

THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

A quarterly eJournal published by the
Marcus Aurelius School
of the College of Stoic Philosophers

APR/MAY/JUN 2018: Issue # 26

Founding Editor: Erik Wiegardt

Right and Wrong

by Erik Wiegardt, Scholarch

To God all things are fair and good and right, but men hold some things wrong and some right.

Heraclitus (fragment #60, Burnet)

The Aspen Dinner Party

It wasn't all that painful when a very rich lady called me a loser to my face. Twice. She didn't just mutter the loser comment under her breath, she sat there at the dinner table with all of us, looked me in the eye, and said it right out loud. Oh, well. Her accusation wasn't new, or even surprising. I've heard it before. I've failed so many times in my life that by the time I was 50 years old I came to the conclusion it was the only thing I was good at—losing. Here's one of many examples: despite three years of graduate school, I spent my fortieth birthday working as a busboy in a restaurant in Hawaii. Well, anyway, it was the rich lady's house, one of several, and it was her dinner party, so apparently she felt entitled to say whatever came to mind. She wasn't trying to be funny or anything. Her contempt for me and my life was clearly obvious the whole time.

Let's look at it from the rich lady's point of view. She was the director of a successful Wall Street hedge fund company, while my life was a chronicle of one low-paying job after another. My current occupation as the unpaid Scholarch of an online college of philosophy was for her just another ridiculous foray into folly. Of course, my opinion was, and is, that what I do today is not a real job at all; it's a calling. But, from her perspective, the fact that I had worked many years without a wage was plainly absurd, and so she had no difficulty seeing a clear pattern: a lifetime of low-paying, mostly dead-end jobs. And for that, I was nothing, a loser.

But was she right? Yes and no. From the perspective of one who single-mindedly pursues wealth, what else could I be? I didn't get rich. I didn't even try! So, of course I was a loser. On the other hand, my most-revered grandfather, Judge O.S. Jones, told me when I was a boy that “a man should work no more than is needed to put beans on the table and a roof over his head.” And, basically, that's just what I did. I got through my day job—sometimes just putting one foot in front of the other on my way to the time clock—the rest of the day I thought, meditated, studied, and created things. But who was right, my revered grandfather or the very rich lady? According to the god of Heraclitus, they were both right.

Heraclitus, the preSocratic philosopher and Stoic cosmologist, was the first to divine that Nature exists as the whole of dynamic continua. Physicists agree with him today—2500 years later. To discover how it is that to God all things are fair and good and right, we will briefly look at reality on opposite ends of this one continuum: those who live for wealth and power at one end, and those who live for Aretē, also known as the Cardinal Virtues, on the other. Then, we will ask and attempt to answer where we Stoics stand on this continuum, and why.

In general remember this, that unless we make our religion and our treasure to consist in the same thing, religion will always be sacrificed.

Epictetus, (*Discourses*, Book 1, chapter 27)

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Jesus of Nazareth, (Matthew 6:21)

* *

Draco and Solon

Draco (*circa* 7th c. BCE) was an Athenian aristocrat and legislator who replaced the prevailing system of oral law and blood feud with a written code enforced by a court. Draco's laws made no pretense of uniformity and favored his ruling class in all matters. Laws written for the lesser classes – merchants, farmers, tradesmen, and laborers – were extremely harsh. For example, any delinquent debtor whose social status was less than that of his creditor was forced into slavery. Convictions for disobedience to most of Draco's laws demanded slavery or death. Stealing a single vegetable, for example, required death. Before long, executions and new slaves became commonplace. Plutarch recorded that when Draco was asked why most offenses required a penalty of death, he said even minor offenses deserved death, and there was nothing more severe that he could impose for great crimes.

Fortunately for ancient Greece, Solon (*c.* 630 – 560 BCE) soon brought relief from the overwhelming cruelty of Draco. When he acquired the power of office, Solon repealed all of Draco's laws except for the death penalty for homicide. As a man of moderation, it was his intent not to revolutionize but to reform *all* classes of society. His new constitution replaced the aristocracy with a government by the wealthy, a plutocracy. He also instituted a Council of Four Hundred made up of all but the poorest classes of society that prepared the business of an Assembly. These changes by Solon are widely considered the foundation of democracy in Athens. And in his honor, Solon came to be known as the first of the Seven Sages of Greece. The laws he wrote have been noted to this day for their fairness. Justice.

