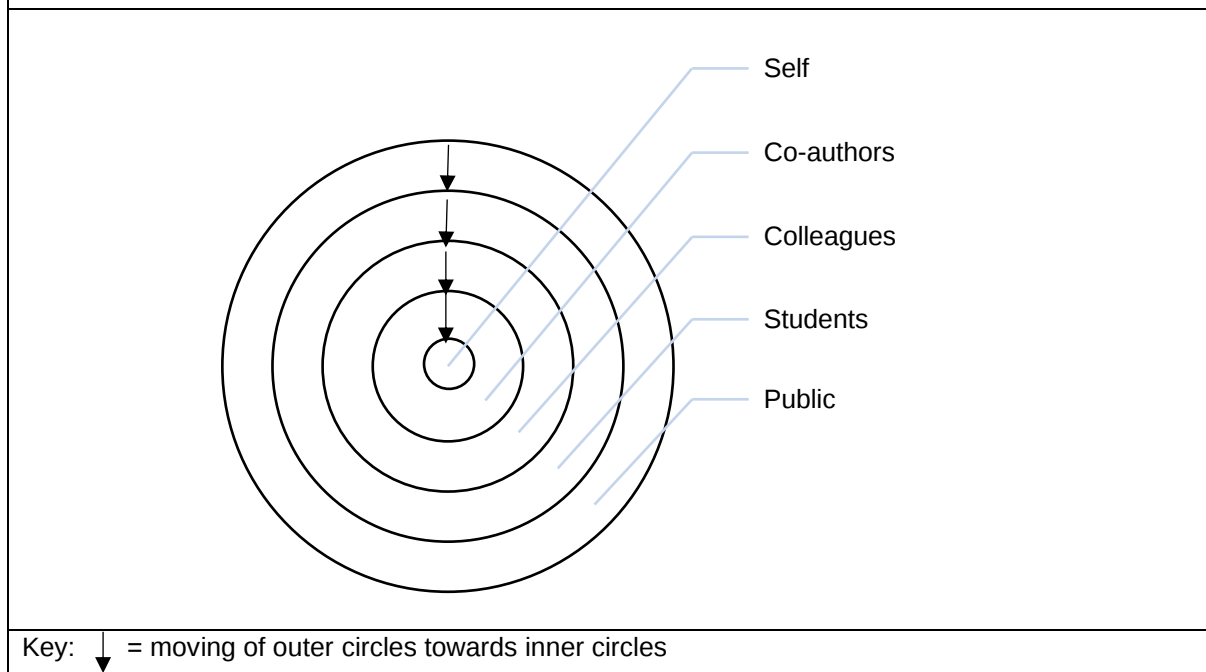
Towards the end of *Meditations*, Marcus asks us to *make your acts refer to nothing else than to a social end* (XII, 20). Marcus extends our conceptualization of a social end “to all rational creatures and views them, in a sense, as his brothers and sisters” (Robertson, 2019, p. 41). Another Stoic, Hierocles, expands on this point by describing concentric circles, whereby the individual is in the inner circle, immediate family are in the next circle, distant family thereafter, and so on, with the furthest/largest circle encompassing all humanity. Stoics aim to move people from the outer circles towards the inner circles, i.e., treating others’ concerns with the same attention as our own (Pigliucci, 2017). The current circles for many academics may look like that presented in Figure 1, where our own needs take precedence, followed by those of our co-authors, colleagues, students and then finally the public.¹¹ In contrast, a Stoic approach would treat the needs of others as thoughtfully as we attend to our own situation, whether that be by taking on our fair share of work with co-authors, helping struggling colleagues with grading, answering student emails in a timely manner, or

¹⁰ Critical accounting research could be dryly posited as a niche within a niche within a niche.

¹¹ Although this broadly mirrors my experience, it is of course idiosyncratic to each academic.

embedding the needs of wider society into our teaching. In other words, we move those in the outer circles closer to the inner circle of 'self'.

Figure 1: Stoic circles of concern adopted for academia



(2) Illusion

Stoicism “is about grasping reality” (Robertson, 2019, p. 68). Marcus shuns illusory or shallow appearances; for instance, his teacher Junius Rusticus taught him *not to be satisfied with a superficial understanding of a book* (I, VII), and he condemns affectation of ‘kindness’ as both disingenuous and obvious to others: the genuinely *good and honest and benevolent show all these things in the eyes, and there is no mistaking* (XI, 15). Equally, kindness does not need to be broadcast. Someone that *has done a good act does not call out for others to come and see* (V, 6).

