

THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

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We have two essays for the Winter issue of our eJournal: one was written by a Marcus Aurelius School student in partial fulfillment of his 3rd term examination of ethics. In it he asks and answers the question of a Stoic's need to be involved with the storm and stress of political action. This work follows the style of Seneca's great work, Letters From a Stoic. The second, much briefer essay, is written by a Marcus Fellow and member of the faculty who examines the value of Logic in the life of the Stoic philosopher. An alternative title for this work could be, "In Praise of Logic." edw

On Political Discourse

by Brendan Petroff
writing in the voice of Seneca

Dear Pugilius,

Thank you for your recent letter. It pleased me to hear that you completed your most recent period of military service honorably. As you know, the importance of duty is a key tenant in our philosophy. In fulfilling our duty, we choose our own happiness. I don't have to tell you that many find this sentiment strange. They imagine that we are advocating a life of drudgery. You and I know that this is not the case at all. Every man who shirks his duty feels the pain of regret, and every man who chooses to fulfill his rational obligations to that of which he is a part – that is to say the whole universe, knows the satisfaction of having fulfilled his purpose as a man. We do not suggest that one invents duties, but only fulfills the few simple things that nature asks of us – eating and sleeping with moderation, caring for our family, discharging our social obligations, acting rationally, and choosing excellence whenever possible. Truthfully it is only this choice that is up to us. The results are in the hands of the gods, but I am now taking us off topic.

In your letter you ask me if I think you should pursue elected office. You pointed out that so many elected officials seem to lack virtue – how true a statement; and suggested you may be able to serve the people better, thus improving the state and through it the whole of mankind. This is a noble sentiment, but then you quite rightfully raise some concerns. Your father is aging and, as his eldest son, management of the family estate falls upon your shoulders. Also you have recently taken a wife, and dreams have recently suggested that you should return to your country home, focusing your energies there, for the betterment of your family. You note that doing so will no undoubtedly provide you with more time for reading and study. In short, you feel caught between two goods, unable to choose the better! Of course, all of our mental struggles are like this: weighing and judging between

two of the same kind of thing. No one loses sleep over whether they prefer good things to bad.

And what is good? To live in accordance with nature; first our own rational nature, then our shared human nature, and finally what is natural to all. So first I must ask you, do you know your own nature? I do not have to ask you if you know the difference between seasoned military men and raw recruits. How both strive for the same goals: to show courage in the face of the enemy, to maintain discipline, to watch over their companions in the unit; yet how the scale of challenge appropriate to each is different. Recruits lack the seasoning of veterans. War is new to them, and they cannot help but shake, while the older centurion bares even his wounds with patience. Experience makes us resistant to fear, and experience cannot be rushed. For this reason the good commander places the veteran in the front, and the recruit several ranks behind him, so he is not overwhelmed by the first sight of the enemy. The question we must ask therefore is not which choice is better, but which choice is better for you. In which of these realms: Rome or the country, will you best be able to practice virtue? It is true that this choice is not always up to us, but when a choice is before us, we should choose wisely. A brave commander must, at times, trust to the courage of his men and the charge. Yet it is foolish if he does not use strategy and tactics to gain the surest likelihood of victory. We should therefore be good strategists, and begin by consider the challenge before you, your own skills and abilities, and always keep in mind the goal of the campaign, namely excellence of character.

Politics first consists of seeking office, then in keeping office, and finally of leaving it. Let us consider each of these in turn, examine what choices are before us in each of them, and then reflect on what promises or challenges they hold for us in the pursuit of virtue.

