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STOIC FORGIVENESS

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1. Introduction: Getting into the Stoic Perspective

Consider two pictures of the world:

- A In general, people behave pretty decently to each other. We all know what is right and wrong, and can be expected to act accordingly. Our social norms are well established, so breaches of those norms are met with surprise and indignation. People who frequently or seriously violate our norms are ostracized. We understand well enough what leads to a happy and fulfilling life, so we are appropriately invested in most of our projects and others should respect them. Nobody is perfect, but we should focus our energies on surrounding ourselves with supportive people who can be trusted, and avoid toxic people who wrong us and those we care about.
- B In general, people are broken and don't treat each other nearly as well as they should. Stories of betrayal, injustice, and violence are the daily norm, while truly inspiring figures are few and far between. People care disproportionately about money, status, image, and power, all of which ultimately bring various forms of mental distress. To some extent, it's not our fault—most people have accepted the story of happiness and success our society tells us. Nonetheless, it is possible to revise our priorities to find a deeper happiness and live in harmony with others (hard as this may be). Importantly, the fact that other people act badly does not lessen our obligation to care for them.

What is the role of the emotions in each of these worldviews? In the first view, emotions like anger frequently mark unacceptable deviations from our social norms, especially those behaviors that violate our moral status and undermine the projects that we rightly value (Strawson 2008). These emotions signal transgressions and alert others to moral threats (Hieronymi 2001, 546). In the second view, emotions are often manifestations of a misguided value system. People get angry when their sports team loses, become bitter when they don't get the promotion they think they deserve, are frustrated when the person they're dating doesn't put out, and sink into despair when the stock market crashes. Of course, both worldviews will nuance the picture—but note the connection between the emotions and our values in each case. In the first instance, our emotions reflect commitments that we rightly hold and should defend; in the second, they are another symptom of a sick society (Nussbaum 1994).

What, then, is the role of forgiveness in each of these systems? In the first view, we need forgiveness when a wrong has been done but the person should no longer be subject to our censure. The paradigm case is when the wrongdoer has apologized, has recognized and sincerely regrets their wrong, and has provided adequate reason for thinking they won't wrong us again; we thus choose not to hold their wrongdoing against them. This is a common way to think about forgiveness (e.g. Allais 2008; Griswold 2007; Hieronymi 2001; Konstan 2010, 2012). But what is the role of forgiveness in the second system? This latter worldview will likely resonate with those who see forgiveness as a necessary response to a depraved world and who see forgiving broken people as an important part of loving them (Pettigrove 2012); we should not wait until people have proven themselves worthy, for no such day will come. More importantly, if we have any hope of being loved by others then we must hope that they will forgive *us* too. We forgive others, then, in solidarity and recognition that we are all imperfect (Garrard & McNaughton 2016).

The Stoics would also say the second worldview is closer to the truth (see Seneca, *On Benefits*, I.10.1). Although they are theists (technically, pantheists or panentheists; Baltzly 2003) and make a number of normative claims about human nature, the Stoic views on forgiveness fall out of a more general ethical framework that can easily be adopted by non-theists. Moreover, the Stoics provide good reasons for doubting some key assumptions about forgiveness that arise in the contemporary philosophical literature, insofar as that literature frequently assumes the appropriateness of a roughly Strawsonian reactive attitudes framework—i.e. a framework where we register, appreciate, and respond to wrongdoing through emotions like anger, resentment, disappointment, and disgust. Here I motivate a Stoic conception of forgiveness, showing how a philosophical system can make forgiveness central while denying that most instances of anger and resentment are justified. Specifically, I highlight four common assumptions that the Stoics would consider problematic: first, that forgiveness is opposed to justice; second, that anger and resentment are necessary for registering wrongdoing; third, that anger and resentment are generally reliable at tracking the severity of wrongdoing; fourth, that reconciliation with wrongdoers is an option rather than an imperative of virtue. Insofar as the Stoics provide defensible and compelling alternatives to these positions, Stoicism offers a number of philosophical resources to re-conceptualize common ways we think about forgiveness.¹

2. Forgiveness and Justice

Intuitively, forgiveness is an alternative to giving a justified punishment. If you wrong me, I can hold you accountable and demand that you suffer the consequences for what you did—or I can forgive you, canceling the moral debt you owe and wiping the slate clean (Allais 2008; Calhoun 1992, 84; Twambley 1976, 89; Warmke 2014). Both courses of action seem like options a virtuous person might rightly choose; thus, the competing demands of justice and forgiveness can be seen as generating indeterminacy within virtue ethical frameworks or as occasions to manifest moral personality. Especially in complex cases, as in the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, it is not obvious that those who encouraged forgiveness were mistaken to do so, but neither did those who called for justice display a defect in character. Virtuous agents might reasonably disagree. One assumption in this way of presenting the options, though, is that forgiveness *cancel*s the wrongdoer's moral debt: I cannot both forgive you *and* punish you; my seeking your punishment is evidence that I haven't forgiven you.

The Stoics reject both that forgiveness is opposed to justice and that to be forgiving entails *canceling* a moral debt. To some extent, this is motivated on doctrinal grounds: the Stoics believe in the unity of the virtues, so for any character trait to be a virtue it has to be shown that it coheres with the others. For forgiveness, the challenge is to show that it does not contradict justice.