Stoics ensure that their speech is “honest ... but also appropriate to the needs of the hearer” (Robertson, 2019, p. 91). In other words, truth matters, but tact is also required. As an emperor, tact and diplomacy were critical for Marcus. Our pursuit of truth shouldn’t make us condemn those that seem far from it: *every soul, the philosopher [Plato] says, is involuntarily deprived of truth* (VII, 63). We also should be prepared to *hear truth as well as dispense it*. Informed and constructive critique can prompt us to *turn to yourself and reflect in what manner you err yourself* (X, 30). If my

teaching evaluations, for example, contain negative comments, I (try to) reflect on the validity of the student feedback. However, feedback can be constructive and helpful, or it can be unreasonable and overly personalized. If it is the latter, and thus illusory, then I proceed as I was going; I am *not diverted by the blame which follows from any people, nor by their words* (V, 3).

Beyond the classroom, academics shouldn't need to constantly 'announce' their virtue and success, for instance on social media. It is partial, unscientific (the scientific method is characterized by trial, error, and failure, rather than glorious 'success') and illusory. By pronouncing it, we diminish it. *What are you doing, man? There is no occasion to give this notice. It will soon show itself by acts* (XI, 15). This illusion is corrosive as it reinforces feelings of inadequacy, especially in junior faculty (Gill, 2016). Humility and realism are called for, rather than the illusion of unhindered success.

Illusion is compounded by the complexity of universities, which provides a shield of opacity. In contrast, Marcus calls us to *make yourself all simplicity* (IV, 26). His family, "though wealthy and influential, was notable for cherishing honesty and simplicity" (Robertson, 2019, p. 46). Marcus acquired from his mother, Domita Lucilla, *simplicity in my way of living, far removed from the habits of the rich* (I, 3). As academics, we can resist complexity most tangibly through our communication. When others read your work, they replace their thoughts with yours, so we must write carefully and do the work, so the reader doesn't have to. Junius Rusticus taught Marcus *to write my letters with simplicity* (I, 7), and we can follow suit. Whether writing emails, exams, reference letters, or research papers, we make our communication as brief, plain (*parrhesia*), precise and concrete as possible, whilst preserving its core message. Simplicity provides fewer hiding places for illusion.

(3) Inequality

The inequality that pervades dark academia entirely contravenes Stoicism. For instance, Sellars (2019, p. 61) describes how "for the Stoics then, people are people, all equal in their shared rationality and instinct for virtue." As emperor, Marcus propagated *the idea of a political state in which there is the same law for all, one administered with regard to equal rights and equal freedom of speech, and the idea of*

a kingly government which respects most of all the freedom of the governed (I, 14). Status imbalances were not to be abused. For instance, although public funds were automatically accessible to emperors, Marcus still “took the trouble to ask the public treasury for funds” (Hadot, 1998, p. 300).

Adjunct/contingent faculty are especially vulnerable to the inequality of dark academia. They are frequently omitted from institutional discussions and “left with no support system” (Danaei, 2019, p. 17). They thus never learn the skills required to become full-time faculty. I have witnessed some well-intentioned institutional efforts to address this imbalance that focus on adjuncts as a homogenous collective and typically entail social events or workshops. These have yielded at best mixed results and rarely last, largely because adjuncts are a busy and varied group with queries that are often ad-hoc rather than ‘fixable’ through generic workshops. In contrast, a one-to-one mentorship system would work better. Marcus learnt much on a one-to-one basis from mentors, including good morals from his grandfather Verus (I, 1), the importance of simplicity from Junius Rusticus (I, 7), the virtue of reason from Apollonius (I, 8) and a benevolent disposition from the philosopher Sextus (I, 9). We can enact this approach, for example, by pairing adjunct and tenured faculty in a way that ensures nobody falls through the cracks. Many institutions have similar one-to-one mentoring arrangements for other parties, such as students, so the same seems possible for adjuncts. Our students don’t tend to distinguish between adjunct and tenured faculty, and we should support each equally.

