

# The Stoic Sage Does not Err: An Error?

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**Abstract:** The Stoics held that the wise person does not err. This thesis was widely criticized in the ancient world and runs afoul of contemporary fallibilist views in epistemology. Was this view itself an error? On one line, the view can be modified to accommodate many of the critical lines against it. Some of these lines of modification are consistent with traditional Stoic value theory (for example, importing the notion of preferred indifferents into epistemic considerations). However, others require larger modifications to Stoic axiology (in particular, a revision of the equality of errors thesis). A version of the no errors thesis emerges as defensible against the criticisms of the view, but there is then the question as to whether it is an orthodox Stoicism.

**Keywords:** academic skepticism, epistemic deontology, infallibilism, Stoic epistemology, Stoicism.

The Stoics held that the wise person (*spoudaios/sophos/sapiens*) does not err. Call this the *No Errors Thesis* (NET). Given that Stoicism is a form of cognitive clarification of human nature, the good, and how the world works, knowledge is the central player in such a story. False opinions are the prime explanation for vice and unhappiness. So the path toward virtue and happiness is through knowledge. Consequently, the NET seems clearly true: the wise, insofar as they are wise, do not err.

This tight piece of Stoic reasoning came under heavy criticism from the Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptics, and it is hard to see the view surviving these challenges in any robust form. Thus, it's worth asking: *Was it an error to say that the sage does not err?* My answer here is: *Yes and No*. On the face of it, this answer is cheating, but two distinctions from Stoic ethics (first, between progressors and sages, and second, between the simply indifferent and preferred indifferents) and a modification of another Stoic doctrine of the Equality of Errors will make this answer more palatable. My plan is to proceed as follows. First, I will motivate the Stoics' NET; second, I will present the ancient skeptical challenges. Third, I will motivate and outline the notions of progressors and preferred indifferents in Stoic ethics and make the case that there are epistemological counterparts to them. Fourth, I'll introduce a qualification to the Equality of Errors thesis. To close, I'll show that there are reasons internal to the Stoic tradition to say that the NET is right, and some reason to say it's wrong but revisable.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is an ambivalent contribution to the roughly named 'reformed Stoicism' movement, represented most prominently by Becker (1998) and Stankiewicz (2020). On the one hand, I see some revisions as salutary, especially those of taking Stoic ethics as free from implausible

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## 1. Casting the NET

That the wise person does not err was a Stoic commonplace. Sextus Empiricus quotes one of Zeno of Citium's theological arguments:

One may reasonably honor the gods; but those who are non-existent one may not reasonably honor; therefore, gods exist. (M 9.133)

The implicit premise here is that reasonable commitment is never in error – so, if one reasonably honors the gods, they must exist. Stobaeus directly reports:

[The Stoics] say that the wise person (*ton sophon*) never makes a false supposition. (Ecl. 2.111.18)

Diogenes Laertius explicitly attributes the NET to the Stoics:

[The Stoics] say that the wise person (*ton sophon*) will never form mere opinions, that is to say, he will never give assent to anything that is false. (DL 7.121)

Cicero, in setting the stage for the skeptical problem of the criterion, characterizes the Stoics as committed to the NET:

Nothing is further from the picture we have of the seriousness of the wise person than error. (Acad. 2.66)

And Epictetus connects the NET to his project of self-perfection:

Make beautiful your moral purpose, eradicate worthless and false opinions. (Dis. 3.1.43)

For Epictetus the consequences are clear: one must assent to the true and reject the false and suspend judgment with the uncertain – breaking this rule threatens one's wisdom (Dis. 1.28.2; 1.7.5).

There are two convergent Stoic arguments for the NET: from the ethics of assent and the other from moral cognitivism. The argument from the ethics of assent is that it is a misuse of the direction of the mind to assent to what is false – reason demands that we assent only to what is true. This is why Diogenes Laertius reports that Zeno held the wise person is the 'true dialectician,' who can discern the true from the false (DL 7.83). And Stobaeus reports that the Stoics held that hasty assent risks error and is a trait of the "incautious and base man and are not attributes of the man of ability who is perfect and virtuous." (Anth. 2.111.18) In short, we have an intellectual duty to avoid false commitment, so the wise suspend judgment with impressions that are not clearly true.

The argument from moral cognitivism runs that the source of moral error is cognitive error. We are virtuous only if our commitments about our actions are held rationally and are true. So the chief matter in becoming good person is to master the principles of judgment. Diogenes Laertius reports:

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Stoic metaphysics. I am inclined less to think that Stoic epistemology and ethics are easily separable, and many of the arguments here depend on their deep ties.

