College of Stoic Philosophers
Tutor: Erik Wiegardt
Ethics Project

7.800 words

Duty and Right Action Toward Hierocles' Gods

by César Avilés

Introduction

In this reflective essay, I will examine Hierocles' theory of duty towards what he considers the three most important relationships. In his treatise *On Appropriate Acts*, he labels them as "kinds of god" and exhorts us to honor them above all other relationships.

Hierocles' most important god is the Stoic God, who *"constitute[s] the primary paradigm for human ethics."*[1] After the Stoic god, Hierocles confides in reason to identify his second most important relationship. He wrote, *"[A]fter the discourse on the gods, it is most reasonable to take up how one should behave toward one's country. For it is, as it were, a kind of second god."*(Hierocles et al. 69) Lastly, he advocates: *"[A]fter the discourse concerning gods and country, what other person could one mention first if not one's parents? Hence we must speak about these, whom one would not err in calling as it were second and terrestrial gods, and indeed because of their nearness, if it is lawful to say so, even more to be honored than the gods."*(Hierocles et al. 83)

---

1. Hierocles, Ramelli, I., Konstan, D., Stobaeus., Suidas, 2009. *Elements Of Ethics, Fragments And Excerpts*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, p.(l).

The purpose of this essay is to understand Stoic ethical behavior from the perspective of Hierocles and explore possible right actions in my own conduct toward these gods.

I. Amor Fati

I was dining with the gods. Once a year, I sipped wine with a wealthy music enthusiast who paid my grad school tuition and gave me a generous stipend. My god's assistance allowed me to focus on my ultimate goal: to become an orchestra musician.

Fortuna didn't stop there. Another sponsor covered my summer tours with a world-class symphony orchestra where I traveled playing in the world's best concert halls. Each year, we prepared a repertoire with our coaches, concertmasters, and leaders working in the best symphonies around the globe. Then we would go on tour. And I kept dining with the gods.

Unfortunately, my sponsors disappeared soon after grad school. Armed with a master's degree in violin performance, I moved to Germany to get an orchestra job, but instead, I got a visit from Hierocles' first God[2]. She came dressed as Fate and told me things I did not want to hear. Having dined with the gods for so long I was ready to pull on

---

2. Ramelli, I., 2015. *Hierocles The Stoic: Elements Of Ethics, Fragments, And Excerpts*. Society of Biblical Literature, p.(l).

Chrysippus' cart for as long as I needed to. I didn't know Fate; I hadn't begun studying Stoicism. At the time, I didn't know that I was dealing with god.

"Stoic traditionalists believe that Fate is God, and that the consciousness of God orders the universe in the best possible way"[3]

#

Ever since I played my first note as a student orchestra member, I knew what I wanted to do for a living. Year after year, I watched that goal getting closer, or so I thought. I've had the best teachers and achieved concrete results that proved my worth. I never stopped moving upwards—until Fate showed up. "Sign here," she said.

Money was tight, and I was almost obliged to sign her contract. I accepted a teaching position at the local school of music with the promise that the fight was not over. My orchestra obsession had become imprinted in my soul, almost like an identity. I was an orchestra musician without an orchestra job. Not a teacher. Fate patiently dragged me farther and farther away from my goal, and slowly, like a video game character, I was losing my energy.

Fate is God. God is Reason. Fate is Reason. I muscled my way forward and tried harder, now desperately sending applications and auditions before running out of air. Fate felt none of my blows. Instead, she gave me superpowers I did not want and made sure I succeeded as a teacher. My boss assured me she'd only heard good things about me. Then the email arrived.

---

3. Wiegardt, E., 2018. *Right And Wrong*. [online] Collegeofstoicphilosophers.org. Available at: <http://collegeofstoicphilosophers.org/show_book/PDF/eJournal26> [Accessed 16 July 2020].

After only two and a half years of teaching at the school, they offered me a permanent position. These are rare, and most of the teachers still work on a per hour rate. Some have even been in the faculty for over 20 years and will never see a permanent position. But I, the guy who doesn't want it, have one. Effortlessly.

One option was to quit teaching altogether, take a loan to pay for living expenses and keep auditioning. I had done ten auditions, each one requiring about three months of preparation. Between my orchestra failures and my struggles with the language and culture, I just wanted to leave Germany. I could have probably won an orchestra position back home, but the situation there is not the best, and my gut told me not to do it. With no strength left to fight Fate, I accepted my new role as a teacher for the first time. I let the cart move in the direction it wanted.

Was this a fatalistic move? I will answer that question in the conclusion of this essay. However, today, eight years after my big intervention, I have a waiting list of students, both in the music school and in my private studio. The teaching business is running great. But still, I keep mourning not having an orchestra job. The Stoics call these emotions *pathe* or passions, which they define as affective responses toward externals generated by false judgment. To find the root of my *pathe,* I decided to study emotions from the Stoic perspective.

