# The Solitary Superhero?

Science Fiction and Philosophy | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

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# 2 INTRODUCTION

In comics and movies, the idea of a powerful, self-sufficient "Stoic" hero(ine) is a common one. Such heroes often begin their stories isolated from those around them, often because they worry that showing any vulnerability will risk those around them. They carefully hide their emotions even from their closest friends (of which they generally have only a few), and carefully "compartmentalize "their lives to avoid entangling innocents. They tend to focus on "doing what is right" by their own lights, regardless of the personal costs. Some examples of Stoic characters include classic comic-book superheroes (Batman, Wolverine, Superman), science fiction/fantasy heroes (Data, Dr. Who, Gandalf), Disney Princesses (Elsa, Mulan), and anti-heroes (Dr. Manhattan, Thanos).

In this chapter, we'll be taking an in-depth look at "Stoic" philosophy, and consider how it can help understand the attraction of such heroes (and villains). We'll aim to go beyond the simplistic "A Stoic is someone who doesn't show their emotions or have any friends", and consider what a more "healthy" Stoic might look like. We'll also take a look at **Taoism,** an "Eastern" school of philosophy to which the ("Western") Stoicism is often compared.

In our readings, we'll consider two well-known characters to illustrate the basic ideas of Stoicism and Taoism: Batman and Elsa.

- **Batman (Bruce Wayne),** who hides his identity from everyone except his Butler (Alfred) and sidekicks and allies (Robin, Batgirl). His public persona is that of the powerful, rich billionaire, even as he fights crime as the "Batman. "Many movies and comics explore his efforts to connect with others (often romantically), though such efforts more-than-occasionally backfire, as his rivals (such as the Joker) take advantage of his personal attachments to attack Batman indirectly.
- **Elsa** is the main character of Disney's *Frozen* movies. Like Batman, she begins the movie isolated from those around her. She is, like him, an orphan who has struggled to deal with her parent's death. Unlike Batman, her main *reasons* for restraining her emotions/attachments have to do with losing control of her own power, and harming others (such as her sister, Anna). (In this sense, she's perhaps more similar to someone like the "Hulk").

# 3 WHAT IS STOICISM?

**Stoicism** is a branch of Hellenistic ("Greek-influenced") philosophy that was especially popular from around 300 BCE to 300 CE, when it was largely supplanted by the rise of Christianity. It was heavily by figures such as Socrates (whose calm acceptance of death inspired Stoics) and his students Plato and Aristotle. Stoic ideas of have remained a well-spring of inspiration for many later writers, artists, religious thinkers, and philosophers.

Some basic ideas about the Stoics:

- **"No harm can come to a good man." (Socrates)** The school was officially founded by **Zeno of Citium** in around 250 BCE. The early Stoics often gathered near the porch (or "stoa") of the Agora in Athens; this explain their name. Stoicism became very popular among the Roman upper classes (especially when the Emperor **Marcus Aurelius (121-181 CE)** wrote a book on Stoicism called the *Meditations*), and Stoic views on ethics, the good life, and the nature of God influenced early Christian thinkers. Like Socrates and Plato, the Stoics hold that there is a very tight relation between *knowledge* and *virtue.* A truly knowledgeable person will realize that is always in his or her best interest to be

virtuous and, for this reason, will also have very little problem in behaving this way. (This is in contrast to Aristotle, who held that becoming virtuous involved a good deal of "training" of one's habits and one's emotions).

- **"This is the best of all possible worlds."** Like Aristotle, the Stoics believed that the universe was made of **particular,** materially existing objects (and not Platonic forms). They conceived of the universe as something like a gigantic, interconnected living being, with the Stoic God (who was somehow "spread out" throughout the universe) deciding what happened at each and every moment. The Stoic God is a forerunner of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God, in that it always aims for the "best" and has complete control over the world. Because they believed that everything was matter, however, the Stoics did NOT believe in an afterlife. They held that their God insured that the good were rewarded and the evil punished in their actual lives. Later Christian thinkers (such as Leibniz) would take up this Stoic idea (but would tack on off an afterlife); critics (of both the Stoics and Christians) have contended that this claim is implausible, insofar as it contradicts what we actually see in the world.
- **"Soul is in everything."** The Stoics adopted the Empedoclean/Aristotelian theory of four **elements,** but with one twist: they thought the elements were always intermixed (though in differing proportions), and could coexist spatially with one another (modern physicists would say that they held a **field** theory). They held that the minds of human beings were an instantiation of **pneuma,** the fundamental force that drove all motion in the universe and invested things with life and reason. The benevolent, all-powerful Stoic God (or **"World Soul")** is the ultimate instantiation of this force. The universe was eternal, and everything occurred in a long cycle (so, if something happens once, the same exact thing would happen again).
- **"If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment." (Marcus Aurelius)** Insofar as the day-to-day happenings of the universe were completely controlled by God, the Stoics were strong believers in **fate.** Where Aristotle held that *some* things happened of necessity (e.g., acorns growing into oaks, rocks falling to the ground) but others do not (an acorn accidentally falls into a fire, a rock is thrown by a human), the Stoics held that *everything* happens in this way. Stoics counseled that the only true way to happiness was to accept to the world as it was, and to not seek change things that you could not control. Many of the Stoics counseled that, if things got bad enough (i.e., you were worried you might behave unvirtuously), you could always kill yourself. Other thinkers (Epicureans and Christians in particular) criticized the Stoics for praising suicide too much.
- **"It is the nature of the wise to resist pleasures, but the foolish to be a slave to them." (Epictetus).** While many of the Greco-Roman philosophers emphasize the value of the simple life, and of making sure to avoid pursuing unhealthy pleasures, the Stoics often argue that reason doesn't need ANY "help" from desires such as hunger, thirst, sexual drive, etc.; instead, these things are merely potential distractions from the good life. Many of the Roman Stoics (unlike Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle) don't approve of Greek heroes such as Achilles or Odysseus, who seem rather angry, lustful, and proud.

