



**THE STOIC  
PHILOSOPHER**

## The Stoic Response to Wrongdoing: Two Case Studies

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### Introduction

A driver cuts you off in traffic; someone cuts in on the line you and others have been patiently standing in; the institution of slavery still exists; a package is stolen from your doorstep; systemic injustice limits your fellow human's ability to thrive simply because they belong to a marginalized group. We recognize these events as wrongs, and they're all equal in the eyes of the Stoics, in the sense that they're all external events predicated on faulty reasoning about what is truly good, and thus unable to penetrate the soul or negatively affect one's character. As Marcus Aurelius writes in *The Meditations*:

In themselves, the things of the world have no effect on the mind; they can't get through to it, they can't sway it, and they can't stir it. The only thing that changes and stirs the mind is the mind, and when external objects are presented to it, it has them conform to the judgements that it deems itself justified in making about them. (Aurelius, 2021, book 5, section 19)

To be sure, some of the examples listed above are worse (in the sense that they have more negative or adverse outcomes regarding externals) than others and demand concerted and collective effort to rectify, but more importantly, for the Stoics they're also all opportunities to exercise wisdom and virtue. What wrongdoing consists of, how we respond to it, and what we can learn from the behavior and choices of those confronted by great injustice will be the focus of this paper.

I will first examine how the Stoics defined wrongdoing as irrational or thoughtless action as well as the position they placed such acts in as occurring outside of the will. I will then look towards the example of Stilbo as a model of personal forbearance in the face of his conquering besieger (as related to us in Seneca's *On the Constancy of the Wise Man* [Seneca, n.d.]), and the powerfully positive effect of letting go of externals and embracing what is truly ours (virtue and will) has on our psyche. Next I will look at a modern examination of Stoic responses to wrongdoing with



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an analysis of Martha Nussbaum's "Middle realm," (Nussbaum, 2016) the social sphere that lies between our close and intimate relations and the greater world at large. Strangers, co-workers, and neighbors populate this sphere, and are the greatest sources of interpersonal conflict on a day to day basis (at least in this my opinion). We will look towards the greater responsibility we have towards our fellow citizens (and the greater one we have towards our own moral integrity) by examining Helvidius Priscus' exchange with the Emperor Vespasian (Epictetus, 2022) before entering the Senate as an example of how the virtues of justice and courage relate to a devotion to duty (even under the threat of execution or exile) that can enable one to rise above wrongs to serve the greater cosmopolis.

### **Wrongdoing Defined**

What, then, is wrongdoing? An everyday (non-philosophical) definition might be expressed as: wrongdoing is an act (intentional or otherwise) that damages or diminishes one's property, person, or reputation, resulting from faulty reasoning, negligence, or ill-will. This definition appears feasible at first, but practicing Stoics would be quick to point out a few problematic features.

First, the common consideration paid to the things harmed, with property, body, and status being the focus of the popular definition. These things are considered goods to the Stoics, as they are things that are rational to pursue and protect because they contribute to a good (pleasant) life, but they are not necessary or sufficient for a eudaimonic or truly *good life*. For the Stoics only virtue, and a character that strives for virtuous living, fulfills that role. Everything else is indifferent, including the things that fortune can bestow or recall, like good health and reputation.

So long as the wronged person's virtue or character remain unharmed by the wrongful act then no true damage has been done to them; indeed it is the wrongdoer who is damaged, as the wrongful act harms their character and alienates them from their fellow humans, themselves, and, by extension, nature. Of course, wrongdoing does damage and impact the offended individual, often in grievous and life altering ways. Simply saying that an event will build one's character does not and should not stop the wronged party from seeking redress, be it through social or legal means.

Any act of injustice is an impious act, because universal nature has made rational beings to help one another benefit one another as they deserve, without ever doing harm, and to transgress against the will of universal nature is plainly to sin against the eldest of the gods and goddesses. (Aurelius, 2021, book 9, section 1)

Second, the Stoics would take issue with the notion that wrongdoing could be unintentional. While they make allowances for errors of judgement and accidents, they



would say that wrongdoing is an intentional act predicated on bad reasoning.

... So why are you angry with her [Medea]? The poor thing has gone astray in matters of supreme importance, and has changed into a viper instead of a human being. Doesn't she more deserve pity, then, if that's the case? Just as we pity the blinded and lame, shouldn't we pity those who've been blinded and crippled where matters of supreme importance are concerned? (Epictetus, 2022, book 1, section 28)

With these objections in mind, I'd like to amend the common definition of wrongdoing to more align with the Stoic view: wrongdoing, then, is a voluntary act stemming from an incorrect belief about what is right and good, in which the agent violates right reason and harms their own moral integrity. The agent can be a person, an organization (corporate, government, or a mob), or, to some extent, a culture. The wrong can be as petty as an insult or as grand as genocide. The virtue violated is *usually* justice, but one could consider that the more virtues (the others being courage, temperance, and wisdom) that the act transgresses upon, the greater the wrong (and the more damaging the act is to the wrongdoer's character and moral integrity).