Solon gave birth to the essential Greek virtue of moderation. “Nothing in excess,” he said. When he came to power, he introduced a revolutionary law, the *Seisachtheia*, “shaking off the burden.” The punitive laws of Draco had driven a great number of the poorer classes into debt, which then required slavery. Solon began his term in office by “shaking off the burden.” All debts were forgiven, and all who became slaves as a result of debt were given freedom. The sayings of Solon have survived the centuries, and to discover his wisdom we only need an Internet entry such as the “Sayings of Solon” to reawaken this sage. Here is one that could have been written by a Stoic: “Rich men without wisdom are but sheep with golden fleeces.”

Draconian. A word in the dictionary that means, “characteristic of Draco or his code of laws...rigorous, unusually severe or cruel [as in] Draconian forms of punishment.”

* *

Niccolò Machiavelli and Roy Cohn

Moreover, in the actions of all men, and most of all of Princes, where there is no tribunal to which we can appeal, we look to results. Wherefore if a Prince succeeds in establishing and maintaining his authority, the means will always be judged honorable and be approved by every one.

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Exitus acta probat. This Latin phrase, the end justifies the means, was first memorialized by Ovid in *Heroides* (c. 10 BCE). Ovid, born of the Roman aristocracy, was one of the three canonical poets of Latin literature, along with Horace and Virgil. He was a popular poet of love and love affairs, including the arts of seduction. He was exiled to the Black Sea in Romania by Emperor Augustus from 9 C.E. until his death in 17-18 C.E. Whether or not we believe the end justifies the means is a fundamental and character-defining choice we must all make in life. Niccolò Machiavelli and Roy Cohn, either consciously or unconsciously, chose to live by *exitus acta probat*.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) was a senior bureaucrat of the Florentine Republic, an independent state with a radius of about 40 miles surrounding the city of Florence, Italy. This was the 16th century, and Christianity had been the official religion of Italy for 1200 years. Torture was legal and commonplace in the investigation of *any* crime, and Machiavelli was arrested and tortured for plotting against the Medici family that controlled the Republic. We may have never heard of Machiavelli except that the brother of the head of the Medici family was elected Pope, and, in a gesture of magnanimity, Giovanni de' Medici, Pope Leo X,¹ released all Florentine prisoners to allow them to join in the celebration of his papal ascension. Machiavelli was 44 years old.

During the 14 years prior to his arrest, Machiavelli had been second chancellor, as well as a diplomat representing Florence's ruling body, the Great Council of 3000. In that position he was expected to raise taxes, create and preserve alliances, and prepare for war. Loyal to the Great Council, Machiavelli was accused of plotting against a new committee dominated by the wealthy Medici family. Within a year of his release from prison, he wrote the first draft of *The Prince*, a work of political theory, giving him the current title of Father of Political Philosophy. There is disagreement among scholars as to *why* he wrote it, the majority think the reason is simple: he was out of prison, unemployed, and he needed a job.

In his work, *The Prince*, Chapter IX, he wrote: “...a principality is obtained either by the favor of the people or by the favor of the nobles. Because in all cities these two distinct parties are found, and from this it arises that the people do not wish to be ruled nor oppressed by the nobles, and the nobles wish to rule and oppress the people; and from these two opposite desires there arises in cities one of three results, either a principality, self-government, or anarchy...one cannot by fair dealing, and without injury to others, satisfy the nobles, but you can satisfy the people, for their object is more righteous than that of the nobles, the latter wishing to oppress, while the former only desiring not to be oppressed...The worst that a prince may expect from a hostile people is to be abandoned by them; but

¹ Pope Leo X, the Medici Pope, was so corrupt that a young, idealistic monk by the name of Martin Luther was horrified when he saw the hedonistic debauchery of the Vatican, and upon his shoulders the Protestant Reformation was born.

from hostile nobles he has not only to fear abandonment, but also that they will rise against him...For this reason, the sole study of a prince is in the art of war, and regardless of one's inclinations it is necessary to resort to treachery and the exercise of deadly force.”

Machiavelli is not included in our essay as one who personally represents one or the other side of the dynamic continuum we are studying, but because he so clearly portrayed machinations of power and those who would gravitate to the philosophy, *exitus acta probat*. It is important to note that he repeatedly describes the difference between the needs and desires of the princes in diametrical contrast to the needs and desires of the common people.