## 3.1 TAOISM AND STOICISM

Stoicism is sometimes compared to "philosophical" **Taoism,** as laid out in classical Chinese texts such as the *Tao Te Ching.* (This is distinct from the much broader "religious" Taoism, which incorporates a huge number

of indigenous traditions and beliefs). While we don't have time to summarize Taoism in detail, it shares the following the following characteristics with Stoicism:

1. As in Stoicism, **nature** plays a central role in Taoism. While the all-encompassing "Tao" may be difficult to understand (much like the Stoic "World Soul"!), it is ultimately the source of all value. This doesn't mean that Taoists (especially historically) don't believe in various "gods"; it's simply that these are conceived as being one more part of the larger "natural world," as opposed to standing apart from it.
2. In keeping with this idea, Taoists tend to think that both individuals and society ought to live in accord/agreement with nature, and not fight against it. The principle of **Wu Wei (non-doing)** says that one should act "without effort," and in accordance with the forces that shape the world around one. While its not always clear what this means in a positive sense, Taoist texts are full of examples of people who think that they can somehow "defeat" nature, only to discover that this never works in the long run. Instead, one must pursue one's goals by working *with* the natural world.
3. Taoist texts also spend considerable amounts of time critiquing unnatural human social systems, in which individual humans are "fit" into certain categories (such as "student" or "soldier" or "farmer" or "parent"), and take their whole identity from this position. For Taoists, to identify oneself (or others) in this way is to miss what one *really is*—a part of the natural world. Taoism, perhaps more than any other major tradition, tends to celebrate rule breakers and misfits (this is a key difference with Stoicism!). Like Stoicism, Taoists frequently discuss the figure of the "sage", whose has overcome such "false" values and achieved an authentic life.
4. Closely related to this, Taoist texts often point out contradictions or absurdities within human systems of valuation. In particular, they delight in pointing that our ways of classifying various things as "good" or "bad" are often arbitrary, are often dependent on one another (with "bad" things causing "good things" and vice versa). The idea of the fundamental inseparability of the **Yin** and **Yang** (light/dark, positive/negative), and the identification of this duality with the Tao itself, is among the most famous of Taoist ideas. This has close parallels with the Stoic idea that one must be **indifferent** to what happens, and refrain from "judging" it as positive or negative.

## 3.2 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, what are THREE main ideas of Stoicism?
2. Can you give some examples of (fictional) characters who embody some of the ideals of Stoicism?
3. Both Stoicism and Taoism coexisted for thousands of years along with "rival" philosophical views that emphasized the importance of society (**Confucianism)** or physical pleasure **(Epicureanism).** Some people lived their lives devoted to "one" philosophical approach, while others "mixed and matched."
    a. What might be the advantages of trying to live "purely" as a Stoic or Taoist?
    b. What might be the advantages of being a "pluralist" who borrows from different philosophical approaches?

# 4 READING: THE TAO OF THE BAT (BY MARK D. WHITE)[1]

**[Brendan: This is a fictional interview with "Master Bat-Tzu", who talks about Batman's relation to Taoist thought. See if you can figure out who Bat-Tzu is supposed to be 😊.]**

*Master Bat-Tzu, I thank you for granting me this interview, especially since you have never spoken to anyone of your unique relationship with Bruce Wayne, also known to some as the Batman.*

You're most welcome. If my humble words can be of any help to anyone, I am glad to do it. Yes, as you say, I have known Bruce Wayne since he was a little boy. I was a friend of his parents, you know, particularly his father, Dr. Thomas Wayne. Good man, Dr. Wayne—I think of him often, as well as his lovely wife. So, of course, does Bruce.

I have tried to be a friend to Bruce since the untimely death of his parents. I hoped to guide him to a more harmonious place, but he chose a different path, what he has called the "way of the bat."[1] Even though I disagreed with his choice, I have tried to provide counsel when I could.

*Why did you disagree with his choice?*

Please don't misunderstand—he does an immeasurable amount of good as the Batman. But his life as the Batman is a life without balance, and balance is necessary for all things, especially people. The importance of balance is one of the central teachings of the Taoist masters, such as Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu, and through their writings they have been my teachers, as I have been Bruce's.[2]

*Taoist masters?*

Yes, Taoism is an ancient Eastern philosophy, dating at least as far back as Lao-Tzu's time, which focuses on the natural flow of the universe. The Chinese called this *tao*, or "the Way," for lack of a better name. Lao-Tzu actually says that the way is that which cannot be named.[3] Taoists try to align themselves with the Way by balancing the opposing forces within themselves, the light and the dark, the feminine and the masculine, the soft and the hard—what the Taoists called *yin* and *yang*.

*Like the popular black-and-white, circular symbol?*

Correct—that symbol is a representation of the balance between opposing forces that defines everything about the world we live in. *Yang* (the white part) represents the masculine, the hard, the unyielding, while *yin* (the black part) represents the feminine, the soft, the nurturing. The way that the two sides look like snakes chasing each other's tails shows that both sides flow into each other and ultimately define each other. This is also shown by the black dot in the white area, and the white dot in the black area—they tell us that the root of each side lies in the other.

Since that horrible day, I'm afraid that Bruce has let his *yang* dominate, believing it necessary to rid his beloved Gotham City of the criminals that infest it, but he has forgotten that he must still embrace his *yin*.

**[Brendan: Have you heard of the Taoist idea of the "Yin" and "Yang" before? How does this presentation of the idea fit with your previous ideas of them?]**

*So he does have* yin*?*

[1] Mark D. White and Robert Arp, *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

Yes, everybody does, and he is no exception—you can see it in the less tense moments, especially with Dick and Tim. . . .

*The original and current Robins.*

Correct—Bruce was often very hard on them, very demanding, in accordance with his *yang*, but he has had tender moments with them as well (though few and far between).

*Didn't he recently go on some sort of "spiritual quest" with Dick and Tim? Do you think that shows some striving for balance?*

Yes, the year he spent traveling around the world, after that horrible mess with Brother Eye and Alex Luthor, when Dick was almost killed.[4] I think he realized then that his *yang* had dominated for too long, and he had become bitter, cold, paranoid—even for Bruce. Lao-Tzu wrote that "sages remove extremes, remove extravagance, remove arrogance."[5] I think that is what he has started to do. Indeed, since he returned, I have seen changes in him—for instance, he decided to adopt Tim shortly after their return. And he has shown such tenderness toward Selina Kyle's beautiful newborn child, Helena—I even heard he took her a teddy bear, in his Batman costume no less![6]

Why, he has even forgiven the magician, what is her name . . .