Assent plays a critical role in the choosing of a wrongful act. From the previously referenced Discourse:

So whenever someone assents to a falsehood, you can be sure that it's not the falsehood to which he wished to assent, for no soul, Plato says, is willingly deprived of the truth - but that he judged something false to be true. Now, in the sphere of action, what is it that corresponds to truth and falsehood in the realm of belief? Appropriateness and inappropriateness, advantage and disadvantage, right for me and wrong for me, and so on and so forth. (Epictetus, 2022, book 1, section 28)

Stoic ethics (all virtue ethics, for that matter) are thus situational, and how to answer the question of what is the proper thing to do in any given situation falls to the agent. While the Stoics spent a great deal of time writing about how to *respond* to wrongs, they were more concerned with the progressing Stoic being focused on *not wronging others*, placing greater moral value on striving to improve one's character rather than giving mere prescriptions against the trials of life. Marcus' injunction in book 5 of his *Meditations* is emblematic of this attitude:

Is someone treating me badly? That's his concern. He's his own man and his actions are his own. I currently have what universal nature wants me to have, and I'm acting as my nature currently wants me to act. (Aurelius, 2021, book 5, section 25)

What we believe to be truly good informs what we do and how we respond to wrongdoing when it occurs. For the Stoics, the one truly good thing is virtue, and *virtue cannot be taken from us*. For an example of how a Stoic would handle a wrongful act so damaging that it takes nearly everything from the victim, let us turn our attention to the Megarian philosopher Stilbo's response to Demetrius.



## The Forbearance of Stilbo

Demetrius, who was surnamed Poliorcetes, took Megara, and the philosopher Stilbo, when asked by him whether he had lost anything, answered, "No, I carry all my property about me." Yet his inheritance had been given up to pillage, his daughters had been outraged by the enemy, his country had fallen under a foreign dominion, and it was the king, enthroned on high, surrounded by the spears of his victorious troops, who put this question to him; yet he struck the victory out of the king's hands, and proved that, though the city was taken, he himself was not only unconquered but unharmed, for he bore with him those true goods which no one can lay hands upon. What was being plundered and carried away hither and thither he did not consider to be his own, but to be merely things which come and go at the caprice of fortune; therefore he had not loved them as his own, for the possession of all things which come from without is slippery and insecure. (Seneca n.d.)

Demetrius, known as the "Besieger of Cities" sacked the city of Megara in 307 B.C., around the time when the Stoic school was founded. His soldiers plundered the city of goods and slaves, and, if Seneca is to be believed, brought great destruction and misery to its residents. Plutarch offers a somewhat similar account of the events in his *Life of Demetrius*:

Megara, however, was captured, and the soldiers would have plundered it had not the Athenians made strong intercession for its citizens; Demetrius also expelled its garrison and gave the city its freedom. While he was still engaged in this, he bethought himself of Stilpo the philosopher, who was famous for his election of a life of tranquillity. Accordingly, Demetrius summoned him and asked him whether any one had robbed him of anything. "No one," said Stilpo, "for I saw nobody carrying away knowledge." (Plutarch, 1920)

One could be forgiven for lapsing into a rage when confronted by the one responsible for the ills Seneca reports, but Stilbo's reply is emblematic of the Stoic approach. Stilbo showed a magnanimous disposition in his reply, and with it modeled the philosopher's way for Demetrius. Stilbo was of the Megarian philosophical school, from whose school Zeno adapted Stoic logic (Sellars, 2006), and thus was not a Stoic, but his reply indicated a contempt for external goods and an exaltation of virtue, something the Stoics (Seneca specifically in this case) heartily endorsed. His reply showed his dedication to philosophy and teaching. Rather than react angrily at Demetrius' query, he used it as an opportunity to display strength of character, unshakable confidence in the promise of philosophy, and as a way to show Demetrius the folly of his dedication to externals. Stilbo couldn't defeat him on Demetrius' terms, so he taught him the better way through virtue.

For virtue, once gained, cannot be plundered. The will (*prohairesis*) also is subject to nothing external, as Epictetus tells us again and again in both the *Enchiridion* and *Discourses*. Tyrants and besiegers can topple walls and sunder bodies, but they can't touch the will. The Stoic, properly trained, is invincible:



“‘I’ve lost my toga.’ Yes, because you had a toga. ‘I’ve got a headache.’ But you don’t have a horn ache, do you? So why are you annoyed? Only things we can possess can be lost or ache.”