The unity of justice and forgiveness in Stoicism can be seen most clearly in Seneca's *On Clemency*. While it has been argued that they are distinct concepts from forgiveness (Allais 2008, 47–8; Konstan 2010, 14; Murphy and Hampton 1998, 21), clemency and mercy are considerations to which a forgiving person attends, and we can learn about how forgiveness is integrated with other virtues in Stoicism by exploring related conceptual terrain (Morton 2012, 4).² *On Clemency* was written for the young emperor Nero (before he became notorious) and stresses the importance of mercy for a ruler, likening a forgiving emperor to a good father and even to God (I.14–16; I.19.9). Clemency is not opposed to justice, but to harshness and cruelty on the one hand, and to leniency on the other (I.13; II.4.1–3; II.7). Seneca stresses that those who break the law should not simply be exculpated for their crimes, as justice requires punishing law-breakers (II.7.1–3). But how can Seneca hold *both* that clemency involves not exacting a justified punishment *and* that justice must always be done? How is it possible to be at once forgiving and just (Garrard & McNaughton 2016, 32–7, 62; Braund 2012, 92–4)?

The key move in Seneca's approach is to draw on the distinction between retributive conceptions and ameliorative (or restorative) conceptions of punishment. The goal of retributive punishment (*timōria*) is to take revenge and inflict harm upon the wrongdoer, whereas the goal of ameliorative punishment (*kolasis*) is to improve the character of wrongdoer (Allen 2000; Dover 1991, 177; McCord-Adams 1991, 297–98). Aristotle marks the difference by defining retributive punishment as for the sake of the person who suffered, whereas ameliorative punishment is for the sake of the person who did the wrong (*Rhetoric* 1369b12–14). This distinction can be seen in a story approvingly reported by both Musonius Rufus and Epictetus:

When a young man who had injured Lycurgus' eye was sent by the people to be punished [*timōrēsaito*] in whatever way Lycurgus wanted, he did not punish him. He instead both educated him and made him a good man, after which he led him to the theater.... "This person I received from you as an unruly and violent individual. I give him back to you as a good man and proper citizen."³

(*Sayings*, 39=Epictetus, *Fragment 5*=Stobaeus 3.19.13)

Though two people may perform the same crime, the states of their character may be different such that one of the people could be improved by a more gentle approach whereas the other requires harsher measures. Clemency is the relevant virtue for identifying those circumstances in which a more gentle approach would be beneficial and for judging what the best course of action is going forward. The clement king is like a forgiving judge: a forgiving judge will need to give out harsher penalties on particular occasions, but they are rightly said to be forgiving insofar as they are *disposed* to give lighter penalties and benefit others in doing so (*Letters* 81.6–8, 15–17; Inwood 2005). Seneca even goes so far as to say that, "it is a fault to punish a crime in full" (*On Clemency*, fragment 2; Nussbaum 1994, 427; Calhoun 1992, 85–6). So you cannot be virtuously forgiving without also being just, and you cannot be virtuously just without also being merciful.

Here we see a conception of forgiveness that doesn't presuppose that a forgiving person has to *cancel* debts but that nonetheless shows a more nuanced attitude toward the punishments a person may justifiably impose. Seneca demonstrates this forgiving disposition by reference to good parents:

So what is [the emperor's] duty? Is it that of good parents, who as a rule admonish their children sometimes gently, sometimes with threats, and on some occasions even chastise them with a flogging. Does anyone in his right mind disinherit a son for his first offence? Surely not! Only when his patience has been overcome by many serious wrongs, only when he fears something worse than he reprimanded, does he resort to the decisive pen [i.e. disinheritance].

Before that, he will try any number of measures to retrieve a character that is still wavering and is already in a worse position. Only when the case is hopeless does he resort to extreme measures. No one arrives at the point of inflicting punishments without exhausting all available remedies first. That is how a parent ought to act—and an emperor too.

(*On Clemency* I.14.1–2; *trans Braund*; see also *On Anger* I.6.1–4)

Just as parents recognize that children should not be subjected to harsh punishments when they first commit wrongdoing, so too should emperors recognize the different states of character in their subjects. For subjects who are otherwise good but have nonetheless gone astray, more gentle punishments are due; for recalcitrant and difficult subjects, harsh punishments may be justified (I.22.1). According to Seneca, then, we shouldn't think that justice looks only to the crime and not to the character. Rather, a good judge will consider the person who committed the crime holistically, and determine what is best on the basis of all available psychological evidence (Inwood 2005, 206–10).

While a legal statute or social norm may determine that some harm is the penalty for a particular crime, the forgiving judge will decide that a different and more gentle punishment is right because it will be more beneficial for the person being punished. The punishment is forgiving seen relative to the harsher punishments that could have been justified—not to the total cancellation of debts or exaction of punishment altogether. Conceiving of clemency in terms of a kind of gentleness thus preserves the connection between forgiveness and justice, for ameliorative justice is being done even though a less forgiving or objectionably cruel judge would have prescribed retributive penalties.