*Zatanna? For the mind-wipe, you mean?*

Yes, that's right, Zatanna—lovely girl, though very hard to understand sometimes.

*Ha!*

Even I was surprised when I heard about that—I thought Bruce would never forgive her for violating his mind like she did.[7] But you see, that's his *yin*—warm, soft, accepting of others' flaws—and it has begun to manifest itself more since his return. Of course, he still needs his *yang*, not only to perform as Batman, but to be a complete person, in harmony with the world and the Tao. All of us need that balance between the hard and soft, masculine and feminine.

*Why is that? One of the key traits of the Batman is his single-minded devotion to the cause of fighting crime.*

But a person with no balance is not in harmony—"knowing harmony is called constancy, knowing constancy is called clarity."[8] Many of Bruce's teachers taught him this, not just me.[9] The world is defined by dualities of opposing forces that must be held in balance to be effective—this is the meaning of the black and white intermingling in the *yin-yang* symbol. Lao-Tzu wrote, "**Being and nonbeing produce each other: difficulty and ease complement each other, long and short shape each other, high and low contrast with each other, voice and echoes conform to each other, before and after go along with each other**."[10] Without the repulsive, we would not know the beautiful; without the dark, there could be no light. We need the bad to highlight the good—how else would we know what the good is?

**[Brendan: How would you describe the "meaning" of this quote in your own words? Do you think it is accurate? Why or why not?]**

Look at Bruce, for example—he is defined by many dualities. Publicly, he lives in spacious, palatial Wayne Manor, but he spends most of his time in a dank, dreary cave covered in bat guano (dreadful stuff). He is one of wealthiest people in the world, a captain of industry, but he spends much of his fortune to support numerous charitable causes, as well as financing his crime-fighting activities. He could easily live a life of pampered leisure, but instead he has devoted himself to a thankless task, fighting crime, every day fighting exhaustion and injury that would fell a normal person. He is one of the most intelligent, learned people in the

world, as well as a physical specimen of human perfection, yet he does not take pride in these things but rather uses his abilities for the good of mankind, claiming no credit for his accomplishments.

Think about this, my friend—for all of his physical prowess, his dark, frightening costume, and his formidable size and presence, the Batman's most intimidating feature is that which is not even there—his shadow! As Lao-Tzu wrote, "The use of the pot is precisely where there is nothing. When you open doors and windows for a room, it is where there is nothing that they are useful to the room."[11] Nothingness can be more important than substance, which Bruce uses to "strike fear into the hearts of criminals," as he likes to say (endlessly, I'm afraid).

Now what was I saying—oh yes, he can be single-minded, as you say. If I had but a penny for every time I've implored him to take a night off, enjoy the company of one of the beautiful, intelligent women he's seen over the years, I could melt them down and make a second giant penny, like the one he keeps in his cave. But he usually relents only when doing so would serve the greater mission against crime—silly man.

[Laughs.] The giant penny, yes—that reminds me of a story. Did you know that once, Bruce was so lonely he asked that Aquaman fellow—not that new, young one, but the one from the old Justice League days—to help retrieve that horrid museum piece from the crevice it fell into during the earthquake that struck Gotham City? He couldn't bring himself to ask his colleague to visit but instead had to concoct a ruse to lure him here. Insufferable man, so afraid to share his feelings, to admit his emptiness, even with those closest to him.[12]

*Have Dick and Tim inherited Bruce's imbalance?*

Oh, thankfully no. Take Dick, for instance—despite all of his soul-searching, he is a young man who keeps his *yin* and *yang* in balance. Ever since he was a young boy, newly in our charge . . .

*You were involved in raising Dick?*

What? No . . . no, of course not, though I saw him quite a bit while visiting Bruce over the years. As I was saying, despite being struck by the early, violent death of his parents, as was Bruce, Dick managed to maintain a basic lightheartedness about him, light to balance the dark.

*He had to—he couldn't exactly be sullen in green Speedos and pixie shoes!*

Oh! Don't remind me. . . . [Laughs.] Sorry. . . . You've distracted me again. Stop that.

You know, I've heard that Dick, in his adult role as Nightwing, is often said to be "the Batman with a feminine side," which is precisely my point. He cares about his friends—not just as his responsibility, as Bruce does, but truly cares about them and for them. Just think about his recent tenure with the Outsiders, which was supposed to be a working group of heroes, rather than a family like the Titans, his former allies. But he found he couldn't do it—he found it impossible *not* to care about his colleagues, who truly became his friends, and he could no longer tolerate leading them into danger. Of course, who did he hand the group off to? Bruce, who was more than happy to assemble a group of heroes who would follow his commands to march into the flames of hell.[13]

*What about Tim, the current Robin?*

Oh, Tim is the one I fear for. He has lost so much since he began his crime-fighting career alongside Bruce—first his mother, early on, and more recently his father; his girlfriend, Stephanie Brown, who fought crime as the Spoiler (and Robin, for a brief time while Tim was "retired"); and two of his best friends, Conner Kent and Bart Allen.[14] And all of them died at the hands of criminals, just like Bruce's parents did. If anyone has a right to sink into despair and lose his soft, compassionate nature in strict devotion to his hard, retributive

side, it's Tim. In fact, he told me once that when his mother died and his father lay paralyzed in a hospital bed, he stared "into the dark side," and felt "the night-demon's cowl . . . sucking me into a lifetime in hell."[15]

But in the end I think Tim realized this danger; he is a very self-aware young man. As Lao-Tzu wrote, "Those who know others are wise; those who know themselves are enlightened."[16] He's seen what loss has done to Bruce—you know, when Tim originally came to us . . .

*"To us"?*

Sorry, I did it again—when Tim came to Bruce, after deducing his secret identity, he said that Batman needed a Robin, that Batman had sunken too far within himself after the death of the second Robin, Jason Todd. He had become too hard and angry, again allowing his *yang* to rule over his *yin*. I suppose, in a way, that Robin has always been the *yin* to Batman's *yang*, the light to balance the Dark Knight.