The treachery of the wealthy and powerful was also recognized two centuries earlier by Genghis Khan (1162-1227) who understood the nature and necessity of realpolitik. When he first began his campaign as a conqueror, the greatest conqueror who ever lived, he attempted to work with the nobles and rulers but soon discovered exactly the same thing Machiavelli wrote about two centuries later. As soon as he and his armies rode away they plotted against him. Peace and prosperity was finally established when he adopted the policy to simply eliminate the rulers. As soon as he conquered any city or town he would ask the common people to bring out their overlords, which they did without hesitation. He then killed them. Quickly and mercifully. (He forbade torture.) To everyone's surprise it was found that their rulers were entirely unnecessary after all.²

Machiavellian. A word in the dictionary that means, “principles of government...in which political expediency is placed above morality and the use of craft and deceit to maintain the authority... characterized by subtle or unscrupulous cunning, deception, expediency or dishonesty.”

*

You knew when you were in Cohn's presence you were in the presence of pure evil.
Victor A. Kovner, lawyer and Roy Cohn's colleague of many years

Roy Cohn (1927-1986) was born into a wealthy Jewish family in the Bronx, New York City. His great-uncle was founder and owner of Lionel toy trains. He was a brilliant student and attended the best private schools, graduating from Columbia Law School at the age of 20. He passed the bar exam at the age of 21, and due to family connections was able to obtain a position in the US Attorney's Office in Manhattan on the day he was admitted to the bar.

Cohn first came to prominence and the attention of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover due to his role in the espionage trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg who gave classified nuclear information to the Soviets. The Rosenbergs were found guilty and executed, but their trial was notoriously tainted by improper judicial and legal activities, many of which were later traced to Roy Cohn. When he was just 24, FBI Director Hoover recommended him to Senator Joseph McCarthy for his communist investigations.

McCarthy made Roy Cohn his chief counsel for what became known as the “Red-scare” or “McCarthy witch hunts.” During this era, hundreds of Americans were targeted as being communists or as communist sympathizers, especially those in government service and in the entertainment industry. It was at this time that Cohn became best known for his aggressive tactics and for holding many of these hearings in “executive” or “off-the-record” locations away from Washington DC and away from scrutiny of the press. Even without a trial or credible evidence, many of these citizens lost their jobs or

2 Jack Weatherford, Genghis Khan: the Making of the Modern World (Three Rivers Press, 2004)

careers. Some were imprisoned. Most of those who suffered through a trial and imprisonment later had their convictions overturned as illegal or unconstitutional.

With Cohn's rising fame he launched a 30-year career as a New York City attorney. His clients included mafia dons, such as Tony Salerno, Carmine Galante, and John Gotti, as well as the New York Yankees club owner George Steinbrenner, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, and businessman Donald Trump. Although he was registered as a Democrat, he invariably supported Republican presidents and eventually became a member of the ultra-right organization, the John Birch Society.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Cohn was investigated and charged three times with professional misconduct, including perjury, witness tampering, and financial improprieties. Each time, he was acquitted. In 1986, the New York State Supreme Court disbarred Cohn for ethical misconduct following a string of unprofessional activities, including one situation in 1975 when he forced a pen into the hand of a hospitalized multi-millionaire to change the dying man's will and make himself a beneficiary.

Roy Cohn died later in that year of complications from Aids. He was 59. Cohn was a homosexual, which he denied, and was the author of strong-arm tactics developed for Senator McCarthy in exposing innumerable gay men in what has been called the "Lavender Scare." According to Senator Alan Simpson, this lesser known search for homosexuals in the federal government was as brutal and harmed even more lives than the McCarthy witch hunts. Cohn died having achieved his life goal, which was, according to one associate, to die broke owing millions in taxes to the Internal Revenue Service.

McCarthyism. The practice of making accusations of subversion or treason without proper regard for evidence. The term is also used more generally to describe reckless, unsubstantiated accusations, as well as demagogic attacks on the character or patriotism of political adversaries.

* *

Trump & Mueller

According to his enemies, and some of his friends and fellow Republicans, Donald Trump is, and I quote, a supreme narcissist, brash, licentious, crude, a pathological liar, a cheater, a braggart, a sleazeball, weak, unstable, disloyal, ignorant, semi-literate, infantile, bad-tempered, moody, bellicose, unhinged, a racist, a misogynist, a con man, a philistine, impulsive, undisciplined, inconsistent, cruel, immoral, a coward, a bully, a psychopath, a thug, intemperate, lazy, chaotic, schizophrenic, and, according to his recently fired Secretary of State who won't admit that he said it but won't deny that he did, a moron. Yes, that pretty well covers it.