Students also bear the brunt of inequality in dark academia. Dark academia’s perception of “students as customers” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000, p. 74) ironically does students a disservice, as it breeds bitterness among some faculty that manifests in inattention to teaching. Students also suffer because the ‘task inequality’ described in Section 2 particularly diminishes teaching and assessment, which clearly matter less in dark academia’s measurement systems (Zeff, 2019). The first step in restoring attention to teaching is to remember that we are not ‘better’ than students, but rather just further along the path. Of course, sometimes students are difficult. Here, we can remember that seemingly bad actors act ‘badly’ through lack of wisdom (*sophia*) and need compassion rather than condemnation. As Hadot (1998, p. 126) observes, “every

person has a natural desire for the good, and ... he can only fail to achieve it by being mistaken about the nature of the good.” Treating students as equals also involves *listening*, i.e., *accustom yourself to attend carefully to what is said by another, and as much as it is possible, be in the speaker’s mind* (VI, 53). For instance, when students come to us with problems, we let them speak, hear them out, and arrive at a reasoned conclusion. In many cases, they are simply looking for an opportunity to vent, rather than an actual ‘solution’. Our students need not a ‘friend’, or an all-knowing guru, but rather someone that through their visible dedication, preparation, and diligence, offers them a figure to model themselves against. Just like Marcus modelled his behavior on his various teachers (see Book I of *Meditations*), we can offer our students, in our own way, an archetype of how to carry oneself. Recall that it is often not the ‘material’ that students retain from us when they graduate; for instance, when Marcus acknowledges his teacher Apollonius, he makes no reference to the content of the classes; rather, he states that *from Apollonius, I learned freedom of will and undeviating steadiness of purpose; and to look to nothing else, not even for a moment, except to reason ... I learned how to receive what are considered favors from friends, without either being humbled by them or letting them pass unnoticed* (I, 8). Note the focus on practical behaviors learnt, rather than on technical teaching material.

(4) Isomorphism

Isomorphism, and especially the coercive, accreditation-impelled isomorphism associated with dark academia, runs entirely counter to Stoic ideals. It is especially salient in accounting departments, and our perennial pursuit of professional exemptions for students (Lindsay, 2020). This indicates a lack of sovereignty and agency that Marcus would reject: *to my own free will the free will of my neighbor is just as indifferent as his poor breath and flesh. For though we are made especially for the sake of one another, still the ruling power of each of us has its own office* (VIII, 56). Every compromise made in the name of accreditation potentially shrinks the ‘office’ of our judgment, or ‘ruling power’. This metaphorical problematization of blind adherence to accreditation entails real-world issues, or ‘trouble’, as Marcus would put it: *how much trouble he avoids who does not look to see what his neighbor says or does or thinks, but only to what he does himself, that it may be just and pure* (IV, 18). When we focus too much on what ‘neighbors’ think, such as accreditation or professional

accountancy bodies, we invite ‘trouble’. Our syllabi contract into isomorphic simulacra of professional courses that reproduce accounting’s problematic connections to neoliberalism (Willmott & Sikka, 1997). We thus relegate our accounting programs to mere stepping-stones on the path to professional qualification. This diminishes what accounting, and accounting education, *could* be. Freeing up the space that accreditation requirements occupy in our accounting programs would open the door for a more diverse and contextualized education for our students, free from the neoliberally infused isomorphism imposed by accreditation. We could take into account, for example, local circumstance, culture and history (Helliard, 2013). We can replace case studies devoted solely to large businesses with ones that consider smaller and unique entities. We could introduce literature that critiques capital accumulation (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015), such as works by Tom Wolfe, Brett Easton Ellis, Jennifer Egan, and others. When accounting education, and thus our students, are bound to neoliberal-infused accreditation requirements, accounting will never fulfil its potential as a social and moral practice (Carnegie, 2022). The potential of accounting education will only be realized if we carve space for it, and such a project requires critical consideration of accreditation’s role in our syllabi.

