



**THE STOIC
PHILOSOPHER**

Brighten Up the Tarnish

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Somewhere along the way our compassion became tarnished. It wasn't a particular call or a particular shift, but day after day, it shined just a little less bright than it did before.

The homeless crisis and all the misguided, failed attempts at solving it have led to the mental and physical damage of first responders. Many of those emergency workers have grown bitter and angry towards the homeless as a result. In this paper I explore whether the implementation of Stoic disciplines can help first responders in the short term by restoring a perspective of social affinity or *oikeiōsis* and in the long term through political involvement within the community.

Over the years, more and more people have found their way onto the streets. A lack of mental health access, a lack of interest in getting mental health care, economic problems and increased drug use (such as methamphetamine and opioids) have all added to these increases. Court decisions and changes in state law have also encouraged more people to stay on the streets and avoid sheltering programs and treatment.

My point of view is not from an academic perspective. I've been in the fire service for thirty years with almost twenty of that as a fire captain. I have watched the dynamic on the streets of my community change over those years. I serve a large metropolitan city, but my experience is not exclusive to me. It mirrors not only other firefighters' experience in both large and small communities, but also other first responders such as law enforcement officers, emergency medical personnel and even hospital staff.

In 2022, the fire department in my city had 61,413 calls where a fire apparatus responded (Fresno Fire Department, 2022). These calls for service included medical aids, rescues and fires such as structure, vegetation, vehicle, rubbish and warming. Homelessness related incidents also fall within those numbers. The medical responses varied from legitimate medical calls to fraudulent requests where the individual called without real medical ailments but seeking only transport to a hospital to get a warm place to stay for the night and meals. Homelessness related fire calls include fires that were started both accidentally and purposefully.

Of our total responses, 5,951 were reported to be homeless related (C. Charette, personal communication, October 18, 2024). This 10% of calls is likely being underreported due to the reporting process where fire department staff must manually select that metric when report writing. Adding to the under reporting, homeless individuals don't stay at fire



Ron is first and foremost a father and husband. In his time away from family, he works as a fire captain in a large city in California. Ron stumbled across Stoicism while trying to explain the concepts of ethics and morality to his children. That led him to the College of Stoic Philosophers, enrolling in the SES course and eventually the MAP course. In his downtime, he enjoys teaching judo, hiking, scuba diving, and world travel.



scenes so when fire crews arrive, no one is present, so the report doesn't capture his or her involvement. It's very likely that the percentage of our calls that are homeless related are much higher, potentially even double the reported number.

These problems are compounded in many states because district attorneys won't prosecute homeless individuals for minor crimes, so law enforcement agencies tend not to cite them knowing that the charges won't go anywhere. This leads to a situation where firefighters, police and emergency medical service personnel feel trapped in an endless cycle. Call after call, shift after shift, the burnout takes over. The additional workload promotes injuries, increased illness and fatigue. The higher exposure to carcinogens from more fires increases the potential of our staff developing cancer. First responders begin to lose patience, and in a way, their humanity towards homeless individuals. They lose their feeling of social obligation to others.

Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing. The things that are within our power are by nature free, and immune to hindrance and obstruction, while those that are not within our power are weak, slavish, subject to hindrance, and not our own. (Epictetus, 2014, p. 287)

With this quote, Epictetus neatly summarizes a powerful idea that ultimately leads to the disciplines that can help first responders. This idea is the dichotomy of control. That some things are up to us and others are not. We must focus on the things that we have control of, our judgements, our wants and our actions. We must not allow ourselves to worry about the rest. Understanding this dichotomy is crucial. By the nature of our profession, we are fixers. We get dropped into extreme situations and try to find solutions to what seems to be unsolvable situations. This leads us to think we can have an impact on almost everything we encounter. We set ourselves up to fall hard when we find that we can't control everything in our lives. Thus, the frustration and bitterness that emergency workers' develop when we encounter this homeless crisis which we have little control over.

As stated above, the change in most first responders' view of the homeless evolved over time. Through fatigue and injury, we added value judgments to these events and worse yet, those judgments were more and more negative. We were lacking in the discipline of assent or *sunkatathesis*. This discipline "consists essentially in refusing to accept within oneself all representations which are other than objective or adequate" (Hadot, 2022, p. 101).