In case you're wondering what gives me the right to write or even repeat things like that about the President of the United States, I'll tell you. On my mother's side of the family I am a *direct* descendant of Susannah North Martin, hung as a witch in Salem, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1692. According to the record, she laughed in the face of the judge at her trial. On my Father's side, I am a *direct* descendant of Powhatan, the indigenous American chief of 38 tribal chiefs. You may better remember his daughter, Pocahontas. Yes, *the* Pocahontas was my many- great grandmother. My ancestors have fought in every war, and on both sides of the Civil War, since before we were a country. So, that's what gives me the right to say these things. That, and the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

But let's take just one of these allegations, that Trump is a pathological liar. On this there can be little doubt. According to the Washington Post and other fact-checking organizations, Donald Trump lied or gave misleading information more than 2,000 times in his first 365 days in office.³ One reason the number is so incredibly high is because they not only check the facts, they count how many times the lie or misleading exaggeration is made. Trump repeats himself a lot. Even when the lie has been caught and revealed to him he claims it's "fake news," and then he tells the lie again, and again. The following quote was repeated 57 times:⁴

"The tax cuts are the most significant tax cut -- most significant reform in American history, with tremendous tax relief for working families, for small businesses, for big businesses that produce jobs -- for just about everybody."

"FACT CHECK: Trump's tax cut is nearly 0.9 percent of the gross domestic product, meaning it would be far smaller than President Ronald Reagan's tax cut in 1981, which was 2.89 percent of GDP. Trump's tax cut is the *eighth* largest tax cut — and even smaller than two tax cuts passed by his arch nemesis, the former President, Barack Obama."

*

To anyone living in the current era, the pairing of Donald Trump and Robert Mueller is not likely to arouse confusion or even curiosity. The former is the president and the latter is the man charged with investigating the election of this president. And, other than the time, place, and circumstance of their births, they couldn't be more different. Trump and Mueller were born less than two years apart in New York City into families of great wealth and power, which included family chefs and chauffeurs. Both went to expensive all-male, private schools before attending prestigious universities. And that's where the similarities end.

School

Donald Trump was an incorrigible and lackluster student. He was combative, braggadocios, and frequently in trouble. It started at an early age, and in the second grade he punched his music teacher in the face. It continued until the eighth grade when his father finally took him out of his elite school and put him in a military academy, one with a reputation for having the strictest discipline. For the first time, he actually began to excel. He was promoted to a position of authority which he wielded with such zeal that he was on one occasion demoted for viciousness in his treatment of lower cadets. He denies the charge.

Mueller went to an Episcopal school in New Hampshire where he was captain of the soccer, hockey and lacrosse teams. Classmates remember him as being serious but likable. One friend from those days said Mueller was a role model for the other students. He recalled one incident when a group of the boys were hanging out at a snack shop making a disparaging comment about another boy who wasn't there. Mueller objected and said it wasn't right to say such things about a person behind their back, then he walked away.

Military Service

Trump apparently had few friends in college and wanted it that way. He spent his spare time and weekends working with his father's real estate empire. After his first two years at Fordham University,

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/?hpid=hp_hp-visual-stories-desktop_no-name%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.4ab8163e03ca

⁴ Ibid.

he transferred to University of Pennsylvania where he scoured the area looking for apartments that could be bought and rented to other students. Despite an era of nearly constant anti-war demonstrations and sit-ins on American campuses Trump was only interested in the family business. He got four draft deferments for going to college and one deferment for bone spurs. When later asked which foot had the bones spurs, he confessed he had no idea. In the parlance of the day, Trump was a draft dodger. Trump is the only US president who has never had either government or military service.

Mueller joined the US Marines a few weeks after graduating from Princeton University—an enlistment quite rare among graduates of Ivy League schools. After Officer Candidate School he shipped out to Vietnam. By November of 1968 he was a 2nd Lieutenant Platoon Leader in the jungle. The very next month he led his platoon in an 8-hour battle against an extensive complex of North Vietnamese bunkers, earning a Bronze Star with a “V” for distinction. According to the account that led to his medal, “...with complete disregard for his own safety [he] fearlessly moved from one position to another, directing the accurate counter fire of his men and shouting words of encouragement to them.” The casualty rate was terribly high.