**[Brendan: This article focuses on the relationship between Batman and Robin. Can you think of other superhero "duos" who might "balance each other out" in this way? I**

**In what ways is Batman a "good" role model for his younger companions? In what sense is a "bad" role model?]**

*I suppose so. I had also never realized the role that death has played in many of Batman's inner circle, including Dick. . . .*

Certainly, Dick has shouldered his share of loss—his own parents, of course, and more recently his adopted town of Blüdhaven, including many of his close friends. But perhaps he understands the nature of death, and hopefully he can help Tim (and, perhaps, even Bruce).

*What do you mean by "the nature of death"?*

Death is just part of a natural cycle and should be accepted as part as the path that we all take. Chuang-Tzu wrote well on this subject: "If you are at peace in your time and live harmoniously, sadness and happiness cannot affect you."[17] He questioned the preference for life over death: "How can I know that wanting to live is not delusion? How can I know that aversion to death is not like a homeless waif who does not know where to return? . . . How do I know the dead do not regret having longed for life at first?"[18]

*I suppose the resurrection of Jason Todd would be a good example of that?*

Yes—who is to say that he is happier now than in his previous state?

Oh, poor Jason—he was so angry, so wild, so uncontrollable—everything that Bruce could be if he doesn't maintain a constant check on his rage. Lao-Tzu wrote, "When beings climax in power, they wane; this is called being unguided. The unguided die early."[19] Jason needed to learn control; we all tried to teach him that. Unfortunately, his mysterious return doesn't seem to have taught him much either. Chuang-Tzu wrote that "the perfection of virtue is to take care of your own mind in such a way that emotions cannot affect you when you already know nothing can be done, and are at peace with what is, with the decree of fate."[20] But his fate remains to be seen, and I can only hope he can learn to accept what he cannot change; Bruce must learn this too, of course.

*Of course, we can't discuss Jason without bringing up his murderer, the Joker.*

The Joker . . . well, the less said about him, the better, I think. I'm sure others have much more to say about him than I could offer.[21] But interestingly enough, I do remember, once Bruce said that Dick told him that "the Joker exists because of me. How I represent the order that is necessary to live in Gotham City and the Joker is the chaos that disrupts that order."[22] That's another example of how members of a duality support each other (and of Dick's budding wisdom, I daresay).

*I notice you haven't mentioned Alfred yet.*

Oh, I haven't? Well, there's . . . I suppose there's really not much to say about Mr. Pennyworth, except that he's a loyal servant, a trusted advisor—a paragon of humility. "Sages take care of themselves, but do not exalt themselves."[23]

*A bit like you, Master . . .*

Oh, I suppose, yes. Actually, I've always regarded Alfred as quite the epitome of the wise man, or sage, of Taoist thought. After all, Lao-Tzu wrote that "sages manage effortless service and carry out unspoken guidance."[24] That suits Alfred very well, I should think. Of course, he has put Bruce in his place on many an occasion, I should say.

*Indeed.*

Pardon me?

*I'm sorry, just something caught in my throat.*

Can I get you some water?

*No, thank you.*

Now that I think about it more, it seems to me that Alfred embodies a very important concept of the Tao, that of *wei-wu-wei*, or "action without action." Lao-Tzu wrote, "Do nondoing, strive for nonstriving."[25] The wise man knows when to do nothing, and by doing so, does something. Alfred is of inestimable aid to the Batman, but does so by simply seeing a clue that Bruce did not notice, a possibility he did not imagine, or some valuable insight that escaped him. Alfred's mind is open, and so he sees all at once. Chuang-Tzu told a story of a butcher who was so skilled he had never sharpened his blade in nineteen years. The butcher said that when he cuts up an ox, **"the joints have spaces in between, whereas the edge of the cleaver blade has no thickness. When that which has no thickness is put into that which has no space, there is ample room for moving the blade."**[26] Alfred is like that butcher, seeing what is there, and also what is not, which is often more important.

**[Brendan: This quote is one of the more famous expression of Chuang-Tzu's version of Taoism. What would it mean to live life according to this? Is Alfred a good example of it?]**

"Sages never do great things; that is why they can fulfill their greatness."[27] Alfred is not the Batman, but Bruce would not be the Batman without him. Chuang-Tzu wrote, "Sages harmonize right and wrong, leaving them to the balance of nature."[28] Alfred must balance the right and wrong within Bruce, tending to his health and his injuries, his joy and his sadness, his calm and his rage, trying to align them with the natural balance of things, the Tao.

It is a very difficult task that he has assumed, but that is Alfred's way, and he chooses to go with it, not against it. He reminds me of what Lao-Tzu wrote about water: "Nothing in the world is more flexible and yielding than water. Yet when it attacks the firm and the strong, nothing can withstand it, because they have no way to change it. So the flexible overcome the adamant, the yielding overcome the forceful."[29] Water runs gently through your fingers but over time can carve mountains. It is patient, as is Alfred—yet another lesson Bruce could learn from him. As you know, many of the martial arts that Bruce has mastered over the years are grounded in basic Taoist principles such as flexibility and yielding—for instance, they teach one to use an opponent's size and energy against him. Would that Bruce took those lessons to heart in other aspects of his life!

You know, Lao-Tzu wrote, "I have three treasures that I keep and hold: one is mercy, the second is frugality, the third is not presuming to be at the head of the world."[30] I can imagine Alfred saying that too.

*It's almost like he just did. . . .*

Pardon?

*Nothing, nothing . . .*

Do you have something to say, young man?

*No, Master, it's just interesting how you've gushed about Alfred, especially since a few minutes ago you "didn't have much to say" about him.*

(Silence.)

*Okay . . . well . . . thank you again, Master. It has been a most . . . illuminating discussion.*

You're very welcome. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some cleaning to do . . .

**[Brendan: So, what do you think? In what ways would Batman have to change to live according to the "way of the Tao?" Would this be a good thing for him? For the world? (And, finally, what might the rest of us learn from this?]**

## 4.1 NOTES

1 *Shadow of the Bat Annual* #3 (1995).

2 The exact details of Lao-Tzu's and Chuang-Tzu's lives, including their true identities (sound familiar?), are a mystery. The *Tao Te Ching* is widely believed to have been compiled from various sources around 500 BCE, and Chuang-Tzu's primary writings date back to around 300 BCE.

3 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapters 1, 25, and 32. All quotations from this masterpiece are translated by Thomas Cleary and can be found in *The Taoist Classics: Volume One* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1994), 12-47.