Understanding clemency as a kind of gentleness in the administration of justice explains further aspects of Seneca's treatise. First, it explains why he urges clemency as an antidote to harshness and cruelty, and second, it explains why clemency also avoids the vice of leniency. Seneca exhorts Nero to aim for clemency because there is a temptation to act cruelly in the name of justice. Those who claim they are enacting retributivist justice may in fact be acting harshly, vengefully, or maliciously. Seneca's point is that we, not being wise, are subject to errors in how things appear to us. We may *think* we are acting justly, but if we are disposed to enact retributivist penalties or to impose maximal punishments, we will systematically go wrong. A better strategy, then, is to aim to be more forgiving, looking first to give gentle reformative punishments and only resorting to harsher and more extreme penalties as a last option for people who have no hope of living safely in community with others.⁴ Thus, forgiveness is a good disposition to cultivate to ensure that non-sages act more justly; cruelty is often done in the name of justice and clemency prevents us going wrong in this way.

Nonetheless, by noting that *some* punishment is properly part of clemency, Seneca is also showing how we avoid the correlate vice of leniency. Forgiving people are sometimes labeled as spineless pushovers in instances where debts are *completely* canceled or offenders experience *no* consequences for their wrongdoing. Seneca would think that such people are excessively gentle, calling them weak, feeble, and cowardly.⁵ Good parents would not jump to punish their children harshly, but neither would they let them get away with wrongdoing. Thus, the inclusion of clemency *within* the concept of justice saves the Stoic conception of forgiveness from critiques of forgiveness as a pseudo-virtue of the powerless.⁶

3. Resentment, Anger, and Registering Wrongdoing

I began by explaining the Stoic view on clemency and justice to make clear that the Stoics think that wrongdoing requires a response. This response should manifest a kind of Aristotelian mean, being neither cruel nor excessively lenient, and can be seen as forgiving insofar as sympathetic

judgments about human fallibility partially determine what the most just course of action is going forward.⁷ The main role of forgiveness in Stoicism, however, is in overcoming anger. The Stoics prescribe an interesting division of ethical labor: insofar as *reason* takes over the role of registering wrongdoing, deciding how best to respond to it, and providing the motivation to act, anger is at best a superfluous feature of our moral psychology and is regularly a corrupting feature (Pettigrove & Tanaka 2014). Thus, with reason performing the functions we normally expect anger to fulfill, we should work on extirpating anger. For this, forgiveness takes center stage.

Overcoming or foreswearing anger is included in many conceptions of forgiveness. Your forgiving me is *partly constituted* by the fact that you are no longer angry or that you are now making a conscious effort to quell your anger. We tend to think, in accordance with the reactive attitudes framework of ethics, that our *anger* is how we register that a wrong has been done and how we communicate that the wrongdoing or the wrongdoer still poses a kind of threat, someone who can't be trusted or of whom we should be wary (Hieronymi 2001, 546–8). Forgiveness is what happens when that anger is no longer justified.

The Stoics recognize that forgiveness is a powerful antidote for anger and there is a connection between the Stoic advice to remove anger and their exhortations to forgive each other. But, by contrast, they also think that *reason alone* should recognize the demands of justice and provides sufficient motivating force to act—anger at best corrupts those judgments and pushes us in dangerous, counterproductive directions. Note, then, how the normative labor is divided up: *reason* and *justice* process the wrongs that have been done and determine the best way of rectifying the situation, but *forgiveness* helps us overcome the feelings of hostility, resentment, and anger we are nonetheless prone to feel in the wake of wrongdoing. The Stoics thus sever the connection between the judgment of wrongdoing and anger.

It was as commonplace in the ancient world as it is now to claim that anger is a powerful motivating force to counter injustice. But Seneca's view is that anything anger can do, reason can do better. He doesn't deny that anger can motivate—of course it can. His response is that anger does not *consistently* motivate us *well* and that reason is a superior psychological force:

“But some people control themselves when they're angry.” Is it the case, then, that they do nothing that anger dictates, or something? If nothing, then clearly anger is not needed for getting things done—the reason that you were summoning its assistance, as though it had some capacity more robust than reason.... Is anger more powerful than reason, or weaker? If stronger, how will reason be able to set a limit on it, since as a rule only weaker entities are obedient? If weaker, then reason is sufficient in itself to get things done, without anger, and doesn't look for the weaker party's aid.

(*On Anger* I.8.4–5; trans. Kaster & Nussbaum)

Here Seneca responds to the Aristotelian claim that in decent people anger is felt but doesn't dominate. This is a powerful argumentative strategy insofar as everyone agrees that anger can become harmful when excessive. But Seneca's dilemma for Aristotle is that *either* anger cannot be restrained (in which case there is nothing preventing it becoming bad) *or* it can be restrained, and it is restrained by reason (in which case reason is stronger than anger and shouldn't need anger's help). If the interlocutor takes the first option, anger should be extirpated because it is uncontrollable and dangerous; if the second, anger is at best superfluous.