Four months later he was in another fire fight. This time it was an ambush by the Viet Cong. His medal earned in that battle stated, “Although seriously wounded during the fire fight, he resolutely maintained his position and, ably directing the fire of his platoon, was instrumental in defeating the North Vietnamese Army force.” After his experience in Vietnam, which he never speaks about, a lifelong friend and Washington lawyer, Thomas Wilner, said Mueller went from being an affable good guy to a man with a backbone of steel. He never brags about these experiences, Wilner says. It isn't his style.

Career

“The key to the way I promote is bravado,” Trump told the ghost writer of his best-selling book, “Trump: The Art of the Deal.”⁵ Unlike his older brother, the first born son Fred Jr., Donald never had any trouble “being a killer,” as his father always demanded of his sons. Fred Jr., was too nice, too sensitive and accommodating to the tenants of the Trump apartment empire. Fred was a failure at the family business. He became an airline pilot and failed at that. He began drinking heavily until he died of heart failure at the age of 43 after many years of alcohol abuse. People liked Fred Jr. Donald liked Fred Jr., and he was so affected by his brother's death that he became a teetotaler shortly thereafter. “[I learned] To keep my guard up one hundred percent. . . Life is a series of battles ending in victory or defeat. You just can't let people make a sucker out of you.”

In 1976, Trump began his real estate career on his own and away from his father's empire with a lie. Although this was the first hotel he was trying to get built he was able to persuade a New York Times reporter to describe him as an established and big builder even though he had never built anything in his life. Then he invented connections to important people as a way of intimidating anyone who stood in his way. He denies all this, of course. His education in muscling his way to the top had already begun under the careful tutelage of his true mentor, the master of self-promotion, lies, innuendo, and intimidation, Roy Cohn.

⁵ Background information comparing the lives of Trump and Mueller is based upon Internet research, but I am especially indebted to the Washington Post article listed here:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mueller-and-trump-born-to-wealth-raised-to-lead-then-sharply-different-choices/2018/02/22/ad50b7bc-0a99-11e8-8b0d-891602206fb7_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_trumpmueller-740a%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.82042803a092

After his service in Vietnam, Robert Mueller spent the next 20 years as a prosecutor in San Francisco and Boston. In Washington DC, he became assistant attorney general in the Justice Department during the administration of George H.W. Bush. In 1995, Mueller left government service for a high-paying job in the private sector as a white collar litigator for a prestigious multi-state law firm. He hated it, because he did not want to defend people who he thought may be guilty. He quit and went to the U.S. Attorney's office in Washington, DC, and asked for a job prosecuting homicides in what was then the murder capital of America. He got the job, took a 75% pay cut, and loved it.

In 2013, Mueller gave the commencement address at the College of William and Mary, Thomas Jefferson's Alma Mater. (This address can be seen on YouTube.) In it he said essentially what Stoics believe: it's the aim not the target. That is, the outcome is less important than how the work is done. "You are only as good as your word. You can be smart, aggressive, articulate, and indeed persuasive, but if you are not honest, your reputation will suffer, and once lost, a good reputation can never be regained."

For more than 10 years, Roy Cohn took the young Donald under his wing. They were so close that there was a time when word among his friends was that if you wanted to talk to Donald, find Roy; if you want to talk to Roy, find Donald. By 1980, Trump was calling Cohn 15-20 times a day for advice on avoiding taxes and zoning ordinances, as well as "sweetheart deals" and intimidation tactics. From his mentor, Trump learned three foundational rules: "Roy was a master of situational immorality....He worked with a three-dimensional strategy, which was: 1. Never settle, never surrender. 2. Counter-attack, counter-sue immediately. 3. No matter what happens, no matter how deeply into the muck you get, claim victory and never admit defeat."⁶

Two brief examples show Roy Cohn rules in action beginning in Trump's career down to the present. In 1973, the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division filed a suit of discrimination against Trump's company for using codes (Code 9 represented black applicants)⁷ and other methods to prevent blacks from renting his apartments in New York. The 27-year-old Donald, on the advice of Roy Cohn, countersued the government for false allegations of discrimination, asking for \$100 million in damages. The result of that case, which dragged on for 2 years, ended in a consent decree admitting no wrong doing. Both the government and Trump declared victory.