#

The Stoics identify two dispositional components to explain how one particular feeling is triggered rather than another. Cicero wrote,

"What causes a person to be distressed at some event, he says, is not a single belief but a combination of two beliefs: ...when our belief in the seriousness of our misfortune is combined with the further belief that it is right, and an appropriate and proper thing, to be

upset by what has happened, then, and not before, there comes about that deep emotion which is distress[4]*."*

By getting rid of one of the following beliefs: (1) that 'not having an orchestra job is a misfortune,' or that (2) 'it's appropriate to be sad because I don't have an orchestra job,' I should be able to avoid the strong feeling.

But before acting on Cicero's proposal, I'd like to discuss the results of a relevant experiment I conducted a few months ago. For a week, I deliberately tried to teach my students with energy and enthusiasm. I forced my body to stay alert for hours at a time and was mentally present at all costs. If teaching could be enjoyable, I needed to know; and so I tried solving my student's musical problems with grace, eagerness, and even love. After a week, I was exhausted and realized students didn't appreciate what I was doing. But I found fulfillment. Perhaps because I was doing my job, "completely correct." By deliberately wanting to find joy in teaching, I stumbled upon what Viktor Frankl calls 'the will to meaning.'

Frankl wrote, *"What is meant by fulfillment is the fulfillment of meaning rather than fulfillment of the self, or self-actualization. Self actualization is not man's ultimate destination. It is not even his primary intention. Self-actualization, if made an end in itself, contradicts the self-transcendent quality of human existence. Like happiness, self-actualization is an effect, the effect of meaning fulfillment. Only to the extent to which man fulfills a meaning out there in the world, does he fulfill himself. If he sets out to actualize himself rather than fulfill meaning, self-actualization immediately loses its justification. In my*

---

4. Graver, M., 2009. *Stoicism & Emotion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.44

view, excessive concern with self-actualization may be traced to a frustration of the will to meaning."[5]

According to Frankl, I experience frustration because I am not fulfilling a meaning out there in the world; I am only focused on my own self-actualization, which is to get what I want, that orchestra job. This is something I have to internalize and keep practicing. Thus, having understood that it's entirely in my power to feel fulfilled as a violin teacher (and that these emotions are unrelated to the orchestra job), I'd like to consider Cicero's argument (above) and deal with emotions and their origin.

#

(The citations in this section are from Margaret Graver's book Stoicism and Emotion[6]*)*

For an emotion to form, we have to assent to an initial impression. This initial impression can be interpreted as a feeling; we can call this feeling a pre-emotion because it's not an emotion just yet. This feeling is involuntary (much like an impression), and thus the sage would feel it as well. The Stoics didn't count this feeling/impression as an emotion because assent is not given yet (p.87). Emotions, then, form *when* we assent to that primary feeling. Thus strong emotions are improper assent to impressions (p.101). Zeno defined emotions as excessive impulses disobedient to reason (p.67).

Because I have been assenting to the same initial impression for years, I've formed a *habit.* Today, the strong emotion is generated effortlessly because the more I assent to an initial impression/feeling, the easier the emotion is generated (p.166-167). My ritual of assent, with time, became a belief. And my beliefs, in turn, make up my character, which the

---

5. Frankl, V., 2014. *The Will To Meaning*. Plume, pp.22-23.

6. Graver, M., 2009. *Stoicism & Emotion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stoics assert is the real reason for my assent to an impression (p.63-64). It is then safe to condone my weak character as the liable promoter of my false belief. My character is culpable for my strong emotion every time I think about orchestra.

To "cure" my false belief, I must work on my character to "*find a new mode of existence in which emotions, in the ordinary and depraved sense, will not occur* (p.70)*."* My current beliefs are clashing against one another (p.50), precisely because I have not achieved a complete and correct understanding of my situation. Thus to exchange a bad emotion for a good one, I must transform myself (p.53). And this transformation starts with my rational faculty. The Stoics would say that this approach will ultimately bring me the liberation I seek (p.63).

As I report on these findings, I have not had the time to practice long enough to have reached a conclusion. However, I've taken extensive notes and plan to implement these in the upcoming weeks. I shall now turn to recognize an important aspect that influenced my orchestra obsession. It is what Cicero calls False Glory.

#

I got out of the bus feeling like Paul McCartney. Hundreds of people gathered around the bus to see us musicians wearing tuxedos and fancy dresses. I was in China with the World Orchestra, and we were getting to the concert hall. It didn't seem like we would play a Shostakovich symphony, but rather like a rock concert. Never have I experienced such excitement from the public toward classical music. I felt like a rock star, but in reality, I was a mere violinist, one of eighty musicians whose "band" would have sounded just as great without him. Nevertheless, I felt important.