Hasty judgment in assertions have an impact on events, so that those who are not well-exercised in handling presentations turn to unruliness and aimlessness. (DL 7.48)

In turn, passions of grief, despair, and anger are ‘irrational mental contractions’ that impel unacceptable action (DL 7.111). Epictetus reasons:

[T]he function of the good and excellent man is to deal with his impressions in accordance with nature. Now, just as it is the nature of every soul to assent to the true, dissent from the false, and to withhold judgment in a matter of uncertainty, so it is its nature to be moved by desire toward the good, with an aversion toward the evil, and feel neutral about what is neither. (*Dis.* 3.3.2)

And Seneca outlines the connection between correct judgment and living properly: “Virtue is nothing else but right reason,” (*Ep.* 66.33) and the corollary that vice and misery are a consequence of error (*Ep.* 78.14).<sup>2</sup> The lesson of Stoic ethical cognitivism is that, since ethical success is predicated on cognitive success, the truly virtuous by necessity assent only to the true.

The convergence of the arguments from ethics of assent and moral cognitivism yields a clear motive for the Stoic NET. In this context, it is useful to place the NET among the famous Stoic paradoxes as another item of Stoic contemplation and revelation. That is, the familiar paradoxes, such as that only the wise person is rich, happy, or a real friend, or that virtue is sufficient for happiness, are all stark statements of Stoic value theory. One holds them and thinks them through as a Stoic cognitive exercise of clarity. One rekindles the dogmata in considering and understanding them.<sup>3</sup> The NET is another of the Stoic paradoxes.

## 2. Katalēptic Impressions and Skeptical Critique

The Stoics were committed to the NET. How, then, did they think they could pursue this end of making no errors? The answer was to propose a criterion of truth, that of *katalēptic impressions*. Of our impressions, some are true and some false. Of those that are true, there is a subset that are of a special epistemic quality. Diogenes Laertius reports the Stoics’ account of them as follows:

The presentation meant is that which comes from a real object, agrees with that object, and has been stamped, imprinted, and pressed seal-fashion on the soul, as would not be the case if it came from an unreal object. (DL 7.51)

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<sup>2</sup> For accounts of Stoic moral cognitivism, see Long (2004), Brennan (2005), Stephens (2007 and 2020), Irvine (2019), MacGillivray (2020), and Klein (2020). Sellars (2006) complicates this picture, as he holds that there is a parallel tradition of *training* necessary for the full development of the Stoic virtues. But even with this addition, right reason is still necessary.

<sup>3</sup> See Seneca’s *De Providentia* 4.6 and Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* 52 for examples of other underappreciated paradoxa, such as that the wise surpass the gods in achieving wisdom and that philosophical progress has its own self-undercutting problems. I spend some time on them in my 2017 and 2020a. See Holowchak (2008) for the case that the paradoxa are central features of the Stoic tradition.

Kataleptic impressions, then, have four defining characteristics:

- (i) They are caused by existing things.
- (ii) They accurately represent their source objects.
- (iii) They are impressions stamped on minds.
- (iv) They are such that they could not have come from what does not exist.

Conditions (i) and (ii) make it so that kataleptic impressions are true of what they are of and from. Condition (iii) makes it so that they are accessible to the minds of inquirers, and (iv) provides their *infallibility*. It is the modal element of this condition (iv) that, on the one hand, provides the tools for the sure criterion of truth for the wise. But, on the other hand, it makes the notion of kataleptic impressions open to skeptical challenge.

How kataleptic impressions provide the tools living up to the NET is not difficult to see: the wise assent only to kataleptic impressions. This guarantees that they will never have false opinions, and what commitments they have will be true. Moreover, not only will they be true, but they, given the modal requirement of kataleptic impressions in (iv) above, they *cannot* be false. And once one has aggregated a number of kataleptically-grounded commitments, an architecture of knowledge may be erected on that foundation.

It was at this foundation that skeptical critique chipped. The challenge was simply the question: *are there ever impressions that cannot be wrong?* Recall that requirement (iv) of kataleptic impressions is a modal requirement – that it is *not possible* that they could come from what they are not of. But it seems that *any* impression has that possibility. Think of your best friend, Greg. If Greg had an identical twin, Frank, it would be impossible for you tell them apart. No impression you have of Greg can be kataleptic. So, all it takes is for it to be possible for Greg to have a twin for your impressions of him not to be kataleptic. This is true for any object of your attention – think of a possible but practically indistinguishable other object, and you have a reason to hold that condition (iv) does not obtain for your impressions.<sup>4</sup> Further, gods can trick or manipulate us and our experiences, as Hera does Herakles, tricking him into attacking his own children (*Acad.* 2.89 and Sextus’s *M* 7.405). So long as any of those possibilities obtain for our impressions, it seems that condition (iv) does not obtain for them. So they cannot be *kataleptic*. But since it’s clear that these are possibilities for all our impressions, none can be *kataleptic*.