“‘But the tyrant will chain...’ What? Your leg. ‘He’ll remove...’ What? Your head? So what can’t be chained or removed? Your will.”(Epictetus, 2022, book 1, section 18)

Wrongdoing that results in the loss of external goods, then, are morally neutral to the Stoics, and how a Stoic responds to wrongs is the only thing of relevance for them. Externals like health and wealth nominally *contribute* to the good life, but are not necessary or sufficient for it.

### **Nussbaum’s “Middle Realm” and “Transition Anger”**

In chapter 5 of her 2016 work *Anger and Forgiveness*, Martha Nussbaum “qualifies” Stoicism as provisionally useful when dealing with the “middle realm,” the social space between family and close friends on one end and the greater world at large on the other (Nussbaum, 2016). She finds helpful Seneca’s advice to approach the folly of our co-workers and strangers with playful humor, as well as his advice to Novatus in *On Anger* to avoid rude or quarrelsome individuals as well as one can. But she also critiques the detachment to externals Stoics advocate as unrealistic, given the seeming importance of reputation, bodily health, safety, and so on (Nussbaum 2016, p. 140). As such, her definition of wrongdoing falls more in line with the first definition I presented and critiqued earlier, a view of harm that the Stoics would call fundamentally flawed.

When confronted with the wrongs of strangers and colleagues, Nussbaum advocates for a special genus of anger, which she calls “transition anger,” whose cognitive content can be summed up as “How outrageous. Something should be done about this” (Nussbaum, 2016). It is a forward looking (that is, it does not look to the offense but what to do about it in the future) and productive emotion that recognizes that one has been wronged and that action ought to be taken to prevent it from occurring again in the future. Critically, Nussbaum’s transition anger lacks the retributive feature characteristic of common anger, which she (and the Stoics) find to be the infantile product of magical thinking (that the punishment of wrongdoers will somehow retroactively repair the damage the wrong has done).

From the Stoic perspective, transition anger strikes me as a unique blending of *propathia* and reasoned assent (perhaps it would be better to say a *transition* between the proto-passion and the response or impulse) and is a novel way for the *prokopton* (one who has made progress on the path of Stoic philosophy) to approach wrongdoing. The practicing Stoic will feel the first movement of anger when provoked to it, but, remembering Epictetus’ advice to “stay with the initial impression,” (Epictetus, 2022,



book 2, section 18) does not assent to the notion that real damage has been done, and will instead look to reason to determine what to do and how to respond, rather than to the dictates of anger.

### **The Stoic Response in the Middle Realm**

How should a Stoic confront wrongdoing, then? If it is the Prokopton who has erred they should try to make amends as soon as they become aware that they have done wrong. Further, it's far better if the agent comes to realize that moral error themselves, rather than having to be told they have done wrong, both because it means the wrongdoer is practicing the kind self-reflection needed to catch these errors, and because seeking an atonement for the infraction that is unprompted shows understanding for the damage done to the victim and eagerness to improve socially.

When the Stoic is the wronged party they should be quick to forgive when it's asked for, and quick to excuse if a reasonable explanation for the offense exists. Because Stoics place greater emphasis on the purity of the intention behind an act than they do on the outcome of that act, we should give the benefit of the doubt to whoever has offended us, be willing to hear out the offending party, and seek the assistance of the law if or when the situation calls for it. Getting angry, wishing for revenge, or actually seeking that retribution is never called for.

The Stoic should strive to remain consistent in their actions and to practice so that when they do encounter an incitement he or she can pause to evaluate the true depth of the harm, or as Epictetus advises us to do, "Stay with the initial impression" of the event (Epictetus, 2022, book 2, section 18). If they can do that they'll see that the base facts presented to them in that initial impression is all they need to form a proper judgement and plan of response. There's no need to add emotive value judgments to the first impression that pops into our heads after an event, and doing so only complicates matters by disrupting the tranquility needed to address wrongs in a just manner.

Finally, apply punishment only as a means to moral correction, not as a vehicle for personal satisfaction. We should be strict with ourselves and lenient with others, as Marcus tells himself to do throughout the *Meditations*.

When the wrong is grievous Nussbaum believes the matter should be turned over to the law, but in everyday instances trivial matters can be dealt with in a manner of ways, many of which Seneca himself suggests in *On Anger*: non-response (similar to Cato's non-reaction when struck in a public bath), a performative show of anger to express displeasure at the inciting stimulus (dangerous because it can so easily slip into a full blown passion), avoidance, and so on (Nussbaum, 2016, pgs. 167-168).



These are all helpful suggestions, but what is one to do when confronted by a once in a lifetime (fate permitting!) challenge to one's commitment, honor, and duty? When the easy route is compliance and the alternative is possible exile or death? For that, we next turn to Helvidius Priscus' exchange with Vespasian.