Couldn't it be that anger is a necessary source of motivation, though, even if it is ultimately led by reason? Seneca refutes this line of argument by appealing to central cases where the agent is not angry, but is clearly acting justly. “A good judge,” he writes, “condemns things worthy of reproof, he doesn't hate them” (I.16.6). Judges dedicate their lives to the justice system, and their job primarily consists in determining appropriate punishments or corrections for people who have

acted unjustly. Surely, then, if anyone appreciates the gravity of injustice, it is a good judge. And yet, we don't expect judges to get angry at every unjust person they encounter—to do so would be both psychologically exhausting and undermine the importance of what we call judicial temperament. The example of a good judge is thus central to understanding the Stoic view on anger and injustice: the judge acts to rectify injustice but does not get angry. Moreover, there are other analogies we can use to help motivate Seneca's case: soldiers and law enforcement officers perform their jobs badly when they are filled with hatred; doctors quickly break down if they grieve every death; parents need to recognize when their children have done wrong, but needn't experience anger to set them right.

Thus, while it is often the case that we would normally show our appreciation and recognition of wrongdoing with an emotional response, Seneca's point is that those emotions are not necessary for that appreciation;⁸ rather, the Stoic recognizes injustice with reason alone and then shows their commitment to rectifying that injustice with action:

So a good man won't become angry upon seeing an injustice done to those he cares about? No, he will not become angry, but he'll be their champion and defender. Why are you afraid that a proper sense of devotion won't goad him sufficiently, even without anger?... A good man will follow up his obligations undisturbed and undeterred.... If my father is being killed, I will defend him; if he has been killed, I will see the matter to a proper conclusion—because I know that's right, not because I feel a grievance.

(*On Anger* 1.12.1–2; see also *On Benefits* II.35.2)

Because the Stoics deny that we have to get angry in order to fight injustice, we would be making a mistake in letting those emotions permeate our psyche. We should act not because we are so worked up that we have to do something but because we recognize that it is the right thing to do. Seneca thus concludes this line of argument by stating:

The fine and worthy thing is to come forward in defense of one's parents, children, friends, and fellow citizens with one's sense of obligation actually leading the way, and to do so willingly, deliberately, and prudently, not impulsively and furiously.

(*On Anger* I.12.5)

In sum, then, the Stoics argue that anger is at best a superfluous piece of psychological machinery; we don't need anger to appreciate or respond to injustice, so we should overcome and forswear our anger while simultaneously working to rectify unjust situations. But as things stand, this verdict understates the Stoic position on the evaluative status of anger, so let us now turn to some of their arguments for why anger is not only unnecessary, but a thorough corruption of the mind and actively harmful as a psychological force.

4. Anger as Distorted Judgment: Expectation, Surprise, and Emotional Freshness

Contemporary writers who discuss anger and forgiveness often build in a “justified” condition on anger (Allais 2008, 36; Calhoun 1992, 77–9; Hieronymi 2001, 530). There's an obvious reason for this: even the staunchest pro-anger philosophers aren't going to say that you should be angry when your new puppy makes a mess on the floor or when your tea is served a touch on the cold side. But the Stoics make an important contribution in pointing out how often this “justified” condition isn't satisfied. They note how easily anger is prompted and magnified by considerations that *even by our own standards* are irrational; in particular, much of our anger comes about because we have incorrect expectations about the world, because we value things

disproportionately, especially when they affect us personally, or because the wrongdoing is recent, leading to a phenomenon the Stoics call “emotional freshness” (Graver 2007, 28, 42–3, 66, 78–9). Recognizing these considerations is important insofar as it shows why forgiveness, understood as involving overcoming one’s anger, will be much more common than might otherwise be supposed.

For the Stoics, emotions depend on and are primarily constituted by judgments. But they noticed that the same judgment could produce different affective states depending on the circumstances. Most notably, our emotions are strongest right after the triggering event occurred. This is why they built into their definitions of the particular emotions a “freshness” condition. For example, distress is a *fresh* belief that some evil is present and that it is appropriate to be pained by it (Stobaeus, *Eclogae*, 2.7.10b). The same judgment that causes you distress now may not bother you at all once the initial freshness has passed.

What is significant is how much of our anger and distress can be caused and exacerbated by freshness and related psychological conditions, like the fact that the event was unexpected or affected you personally. Cicero, reporting Chrysippus’ view, explains some of the various factors that can influence the force of emotions:

What is unforeseen strikes us with greater force. But there is more to it than that. It is true that a sudden assault of the enemy creates rather more confusion than an expected one, and that a sudden storm at sea strikes more fear into those on shipboard than if they saw it coming, and there are many similar cases. But if you were to study such events carefully and scientifically, what you would find, quite simply, is that when things happen suddenly, they invariably seem more serious than they otherwise would. There are two reasons for this. First, there is not enough time to gauge the seriousness of what is happening. Second, we sometimes think that if we had foreseen what was to happen, we might have been able to prevent it, and then our distress is keener because compounded with guilt. Thus the cause of distress is not solely that the events are unexpected. Such an event may indeed strike a heavier blow, but what makes it seem more serious is not merely the unexpectedness of it. The reason is rather that the event is fresh in one’s mind.

(Tusculan Disputations, III.52)

Certain events seem more serious when they are fresh, when we don’t have time to get perspective on their gravity, when they are unexpected, and we think we might have been able to avoid them. What this means is that two people suffering the same misfortune could react very differently on account of a host of other beliefs and character traits that influence their responses.