"A false glory, also called 'popular acclaim,' is to be distinguished from true glory, and the latter must still be kept distinct from moral excellence and the right actions in which

it is displayed. (p.162)*"* It is easy to judge my experience in China as a "good." But it was only a preferred indifferent. When treated without proper caution, popular acclaim can give rise to bad emotions because the risk of false judgment is too high. On the other hand, real glory is defined by Cicero as the approval by those who know how to judge excellence of character, namely the Stoic teacher and sage. But still, he emphasizes that even true glory should be kept distinct from the "real good," which is continual moral excellence and right actions.

In sum, I would categorize my experiences as follow: in China, I clearly experienced false glory, whereas during my teaching experiment (where I felt fulfillment) I had a true or real glory experience. Fulfillment was reached by right action, cosmopolitanism. However, my constant attempt to act right trumps both the false and true glory experiences. Constant right actions are my true goal as a Stoic Prokopton. These actions are analogous to Fate's will (Hierocles' first god) and will ultimately ensure I live according to Nature.

II. Duty in Room 16

I got my second soul in 2001. We started as separate entities spending seven to nine hours a day learning about each other. It's different now. My responsibilities limit the time I can spend with my second soul to about five hours a day. However, after almost two decades of sacred communion, I dare say that we've become one.

"I hate the violin!" yells my eight-year-old student. As soon as he enters room 16, the walls start burning and screaming for his soul. *Welcome to hell*, I construe as I put on my monstrous mask. Luckily, in about 29 minutes, benevolent gods will intervene, and the angelic sound of his Gameboy will turn off the fire in room 16. Resentful, he will mentally flick me off as he leaves my reign. I take off my invisible mask and think, *what the hell did I get into?*

My student is not doing anything wrong—he's only eight. His parents and the system forced him to meet me, his evil ogre, each week for a violin lesson. The purpose of this section is to discover my duty and learn how to lessen the pain of students who are forced to meet with me and learn the violin.

#

(Except otherwise cited, the following footnotes are taken from Ilaria Ramelli's 2014 book[7].)

In his treatise on *Appropriate Acts*, Hierocles suggests that "*after the discourse on the gods, it is most reasonable to take up how one should behave toward one's country. For it is, as it were, a kind of second god"* (p.67)

Hierocles further explains why he believes one's country overrules family, and even the self (oneself),

" [A] person would be senseless who preferred one finger over the five, whereas he would be reasonable in preferring the five to just one—for the former ends up discrediting even the preferred finger, whereas the latter, amidst the five, saves also the one—in the same way a person who wishes to save himself more than his country, in addition to doing what is unlawful, is also senseless, since he desires things that are impossible, whereas one who honors his country more than himself is both dear to the gods and is furnished with rational arguments." (p. 69)

From this very cosmopolitan perspective, Hierocles confides in our rational faculty, a Stoic move, to find one's duty toward the whole. Preferring the whole (i.e. hand) is more *reasonable* than preferring the individual (i.e. finger) because our personal wellbeing highly depends on the wellbeing of the community, for each of us is a member of it. Furthermore, *preferring* the whole can be better translated as *caring* for the whole. When I genuinely care about my relationship with a student, I am selflessly taking care of the whole. This sociable *oikeiôsis* (more on that in a minute) is what I, and others, need to embrace to improve the wellbeing of the whole (which includes ourselves). We instinctively take care of

---

7. Ramelli, I. and Konstan, D., 2014. *Hierocles The Stoic*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

ourselves because it ensures our survival. However, this is only the beginning and first level of *oikeiôsis.* To maximize our impact on the whole, and therefore the impact on our own selves, each individual must fully embrace the next level of concern: caring for others.

Hierocles' most famous concept, his circles of concern, demonstrate our commitment to duty toward others and levels of responsibility. His series of concentric circles begin with, "*that representing our own body, then the circles representing our parents, siblings, spouse and children, and on to more remote relatives, and then to members of the same deme and tribe, to fellow citizens, to those who belong to the same people or ethnos, until we arrive at the widest circle, which is that of the entire human race." (Lvi)*

More importantly, *"The width of the circles and their distance from the center constitutes the standard by which to measure the intensity of our ties, and therefore of our duties, toward people." (Lvi)*

The farther away from the self a particular circle is, the less responsibility is expected toward them (i.e., responsibility toward your kids vs. responsibility toward a stranger). Moreover, Hierocles suggests we *"reduce as much as possible the distance from each circle to the next one out and thus to create the closest possible oikeiôsis**,**(Lvi).* He further details the various types of *oikeiôsis*:

(1) that toward oneself,

(2) toward one's offspring (xxxii), which is equal to the self,

(3) toward others (the so-called sociable *oikeiôsis*),

(4) and toward external things (xxxiv)*"*.

Hierocles encourages us to *"employ the onomastic strategem of designating others by names appropriate to a degree of relationship one step closer to us than that which characterizes them in reality. (Lvi)"* Does this mean I should call my eight-year-old student

"son"? To his face? Considering that I teach in Germany and the custom of calling people "son" is not adequate, I can *visualize* my student like a son.