### **Death, Exile, and Devotion to Duty: Helvidius Priscus' Reply to Vespasian**

Helvidius Priscus saw this, too, and acted on the insight. When Vespasian told him not to attend a meeting of the Senate, he replied, 'You have the power to disqualify me as a senator, but as long as I am one, I'm obliged to attend meetings.' 'All right, then, attend the meeting,' says Vespasian, 'but don't say anything.' 'Don't ask me for my opinion and I'll keep quiet.' 'But I'm bound to ask you.' 'And I'm bound to say what seems right.' 'But if you speak, I'll have you killed.' 'Did I ever tell you that I was immortal? You do your job and I'll do mine. Yours is to put me to death and mine to die fearlessly. Yours is to send me into exile and mine to leave without grieving. (Epictetus, 2022, book 1 section 2)

Helvidius Priscus was indeed executed by order of Vespasian, shortly after the emperor exiled him. Priscus was a member of the Stoic opposition, whose membership included Thræsea and Musonius Rufus. Many members of the Stoic opposition were executed or exiled by the emperors they opposed. While fully examining their motivations, aims, and actions that they took while opposing Vespasian is a subject deserving of its own essay, and some aspects would fall outside the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, they were interested in preserving the integrity and authority of the Senate, and more importantly, preserving their own personal moral autonomy in the face of an emperor they found morally corrupt. For his opposition (something as petty as refusing to call the emperor Caesar, along with other stubborn but principled acts) Vespasian issued his directive for Priscus to not attend a meeting of the Senate.

Writing years after Helvidius' execution, Tacitus gives us a brief sketch of the Stoic senator:

...In his early youth Helvidius devoted his extraordinary talents to the higher studies, not as most youths do, in order to cloak a useless leisure with a pretentious name, but that he might enter public life better fortified against the chances of fortune. He followed those teachers of philosophy who count only those things "good" which are morally right and only those things "evil" which are base, and who reckon power, high birth, and everything else that is beyond the control of the will as neither good nor bad. After he had held only the quaestorship, he was selected by Paetus Thræsea to be his son-in-law; from the character of his father-in-law he derived above everything the spirit of freedom; as citizen, senator, husband, son-in-law, and friend he showed himself equal to all of life's duties, despising riches, determined in the right, unmoved by fear. (Tacitus n.d.)

From this and Epictetus' account we can see that Helvidius Priscus studied well and practiced what he preached. He took his duty seriously enough to risk his life for it. And



what does duty demand of us Stoics? To work for the benefit of our fellow humans, undaunted by tyrants, steadfast and cheerful in the face of setbacks, and unmoved by wrongs, using our philosophical training as a foundation for determining what is the best course of action. When the foolish demand that we join them in wrongdoing to please those in power (or, worse, the crowd) we must have that firm foundation to fall back on, or we run the risk of trading our moral autonomy for external gain. Priscus' example showed that moral integrity (even at the cost of one's life) is more important than petty externals like power and honors.

Such feats of moral integrity require a thorough understanding of the relevant virtues. The virtues Helvidius most needed in his defiance of Vespasian were courage and justice. Courage, according to the Stoics, consisted of knowledge of what is truly good and bad and the ability to act to pursue the good and avoid or prevent the bad, regardless of the hazards acting brings. Justice consists of kindness and fairness, as well as knowledge of how individuals relate to one another, as well as the understanding of the duties being a member of a community brings. Stoic notions like *oikeiosis* (a widening circle of social concern) and cosmopolitanism are directly derived from a Stoic understanding of the virtues as well as the three main subjects of philosophical study: logic, physics, and ethics.

The high moral standard that Helvidius Priscus set for all of us is clear: do not compromise your core values and personal integrity for external gain or to avoid something that is ultimately morally indifferent like death or exile. When one's circle of social concern is wide enough and one's understanding of what is truly good is firm enough one can look past personal danger and misfortune to see that we're all part of a greater whole, and that doing the right thing is more important than any paltry earthly reward.

## Conclusion

Stoic ethics, as we have seen, calls for the wronged to use reason to clear away the emotive haze that always wants to override judgement after an insult, and for the wrongdoer to come to reason so that they will do wrong no more. Through a commitment to justice, the wronged Stoic will look to the past only to determine what punishment (if any) is most appropriate to employ so that the future can be brighter for both the victim and punished. Put another way, Stoic justice isn't retributive, it's rehabilitative and deterrent. Anger plays no role in that process for the sage, as reason alone would be sufficient to recommend a course of action that is beneficial for both the wronged and the wrongdoer. The less we non-sages indulge anger after outrage the closer we come to realizing the promise our system offers: equanimity and magnanimity.



Like death and taxes, encountering wrongdoing is as inevitable as it is ineradicable. By framing these inevitable events as training opportunities to strengthen their characters and understanding of virtue, the practicing Stoic can free themselves of a great deal of unnecessary mental trouble that the average person will go through when facing life's troubles.

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