The second example is current (March 2018), and as anyone who pays attention to the news is aware, President Trump's attorney Michael Cohen is suing the pornography actress, Stormy Daniels, for \$20 million in damages for breach of contract. Cohen claims that in 2016 he paid \$130,000 ("out of his own pocket" to Daniels) to remain silent about a 2006 affair Trump had with Ms. Daniels while his wife, currently First Lady Melania Trump, was pregnant. Trump never signed the agreement, so Daniels is suing to void the contract. Trump claims he knows nothing, and it never happened. Attorney Cohen says he wants \$1 million every time she talks about the affair, which he says she has done 20 times, and the sordid matter goes on and on. As a footnote, there are currently two other women suing Trump for egregious sexual misbehavior.

On Trump's first big project, the 1980 renovation of the Grand Hyatt, he became embroiled in several controversies, including fighting City Hall on tax abatement and cheating his own partner, Jay Pritzker, by changing the terms of their deal while Pritzker was in Nepal without access to a phone. When building Trump Tower, he ignored appeals by city officials and art patrons by destroying the Art Deco

⁶ There are numerous Internet resources for investigating the relationship of Trump and Cohn, but one of the best I found was from Vanity Fair: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/06/donald-trump-roy-cohn-relationship>

⁷ <http://thehill.com/homenews/news/319788-fbi-releases-documents-related-to-trump-apartment-discrimination-case>

friezes on the 1929 building he was replacing. When the papers published the story, Trump said, “Who cares? Let’s say that I had given that junk to the Met. They would have just put them in their basement.”⁸ Trump kept an 8x10 inch photo of Roy Cohn on his desk positioned in such a way that it was clearly visible to intimidate the contractors who came to his office.

One week before the terrorist planes hit the Twin Towers, Robert Mueller was sworn in as Director of the FBI. Under his administration, the FBI went from domestic law enforcement to an international intelligence agency. He was nominated for this position by George W. Bush and served under both Bush and Obama for twelve years—longer than any FBI Director except J. Edgar Hoover. Although a lifelong Republican, Mueller never questioned his duty regardless of the party of the president. As Director, he always crossed out the word, “I,” in his staff-prepared speeches. He said the FBI was not about him. It was about the men and women who served with him.⁹

On December 28, 2017. President Trump gave a half hour, impromptu interview with the *New York Times*. In that 30 minutes, he made 24 false or misleading claims, almost one a minute, according to their fact checkers. But maybe Trump isn't a pathological liar. Maybe he has a new mentor, Vladimir Putin. In 2016, the nonpartisan research RAND organization in a study unrelated to Trump or his candidacy for president, published a study of the Putin propaganda machine. They called this media technique a “Firehose of Falsehood.”¹⁰ It's similar to Soviet Cold War propaganda that obscures information in such a way that the recipient does what they are told without knowing they have been manipulated.

Today, there are many other forms of media available that were unknown in the Soviet era, and the new technique takes advantage of these new outlets. (Putin was an agent of the Soviet KGB who became Director of the Federal Security Service that replaced it.) RAND calls this new propaganda technique a firehose of falsehood because they use numerous media sources or channels to entertain, confuse, and overwhelm. These lies come in a firehose of misinformation that is rapid, continuous, repetitive, and lacks commitment to consistency. According to RAND, this propaganda technique effectively undercuts our perception of reality because:¹¹

- People are poor judges of true versus false information—and they do not necessarily remember that particular information was false.
- Information overload leads people to take shortcuts in determining the trustworthiness of messages.
- Familiar themes or messages can be appealing even if they are false.
- Statements are more likely to be accepted if backed by evidence, even if that evidence is false.
- Peripheral cues—such as an appearance of objectivity—can increase the credibility of propaganda.