Moreover, I believe that showing and feeling affection is crucial for this experiment to succeed. It is affection that will bring my student closer to my self and reduce the distance from his previous category (of a mere citizen) to someone I dearly care about. However, I not only care and feel affection toward my family; I love them. Must I then love my student? If so, would that love be any different?

"As one comes to think of the persons in the wider circle as truly belonging to oneself, one will be increasingly motivated to behave toward them in the way the wise person would do." [8]

If the actions of the wise are analogous to that of the gods, and the wise narrows all of his relationships to the self circle, then the wise (like the gods) is one with all. He loves all because he loves himself (*oikeiôsis*). This approach reminds me of the active principle, which we all share a portion of—the Logos. Furthermore, by owning a portion of the Logos, my student is connected to the All—and so am I. Everyone and everything is connected to the All because we are all the All.

The kind of love I would give my student is consequently related to the divine spark. I hypothesize that Pneuma, as it permeates and shapes everything, also comprises of love. And as an essential component, it may help the Cosmos flourish and evolve. Love then belongs to the connection between all things, and thus it may be crucial to reduce the distance between concentric circles. Once my student's circle is close enough to my self, it will be easier to

---

8. Graver, M., 2009. *Stoicism & Emotion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.176-177.

feel *compassion* for him (i.e., compassion for a son vs. compassion for a stranger). By actively pursuing these cosmopolitan traits, I concentrate on my duty, which I argue is to love and care, while keeping an eye on those strong emotions (passions) that build when I am careless. (The word "passion" in religion and philosophy is identified with innate or biologically driven emotional states.)[9]

#

"For these reasons I claim that whoever behaves rightly toward his country must rid himself of every passion and illness of the soul. He must also observe the laws of his country as though they were second gods, by living in accord with their guidance and, if anyone should attempt to transgress or change them, by making every effort to prevent him and opposing him in every way." (p. 71)

Lastly, Hierocles talks about loyalty to our country's laws because they ensure the wellbeing of the whole. Yet I think Hierocles would agree that a good Stoic follows reason first, for the system is imperfect and may constitute flawed or irrational laws. These, in turn, may contribute to injustice as sometimes irrational behavior does. Moreover, the system also creates a kind of "law" in its customs, which may strengthen a community. But again, if followed blindly, they may not be reasonable, and we may run the risk of creating injustice.

My eight-year-old student is a victim of injustice, in my opinion. The culture (customs) convinces his parents that learning an instrument is necessary, regardless of his very own nature. And if I ever tell his parents that music is not in his nature, I will get fired. I can't say stuff like that. He's our customer; we need their money! I can still act right,

---

9. En.wikipedia.org. 2020. *Apatheia*. [online] Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apatheia> [Accessed 14 September 2020].

however, and my hands are not tied. As long as I have a functioning rational faculty, I can choose how I deal with externals. Here's what I can do to act right.

I can bring energy and joy to the classroom and conserve a suitable learning environment. Even if I am tired, I can decide to act energetically because it ultimately influences the outcome of what happens in room 16. I am not faking my attitude; I'm deciding to act with energy for our lesson's sake. This approach helps both of us: my student learns in an efficient environment, and I fulfill my mission as the teacher. Furthermore, as one of two people in the room, I control half of what happens in room 16. Deliberately *caring* about my relationship with my student, regardless of his poisonous comments (dispreferred indifferent), should help with the image I portray. However, I am not a therapist, and caring doesn't mean acting like one. In the past, when students had a tough time, I would spend most of the lesson dealing with their personal life. Seneca reminds us that "to relax the mind is to lose it." Listening to their rants got me into a passive mode of teaching, which was more like resting. I won't stress about this, but I need to maintain strictness not to lose focus.

Finally, I will follow Marcus' advice and *"frequently consider the connection of all things in the universe and their relation to one another."* (Meditations 6. 38.) This process begins with the practice of sociable *oikeiôsis:* caring for the wellbeing of others. Visualizing my connection to all living beings is where my focus will be; I trust this approach will help lessen the pain of students who, like my eight-year-old, are forced to meet me in room 16.

III. Option One

"Abuelita! Abuelita! Abuelita!" they cheered as I walked on stage to pick up my certificate of participation. *Abuelita* is Spanish for grandmother, and they called me so because I went to bed early and avoided parties. The nickname didn't bother me that much because I was not always an *Abuelita.* Once 8 pm came around, each of us turned into one mastermind—everyone playing their individual roles for the good of the whole orchestra. I was there to play my part and contribute my portion. That had nothing to do with the names they called me.