In plain terms, things always seem worse when they first happen, and we more easily accept misfortunes as a part of life with the passing of time. The Stoics exploit this point to great effect, as we don’t often think that this later judgment is mistaken. It may seem at the time as though we’ll never be happy again when an important relationship ends, but we are right to realize later that a good life is still possible. Cicero, reporting the Stoic view in his *Tusculan Disputations*, argues that what time does slowly, reason can do quickly (III.58; see also III.53–54, 74). When we are struck with misfortune or someone wrongs us, we can either wait for time to change our judgment about its seriousness and effect on our life, or we can use reason now to come to the same judgment we would get to eventually. The Stoics thus challenged Aristotelians, who claimed that anger is a fitting response to injustice, to explain why their anger should ever cease (cf. Callard 2019; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, III.74, IV.39). If the judgment was correct a year ago that you were seriously wronged and that this merited anger, then either it is still correct now and so you should *still* be angry, or it was never correct and you should *never* have been angry.⁹ Their point is that we usually realize after some time (once the surprise and freshness have worn off) that we were either not

seriously harmed or that our anger was not merited, and so we might as well reason our way to that judgment as soon as we can.

Seneca thus recommends pausing before acting on anger, as anger will likely subside with time:

No one says to himself, ‘Wait a minute’—yet the greatest remedy for anger is postponement, so that its initial ardor might slacken and the darkness that overwhelms the mind might either pass or be less thick.... Whenever you want to know the character of a thing, entrust the job to time: no careful discriminations are made in flux.

(*On Anger*, III.12.4)

Because anger distorts our judgments in the moment, if we want to have a clear perspective on the matter, we often need to wait. Importantly, Seneca also offers this advice because it is difficult to forgive right away:

Ask [anger], at the outset, not to forgive but to deliberate: its first assaults do the damage, but if it waits it will back off. Don’t try to uproot it all at once: it will be overcome entirely while you pluck it away bit by bit.

(*On Anger II.29.1*)

Thus, overcoming one’s anger is the goal, but Seneca realizes that this is difficult given the powerful distorting effects of freshness on our reactive attitudes. Forgiveness comes easier once we have time to gain perspective.

But time isn’t the only distorting force the Stoics recognize. They also note that our more general expectations about what the world is like and what we think we deserve affect our emotional responses. It is easiest to get a grip on this idea using some examples from Epictetus. Notoriously, he writes:

With regard to everything that is a source of delight to you, or is useful to you, or of which you are fond, remember to keep telling yourself what kind of thing it is, starting with the most insignificant. If you’re fond of a jug, say, ‘This is a jug that I’m fond of,’ and then, if it gets broken, you won’t be upset. If you kiss your child or your wife, say to yourself that it is a human being that you’re kissing; and then, if one of them should die, you won’t be upset.

(*Handbook*, 3; *trans. Hard*)

Epictetus is *not* saying here that we should think of our loved ones like a jug, nor is he saying that their passing should affect us as much as a chipped plate. Rather, he is prompting us to bring to mind a relatively trivial object *of which we are fond*, and are thus likely to overreact when something happens to it. We know our favorite coffee mug will break eventually, as that is what is the nature of ceramic objects that we use frequently. But by telling ourselves what kind of thing a mug is, we can set realistic expectations about what is likely to happen to it.

Epictetus relates a similar thought regarding the circumstances we are likely to find ourselves in:

When you’re about to embark on any action, remind yourself what kind of action it is. If you’re going out to take a bath, set before your mind the things that happen at the baths, that people splash you, that people knock up against you, that people steal from you. And you’ll thus undertake the action in a surer manner if you say to yourself at the outset, ‘I want to take a bath and ensure at the same time that my choice remains in harmony with nature.’

(*Handbook*, 4)

People get splashed at public pools, and you would be a fool to be angered by this, given the nature of public pools and moral seriousness of getting wet (consider also: people getting angry at traffic or flight delays at airports). These cases are uncontroversial. But from the more mundane judgments, we *then* are supposed to work up to forming realistic expectations about things we care about much more than jugs, like our family and loved ones, applying the same logic. We know that human beings get sick and die eventually, so we should prepare ourselves for when—not if—that happens. This mental preparation for future misfortunes and eventualities, the Stoics claim, will lessen the emotional impact of the event when it occurs (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* III.52–61). What is important for us to note is how our reactions can be altered by our adjacent expectations. One person may become furious at a transgression, while another may see it as part of the predictable course of the day. We cannot then judge the seriousness of the transgression by looking at the anger in isolation from the other beliefs that influence it.

To take another Stoic example, people become much angrier and more distressed when the transgression affects them personally. Epictetus notes the different way in which we treat our own case, and the advice we give to others, pointing out that the advice we give to others is a much better guide to the way things really are:

The will of nature may be learned from those events in life in which we don't differ from one another. For instance, when someone else's slave-boy breaks a cup, we're ready at once to say, 'That's just one of those things.' So you should be clear, then, that if your own cup gets broken, you ought to react in exactly the same way as when someone else's does.