* *

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-vs-mueller-is-a-battle-for-americas-soul/2018/02/26/0979904c-1b19-11e8-9de1-147dd2df3829_story.html?hpid=hp_no-name_opinion-card-e%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.16787828b48b

¹⁰ https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND_PE198.pdf

¹¹ Ibid. Quoted directly from the Rand study

Right and Wrong

Amour-propre [self love] is... a relative feeling, factitious and born in society, which inclines each individual to be preoccupied with himself more than with anyone else, which inspires in men all the evils they do to each other.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*

According to Stoics, Rousseau is clearly wrong about self love, which we call *oikeiosis*. It is *not* born in society; it is born throughout Nature, from flora to fauna. It is a given fact of all life from the moment of birth. But he may not be wrong about this as an inspiration to do evil as a way to satisfy that natural drive. Stoics believe that evil, which is nothing more than a lack of virtue, may be inspired by *oikeiosis* for those to whom the ends justify the means, *exitus acta probat*. But, *oikeiosis* is also the beginning of virtue—a personal effort that evolves from self love to love of others to altruism, sacrificing oneself on behalf of another, the highest form of ethical expression. *Oikeiosis* is only appropriate to infants and toddlers, and soon after that time most of us learn to *expand* our love of self through the education of parents, teachers, and sound reasoning. Even people born into the lofty heights of aristocratic entitlement can learn that lesson; Solon and Mueller did, but some do not. The noble man or woman has learned; the narcissist refuses to learn and evolve. So many of our leaders are creating dystopias.

The human species experiment may come to an abrupt end; or, the end may be slow and painfully long; or, we may become immortal as a computer program. That technology is available now.¹² If that is our goal, who will be the customers of this technology? It is impossible to know with perfect certainty, but it's likely that only the very rich will be able to afford to have their brains turned into a computer simulation. Such fantastic technology would likely be fantastically expensive, and for the sake of argument let's say that it is. Well, then, wouldn't it behoove each and everyone of us to end our physical aches and pains and extend the length of our mental lives tenfold, or more? What are we waiting for? Wouldn't we feel justified in lying, cheating, and stealing, maybe even murdering our way into such great wealth and privilege? *Exitus acta probat*.

Here would be one more reason to get rich, one more of so many that we already know: the best medical care, only work when we feel like it, play all the time if we want to, only the most luxurious of everything, beautiful homes in all our favorite places, the finest foods prepared by the greatest chefs, and being served and pampered and surrounded by sycophants who are well paid to tell us how wonderful we are every day no matter what we do or say. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to give each of our sons and daughters a new Porsche or Maserati as they head off to the most prestigious universities that only the very rich can afford? What better way for them to make connections with their kind of people that will serve them well in any career or dream they may have for the rest of their lives? Why would anyone in their right mind NOT want to live by the motto *exitus acta probat*?

Stoics are in their right minds, and they do *not* want to live by such a motto. We live by a virtue ethic, and we believe that in all we say and do it is the aim, not the target. How we draw the bow and position the arrow is what matters. To what end the arrow flies is not the true meaning of our lives.

¹² The startup called Nectome, founded by MIT computer scientists, has been created to embalm and preserve every detail of the brain, so that it can be scanned someday in the future to be placed in a computer simulation (The Week, March 30, 2018, page 18, "What's new in Tech").

In 1983, when walking through a large public park in Tokyo, I was drawn to the sight of a young man with a bow and arrow. He was clad in the traditional Japanese archer's costume and long bow, the real bow without all the gadgets Olympic archers need to get their medals. Beside him, to the left, there was a simple wooden stand with a single pottery bowl holding incense—the kind they burn in temples. In front of him, the bull's-eye target was a maximum of four meters, ten or twelve feet away. Every movement was performed in graceful slow motion and effortless perfection: removing the arrow from the quiver, putting it into place on the string, raising the bow, and releasing the arrow at exactly the moment of absolute stillness. I don't remember where the arrows landed on the target, because that was entirely irrelevant, a matter of indifference, both to him as the archer and to me as the observer. It was the aim, the performance; not the target.

*

As those of you who have taken the second term of the Marcus Aurelius School program already know, Stoics are compatibilists. That is, in the ancient argument of determinism versus free will we say that a free will is *compatible* with determinism, because there are both internal and external causes to all matters in our lives. Fate is the external cause; free will is the internal cause. Inside our mind there is our will, and we can choose to live a life guided by *aretē* or by *Exitus acta probat*. If we consistently choose one path in preference to the other, we become the person we have chosen to be. And both the internal and the external together equal the outcome.

Stoic traditionalists believe that Fate is God, and the consciousness of God orders the universe in the best possible way, but it is our internal will, our free will, that contributes to the outcome in those matters in which we are personally involved. So, as Stoics we choose to do our best and let Fate do the rest. It's the aim, not the target. Whether or not our aim yields the target bull's eye is up to Fate or Moira, the daimon spinner of destiny. Some people call it luck, but we are not going to attempt to prove that Fate=luck today. That will require another essay.