As an introvert, my nature came up practical when I moved to Germany in 2012. Besides trying to get an orchestra job, I had most of the day to be with my girlfriend (now wife) or be alone, which I fully embraced. However, today after eight years of living here, I still don't consider Germany my home. I don't belong here, but neither did I belong with the musicians I toured years ago. They even spoke my language and loved what I loved. Maybe I just don't belong anywhere. Nonetheless, I often want to go back to the U.S., where I have fond memories. Yet I know this desire makes me a victim of the declination bias, which says

that one sees the past as more glorious than it was and the future as harsher than it will likely be.

My desire to move out is secretly a desire for easier challenges. However, no one assures me these will be any easier in the U.S. It is interesting because I once read that if we achieve a life free of adversity, our minds create some obstacles. It seems we *need* hardships. The nature of our world demands us to thrive by enduring adversity, perhaps for the sake of the transformation we undergo. After conquering our obstacles, we end up stronger, wiser, evolved. And if the reason for existence is really to evolve, then Earth is just a battlefield designed for this transformation.

Into what do we evolve? I don't think it matters. Philosophies and religions provide us with speculative answers, but Stoics don't care about what happens after death. They focus on the now, and it is now that we can *act right*, which I will argue is a requirement for evolution. Because right action can only be executed in the present, Fate has an active role. It is Fate who brought me here, to this very moment. Now, I can *choose* how I deal with what Fate is handing me (compatibilism). In light of this, I see three options:

1. Follow Fate, aim toward right action, fight, grow, and evolve (in favor of Providence and free will).

2. Be stubborn and try to redirect Chrysippus' cart my way, ignore the open door of Fate and try to open a door that's locked and unavailable, be troubled, and reject the theory that we are on Earth to evolve (deny Providence).

3. Sit on a couch and fatalistically let externals impact me while denying free will.

Most of us alternate between all three options at different periods of our lives; however, orthodox Stoics would continuously try to choose option one, arguably the path of the Prokopton. The best justification I can currently give for taking this path is that no matter

how much one struggles to open a locked door (option 2), one cannot know where it will lead to; just as one cannot know what Fate (and its open door) will bring (option 1). Since we can't know, and we believe Providence arranges Fate, then we can proceed, sanely, to what nature decided is available now. The last choice, option 3, denies free will and thus isn't compatible with Stoic doctrines either.

In his essay *Allegory of Doors* (2014), Wiegardt explains how to know when we stand before Perseverance's wall; this is when we only see one door. If the wall has two open doors, then it is the wall of Decision. Finally, when there are many doors, but only one is open, that's the wall of Doubt, and the open door is the door of Fate. Wiegardt's approach is a fantastic way of looking at the options! However, one still needs to learn to recognize, in real life, whether a door is open or locked. The path of the Prokopton teaches precisely that! We can use Stoic doctrines to learn to accept the open door of Fate.

I took the open door of Fate when I accepted the name *Abuelita*. But I'm convinced that my desire to move out of Germany is a desire to open a closed door. Seneca wrote, *"[A] change of soul rather than a change of climate."* A change of soul entails working on one's character, which we use to manage externals. Our character holds our beliefs, but it's the *will* that reinforces those beliefs to become right action. Therefore it's crucial to strengthen the will by adhering to a strict routine of self-discipline. These adjustments can positively influence our actions to amount for our desired evolution—which I argue is the purpose of existing.

I'm just learning to recognize the different kinds of doors in front of me. I cannot tell with complete certainty if the door of "moving out" is open or locked. However, as a practicing Stoic, I want to choose option one consciously. And if I study my past, I can see that Germany is the perfect place for me to evolve. It was the struggle of dealing with the

language, the culture, and loneliness that ultimately led me to Stoicism. In this sense, Germany is what I need. If I look at the last eight years without judgment, all I see is evolution. Ultimately, what I want.

Like Seneca, Marcus also suggests turning inward instead of running away (moving out) to find the cure for our so-called problems. He wrote, *"Men seek retreats for themselves, houses in the country, seashores, and mountains, and you too are wont to desire such things very much. But this is altogether a mark of the most common sort of men, for it is in your power whenever you shall choose to retire into yourself. For nowhere, either with more quiet or more freedom from trouble does a man retire than into his own soul, particularly when he has within him such thoughts that by looking into them he is immediately in perfect tranquility. And I affirm that tranquility is nothing else than the good ordering of the mind. Constantly then give to yourself this retreat, and renew yourself, and let your principles be brief and fundamental, which, as soon as you shall recur to them, will be sufficient to cleanse the soul completely, and to send you back free from all discontent with the things to which you return."* (Meditations 4.3)

The Meditations were an exercise Marcus used to retreat into himself and cultivate right beliefs. Pierre Hadot wrote, *"To repeat the dogmas to oneself, or write them down for oneself, is 'to retreat,' as Marcus says (IV, 3, 1), "not to the countryside, the seashore, or the mountains," but within oneself. It is there that one can find the formulas "which shall renew us.* [10] ”

---

10. Hadot, P., Chase, M. and Marcus Aurelius, 1998. *The Inner Citadel*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, p.38.