4 See *Infinite Crisis* #7 (June 2006); the yearlong travels occurred during the *52* series (2006-2007), but were explicitly shown only occasionally.

5 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 29.

6 *Catwoman* #53 (Mar. 2006), reprinted in *Catwoman: The Replacements* (2007).

7 The mind-wipe was revealed in flashback in *Identity Crisis* (2005); Bruce forgave her in *Detective Comics* #834 (September 2007).

8 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 55.

9 "In my teachings I had many masters, each with his own singular philosophy. My masters agreed on one point only: to be a warrior requires balance" (Batman, in *Batman Confidential* #8, October 2007).

10 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 2.

11 Ibid., chapter 11.

12 The giant penny was lost during *Catalysm* (1998); the Aquaman episode occurred in *Gotham Knights* #18 (August 2001).

13 See *Outsiders* #49 (September 2007).

14 Tim's mother died in "Rite of Passage" (*Detective Comics* #618-621, 1990); his father in *Identity Crisis* (2005); Stephanie in *Batman* #633 (December 2004), reprinted in *War Games Act Three* (2005); Conner in *Infinite Crisis* (2006); and Bart in *The Flash: The Fastest Man Alive* #13 (June 2007).

15 *Detective Comics* #621 (September 1990); see also the last three pages of *Robin* #167 (December 2007) with regard to the death of Tim's father.

16 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 33.

17 Chuang-Tzu, *Chuang-Tzu*, chapter 3, p. 68. The "Inner Chapters" of Chuang-Tzu are included in *The Taoist Classics Volume One*, 51-100, from which the translations I quote are drawn, again translated by Thomas Cleary. These chapters are the most widely known and are the only ones attributable to the master himself. The unabridged *Chuang-Tzu* , including material appended by later scholars, can be found in *The Texts of Taoism*, vols. 1 and 2 (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1962).

18 Chuang-Tzu, *Chuang-Tzu*, chapter 2, p. 64.

19 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 35.

20 Chuang-Tzu, *Chuang-Tzu*, chapter 4, p. 73.

21 Indeed, see the essays in this book by Robichaud, and Donovan and Richardson.

22 *Batman* #614 (June 2003), included in *Hush Volume Two* (2003).

23 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 72.

24 Ibid., chapter 2.

25 Ibid., chapter 63.

26 *Chuang-Tzu*, chapter 3, 66-67.

27 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 63.

28 *Chuang-Tzu*, chapter 2, 60.

29 Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 78.

30 Ibid., chapter 67.

# 5 READING: LET IT GO? ELSA, STOICISM, AND THE "LAZY ARGUMENT" (BRENDAN SHEA)

This is an excerpt from a (much longer) piece I published here:

Shea, Brendan. 2022. "Let it Go? Elsa, Stoicism, and the 'Lazy Argument'." In: W. Irwin (ed.). *AndPhilosophy.com: The Blackwell Philosophy and Popular Culture Series.* https://andphilosophy.com/2022/05/07/let-it-go-elsa-stoicism-and-the-lazy-argument/

A few minutes into *Frozen,* we see a young Elsa accidentally injure her baby sister Anna with her magical powers while the two of them are playing. The sisters' parents seek out the trolls to help with Anna's injury. Grand Pabbie, a troll leader, warns both the parents and Elsa that she needs to keep control of her powers, and that "fear" will be her enemy in her quest to do so. In response to all of this, Elsa (apparently under her parents' directions) all but withdraws from the world, shutting herself off even from her sister Anna. As Elsa herself will later put it (in the song "Let it Go") she has been told to "conceal, don't feel," and it indeed seems to be the case that young Elsa's powers are inadvertently and involuntarily triggered by strong emotions, such as when she hears of her parents' death, discovers that Anna has agreed to marry someone she has just met, or learns for the first time of the doom that her powers have brought upon Arendelle.

Elsa's early strategies for dealing with the hand that fate has dealt her—marked by isolation from loved ones, withdrawal from the activities of life, and an overt focus on suppressing the expression of negative emotions—has close links with an idea that might be called *commonsense stoicism.* This is the idea expressed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *stoic* as "one who practices repression of emotion, indifference to

pleasure or pain, and patient endurance" ("Stoic, n" 2021). This sense of s*toicism*—arguably the dominant one in everyday discourse—is tightly linked to the claim that one should (or shouldn't) behave "stoically" in the face of danger or misfortune. It is, among other things, associated with an almost monomaniacal focus on negative emotions, and on their control and suppression.

Certain Stoic aphorisms (of the sort often quoted in the Stoic-inspired "self-help" books) also seem to lend support to Elsa's early choices, and commonsense Stoicism more generally. For example, consider Epictetus' famous admonition:

> Let death and exile and everything that is terrible appear before your eyes every day, especially death; and you will never have anything contemptible in your thoughts or crave anything excessively. (Epictetus 1983, sec. 21)

Taken in isolation, this seems an outright endorsement of young Elsa's way of living and thinking. Indeed, considerations of death and injury (of the sort that might be caused by her powers) and of (self-chosen) exile determine much of Elsa's early behavior.

In the end, of course, Elsa's strategies for controlling her emotions in this way are revealed to be not only useless, but counterproductive, as her fear and isolation mutually reinforce each other, leading eventually to her freezing of Arendelle, her flight into the mountains, and the disasters that follow this. She is acutely aware of what she sees as her "fate" and seems to conceive of herself primarily as a threat to others, who can only be saved if she somehow removes herself from their lives. Elsa's failures here have important real-world analogs; for example, some psychological research (Murray et al. 2008; Moore et al. 2013) has linked this sort of "stoicism" to poor physical or mental health outcomes. In Elsa's case, she begins to make progress only when she self-consciously *rejects* these sorts of strategies, for example, by allowing herself to fully experience her love for her sister Anna (which both literally and figuratively "melts a frozen heart"), and by embracing whole-heartedly her roles first as a queen and as later an intermediary with nature itself.

In the light of all of this, it might well be asked: "What could Stoicism possibly have to offer Elsa, or indeed any of us? Doesn't her story reveal the *shortcomings* of Stoicism, rather than its strengths?" Answering this question will require taking a step back and considering in more detail the ideas and claims of Stoic philosophers, before returning to the question of Elsa's attempts to grapple with her fate. As it turns out, the Stoic attitude toward both fate and the appropriate response to it is considerably more nuanced than "conceal, don't feel" and can only be understood against the larger backdrop of their larger philosophical project. It is to this background we now turn.