This is not to suggest abandoning accreditation, or jettisoning technical ‘core’ accounting subjects, but rather striking a better balance between mainstream isomorphic accreditation-led modules and alternative heterogenous critically informed modules. This will require consulting material that sits outside classic accounting fundamentals. *Meditations*’ frequent references to eminent philosophers (e.g., Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Epictetus) demonstrates how, although he was “a king, bereft of the leisure he needs to think and to philosophize” (Hadot, 1998, p. 57), Marcus found time to diligently engage his intellectual curiosity. We too surely can multitask and read and populate our modules with more critically informed and less isomorphic, accreditation-led material. Of course, departing, even partially, from the realm of professional accreditation may worry even the most seasoned accounting academics.¹² It will take courage, again a core feature of Stoicism. For the Stoics, courage means “doing the right thing, both physically and morally, under all

¹² Recall, for example, panic during the COVID-19 pandemic, when accreditation was jeopardized by the absence of traditional assessment arrangements (Sangster, Stoner, & Flood, 2020).

circumstances” (Pigliucci, 2017, p. 205). Small steps are in order. Rather than jettisoning *all* exemption-bearing content, a moderate Stoic approach is required (Robertson, 2019). Let us introduce elective modules that preserve local context and color, that contextualize and critique the origin of accounting, and that are solely devoted to (rather than paying lip service to) the role of accounting in sustainability efforts (Carnegie, 2022). Moving such modules from being elective to mandatory and thus reducing the space for exemption-bearing material, will require collective discussion with professional bodies, wherein various accounting departments speak as one. An initial stance could be to negotiate downward the percentage requirement of overlap between our exemption bearing modules and the professional accountancy bodies’ modules.¹³ A more radical step could be to collectively persuade the professional bodies to introduce such contextualized and critical material in their *own* syllabi. The time is opportune for this, given the threat of artificial intelligence to automate away large parts of technical accounting subjects, thus heightening the emphasis on critical thinking. Resisting the siren call of accreditation will allow our teaching to deviate in critical and interesting ways that can push back against the isomorphism of dark academia.

(5) Infinitude

Dark academia’s value of infinitude extends to both the size and the scope of our roles, which seem increasingly endless and complex. This runs counter to the Stoic propensity to avoid being *busy about too many things* (III, 5). Stoic ideals can be mobilized to tackle infinitude in ways that are concrete and immediate, and in ways that are more long-term. Regarding the former point, the burden of never-ending academic work can be lightened through cooperation. Marcus writes that *we are made for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth* (II, 1). Marcus’ role as emperor often required cooperation, and academia is the same, whether that is in co-authoring papers, designing courses, or helping each other with grading. These are all relatively obvious and everyday sites of cooperation. Other cooperation opportunities also exist. For instance, PhD students may benefit from cooperating with a PhD ‘buddy’, perhaps someone who shares the same supervisor

¹³ ACCA, for example, prescribe a minimum level of 80% course overlap (ACCA, 2024).

or research topic. My own PhD journey was greatly enhanced by the presence of a fellow student whose journey mirrored mine in fortuitous ways. For instance, she came from a similar professional accountancy background, commenced her studies the same day as I, and we shared the same supervisors. Cooperation opportunities also exist between academic and administrative staff. Unfortunately, there is often a chasm between those two groups. This divide risks obscuring the opportunities for fruitful cooperation that could exist if we were to focus on cultivating bridges rather than borders between academic and administrative staff. As Marcus explains, *when you wish to delight yourself, think of the virtues of those who live with you. For instance, the activity of one, and the modesty of another, and the liberality of a third, and some other good quality of a fourth* (VI, 48). We all possess different ‘virtues’, and cooperation harnesses this diversity in a way that pushes back against infinitude.

As well as the Stoic call for cooperation, infinitude can also be resisted via two higher-order Stoic concepts. First, recall that infinitude is in fact impossible. Nothing lasts forever, and no matter how onerous the task in size or scope, *a brief existence is common to all things* (X, 34). The next ‘crisis’ that emerges, whether stemming from an unhappy student, an impatient manager, or a demanding accreditation agency, will pass. *How then is he not a fool who is puffed up with such things or plagued about them and makes himself miserable? For they vex him only for a time, and indeed for a time that is short* (V, 23). Second, Stoicism can help us turn away from infinitude by encouraging us, somewhat counter-intuitively, to love *less*. Infinitude’s debilitating power is compounded by our emotional attachment to our jobs. Gill (2016, p. 52) describes how “neoliberalism found fertile ground in academics”, owing to our inherent motivation to perform well. Instead, we should mobilize appropriately the oft-criticized Stoic distance. Marcus’ perceived coldness is exemplified by his reaction to death: *Soon, very soon, you will be ashes, or a skeleton, and either a name or not even a name* (V, 33). In our context, a little coldness, and a little less love for our role, will help counter infinitude. Everywhere one turns in academia, including in myself, one sees over-attachment. As Berg and Seeber (2016, p. 17) observe, “the irony is that the more committed we are to our vocation, the more likely it is that we will experience time stress and burnout.” The endless ‘freedom’ and ‘flexibility’ associated with dark academia makes it seem almost taboo to complain. As Gill (2016, p. 52) perceptively