Seeking office first consists of gaining money. Either you spend your own private fortune, or you gather it from wealthy men. If from the former, you deplete the resources of your own family. If you fail to return these resources you have neglected that which the universe has set in your care. If you succeed in your election campaign, and use your new position for financial gain, you have violated the trust which placed you in office. You should spend, therefore, only the money you can afford to lose. For most men, the cost is simply too high. For this reason, the politically inclined seek out wealthy benefactors. Yet they forget these benefactors are in exactly the same position. Why should rich men spend wealth on a political campaign except to see some benefit? It is a rare man who devotes his wealth to the care of the Empire for its own sake. Unless you know such a modern day Cato, you will be forced to raise money from men of lesser character. Here again you face the same difficulty as before. If you do not repay their investment willingly, they will seek repayment through other, less savory, means. If you misuse your exalted position, you have betrayed the public trust. A difficult position, plotting the course between Charybdis and Scylla, a problem we will find again and again in the political realm.

Here you must certainly be thinking, "My dear friend, it cannot be all that bad. Did you not yourself apply your philosophy in the palace, the very heart of the State?" Yes, I did. Fate put me within the palace and I did my best to do good in that place, but finding oneself in the palace, and bending all of one's energies to put oneself there are very different things.

Even if you gain office and keep your honor, you must somehow manage to keep both. Once in office the worst traits of others assail us. All the problems of seeking election are returned an hundred fold, for before you only held the promise of power whereas now you hold it in fact. Even if you believe, as I know you do, that virtue is the only good worth pursuing other men in their ignorance do not. Misguided and lacking philosophy they believe their material and social benefit to be all important, mistaking as good what is only to be preferred. Few men would be tempted to betray a friendship, or rob their neighbor, for a few more square feet of farmland, but when provinces, armies, and temples are at stake, men lose their wits and all sight of what is truly worthwhile in life To

gain their supposed good they will assault you with lies, flattery, seduction, fawning servility, greed, a hydra of temptation. It take a veritable Heracles to snuff it out! I will not insult you by dwelling upon the risk to your very life and security, for I know that you hold these in little esteem, but in gaining a full tally of the dangers we should not omit the pain that exile may cause on your family, whether it be to Sicily or Hades.

Undoubtedly, a man of your character can do some good, but it is a dangerous battlefield. Even our private conversations in barber-shops, in the square, the theater, or around our dining tables, are fraught with political debate and discussion. The universe has made all creatures to seek their own good, but unlike the solitary tiger, men are social creatures made for co-operation. Politics is the place where these two potentially conflicting impulses – care of self and social co-operation, meet. Who has not seen this first-hand? How often does political discourse end friendships, or cause strife between father and son? Even in the best of circumstances imagine the life of an elected official: making speeches, nodding politely at the opinions of ignorant but powerful men, bargaining with the mob. Some men excel at these things. I must admit that despite my best efforts to serve the Empire, I never developed a taste for it. Have you ever been persuaded to change your mind about some principle by a beggar or a bully? If we are honest with ourselves, how much of politics is begging and bullying? Now I am acting the politician and making speeches! Let us return to the topic with sober minds, remembering that the approval or disapproval of the crowd does not matter, for it does not make a man any better or worse than he is already.

Now I think I have said enough about the risks, with many hoary warnings from an old man. What of the benefits you ask? The common and uneducated men will here list wealth, fame, and power. We know, however, that these are not good, but merely indifferent, for they are potentially good or ill depending on our character. The improvement of our community is certainly a benefit, but again here we must remember that what other men think and believe is not up to us. Remember that community does not exist as a thing in itself. It is just a grouping of men, all living together in a society. Remember also that the opinions of other men are not up to us. Socrates, the very best of us, met each man as a friend. He did not assume that he knew what was best for his friend, only what was best for himself: to pursue virtue in all situations. If he found himself in the street, or in the council chamber, or on the battlefield, or in the bedroom, or in court, or even in a prison cell, he did not waiver or allow himself to be lead astray. Nor did he fall victim to hubris, but always told his friends, when pressed on an uncertain subject, that he did not know. Can we imagine a better example for emulation? And yet, even he failed to convince his generation of Athenians of their follow, and they killed him for his friendship to them. The only thing which is truly up to us is the improvement of our own character. It is here that the political realm may offer some benefit to us. By resisting those forces of corruption we encounter, we can improve ourselves, but this is a hard road that so few are able to walk, and opportunities for self improvement can be found everywhere.