**[Brendan: I omit here a bunch of stuff on the history of Stoics and their beliefs. The basic idea is that Stoics want Elsa to live in accord with "nature", and with what Arendelle "wants" or "needs" of her.]**

## 5.1 IS ELSA'S FATE'S FOOL?

The Stoic universe is a regular, orderly one, where everything happens for a good reason, and where its inhabitants can thus be assured that they'll never be faced with any challenge that can't be met by careful, judicious use of their human reason. The universe, quite literally, has its own "plans" which it pursues by the motions of its constituent parts (which notably includes humans). As discussed in previous sections, this is key to making sense of Stoic ethics, which admonishes us to "live according to nature." If we follow this advice, as Elsa does, we will thus find our proper role within that social and natural order of the world. It may be that this role is not what we'd originally expected or desired, but we can nevertheless be assured that it will fit us perfectly.

There is, however, something a bit off-putting about this whole picture, as even the earliest critics of the Stoics noted. In particular, it raised the problem of *fate,* and of the seeming inability of humans to shape their own lives. In his *On Stoic Self-Contradictions,* Plutarch quotes Stoic Chrysippus as follows:

> For since the common nature extends into everything, it will be necessary that everything that occurs in any way in the universe and in any of its parts should occur according to it [the common nature] and its reason, in proper and unhindered fashion, because there is nothing outside it which could hinder its organization nor could any of its parts be moved or be in a state otherwise than according to the common nature. (1050c-d)

Plutarch goes on to argue that this picture of fate has unwelcome consequences for Stoicism and that it may put Chrysippus in danger of self-contradiction. In particular, if every event happens just as it is determined to occur, then it is hard to see how Stoics could allow for either (1) a category of *possible* events which could happen, but which might not happen, or (2) a sense of genuine human responsibility for their actions (as opposed to, say, blaming their failures on the machinations of the gods)[i].

Elsa's development provides a vivid illustration of this problem. Arendelle has, in a quite direct way, *made Elsa what she is.* It provides her with magical ice powers, apparently because of the bravery of her mother in saving her father. It does not, however, grant the young Elsa with the ability to control these powers, and it doesn't bestow her on sister Anna with any way to protect herself from them. This leads, with more-than-seeming inevitability, to Anna's initial injury, to their parents' death in a storm at sea, and to Elsa's increasing agitation and anxiety, leading ultimately to the events depicted in the movies. Elsa, for all her power and grandeur, has no control over any of this. Even her recognition of the power of love (at the end of the first move) and her realization that she is the Fifth Spirt (and the end of the second movie) are events that happen *to* her, as the result of both natural phenomenon and the actions of other characters, in particular her sister Anna.

What sense, then, does it make sense to say that Elsa "chose well" or "chose poorly" at different points in the movie? After all, it seems as if, according to the Stoic worldview, there is *nothing else* that Elsa could have done. Every event in the universe is, after all, caused by some other event. Taken together, this string of causes determines everything about Elsa, from the identity of her parents to her powers to the events of her childhood to the various crises to which she must respond in the *Frozen* movies. Stoics would emphasize that this is true not only of Elsa but of everyone as well. We must all follow the path that universe lays out for us. And if this is the case, then how can Elsa (or anyone else) genuinely *choose* to follow the principles of Stoic ethics, or be praised or blamed for how they, or don't, live morally decent lives more generally[ii]?

**[Brendan: Can you give other examples of stories where the hero is "destined" or "fated" to fulfill a certain role? What is the attraction of this view of the world? What might be some disadvantages?]**

## 5.2 THE SHAPE OF A SOUL

Chrysippus offers perhaps the most well-known and influential Stoic attempt to resolve the problems discussed in the previous section. His argument has both a positive and a negative aspect. The positive aspect consists of an attempt to identify those events or actions for which we *are* responsible, even if they are ultimately fated. In general, Chrysippus argues that we can and should be held responsible for those actions that result from the inner workings of our character. To explain the role of character, he gives the analogy of a cylinder and a cone, and the differing ways in which these two objects move when they are pushed. The push is an external force, which can be compared to the various things that happen to us and call for responses on our part. The effects of this push are very different on the two objects, however: the cylinder simply rolls in a straight line, while the cone spins around in a circle. This motion, he argues, is due not to the

external push, but the nature or "shape" of the objects themselves. This nature is thus analogous to our character, which allows us to voluntarily *assent* (or withhold assent) to what the world *presents* to us:

> Just as he who pushes the cylinder gave it the start of motion, he did not, however, give it its 'rollability', so a presentation which strikes will certainly impress its object and, as it were, stamp its form on the mind, but our assent will be in our power, just as…the cylinder, when struck from without will henceforth by moved by its own force and nature" (Cicero, *On Fate,* sec. 43).

On this account, Elsa is accountable for precisely those actions that depend on her unique psychology. She is not, for instance, responsible for things such as being born heir to the throne, or having ice powers, or (more contentiously) her initial feelings of fear and regret when she injures Anna as a child. She certainly isn't responsible for Hans kidnapping her and putting her in a dungeon. These events were caused by forces entirely external to her. By contrast, Chrysippus would argue that she *is* responsible for such things as cutting off Anna from her life in response to her fear, and for fleeing Arendelle when she becomes upset. These are things that someone with a *different* psychology (a "cylinder" rather than a "cone") might have done differently. Anna, for example, seems to have a very different sort of psychology, and might well have made very different choices in response to these situations.

This sort of response has not always placated critics of Stoicism (Brennan 2001). After all, they might argue, what difference does it make *to Elsa* that Anna would have chosen differently if put in her shoes? Elsa's and Anna's difference in character is, according to Stoic metaphysics, itself entirely determined by things that are themselves out of the sister's control, from their differing genetics to the subtle differences in the way their parents and others interacted with them. Given that Elsa can't choose to be Anna, why should she be held responsible for "not acting as Anna would have done?"

