



Focus on goodness

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Happiness, wealth, and power

We can all think of people in public life who have accomplished big things and earned wide recognition, wealth, and power, even reaching the highest political offices or C-suite jobs. Outside of the typical halls of power, we also know of artists, writers, filmmakers, or cultural figures who have made a major impact on their work and gained a reputation that way.

But it's worth asking: How many of these individuals are seen as awful human beings by those who know them? How many take advantage of or outright abuse others? How many of these individuals—who have the material or social trappings of a “good” life—actually live well?

Stoic philosophy can explain a lot about how people with power, reputation, wealth, or fame could fail to live a good life—and it's been a topic of discussion since the ancient Greek days. From my perspective, here are a few Stoic attributes that these individuals may be lacking.

The virtue of self-control

Many high-achieving but ethically questionable people show a lack of self-control when they reach positions of power over others, subjecting people to their impulses. For example,

some powerful men harass women when there are power differentials in the workplace. Some bosses mistreat their staff, trying to assert control or domination, using anger as a weapon. Any position of power can create this temptation, even on a less exalted scale. Even some teachers may lack the self-control to stop themselves from emotionally degrading students. All of these people lack discipline and the ability to express themselves with equanimity—central to Stoicism.

Using the internal spark of reason

Reason helps us to forge a “good” path in a moral sense. Some powerful people fail to look at the moral nature of their choices, or examine actions in light of the virtues (in Stoicism: wisdom, justice, courage, and self-discipline). They ignore how their choices are affecting other people, nor do they strive for broader wisdom.

Often, they are confined to a very narrow vision of their own self-interest or the self-interest of their organizations. But humans are interconnected by common humanity, so if a person's choices harm lots of people, that individual is lost on the path to human flourishing.

Externals are irrelevant

The ancient Stoics' taught that

“Externals” such as fame, fortune, and power have no bearing on a person's happiness or ethical life.

These things are merely “preferred indifferents.” This may seem obvious to Stoic readers but bears repeating. Externals need not be completely despised. For example, it's still helpful to have friends, take care of our health, and pursue a good paycheck. But we just can't expect those “preferred” external things to always go well for us... and gaining them certainly does not make us superior humans. They are called externals because they are, ultimately, beyond our control. They can be taken away in an instant, no matter what the rich and famous may wish to believe.

In the end, we also have to ask ourselves: Are these powerful people living a happy or good life? In Stoicism, happiness and goodness come from human flourishing, in a moral sense—not materialism, reputation, or other externals. Perhaps a pursuit of dazzling externals, if it lacks ethics, leaves an emptiness that only more power, wealth, and fame can fill.

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