Elsewhere Hadot calls the practice of writing to oneself a therapy (*The Inner Citadel*, p. 50). Although I have not yet tried writing my own *hypomnemata* and cannot say anything about its benefits, I plan to work with this format soon. Nevertheless, I have spent many hours using meditation to retreat into myself. Meditation induces gratitude, which I visualize as a force field that begins in the self and expands outward to cover everyone and everything (inspired by Hierocles). Moreover, this force field of gratitude welcomes dispreferred indifferents. Epictetus wrote*, "it is easy to praise Providence for anything that may happen if you have two qualities: a complete view of what has actually happened in each instance and a sense of gratitude. Without gratitude what is the point of seeing, and without seeing what is the object of gratitude?"* (Discourses, 1.6.1–2)

A complete view (the view from above) helps me put into context my encounters with dispreferred indifferents. For example, I have almost no help raising my kids (ages 2 and 4). My family does not live in Germany, and I often wish my circumstances were different. But by actively choosing option one, I'm agreeing with Fate and welcoming the *challenges* that she assigns to me and that belong to this path. Everything is in a constant state of becoming. Seeing life as a moving river can help me embrace those dispreferred indifferents because I understand everything is in flux; annoying indifferents won't last forever.

Today I live in Germany. Tomorrow I may not, or maybe I'll stay here until old age. What a great mystery!

Musonius Rufus taught, *"Even if someone has deprived us of our country, he has not taken away our ability to endure exile."*[11] Fate may have closed the door to move out, but she

---

11. Musonius Rufus, King, C. and Irvine, W., 2011. *Musonius Rufus*. [United States]: Createspace, p.48.

also gave me the strength to endure it. Option one supports that everything that happens contributes to the health of the cosmos, even my own feeling of exile. Therefore, I will gladly accept each challenge handed to me by Fate because it's my choice to *choose* option one. It's my choice to smile at the present moment. As a Stoic in training, I understand it's all I have.

IV. God is Free of Vice

I was 12, and god was angry at me. He shoved me into a closet, but I can't remember why. When he finished punishing me, he cursed and threatened to return even more ferocious next time. After the beating, my upper body ended up purple. I feared god. I feared him for a long time.

"After the discourse concerning gods and country, what other person could one mention first if not one's parents? Hence we must speak about these, whom one would not err in calling as it were second and terrestrial gods, and indeed because of their nearness, if it is lawful to say so, even more to be honored than the gods."[12]

I grew up in Aguada, a small town known as the Vatican of Puerto Rico. In my community, if a girl got pregnant before marriage, she was rejected like a bag of shit. My grandfather would have been the first in line to get rid of such sinners. He was the leader of various movements within the church, and everybody in town knew him well. Grandfather

---

12. Ramelli, I. and Konstan, D., 2014. *Hierocles The Stoic*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, p.83.

raised his kids in a strict Catholic environment, and my father, in turn, raised me in a similar version of that strictness.

In the Vatican of Puerto Rico, one has to play by the church rules or else be thrown to the wolves with all the unmarried pregnant ladies. My dad understood the rules of the game and played it expertly. He is intelligent, astute, and a natural leader, and when my grandfather died in the 1990s, he became the alpha male of a big family. In our sexist conservative town, my dad was a king. Family members used to ask for his advice on all kinds of matters. He had all the answers. To this day, I've never heard him say he was wrong about something. I don't think he believes he is ever wrong. Maybe because people who are wrong in my town are thrown to the wolves, better pretend you are a god.

I always saw my father as a powerful person. He inspires fear. These days if I am not attentive, I would impulsively react fearfully around him. As a boy, I avoided him as much as I could. Once I broke my bike and was so afraid that I hid it for months. I feared he would find the bike and destroy my face. I couldn't sleep well. He finally discovered my broken bike on my birthday, and luckily my mom didn't let him punish me.

The only person who dared confront my dad was my little sister. She publicly left the Catholic Church for the Seventh Day Adventist, shattering the image of my father. My dad was never really a devoted Catholic. Most people weren't; you went to church to be seen in church. Sadly, my dad's image was more important than whatever his daughter was feeling at that moment. Was my dad wrong? Well, to answer this question, we have first to define wrong.

The Stoics agree with Socrates that no one ever does wrong willingly. They act following what they believe to be right[13]. The ignorance of my father contributed to his vicious actions. He couldn't have acted otherwise. Nonetheless, injustice is a vice, and not doing anything about his unjust actions is also an injustice. My father is wrong when he acts unjustly, but as we'll see, his actions cannot harm anyone without their consent.