Let us consider the second: management of your family estate. Of what does it consist? It requires living away from the excitement of cities, managing the estate itself, and living peaceably with your neighbors. The first item often seems unattractive to young people, imagining that every cry or whisper in the city holds some secret delight or intrigue. Yet we know it is merely the noise of many people going about their lives in a relatively small space, doing perfectly ordinary things: baking bread, washing clothes, gossiping with their neighbors, trundling goods to market, and so on. Unlike the country it goes on at all hours in the city, but is this of some benefit? Is life that much different at night than during the day? What is to be gained from staying up with the bats and thieves, drinking wine and babbling inanities with dinner guests until the small hours? We wake with a splitting head and a heaving stomach, and call for remedies like an invalid. Remedies for a disease we ourselves

have created. Books and letters can be had in the country, and time to read them! Friends can be invited to visit, and the food – while often simpler, satisfies. What have we lost but smelly gutters, crowded streets, and the never ending noise?

Managing the estate itself is a complex thing, requiring very many skills, such as rising early, seeing things accomplished in their due season, being careful with accounts, managing servants with care, looking to the well being of the family, observing the festivals and praising the Gods. All of these tasks are worthy of philosophy. All of them are fertile ground to be planted with the seed of virtue. Rising early is easy for a man such as yourself, who has been on campaign. Besides, there is a very clever trick to accomplishing it – retiring at a reasonable hour. Punctuality and attentiveness to proper timing are excellent habits to cultivate, regardless of one's place in life. No man is thought worse for possessing them. The management and care of the household - servants and family, this is the chief practice of all fathers. In cultivating this we emulate the very highest ideals. Is this wisdom and care not what we wish to see exemplified in our Senators? In the Emperor? In the Gods? Speaking of the Gods, when we bless crops or observe the seasons, are we not calling our attention to their creation – nature? By placing ourselves in the patterns of nature do we not accomplish our duty as men?

Finally, by coming to friendly terms with our neighbors, do we not accomplish everything that politics sets out to do? Namely to bring our own personal interests in harmony with our fellow man? If we wish to exercise a positive influence over our community, here is the place where we can do it. Yet here you must exercise the same care which we spoke of earlier, remembering that the only good is to pursue excellence of character, and not to refute or correct your neighbors – even when they speak from ignorance. Likewise you should not fear speaking your mind, if called for. It is only slaves who cannot speak their own thoughts.

It is true that the country farm has other challenges. Small mindedness often plagues village life. Men who have never traveled sometimes forget that we are citizens of the world; that men everywhere desire the same things and fear the same things. They believe that civilization starts and stops at their border. Likewise while the city has more people, men are not of different character in the country. The village has it's own drunks, troublemakers, gossips, leches, thieves and prudes. Forgetfulness is perhaps the chief danger. In the pattern of country life it is possible to forget oneself and no longer live philosophically, but like a wagon on a bad road, to fall into a groove and trundle along mindlessly. These risks, however, can be found everywhere. But the country life is not for everyone. I, myself, found it difficult at first. You must adjust yourself to the slower rhythm of nature, and learn to enjoy your own company. Hot blooded men often find this difficult, and make a nuisance of themselves.

I hope I have not wearied you with the opinions of an old man, nor let you believe that along one road lies certain good, while down the other evil. Life is not as the Epicureans suppose, made for pleasure. If it were, surely we would find fault with the Gods and providence for introducing so many troubling things – wars, hunger, disease, stinging insects, earthquakes, storms, and the like. Finding our way through life is also trouble at times. It is hard to know which road to choose, and harder still to keep it once chosen, yet this too is according to nature, for men have been made with the power of choice, and charged with executing it. Blessings and challenges are found everywhere the same, and while I may state my preference and the reasons for it, we go where fate leads us.