(Handbook, 26)

We're not *lying* when we tell our friends that the wine stain on the couch doesn't matter, or when we say that job rejections are par for the course and that they shouldn't be taken to heart. But we are often bad at following our own advice and frequently take our own situation more seriously than that of others. This means that our own anger and distress are further exacerbated because we are the ones affected. Despite how personal the wrongdoing is, the Stoics urge us to think about the matter objectively and impartially.

In sum, we often realize later that our earlier reactions were unjustified. Contemporary philosophers, then, have missed an important part of describing the practice of forgiveness by bracketing off concerns about unjustified anger (e.g. Hieronymi 2001, 538). It is precisely because *anger feels justified in the moment*, often made to appear more serious by extraneous considerations, that we need to remind ourselves to be forgiving; otherwise, we will regret the anger and the actions that flow from it later. From a purely conceptual perspective, forgiveness in response to unjustified anger is not a paradigm case, but in the real world, where the worth of our anger is often distorted, it very much is (McCord-Adams 1991, 293).

All that being said, it is one thing to claim that you don't need to be angry to register wrongdoing and that anger is often a source of distortion, but it is quite another to claim that you should forgive those whom you *rightly* recognize have wronged you, and have wronged you in a morally serious way. Let us turn, then, to consider someone with impeccable epistemic credentials and then ask whether the Stoics think that they too should forgive wrongdoers.

5. The Imperative to Reconcile

So far we've seen that the Stoics think that we should respond to injustice, but that we don't need to get angry to respond well, and that we are often angered more easily than we should be. Now we'll consider the strongest claim that Seneca makes about forgiveness, namely that we should forgive everyone all at once. This claim is motivated by two sets of considerations: first, that all

human beings are broken and imperfect, and second, that our social nature means that we should live together in a state of mutual cooperation and harmony. Because our making mistakes and acting unvirtuously is inevitable, but there is nevertheless an imperative to reconcile with others, forgiveness is the only solution. The Stoic approach to forgiveness here is at odds with a number of contemporary assumptions: because virtue *requires* that we forgive others, forgiveness is not elective nor a “gift” (Allais 2008, 37; Calhoun 1992, 76–7, 79, 81; Fricker, 2019; Twambley 1976, 90); more significantly, forgiveness needn’t be preceded by an apology or a sincere change of heart from the wrongdoer (Griswold 2007, 47–59; Hieronymi 2001, 549; Konstan 2010, 7–13; 2012, 17; Sherman 2005, 83). Because people acting unvirtuously is the rule and not the exception, the Stoics would say that it is naïve to wait until people have changed their ways before forgiving them.

The Stoics have a normative conception of the world and human nature, such that we are all citizens of the same cosmic city and we should work together in cooperation for the sake of the whole. This can be seen most clearly in a beloved passage from Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*:

Say to yourself first thing in the morning: I shall meet with people who are meddling, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, and unsociable. They are subject to these faults because of their ignorance of what is good and bad. But I have recognized the nature of the good and seen that it is the right [i.e. virtue], and the nature of the bad seen that it is the wrong [i.e. vice], and the nature of the wrongdoer himself, and seen that he is related to me, not because he has the same blood or seed, but because he shares in the same mind and portion of divinity. So I cannot be harmed by any of them, as no one will involve me in what is wrong. Nor can I be angry with my relative or hate him. We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth. So to work against each other is contrary to nature; and resentment and rejection count as working against someone.
(Meditations II.1, trans. Gill)

There is an important sequence to Marcus’ logic here. First, he sets realistic expectations about the kind of behavior he can expect to encounter during the day; then he thinks about the psychological causes of this behavior, focusing here on human ignorance about the good (cf. XI.18 for a richer psychology); finally, he reminds himself of our social condition and the goal of cooperation, working together harmoniously as parts in a whole. Anger is contrary to each of these stages, as we shouldn’t be angered by what we expected, by people acting out of ignorance, or at people whom we should be helping (Pettigrove 2012, 66).¹⁰

Marcus’ writing closely mirrors an earlier passage from *On Anger*, in which Seneca explicitly connects wrongdoing with the human condition (II.10.6–8; see also I.5.2–3). Seneca explains that virtue is astonishingly rare and unvirtuous people will wrong us, but this isn’t an excuse to give up on others. Rather, he says our job is to help as best we can, like a doctor treating a sickness or a sailor trying to plug a leak, and this burden falls on everyone equally. Seneca knows fighting vice is a never-ending battle; realistically, the goal is not to make wrongdoing cease—this is impossible—but to try to minimize it and stop it from overpowering the good.

How does forgiveness fit into this picture? Once we truly understand human beings in all their ignorance and vice but also understand our ethical responsibilities to each other, we must forgive everyone:

To keep from becoming angry with individuals you must forgive all at once: the human race should be granted a pardon. If you become angry with young men and old men because they do wrong, then be angry with infants: they’re going to do wrong. Surely no one becomes angry with children of an age incapable of drawing distinctions, do they? Being human is a greater excuse, and more just, than being a child. These are the terms and stipulations of our

birth: we are creatures subject to no fewer diseases of mind than of body, neither dull nor slow, to be sure, but misusing our acuity, all of us offering each other examples of vices.... What eliminates a wise man's anger? The great crowd of wrongdoers. He understands how unjust it is—and how dangerous—to be angry with a vice that is pandemic.