*"Appropriate actions are largely set by our social relationships. In the case of one's father, this involves looking after him, letting him have his way in everything, and not making a fuss if he is abusive or violent. "But what if he's a bad father? " Do you think you have a *natural affinity only to a good father? "No, just to a father." "Suppose your brother treats you badly. In that case, maintain your fraternal relationship to him. Don't think about why he behaves that way but about what you need to do to keep your will in harmony with nature. No one else, in fact, will harm you without your consent; you will be harmed only when you think you are being harmed. So make a habit of studying your social relationships – with neighbors, citizens, or army officers – and then you will discover the appropriate thing to do." (Enchiridion 30)*

Epictetus would say that my father's abusive and violent acts are not up to me and that his vicious actions cannot harm me without my consent. I believe it. I truly do. But I don't possess the knowledge that: "My father does not hurt me without my consent." I have gathered the information, but I haven't convert it into knowledge. For the Stoics, knowledge doesn't just happen immediately. First, one receives an impression; then, one assents to it. This information now turns into a cognition, which over time, and after the cognition interlaces with other ideas, becomes knowledge. My lack of knowledge may be why I cannot

---

13. Sellars, J., 2006. *Stoicism*. Chesham: Acumen, p.47.

follow Hierocles in calling my dad a god (however, I am all for honoring parents, which I'll discuss in a minute). The following excerpt is disturbing for the reasons above mentioned:

"The most excellent name for our parents was when we called them gods, to this idea we must add another, that we must consider ourselves as kinds of ministers and priests in our home as in a temple, elected and consecrated by nature itself and entrusted with the tendance of our parents."[14]

Nature elected my father for me, and I honor that choice. I honor human evolution and the natural processes that got us to this point. I honor Nature. Moreover, I am a minister, but my god is not my father, my god is Nature, and my temple is not my home; my temple and home is the world. Heraclitus wrote, *"the One is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one (fr. 58)."* From our cosmologist's perspective, my father can be a god as much as everything else can be a god. However, if we define god as a being free of vice, then the Stoic sage is more likely to be a god. By this definition, my dad and everyone else who acts viciously cannot be a god.

Further, I can disobey my father and act right, but I cannot disobey the gods (Stoic god) and act right. Therefore, my father is not a god in the way the Stoic god is a god. Musonius taught, *"If someone refuses to obey a person who is doing something wicked, unjust, or shameful- whether that person is his father, a ruler, or even, by Zeus, a despot- he is not disobeying, and he certainly isn't being unjust or doing something wrong. A*

---

14. Ramelli, I. and Konstan, D., 2014. *Hierocles The Stoic*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, p.83.

disobedient person is one who ignores or disobeys orders that are right, honorable, and beneficial. That is what a disobedient person is."[15]

I honor my father as someone who provided for me and wished for my well-being. My father is the reason I am a musician. He paid for music school, drove me to concerts, and bought me various musical instruments that eventually shaped my life. Each note I played and will ever play carry his name. He planted that seed, and I honor him for those gifts. My honor is a sign of gratitude for those preferred indifferents I received that contributed to my development. However, indifferents are indifferents and in no way related to virtue. My father's actions, both abusive and supportive, were indifferents. The only good lies in my decision to act right toward him and his actions. My detachment from indifferent events, and my focus on what I can do to act right consistently toward them, is the foundation of my Stoic practice. Perhaps one day, when I detach even more from the subjective idea of good and further embrace the virtues as the only good, I may agree with Hierocles that parents are indeed terrestrial gods.

#

15. Musonius Rufus, King, C. and Irvine, W., 2011. *Musonius Rufus*. [United States]: Createspace, pp.65-66.

Conclusion

In this essay, I gravitate toward the Stoic conception of Fate and the thesis of compatibilism to identify: (1) possible right actions toward the Stoic god as Fate, (2) duty toward the country, and (3) moral obligation toward parents.

For the Stoics, Fate is the product of a causal nexus comprising of external and internal causes. Nature controls externals, whereas our character and attitude form internal causes. In Part I, my external and internal causes clashed because my attitude (internal cause) did not align with my external causes; this accounted for distress. To eliminate my affliction, the Stoics suggest aligning my attitude with the will of Universal Nature. It is my choice to decide to find meaning in what Fate assigns me. I can decide to find fulfillment from the circumstances given.

Viktor Frankl wrote that *"what is meant by fulfillment is the fulfillment of meaning rather than fulfillment of the self."* After failing to get an orchestra job for years, I had two choices. Be angry at the gods and the world, or accept Fate gladly and try to make the best of what I got. When I decided to agree with Fate as part of an experiment, I felt Frankl's fulfillment of meaning. I also shifted my attention to see what I can do (glass-half-full point

of view). Because I don't have an orchestra job, I can spend many hours a day with my kids; I can pursue personal projects; I can study Stoicism. Also, I realized I can play an essential role in the evolution of other souls, namely, my students'. I can make it my mission to impact their lives through music and as a listening friend and fellow cosmopolitan citizen of the world.