Yours in friendship,
Lucius

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Quoted in its entirety from a Facebook, Society of Epictetus "Pneuma Talk," December 12, 2015, with permission by the author.

A Meditation on Stoic Syllogisms/Stoic Dialectic

by Ian Campbell, FCSP

Of the three studies in which the Stoic philosopher must engage (Logic, Physics and Ethics), Logic often feels as if it is the unloved child. Ethics is frequently considered the most relevant for those seeking to grow in wisdom, and indeed among Modern Stoics it is emphasized to the exclusion of all else. As Traditional Stoics, we have a natural affinity for Physics, and the deep things of the Cosmos, in which we in turn we embed our Ethics. But where does Logic fit in? at least that part of Logic which deals with formal reason, that which Sellars refers to as Stoic dialectic?

Upon embarking upon study in the Chrysippus School of Theology I was sent a questionnaire which asked as to the role of Logic in the life of the Stoic Philosopher. It is a question to which I struggled to give a good answer. I suspect few, if any of us spend much of our free time studying Logic as a standalone subject. I know that when I studied for the SES the chapter of Logic was something to get through before passing on to the more interesting matters of Physics and Ethics.

As Stoics, we believe that the virtuous human is the rational human. Logic is an expression, if not *the* expression, of how Cosmos works. Logic is a reflection of the structure of our Cosmos, and the relationship of the events which unfold within the Cosmos. If we are to follow nature, we are to first recognize what nature is and how it works. Science is the most precise expression of the workings of nature. Yet language expressed in logically consistent forms can accurately describe the workings of nature from the everyday perspective of a human living its life, and is indispensable to the Philosopher committed to making progress.

Stoics are familiar with the example of the Sage, and the importance of holding a model of the character of one who has gone before in front of our eyes, who we can use as a yard stick by which to check our progress, and as a spur to greater effort in our practice. Yet Logic itself has a character which we would do well to emulate. This should be no surprise. We are to follow nature. Nature is rational. Logic, at least in part, is the art of reason.

1) Logic is simple. By this I do not mean it is easy, but that it contains nothing superfluous. Syllogisms contain the bare minimum number of steps, there is nothing present which need not be there. Our minds too, ought to endeavor to think only those thoughts which are necessary. "So in every case one should prompt oneself: "Is this, or is this not, something necessary?" (Meditations, 4:24)

2) Logic is egalitarian in its handling of facts. Whether the assertibles in a syllogism concern the weather or a terrorist attack, the necessary conclusion must follow in exactly the same way. As Stoics whilst we grant ourselves the bandwidth to distinguish between preferred and non-preferred indifferents, the impressions we receive, from a moral perspective, are equally indifferent and we are to treat them as such.

3) Logic is fearless in so far that it does not shirk from conclusions. The human mind frequently avoids

reaching unpalatable conclusions, often preferring willful ignorance to truth which might hurt. Yet a syllogism cannot stop half way, even if we would rather the conclusion were different. As Stoics we too must face, and even embrace and love the truth, even if our instinct is often to avoid it.

4) Logic is beautiful. I used to have a maths teacher who, each lesson, would tell the class that maths was beautiful. As a teenager I smirked at what seemed a ridiculous statement, but now I feel I do understand it. Similarly logic has an ascetic quality, perhaps deriving from its balance and its order. The good person too, has a beauty, something which can be recognized from their eyes, speech, and body language. "In short, the good and honest man should have the same effect as the unwashed – anyone close by as he passes detects the aura....the good, honest, kindly man has it in his eyes, and you cannot mistake him." (Meditations, 11:15)

5) Logic is eternal. The syllogisms Stoics studied were necessarily true 2,000 years ago, are true today, and will be true in 2000 years time. There is a timeless quality too about the path of the Stoic, our environment and society changes have changed beyond recognition, yet the path of the wise man is entirely unchanged.

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