explains, “we therefore need urgently to think about how some of the pleasures of academic work (or at least a deep love for the ‘myth’ of what we thought being an intellectual would be like, but often seems at far remove from it) bind us more tightly into a neoliberal regime with ever-growing costs, not least to ourselves.” It’s *okay* to vent and to push back. Furthermore, Marcus reminds us that *it is necessary to take rest* (V, 1). Not every conference needs to be attended, not every email needs to be replied to immediately, and not every request needs to be met. This is especially pertinent to a field plagued by burnout such as academia, compounded “because academic work by its very nature is never done” (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 3). Learning to say ‘no’ is an especially useful skill associated with self-compassion. Wherever I have worked, there have been specific individuals constantly called on for extra tasks. Consistent acquiescence to such requests eventually renders this work invisible, in that it is taken for granted that you will comply. This perpetuates situations where others are rewarded for slackness by never being called upon for such favors. Such dysfunctional situations are challenged every time you politely refuse to do one of these extra favors, therefore your self-compassion can also result in a fairer workplace. It is also okay to sometimes reject ‘service’ requests. ‘Collegiality’ is a double-edged sword that is often used, primarily as a stick, to motivate faculty behavior in a way that only compounds the sense of infinitude (Fleming & Harley, 2024). In sum, do less but do it diligently; *for this brings not only the tranquility which comes from doing well, but also that which comes from doing few things* (IV, 24). Doing everything enshrouds us in infinitude and distracts us from our core task of knowledge creation and diffusion. Does this email really need to be responded to? Do my lecture notes really need endless refinement? Do I really need to attend this conference? In other words, *on every occasion a man should ask himself, “is this one of the necessary things?”* (IV, 24).

5. Discussion

We are all implicated in dark academia. As academics, we contribute to “the metric fixation that has swept through higher education, either for reasons of careerism, compromise, or simply not speaking out” (Fleming & Harley, 2024, p. 186). And as accounting academics in particular, our teaching propagates neoliberal tropes of measurement, profitability and shareholder wealth. We proudly call accounting the

'language of business' but perhaps that claim should prompt consternation rather than celebration. In this paper, I have traced the origins of dark academia, and identified its five values, i.e., *individualism*, *illusion*, *inequality*, *isomorphism* and *infinitude*. I then described how Stoicism can be utilized to *accept* and yet also *resist* these values. In this discussion, I first address two contemporary concerns regarding Stoicism, namely that it is not practical, and that it is overly focused on the individual, to the detriment of wider society. I then describe the contribution of this research, followed by a discussion of its limitations, alongside some opportunities for further research.

5.1 Practicality

Stoicism is sometimes criticized as being impractical, especially in a modern context. However, Stoicism does not entail abandoning reality. For instance, although Stoics view everything outside our moral control as indifferent, there are still "preferred indifferents" (for instance, health or wealth) which "you may very well have and cultivate, as long as they don't interfere with your virtues and moral integrity" (Pigliucci, 2017, p. 199). These may not add virtue to our lives, but "they add ordinary pleasures to it – something Stoics decidedly do not reject" (Becker, 2017, p. 158). Furthermore, preferred indifferents are sometimes *essential* for Stoic progress, and, in the context of this research, for resisting dark academia (Becker, 2017). For instance, a preferred indifferent such as promotion can give us the platform to help students and adjunct faculty and thus challenge dark academia's *inequality* value. Of course, a preferred indifferent could also contravene Stoic ideals; for instance, the same promotion could alternatively heighten one's sense of superiority and thus *compound* the inequality value. As Marcus would say, beware the dangers of a station and *take care that you are not made into a Caesar* (VI, 30) that is distant and arrogant.