By the nature of what we do, first responders need to clearly see and understand the situations we face. This clarity of "vision" is developed through proper assent. The large majority of what we deal with is not up to us. We as emergency workers don't control the laws that legislators create. We don't establish the policies that governmental agencies make and enforce. We didn't cause the multi-unit apartment fire. We didn't start the grass fire that threatened an adjoining neighborhood. We didn't cause the pin-in vehicle accident. We didn't cause the stroke that affected the father of the three young children that we just walked past. I could go on and on with the list of what I've encountered in my 30 years of doing this. We have no control over if an emergency call will come in, but we do have full control of the value judgments we attach to those events and the situations we find.



This control over our value judgments is crucial when dealing with homeless individuals, as this demographic is an easy target of our ire. We need to remember that it's our job to respond to all emergencies. Simple as that. We don't get to pick and choose which calls we feel are legitimate or valid. Qualifying the experience as 'more negative or worse than others' because it involves the homeless does nothing more than sabotage ourselves. We are the ones that become 'more negative and worse than others' as a result. All too often, first responders begin to look at the homeless as less than others. Almost as if they are subhuman and not a fellow person who is just sick, addicted or has just found themselves in dire circumstances. Most homeless individuals lack understanding and don't act out of malice. If we eliminate the negative value judgments associated with responding to these calls, we can minimize or hopefully eliminate the upsetting or unhealthy feelings associated with these events. This requires us to always be attentive and mindful.

The attention required is called *prosochē*. *Prosochē* "is the state of continuous, vigilant, and unrelenting attentiveness to oneself" (Fisher, 2018, para. 2). It's easy to fall back on old habits and start to ruminate on earlier calls or your potential to run more homeless calls later that night. Even more so while you are responding to the 13th call of the day, but you can't let yourself do that. Hadot reinforces this when he explains that Marcus Aurelius clearly points out that the disciplines of assent, desire and action are concerned with the present (Hadot, 2022). You must stay attentive and present in the current moment.

Exercising proper logic isn't enough to resolve the negative emotions that we feel in these situations. We need to develop a level of acceptance that can work hand in hand with our assent. To work towards this acceptance, developing our discipline of desire, or *orexis*, is crucial. At first glance many may question how regulating desire can assist with acceptance but the two are tied to one another and learning about Stoic physics can bring that relationship into view.

Stoic physics illuminates how first responders improperly view the world and our place in it. Our bitterness grows when we imagine a reality where we don't respond to these events. Deep down we think that we wouldn't feel like our time and health was being wasted if this crisis had been properly solved in the first place. We'd feel more rested and better enjoy the time off with our families if we didn't have to wake up the night before because a few people were cold and didn't want to sleep on the streets. Or because we had to respond to someone who overdosed on fentanyl, and we were needed to administer medication to counteract the opioids. I know I've been frustrated over the years and felt all these emotions just like many other first responders have.

This process leads to us developing wants and aversions to things we have no control over or that turn out to be unhealthy for us. Things that are not in harmony with Nature and in the end, lead to frustration, depression, addiction, etc. Many emergency workers become very bitter and begin self-medicating with drugs and alcohol. Their marriages and families can fail because of these unhealthy desires. Honing the discipline of desire can change our view of the world by allowing us to desire things as they are and dismissing our want of things that aren't possible or that lead to vice.

Through Stoic physics we begin to understand that there is a connection between all things. Cosmic sympathy "suggests that there is continual interaction between all parts of the cosmos no matter how far apart they may be" (Sellars, 2014, p. 103). So ultimately, we as first responders are connected to



all people, even those that are homeless and add to our workload and frustration. This is an important mindset that we can't lose sight of.

“Don't seek that all that comes about should come about as you wish, but wish that everything that comes about should come about just as it does, and then you'll have a calm and happy life” (Epictetus, 2014, p. 289).

Epictetus reveals another important concept through this quote. This is a method to properly aim our desires by developing a thankful attitude about the situations that we find ourselves in. By accepting our situation and being grateful for it, first responders can minimize the negative emotions that they have developed from these calls. This attitude has been referred to as a love of fate, or *amor fati* (Nietzsche, 1911). This love of fate allows firefighters, law enforcement officers, and emergency medical staff to appreciate these challenges and view them as an opportunity to test and better themselves. As Seneca stated, “[f]ire tries gold, misfortune tries brave men” (Seneca, 1889, p. 17).