To answer this worry, we can turn to the negative aspect of the Stoic argument, and ask the critics of Stoicism how character and choice should or could be related, if not in the way the Stoics suggest. First, consider the nature of character itself. As much as the idea that character is determined by some combination of genetics and environment might seem distasteful, it is difficult to see how any *alternative* account of character will be more palatable. For example, would Elsa be freer if the internal works of her psychology were determined by the random, uncaused movements of particles, as both the ancient Epicureans and some modern libertarians about free will hold[iii]? Second, we can consider the relationship *between* character and the choice that is made. Similar considerations apply: if our choices are not caused by our character, then they must be caused by *something else.* And again, it is difficult to imagine what sort of something else this could be if isn't part of character.

**[Brendan: As noted here, critics have often accused Stoics of denying "free will." What do you think of the Stoic response presented here?]**

## 5.3 THE LAZY ARGUMENT

Over the course of the *Frozen* movies, we see Elsa transform from an isolated and scared girl to a young woman who has fully accepted her roles within the wider world, be these political (queen), familial (a sister to Anna, and something like a mother to the snowman Olaf), or natural (as intermediary to the elemental spirits). She also seems to calmly accept those roles that fate has excluded her from. For example, she gives up both the throne and her home when she discovers she is the Fifth Spirt and feels no apparent angst over her lack of a romantic partner over the course of the first two movies. She still grieves for her lost parents, but not excessively so, just as Stoic philosophers would have counseled[iv]. This is all in keeping with the picture of Elsa as a Stoic sage who bends her will to accord with the demands of nature. When nature calls, she does what is required, and does it without reservation.

One of the most famous objections to Stoicism—the so-called "Lazy Argument"—contends that it is *irrational* for Elsa to behave in this way, at least if Stoics are correct in their assumptions about the power of fate and causal determinism. Cicero describes the objection as follows:

> *If it is fated for you to recover from this illness whether you call the doctor or not, you will recover; similarly, if it is fated for you not to recover from this illness whether you call the doctor or not, you will recover. And one of the two is fated; therefore, there is no point in calling the doctor. (On Fate sec. 28)*

The structure of the argument seems to be as follows:

1. Every event is either fated to occur or not. So, for example, it either will be the case the Arendelle will be destroyed by extreme weather (as threatens to be the case in both movies) or it will not.
2. No amount of effort by any individual is sufficient to make a *difference* as to what is fated. So, for example, Elsa's power cannot change fate.
3. It is only rational for individuals to exert effort if they can make some difference.
4. So, it is irrational for anyone to exert any effort, ever. Elsa shouldn't bother trying to save Arendelle.

This argument is meant to serve as a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* to the whole Stoic project. The Stoic doctrine of fate, and the importance of accepting it, is first and foremost meant to help lead better, more ethical lives. If it turns out that this doctrine instead encourages laziness, cowardice, and apathy, this would be a strong reason to reject Stoicism altogether.

Chrysippus responds to the Lazy argument by arguing that it fails to distinguish between *simple* events and *conjoined* (or *co-fated*) events (sec. 30). So, for example, some simple events would be "Arendelle is saved from destruction" and "Elsa gains control over her powers after much effort" while a conjoined event would be "Arendelle is saved from destruction AND Elsa gains control over her powers after much effort." Chrysippus argues that the Lazy Argument ignores the relationship between co-fated events, and assumes that it would be possible to have Arendelle saved from destruction *without* Elsa's efforts to control her powers. This, he points out, is an unjustified assumption. Instead, Elsa's effort (or her lack of effort) are just as much as a matter of fate as anything else, as is their *relationship* with other events.

The success of Chrysippus' attempted rebuttal hinges crucially on what exactly we take the conclusion of the Lazy Argument to be. If the conclusion requires that we (as rational individuals) cease to apply any effort, it is fair enough to respond that our effort—or lack of effort—is itself a matter of fate, just as much as anything else. Moreover, we might have perfectly good evidence that, as a matter of fact, instances of saving-the-world tend to be preceded by instances of people-trying-hard-to-save-the-world. There is thus no *logical* contradiction between the Stoic doctrine of fate and the truism that hard work breeds success.

However, the conclusion (that Elsa "shouldn't bother") might be a more invidious one: what if the idea is that, in the mere entertaining of the Lazy Argument, we rationally come to see ourselves—and our actions—as being fundamentally inconsequential and meaningless? What if, for example, Elsa woke up one day with the thought that "my whole life has been decided for me, from the circumstances of my birth, to the death of my parents, to my psychological quirks, to the words of the songs I sing. Nothing is up to me! Why should I even bother?" The argument on this reading, is an empirical claim about the *effects* of believing Stoic doctrine on motivation, as opposed to a logical puzzle regarding the nature of determinism itself.

If the Lazy Argument is, indeed, a psychological one, Elsa can help us see a way out of the puzzle. The Lazy Argument is based on the idea that, all things being equal, it is *preferable* for us to be lazy, cowardly, or apathetic and to resist the demands of the larger world rather than "give into them." Elsa's experience shows that this is simply unrealistic. Elsa's early life is, in some ways, the epitome of a "lazy" life: she refuses to use

her magical powers, cuts herself off from her subjects, and basically stays alone in her room, trying desperately to avoid taking her "fated" place in the larger social and natural world. However, this does not lead to a happier, freer life; instead, it proves to be something like the opposite. In her attempts to escape what fate demands of her, Elsa cuts herself off from precisely those aspects of her life—human relationships, creativity, engagement with nature, and making a positive difference on the world—that make living bearable in the first place.

Elsa's eventual insight, on this interpretation, is to realize that "accepting one's fate" need not contradict a view of oneself as a free individual capable of making genuine *choices*. These choices are not concerned with "changing fate" (which verges on incoherence) but instead with changing her life, the lives of those around her, and the natural world in which they live. Her sense of freedom is, in the end, a thoroughly Stoic one, grounded in the recognition that we are inescapably a part of innumerable different communities, and that is only by embracing our membership these communities that we can fully become ourselves. We are, in the end, beings who are always embedded in a complex network of familial, social, political, and natural relationships. These relationships are the sources of fate's "demands" of us, but also provide us with the resources to meet these demands. There is, in fact, nothing else to our lives besides this.