In writing Part II, I separate myself from my self to see difficult events from the context of the Whole. Stoic cosmology supports that everything is one, and the practice of cosmopolitanism helps All evolve by encouraging its individual parts to care for the health of All. This is what Hierocles' sociable oikeiôsis is all about. In this section, I distinctly called Pneuma, love because I see love as a law that encompasses all things. If the Cosmos is conscious and benevolent, and we are one with It, then, like humans, the Cosmos may exert love to nourish and care for its individual parts helping to ensure its best evolution. However, this is a hypothesis, and like the argument for a providential cosmos, we cannot prove or disprove it concretely. Our job as Stoic philosophers is to come up with our own conclusion and decide which way of thought makes more sense to us.

I delved further into the Stoic conception of Fate in Part III. However, unlike in Part I where I studied Fate from a subjective viewpoint, I proposed an option available to everyone as a result of the wiggle room (free will) we get from the thesis of compatibilism. For the Stoics, our so-called problems are opportunities to practice virtue. By constantly wanting to accept Fate, aim toward right action, fight, grow, and evolve, we begin a pilgrimage toward the ideal of the Stoic sage. Stoics call this the path of the Prokopton. A path that teaches us to stop judging life's events as good or bad and accept them for what they are: mere indifferents, things that just are. Because we are so used to add value judgments to life's indifferents, it becomes challenging to stop judging events. Moreover, some of the things we

consider "bad" are only challenges that belong to the path, helping us evolve. Our cosmologist Heraclitus reminds us that *"Good and bad are one."* (Frag. 56, Burnet)

Lastly, in Part IV, I disagreed with Hierocles that parents are gods, at least in the way the Stoic god is a god. The behavior of parents (and everyone else) is an indifferent to us individually. Parents' actions have nothing to do with how we react to them. For the Stoics, the only good lies in our decision to act right toward their vicious and virtuous actions. On the other hand, I agreed with Hierocles that one should honor one's parents and express gratitude toward the gifts they offer us. Gratitude completes the circle they started when they conceived us and provided for us. It would be unfair not to pay our respects to those who helped us thrive in this world.

#

Over the last three months, I have noticed small changes in my Stoic practice, especially in how I deal with impressions. I'm getting better at stripping impressions bare and distilling them using Stoic doctrines. I catch myself thinking: Is this an indifferent? An opportunity to practice patience? Courage? Compassion? Love? Once I assent to the adequate impression, "bad" emotions don't arise. This practice has been most effective concerning my feeling of exile.

Finally, I conclude that the best I can do with this short time allotted to me is to love All. To love All is to practice selflessness, which usually leads to right and virtuous actions. My former tutor, Dirk Mahling, made me aware of the following excerpt by Lawrence Becker, which fully supports my conclusion.

"Living virtuously is the process of creating a single, spatiotemporal object—a life. A life has a value as an object, as a whole. It is not always the case that its value as an object will be a function of the value of its spatiotemporal parts considered separately. But it is

always the case that an evaluation of the parts will be incomplete until they are understood in the context of the whole life. What seems so clearly valuable (or required or excellent) when we focus on a thin temporal slice of a life (or a single, long strand of a life) may turn out to be awful or optional or vicious when we take a larger view. And it is the life as a whole that we consider when we think about its value in relation to other things, or its value as a part of the cosmos." [16]

16. Becker, L., 2001. *A New Stoicism*. Princeton University Press, p.20.

Bibliography

Arrian, 1944. *Discourses of Epictetus,* trans. T. Higgenson. Walter J. Black.

Aurelius, M., 1964. *Meditations,* trans. M. Staniforth. Penguin Books.

Becker, L., 2001. *A New Stoicism*. Princeton University Press.

Burnet, J., 1908. *Early Greek Philosophy*. 2nd ed. London: Adams and Charles Black, pp.146-156.

En.wikipedia.org. 2020. *Apatheia*. [online] Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apatheia> [Accessed 14 September 2020].

Frankl, V., 2014. *The Will To Meaning*. Plume.

Graver, M., 2009. *Stoicism And Emotion*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.

Hadot, P., Chase, M. and Marcus Aurelius, 1998. *The Inner Citadel*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Hierocles, Ramelli, I., Konstan, D., Stobaeus., Suidas, 2009. *Elements Of Ethics, Fragments And Excerpts*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

Musonius Rufus, King, C. and Irvine, W., 2011. *Musonius Rufus*. [United States]: Createspace.

Sellars, J., 2006. *Stoicism*. Chesham: Acumen.

Seneca, L., 1977. *Letters from a Stoic,* trans. R. Campbell. Penguin Books.

Wiegardt, E., 2018. *Right And Wrong*. [online] Collegeofstoicphilosophers.org. Available at: <http://collegeofstoicphilosophers.org/show_book/PDF/eJournal26> [Accessed 16 July 2020].