Marcus Aurelius ties together our disciplines of desire and action with this passage from Meditations.

Say to yourself at the start of the day, I shall meet with meddling, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, and unsociable people. They are subject to all these defects because they have no knowledge of good and bad. But I, who have observed the nature of the good and seen that it is the right; and of the bad, and seen that it is the wrong; and of the wrongdoer himself, and seen that his nature is akin to my own-not because he is of the same blood and seed, but because he shares as I do in mind and thus in a portion of the divine-I, then, can neither be harmed by these people, nor become angry with one who is akin to me, nor can I hate him, for we have come into being to work together, like feet, hands, eyelids, or the two rows of teeth in our upper and lower jaws. To work against one another is therefore contrary to nature; and to be angry with another person and turn away from him is surely to work against him. (Aurelius, 2011, p. 10)

No man or woman is an island (Donne, 1959). We are part of the whole as many philosophers, poets and artists have waxed poetic about for centuries. As first responders, our entire mission is to serve those needing help so moral action towards others defines us. At times, the homeless population has the most need so how we serve them defines us more than most things we do in these professions. By developing frustration towards these individuals, we are going against the innate obligation that all rational beings have towards each other. To this end, Will Johncock states that it's critical “to not allow the wrong or unjust circumstances to dominate our beliefs about the world by steering us toward irrational, externally dictated, psychological states” (Johncock, 2023, p. 19). The Stoics knew that we have potential to develop these irrational feelings and beliefs so it's important that our actions aren't predicated on them.

For many, noticing this slow negative evolution in our beliefs and actions can be difficult to see in ourselves. Many times, a supportive peer group can see these changes in us much sooner than we can, so first responders should try and develop these groups. These trusted peers can identify these changes and let you know when your actions and statements are drifting away from the ideal. These



conversations can be difficult and it's easy for people to become defensive so establishing trust is crucial for these peer groups.

The tripartite system of disciplines give first responders tools to properly see and act towards the homeless when they call for service, but the exercises don't work towards changing the situation beyond the actual emergency incident call. While we can't immediately solve the homeless crisis at that moment, there are actions we can take that may reduce or eliminate it in the long run, fate permitting.

One longer term solution that firefighters can work towards is providing fire prevention. Ensuring that weed abatement is completed, that combustible rubbish dumping is minimized and securing vacant structures are several important methods to reduce or eliminate accidental and purposeful homeless started fires. As supervisors, we can make sure that our crews are staying as healthy as possible despite the increased workload through proper exercise, nutrition and rest. We can make sure that our crews are using proper decontamination procedures on our personnel protective equipment and gear so the exposure to additional carcinogens are minimized. All emergency workers can make attempts to get homeless individuals off the streets by offering them appropriate services such as shelters, drug and alcohol treatment programs, etc. Many will not take the services that are offered but everyone who does makes the crisis more manageable.

Another path for moral action is to approach the solution politically. As first responders, we see the direct result of legislation and case law on the homeless population. We need to work with legislators and policy makers on how laws and policies are failing that community. We are the subject matter experts of what is and isn't working since we are in the streets daily seeing the fallout of this crisis. This makes establishing cooperative working relationships with these public officials extremely important and allows us to work together towards possible solutions.

What kind of a man do you suppose Heracles would have become if it hadn't been for the famous lion, and the hydra, the stag, the boar, and the wicked and brutal men whom he drove away and cleared from the earth? What would he have turned his hand to if nothing like that had existed? Isn't it plain that he would have wrapped himself up in a blanket and gone to sleep? First of all, then, he would surely never have become a Heracles if he had slumbered the whole of his life away in such luxury and tranquility; and even if he had, what good would that have been to him? What would have been the use of his arms and of all his strength, endurance, and nobility of mind if such circumstances and opportunities hadn't been there to rouse him and exercise him?
(Epictetus, 2014, p.17)

Epictetus paints a beautiful picture of how adversity can shape us in *Discourses*. We as first responders have been shaped by serving the homeless within our communities. What shape it takes is up to us. We control what we assent to, what we desire and how we act. We can develop resentment and anger, or we can view it as an opportunity. An opportunity to become our own Heracles and brighten up the tarnish.



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