**[Brendan: How would you describe the "Lazy Argument" against Stoicism in your own words? Do you think the "Elsa" model works as a response to it? (It's OK if you don't! I welcome criticism!)]**

## 5.4 CONCLUSION: ELSA AS STOIC HERO

The problem raised by the Lazy Argument—that of trying to reconcile human choice and moral responsibility with the thesis that we are, at bottom, physical beings governed by the same laws as other physical objects—is by no means Stoic's problem alone. Indeed, *causal determinism*—the claim that there are no "uncaused" physical events—is implicit in much of modern science. Moreover, the Stoic response to determinism, which consists of an attempt to show how we can still have meaningful human lives against this background, is the distant ancestors of today's dominant *compatibilist* accounts of free will. Elsa's struggle to deal with her fate should thus be of more than passing interest to us, as should her Stoical strategies in meeting this challenge.

To conclude, I'd like to briefly consider a potential criticism to the ideal of "Stoic hero": namely, that such as a person is too likely to accept the world as they find it, and is thus unlikely to challenge an unjust status quo. So, for example, consider the case of a society with unjust gender roles, where women are denied the opportunities allowed to men. Classical Stoic thinkers clearly recognized that women are both rational and capable of virtue; however, they generally argued that what was *rational* for women to do was to conform to the roles that their society assigned to them, and simply do their best in these sorts of roles, as opposed to challenging them (Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014). Strikingly similar criticisms have been made of the character of Elsa: that despite her power, she still exemplifies harmful gender stereotypes, in particular in the way her political and magical power are seen (both by her and others) as being incompatible with traditional romantic or other relationships (Streiff and Dundes 2017).

Somewhat more controversially, one could argue that these same sorts of concerns are borne out by the lives of prominent historical Stoics, particularly those who—like Elsa—actually managed to wield power. Seneca, for example, famously became rich serving as a counselor and public advocate for the vicious Nero, going so far as to compose letters defending Nero's murder of his mother Agrippina. Marcus Aurelius, for his part, may have helped end the *Pax Romana* when he allowed his biological son Commodus to become his heir, as opposed to adopting an heir who might have been better suited for the task, as many previous Emperors had done. One can plausibly interpret these failings as mere philosophical inconsistency, or even as well-intended

interventions gone awry. However, one might also worry that the Stoic doctrine to accept the "natural order of things" played a role in their unwise acquiescence.

If understood properly, Elsa points to a more fully realized version of Stoicism that helps mitigate such worries. Elsa's conception of the world, for instance, notably goes *beyond* that of the social, familial, and professional contexts in which she finds herself. Elsa does, not for example, seem to think of her exclusively as a queen, sister to Anna, or even magic-user. Instead, in embracing her role as the Fifth Spirit, she must conceive of herself as something like a "citizen of the universe," and come to see her own capacities and limitations in this new, larger context. Such a perspective crucially gives her *distance* from the roles she plays in existing human communities, which in turn allows her to reenvision the ways in which these communities could and should work. So, for example, the mature Elsa we see at the close of the second movie is perfectly capable of imagining ways in which relations between Arendelle and Northuldra people could be improved, or how the *status quo* of humanity's relationship to the natural environment needs to change. This same strategy—of shifting one's focus from local circumstances to the universe as a whole—can provide a fulcrum for Stoics to challenge the existing order.

In the end, of course, one might still object that the Stoic view of nature—as fundamentally benevolent and amenable to human reason—can blind one to the injustice and suffering that exist in both the social and natural world. After all, Elsa is far cry from a revolutionary on issues such as politics or gender, where she seems to aim for reform rather than abolition. She, like Marcus Aurelius, aims to be a good monarch rather than a person who ends monarchy. And she, like her sister Anna, is clearly cast from the same mold as previous Disney's Princesses, albeit with some very important differences.

The Stoic response here, it seems to me, is to reiterate that their philosophy is ultimately intended to be a *practical* one, which teaches its practitioners to accept what cannot be changed precisely so that they can exert their efforts on those things that can. Elsa provides a model for what this sort of "active acceptance" might look like, and how "fate" need not prevent one from being a genuine hero. A Stoic hero is, by definition, one who understands that there are many things—about society, the natural world, even their own psychological makeup—that are beyond their power to change. Their response to this, however, is not fatalism but a calm, dedicated, sustained attempt to help the world of which they are a part become the sort of place that they know it *wants* to be. They find satisfaction not in their successes, but in their strivings, confident that even their failures help to bring this about. They, like Elsa, knows that they are a part of everything, and that even their smallest movement will reverberate through the ice-covered landscape.

**[Brendan: This article (like the one on Batman above) doesn't really address in detail the many criticisms of both superheroes and princesses, especially when it comes to things like gender norms, violence, etc. So, I'll just leave an open question here: what are YOUR thoughts on some philosophical issues with Batman, Elsa, and the more general superhero-princess complex?]**

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[i] The definitive treatment of the Stoic attitude toward fate, and its complex relationship with ideas such as "necessity" is provided in a series of articles and books by Susan Bobzien (1997; 1998b; 1998a; 2005). My treatment here is indebted to these.

[ii] In *On Fate,* Cicero describes the argument against Stoicism as follows: "If everything happens by fate, everything occurs by an antecedent cause, and if impulse [is caused], then also what follows from impulse [is caused]; therefore assent too. But if this cause of impulse is not in us then impulse itself is not in our own power; and if this is so, not even what is produced by impulse is in our power; therefore, neither assent nor action is in our power. From which it follows that neither praise nor blame nor honor nor punishment are fair" (sec. 40).

[iii] The relationship between free will and quantum mechanics has remained a contested one. Loewer (1996) and Bishop (2002) both give nuanced introductions. De Caro and Putnam (2020) provide an argument that quantum mechanics is

ill-suited to rescue so-called *libertarian* conceptions of free will, according to which free will requires *violations* of the sort of determinism posited b the Stoics.

[iv] Early on, Stoics recognized that the death of loved ones (and our knowledge of their inevitable deaths) was among the most challenging things for humans to deal with, and this certainly seems to be the case for Elsa and Anna. It can, in fact, make it difficult for people to love at all. Epictetus advises that we can deal with these emotions, in part, by surrendering the idea that our loved ones are "ours" to begin with: "Never say about anything, 'I have lost it,' but instead say 'I have given it back.' Did your child die? It was given back. Did your wife die? She was given back…How does the way the giver asked for it back concern you? As long as he gives it, take care of it as something that is not your own, just as travelers treat an inn" (Epictetus 1983, sec. 11)