(*On Anger*, II.10.2–4; see also *On Benefits*, V.17.3; *Marcus Aurelius, Meditations*, IX.42)

Here forgiveness is directly linked with the foreswearing of anger, and it is prompted by the recognition that we owe the same compassion to all human beings that we show to children. As we saw in *On Clemency*, it is not that we ignore the errors of the young, but rather we gently seek to correct and improve them. This is how the Stoics think that we should approach all instances of wrongdoing, and anger is counterproductive for improving others and motivating ourselves to work for their benefit.

That we should have the benefit of others as a goal is not optional. We too easily think of ourselves as atomistic individuals who enter in relationships at will, and with only those people who have shown themselves worthy of love and trust. In such a framework, when someone wrongs us, they signal that they do not value the relationship in the way that we do, and thus that the costs we are incurring for them may not be justified. The Stoics reject this framework outright (Seneca, *On Benefits*, IV.18.2–4). The teeth do not demand that the hands contribute equally, nor should the feet complain that their burden is heavier than that of the arms. The point, instead, is to consider the nature of the whole and to look to one's own roles and to how the parts can best work together (Gill 1988). But because the other parts are other people in the world, to whom we are connected by our very nature as humans, forgiveness is not optional. We cannot work harmoniously with others if we are angry with them, so we must forgive each other so that we can live together (cf. Wolf 2011).

Stoic forgiveness, then, is not conditioned on a sincere apology or change of heart. It is possible to infer from this absence that the Stoics simply do not have a concept of forgiveness (Konstan 2010, 11). But it is also possible that they reject that people should have to be remorseful or become better before being worthy of our forgiveness. If the baseline we can expect is that people will make mistakes, hurt us, and we will do the same to them, then we simply cannot wait until people are virtuous before entering into relationships with them—we have to work with how they are now, expecting that they will do wrong (Cornell 2017; cf. Hieronymi 2001, 530–1). Consequently, we needn't think that someone's wrongdoing doesn't reflect who they *really* are before forgiving them (Calhoun 1992, 95–6; cf. Allais 2008, 51, 57; Murphy & Hampton 1988, 24).

Even if we don't fully buy into the Stoic picture of widespread vice, contemporary virtue ethicists should still be skeptical of the framework of character reformation that is implied in much of the forgiveness literature. Character traits go “all the way down” and rapid changes are more likely apparent than real—or at least call for special explanations, like a powerful religious experience on the road to Damascus (Hursthouse 1999, 12). Thus, given that character and habits are formed over long periods of time and are not easily altered, if someone apologizes by saying that they've changed and won't do it again, most of the time we shouldn't believe them (cf. Konstan 2010, 17). More charitably, the Stoic might interpret such apologies as a recognition of the human condition and a welcome gesture of goodwill, but they will not adjust their expectations of that person's behavior in any substantial way. From this perspective, then, apologies are much less important for Stoic forgiveness than they might otherwise be. While they might communicate a recognition of the error and a renewed commitment to do better, apologies should not be taken as evidence that the person has turned over a new leaf or that they won't act badly in the future. Of course others will act badly, but so will we. With any luck, we can somehow help each other improve anyway.

6. Conclusion

From within the Stoics' distinctive ethical worldview, which emphasizes widespread and consistent wrongdoing, various contemporary assumptions about forgiveness and anger aren't as obvious as they might otherwise appear. We needn't think of forgiveness as opposed to justice; anger is not necessary for registering wrongdoing, nor is it necessarily a reliable guide to the seriousness of wrongdoings; forgiveness for the sake of reconciliation (even before an apology) is required if unvirtuous people have any hope of living together. If, then, the Stoic worldview has something going for it, we might reasonably rethink some of the central terms of the forgiveness debate.

It has been difficult to write this chapter, as I can literally hear coming through my window the shouts from people protesting police brutality and systemic racism. They are very angry, and the wrongs they have suffered are painfully personal. As a historian of philosophy, my job is to present the Stoic views in the most accurate and philosophically compelling ways I can, and it is true that the Stoics would claim that even the anger of the oppressed should be minimized and extirpated. But they would hasten to add that the greater blame falls on those doing the oppressing, as oppressive people and institutions are the sources of injustice and thus the cause of the social disharmony. A Stoic would say that you can be happy and control your anger in situations of oppression, but it is also much harder for a person to respond virtuously in such circumstances, and so it is wrong to put others in that situation when it could be avoided. The main task of Stoic political philosophy, for example, is to determine and bring about the conditions in which people are most likely to progress toward virtue and act rightly. While anger is an impediment to reconciliation, wronging others in such a way that prompts them to feel anger is the more serious error.¹¹ *First* we must all strive to act virtuously, but when we inevitably fall short, *then* forgiveness plays a central role.