We can follow Stoic values and still live in the real world. Rather than taking on the full trappings of Stoic life, i.e., "a short cloak and a hard bed" (Hadot, 1998, p. 7), we can merely try to make a difference where we can in our everyday workplace, remembering that Stoic ideals can manifest in diverse and varied ways (Becker, 2017). Furthermore, the detachment that Stoics advocate is *dispositional* (Becker, 2017), i.e., it is only to be called upon in salient events. For instance, a pilot landing an airplane would need to be emotionally detached, but this approach would likely not

be appropriate for a family event. Moreover, Stoics don't chase perfection, with Marcus himself often becoming irritated easily and despairing of his subjects (Hadot, 1998). Stoics, like all of us, "must painfully orient themselves within the uncertainty of everyday life" (Hadot, 1998, pp. 192-193). They are not all-knowing sages, but rather the "non-foolish non-sages" that we call philosophers, i.e., those that *know* their state of ignorance yet continue to proceed in the direction of wisdom, armed not with certainty, but with reason (Hadot, 1998, p. 77). Celebrate the small things; as Marcus advises, *be content if the smallest thing goes on well, and consider such an event to be no small matter* (IX, 29). Pleasingly, small efforts can yield big gains. We can make an immediate difference, unlike, for instance, a dance, *where the whole action is incomplete if anything cuts it short* (XI, 1).¹⁴ As long as we pursue only *that which is useful and well suited to society* (VII, 5), then even if we fail, we succeed. Just as a doctor would not abandon her profession if she failed to cure a patient's ailment, the Stoic does not falter in their "controlling goal" to practice being a Stoic to the highest standard possible, even if and when events go awry (Becker, 2017, p. 139). It is not the result that matters, but that our intentions are good, i.e., "firm, determined and resolved to overcome all obstacles" (Hadot, 1998, p. 194). Stoics try their best, but always with a "reserve clause", for instance, "I will sail across the ocean, if nothing prevents me" (Hadot, 1998, p. 193). A reserve clause means that the intention is always preserved, regardless of what obstacles should appear.

Realistic Stoics understand that to extinguish entirely dark academia would contravene the Stoic *tenet of futility*, which states that you "are required not to make direct attempts to do (or be) something that is logically, theoretically, or practically impossible" (Becker, 2017, p. 45). So do not attempt the impossible – but instead, do what you *can* to *make* the impossible possible, via what Becker (2017, p. 47) terms "meta-endeavors". For instance, an *actual* endeavor, such as running a marathon, can only be *made* possible by the meta-endeavor of *training* for the marathon. For Stoics, their 'training' is "persistent practical reasoning", which "will not allow them to remain as they are" (Becker, 2017, p. 48). Dismantling dark academia is thus construed as an

¹⁴ We could also cite accounting as an activity where one misstep renders the product 'unfinished.'

actual endeavor that can be tackled via the *meta*-endeavors of acceptance and resistance set out in this paper.

Finally, it is important to note that we are not *born* Stoics. Instead, consider a developmental model of Stoic morals, which holds that refinement of virtue is ‘learnable’ at any stage of life. Pigliucci (2017) describes how virtue stems from three sources: (1) our received natural endowment; (2) habits formed whilst growing up; and (3) learning and philosophical reflection. It is this final category to which this paper belongs. As we mature, the balance (hopefully) shifts away from the instinctiveness of youth towards a more empirically informed reasoning. Even Marcus’ reasoned attitude “didn’t come naturally to him; he had to *learn* it” (Robertson, 2019, p. 157, italics in original).

5.2 Individual and societal benefits

A recent spate of articles by academics and public intellectuals with bracing titles such as *Why you shouldn’t be a Stoic* (Baggini, 2022), *3 Reasons not to be a Stoic* (Durrant, 2023), and *The False Promise of Stoicism* (Smith, 2019) problematize the alleged self-centeredness of Stoicism. These articles claim that Stoics only value that which is ‘internal’ to them, and everything ‘external’ is of diminished consequence. Admittedly, Stoicism’s benefits for the *individual* are undeniable. Wellbeing facilitated by Stoic philosophy allows us to experience “the calm (equanimity; tranquility) that comes from the absence of further moral struggle and the absence of retrospective regret or prospective alarm about things outside one’s control, together with the confidence that comes from the effortless persistence of moral purpose” (Becker, 2017, p. 91). In other words, a moral roadmap allows us to relinquish (false) sensations of control and gives us a path to walk and a goal (*eudaimonia*) to aim towards. Focusing only on what is under our control, and externalizing any negative outcomes as being uncontrollable, builds confidence by drawing a partition between our sense of self-worth and the external events that befall us. Having a moral roadmap means we won’t waste time chasing shallow and temporary things, such as fame or glory. We also won’t capitulate when things go wrong. The Stoic call to live in the present helps us reduce hardships to “a succession of brief instants” (Hadot, 1998, p. 132) that we can control. Put simply, Stoic *eudaimonia* enhances our character,