If you as a Stoic are good, strong, just, and wise and have decided that your preferred indifferent is to start a widget company, then after using your wisdom to determine there is a need and value for your brand of widgets, you can choose to found such a business with the motto, *Exitus acta probat*, the end justifies the means; or, you can do your best, preserve your noble character and let luck, aka destiny, Fate, the external cause, work for or against your business. If it works for you, no one can keep you from success. If it works against you, then your only recourse is to lie, cheat, steal, murder, sell drugs, do whatever you have to do to force the world to do your bidding. It may work, and in the process you have destroyed your soul, your *hedgemonikon*, your good name and noble character. You may choose. That is your free will.

Our philosopher-king was the emperor Marcus Aurelius. He is the role model for one who would be a Stoic leader, a servant of the people, and a steward of the land. Even Machiavelli speaks of him admiringly in *The Prince*. But who cares? Why don't we all just give up and go over to the Dark Side? Why don't we all focus our lives on doing and saying whatever we have to do to increase our wealth and power—wealthy enough to have whatever we want and powerful enough to be the perpetrator of humiliation rather than the victim? Shout down any twinge of empathy. Consciously regress back to the infantile stage of caring for no one and nothing but the gratification of all our wants and needs. *Exitus acta probat!*

*

Today, the world is dominated once again by a Prince of Darkness. He has been here before in many guises, and he lacks all appearance of virtue in his soul. He inspires others to join him in making malfeasance almost respectable—and what a time they're having winking and nudging one another with knowing glances. After all, if there are so *many* duplicitous carrion hereabouts feeding on the body

politic, then it must be normal, and they can gleefully be what they really are and want to be. In America, the current political rulers have formed a kakistocracy, a nation ruled by the worst members of its society. It's certainly not the *only* kakistocracy in the world, just the most visible and powerful.

I don't really believe there is such an entity as a Prince of Darkness. I believe with the Stoics that there is no evil except in the absence of virtue in the soul, and that only the will is in our power. I also believe along with Heraclitus and contemporary physicists that existence is only possible when there is a dynamic continuum of opposites.¹³ There really are living and working among us psychopaths and other human beings who only pretend to be pious and decent—and only when it is to their advantage. They have no shame. They have no empathy. They only live for the accumulation of wealth and power and the joy of intimidating others. They place no moral boundaries upon what they will do to achieve their ends, and they think anyone who does not do the same is naive and irrelevant. Losers.

*

If it is true that “To God all things are fair and good and right, but men hold some things wrong and some right,” then what is the point of all this effort and discipline practicing the Cardinal Virtues? Why don't we all just focus on wealth and power and taking whatever we can steal, sweet talk, connive, and bully away from others? Why? Because some of us know that virtue is the highest reward and that the only path to real and lasting happiness is by cultivating and preserving a noble character. We *want* to be Good, Strong, Just, and Wise above all else. We are not those who have consciously or unconsciously chosen the Dark Side. We are not those who never know empathy and mistake lust for love. We are not those who mistake wealth and power for success. We know there is another, a better way.

We who practice Stoic philosophy can be the saints and sages of history. Stoics are those who insist on rational order and goodness and justice with mercy. We are the Solons, not the Dracos or princes described by Machiavelli. We are Marcus Aurelius. We are the Salem witch who laughed in the face of death. We are the Robert Muellers, not the Roy Cohns or Donald Trumps. We are those who stand firmly against the chaos and corruption that surround us and pollute the world. We do NOT believe the end justifies the means. We are an anchor on the good, the virtuous side of the human being continuum.

But, trust is the key. We who are the Stoics of this century must have trust in the providence of the divine. We who are cosmic optimists must have trust that our cosmos is rational and therefore works for the good of all. We who are able to take the emperor's view from above will see and know that all is fair and good and right. The world needs us. Yes, the world needs us. But the world needs all of us.

All of us are working together for the same end; some of us knowingly and purposefully, others unconsciously...to one man falls this share of the task, to another that; indeed, no small part is performed by that very malcontent who does all he can to hinder and undo the course of events. The universe has need even of such as he.”

Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*, bk six, 42)

Men would not have known the name of justice if these unjust things were not.

Heraclitus (fragment 59, Burnet)

* * * *

¹³ “Homer was wrong in saying, 'Would that strife might perish from among gods and men.' He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe... (Heraclitus fragment 42, Burnet).”