The Stoic view of forgiveness may seem overly permissive, failing to appreciate the moral importance of apology and reform. I hope to have motivated an alternative view, built on taking human fallibility very seriously. Given that all of us will go wrong repeatedly and anger often exacerbates our wrongdoings, we must be less harsh in our punishments, less attached to our anger, and strive toward justice and reconciliation, not only with those people who have shown beyond reasonable doubt that they are no longer a "threat," but with the very people who will inevitably wrong us again and whom we will inevitably wrong. This is a generous attitude to forgiveness, but perhaps it is the natural consequence of thinking that imperfect people must live with one another.¹²

Notes

- 1 I respond indirectly to Konstan (2010), who argues persuasively that the Stoics have no conception of forgiveness. Though an adequate response will take more space than I have, I provide some reasons for thinking that Konstan's understanding of forgiveness is too narrow and ill fits the Stoics' revisionary ethical views.
- 2 Parts of *On Clemency* make it seem like Seneca endorses clemency but not forgiveness (esp. II.7.1), but this translation choice in part relies on the assumption that to forgive means to abandon what justice requires. Readers should know that there are difficult lexical and historical-conceptual issues here (Dover 1991, 175). My approach is to try to show that Stoic writers are working with conceptions of forgiveness sufficiently similar to our own that we can fruitfully engage with them.
- 3 See also Thorsteinsson (2010, 52–4, 166–74), and Musonius Rufus 10, for the claim that we should not return wrong for wrong, but offer forgiveness (*suggnōmē*).
- 4 The Stoic can thus say that the appropriate response to psychopaths and the kind of people considered by Watson (2008 [1987]) and Wallace (2019) is to take steps to prevent them from harming others, but this can be done without negative reactive attitudes like resentment, anger, or disgust. The fact that humans are by nature social did not, for Seneca, entail that we must never resort to exile, incarceration, or capital punishment; rather, Seneca's point is that our standards for judging others need to take into account the reality that most—if not all—people are predictably unvirtuous in various ways, and so a

great deal hangs on how bad the person being judged is, how serious their crimes are, and whether there is any hope for rehabilitation.

- 5 The older Stoics appear to have been especially uncompromising on this point; see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VII.123; Cicero, *Pro Murena*, 61–65; Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 11d26–39.
- 6 This also raises interesting questions about who has the *authority* to forgive. If there are appropriate people to administer just punishments, so too must there be appropriate people to forgive wrongs. In the *Life of Cato the Younger*, Plutarch reports an episode where Cato refuses to supplicate Caesar: “For if,” Cato said, “I were willing to be saved by the grace of Caesar [χαρίτι Καίσαρος] I ought to go to him in person and see him alone; but I am unwilling to be under obligations to the tyrant for his illegal acts. And he acts illegally in saving, as if their master, those over whom he has no right at all to be lord” (66.2; cf. Braund 2012, 89–94).
- 7 That others’ injustice occurs at the level of what the Stoics call “indifferents” (things that cannot affect our happiness) is thus tangential to our discussion. Even though the Sage can be happy in situations of injustice and is free from mental distress at others’ wrongdoing, a Stoic would still try to remedy those injustices (note Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 11m = SVF 3.578). As Cicero’s archery analogy makes clear, every virtuous action takes as its target some set of indifferents (Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, III.22; Klein 2014).
- 8 For the emotions as modes of ethical appreciation, see, e.g., Srinivasan (2018, 132); Hieronymi (2001, 531, 541) claims that not getting upset amounts to “giving up on... the seriousness of the wrong.” When we think harder about emotions versus actions as modes of appreciation, intuitions diverge depending on the case. On the one hand, we may rightly worry about somebody who is consistently enraged at police brutality but who does nothing; on the other hand, somebody who performs the actions of loving spouse but who feels nothing simply does not love their spouse. Interestingly, Seneca seems to recognize the latter point in *On Benefits*, where the actual gift is not what has moral value, but the goodwill behind the gift-giving (I.5.1–6.1). This notion of non-affective goodwill is worth exploring.
- 9 Philosophers who think that anger plays primarily a communicative role have a better response than those who defend a fittingness model. I may only need to tell you once that Prokofiev wrote excellent music for me to *communicate* my valuation to you, but I will need to continue enjoying it throughout my life to continue *appreciating* its value fittingly. Aristotelians who claim that revenge or the rectification of an injustice is the goal of anger also have a rejoinder here (Nussbaum 2015).
- 10 The ignorance condition has led some writers to claim that the Stoics think that everyone should be *exculpated* but not necessarily *forgiven* (Konstan 2010, 31–3). This is a complicated point, but ignorance may only function as an excuse when it is about particulars and is egregious. The Stoics think that everybody is ignorant, and about the most important things. Moral ignorance should change how we respond to people (compassionately and through teaching, rather than anger) but does not universally undermine moral responsibility. See also McCord-Adams (1991, 293–4) for further discussion of forgiveness in light of ignorant wrongdoing.
- 11 This is consistent with the Stoic paradox that all wrongdoings are equal; see Cicero, *Stoic Paradoxes*, III. Something is politically amiss if certain groups are being asked to do much more forgiving than others.
- 12 Thanks to Jacob Abolafia, Julia Annas, Dylan Barton, Alia Ghafur, Brad Inwood, Hallie Libert, Theresa Lopez, Ivan Manriquez Jr, Glen Pettigrove, Emory Rhodes, Julius Schönherr, Rachel Singpurwalla, Robert Wallace, and the audience at San Francisco State University for helpful discussion and comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

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