offering us “greater emotional intelligence, strength of character, and moral integrity” (Robertson, 2019, p. 14). It also enhances our power. No matter what our academic career presents us, nobody can access, amend or steal our inner conceptualizations of events. All aspects of acceptance and resistance that I set out are completely in our control. Hadot (1998, p. 122) terms this freedom of choice an impregnable “inner citadel”.

Furthermore, somewhat contrary to the above-mentioned criticism, the benefits conferred by Stoicism on the *individual* also benefit the *community*. For Stoics, “the point of life for human beings is to use reason to build the best *society* that it is humanly possible to build” (Pigliucci, 2017, p. 48, italics added). They never shied from serving the community, and believed that we are “by nature social and political animals” (Sellars, 2019, p. 55). For instance, Marcus served as emperor, but other Stoics included senators such as Seneca and Helvidius Priscus, and Cicero, who attained the preeminent office of consul. In an academic context, an individual’s pursuit of Stoic eudaimonia begets a virtue spillover that benefits the community and can manifest in many ways. For instance, *acceptance* helps her avoid personalizing events and dragging others into needless and corrosive conflict. Students can enjoy her more compassionate teaching approach. Colleagues can benefit from her propensity to cooperate productively and transcend perceived differences. Courage allows her to manage apprehension and let others benefit from her best self. Her exhibiting Stoic values serves a modelling role for others to mirror, thus creating a compounding benefit effect. In other words, “stoic ethical theory begins with the particular – with fully situated individuals – and works carefully out to more general matters” (Becker, 2017, p. 14). The individual *and* the community benefit.

5.3 Contribution

I offer two main contributions with this paper. First, although prior research examines the ailments of university life, it generally tends to focus on universities and/or business schools in general. I tailor my analysis to accounting academia, as accounting is arguably more implicated in dark academia than any other discipline. Additionally, although prior work discusses the *cause* (neoliberalism) and *effects* (deleterious mental health impacts) of dark academia (e.g., Fleming, 2020; Fotaki &

Prasad, 2015; Lund Dean et al., 2020; Taylor, 2017), I conceptualize its *nature* through a systematic and novel characterization of its origins and its values. Disaggregating the seemingly insuperable force of ‘neoliberalism’ into ‘values’ makes tackling dark academia less daunting. Identifying dark academia’s values prompts my second contribution, which entails applying Stoic philosophy to the career experiences of accounting academics, an under-researched topic (Lindsay, 2020). I address the pressing question of “what can be done?” (Humphrey & Gendron, 2015, p. 57) to steal us from dark academia. The Stoic approach aids the community and engenders positive individual benefits, rather than the corrosive anxiety and stress associated with the status quo. Anxiety and stress permeate academia, especially affecting junior faculty (Lindsay, 2020), and Stoic philosophy is closely associated with managing such phenomena (Pigliucci, 2017). If the Stoic approach that I set out helps even one marginalized and “vulnerable member” (Becker & Lukka, 2022, p. 14) of our community, such as PhD students and early career academics, then it will have been worthwhile. Their journey is often characterized by stress and burnout (Lindsay, 2020), so this research is intended as an intervention of sorts, to show them that their issues are often common to the academic community, and that there are ways of transcending them. After all, it is “ultimately on the shoulders of such people that the future strength of the discipline rests” (Humphrey & Gendron, 2015, p. 57). Faculty stress also “has direct consequences for society” and “directly affects student learning” (Berg & Seeber, 2016, pp. 4, 6). Happier academics leads to happier students, which ultimately benefits the community and wider society. Indeed, it is hard to picture any organizational context where a Stoic approach would not yield at least some benefit to the individual and their surroundings.

5.4 Limitations and future research

Using an auto-ethnographic approach entails accepting the method’s limitations. Notwithstanding the reported prevalence of dark academia, both anecdotally and in the literature, this research leans on my own subjective experience. I strive to manage potential bias by anchoring my work in the literature and by mediating my experiences and conclusions through the lens of Stoic philosophy. A further limitation is that I largely confine my analysis to the work of Marcus Aurelius. Future research could supplement the nascent literature in this space by considering other Stoics, for

instance Epictetus and Seneca. Additionally, any research that mobilizes *Meditations* runs the risk of ‘cherry-picking’ aspects of Marcus’ work to suit the argumentation. As this paper concerns a specific place (i.e., academia) and time (i.e., 21st Century), not all of Marcus’ comments applied, and there was unavoidable subjectivity involved in deciding which passages of *Meditations* to cite. To guide that process, I consulted contemporary Stoic scholarship (e.g., Becker, 2017; Hadot, 1998; Holiday & Hanselman, 2016; Pigliucci, 2017; Robertson, 2019; Sellars, 2019). For instance, the decision to focus on ‘acceptance’ was informed by the themes that Hammond identifies in his analysis of *Meditations* (Aurelius, 2006).

I also limit my analysis to a Western context. Some of dark academia’s values, for instance individualism, may manifest less in Eastern societies that rely more on a communal approach, privileging the collective rather than the individual (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Future research could examine whether and how dark academia’s values manifest within non-Western academia. Ultimately, that would bring us closer to understanding whether dark academia is limited to the Western world, or in fact is an essentially academic phenomenon that tracks institutional rather than geographic contingencies.

Finally, any research anchored in an ancient philosophy is subject to that philosophy’s limitations. Although its recent resurgence speaks to the robustness of its fundamental doctrines, Stoicism also offers some perishable worldviews that likely resonated more with ancient scholars than with modern readers. For instance, in asking us to *let the part of your soul which leads and governs be undisturbed by the movements in the flesh* (V, 26), Marcus seems to suggest a metaphysical form of mind-body dualism that is brought into disrepute by modern neurology. However, for the Stoics, the soul ‘acted’ as the mind (Long, 1982), and their apparently dualistic perspective does not preclude mind-body *interaction* (Glannon, 2020); in fact, the Stoics perceived soul and body as descriptively discrete but “totally blended” (Long, 1982, p. 52). Interestingly, we often live our lives as if guided by dualistic principles. For instance, if we have a problem with our body, we go to a general practitioner, whilst problems that we perceive associated with our mind require a psychologist. Regardless, it seems difficult to meaningfully reconcile this aspect of Stoicism with

modern science. Equally, a contemporary mobilization of Stoicism likely requires contextualization of its cosmological and teleological claims regarding a providential universe. Nonetheless, as Becker (2017, p. xiii) notes, “the picture of the universe ancient Stoics presented us with – the picture of the universe as a gigantic rational organism ... is still beautiful and inspiring to many people today.” Rather than seeking to ‘rescue’ or ‘sanitize’ the inconvenient local aspects of Stoicism as we find them, we can identify its core principles, appreciate the wisdom therein, and live our lives accordingly. Moreover, Marcus’ writing, which frequently thanks and praises his teachers, suggests epistemological humility, and that, were he to glimpse our modern science, he would contemporize aspects of his work: *change your opinion if there is anyone at hand who sets you right and moves you from any opinion* (IV, 12).

6. Concluding comments

How soon will time cover all things, and how many it has covered already (VI, 59).

Marcus died in 180, at war and far from home. Everything ends, including our careers and our lives, and we have a limited window to weather the tide of dark academia. The Stoics believed “it was the duty, and privilege, of a true philosopher to speak truth to power” (Robertson, 2019, p. 91). Are we not philosophers? Even if ‘only’ “strange philosopher-accountants” (Power, 1999, p. xiii)? If so, then let us resist neoliberalism’s distorting and deranging pull on higher education. Let us be brave and let us be optimistic. We must remember that “social forces are not disembodied entities; they are inescapably carried through people’s minds and actions” (Gendron, 2015, p. 173). A Stoic approach that begins in the mind of the individual and then gets scaled with sufficient momentum can have meaningful impact. Finally, my approach is intentionally and unapologetically principled. As Berg and Seeber (2016, p. 17) argue, “most of us pursue an academic career for idealistic, rather than pragmatic, reasons.” I thus offer a reminder, rather than a revelation, that we entered academia to make things better. We can orient ourselves away from the values of dark academia and back towards the calling that instigated our journey.

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