The Stoic ancient answer was to meet the skeptical challenge head-on and argue that there, in fact, *are* kataleptic impressions. Parents of twins can tell them apart, and many can, with training, acquire very sensitive capacities with

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<sup>4</sup> This was the line of argument from the Academy in Cicero’s *Academica* 2.56 and from the Pyrrhonists in Sextus Empiricus’s *Against the Logicians* *M* 7.409. For accounts of the dialectic between Stoic epistemology and the skeptics, see the following: Frede (1983), Reed (2002), Hankinson (2003), Hensley (2020), and Aikin (2020b).

complicated phenomena. All one needs is time and patience, and the capacity to identify kataleptic impressions is within our reach. And we, with a life of experiences, can build a system of kataleptic impressions to yield something like wisdom. This was the ambitious epistemological program proposed by Antiochus of Ascalon, and Cicero outlines it in his *Academica*. The near universal response to Antiochus was that the program was not within the power of any human to achieve with the breadth of items that are needed for wisdom. In short, such a foundation can be built, but it is unlikely to be broad enough to build much upon.

The second ancient reaction to the challenge was a mixed Academic-Stoic tradition, one that maintained that the wise do not err, *but they do so by not assenting to anything*. Cicero attributes it to the Academic Arcesilaus after his conversations with Zeno:

[H]e thought that we shouldn't assert or affirm anything, or approve it with assent: we should always curb our rashness and restrain ourselves from any slip. But he considered it particularly rash to approve anything false or unknown, because nothing was more shameful than for one's assent or approval to outrun knowledge or apprehension. (*Acad.* 1.44)

In essence, Cicero argues that a philosopher, in taking the Stoic's principles to heart, *can* maintain the NET – but *by becoming a skeptic*.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this view saves the Stoic NET, but it does so by jettisoning the rest of Stoicism, since the NET was supposed to be something that ensured what survived its critical scrutiny would be worth living by, and this was supposed to be the Stoic *dogmata*. The problem, as Saint Augustine of Hippo observed in his *Contra Academicos*, is that if wisdom is now simply not making errors by not assenting to anything, it is not so much the kind of wisdom we'd sought in the first place (CA 3.4.80).

The result, as revealed by the ancient controversies, is that Stoicism's No Errors thesis and the epistemology it necessitated was not only under significant scrutiny, but it was considered, perhaps, an error itself. Cicero, himself, expresses deep sympathy with the Stoic philosophical program and he integrates its insights about ethics and metaphysics in his own thought. But he decides he cannot be a Stoic, because the demands of certainty necessitated by the Stoa are not ones he thinks he can achieve (*Academica* 2.66; *De Officiis* 1.2.6; *De Natura Deorum* 3.95). At this stage, it appears that Stoicism's NET is an error. However, I think there is a path forward for saving a qualified version of NET with two concepts from Stoic value theory, those of *preferred indifferents* and *progressors*, and by modifying the Stoic paradox of the Equality of all Errors.

### 3. Progressors and Preferred Indifferents

Stoicism is thick with stark contrasts. Two of regular vexation are (a) the paradox that there are only two kinds of people, the wise and the mad (Cicero, *Paradoxa*

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<sup>5</sup> Harald Thorsrud (2009) has argued that the best approach to interpreting Academic skeptical arguments is as posed internal to the Stoic program.

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*Stoicorum* 77), and (b) the fundamental divide between what is up to us and what is not, the former being the things of moral importance, and the latter being things of moral indifference (exemplary for this distinction is Epictetus's *Enchiridion* 1). The problem for Stoics was that these stark divisions were perhaps *too stark*. Surely of those who are not wise, some are doing better than others. The Stoic analogy is that those who are not wise are like those drowning – they are under the water's surface, and so whether it is one inch or a mile, they cannot breathe. The reply is that though they are all under the metaphorical water's surface, there are those who are swimming toward the surface instead of sinking deeper. Call them *progressors*. They are not wise, but they are taking steps to correct their foolishness.

Of the things not up to us, the indifferents, there are many things that can help us do our duties more effectively than others. Health, for example, allows one to be attentive and active, whereas illness prevents that. Wealth, too, provides one with opportunities to provide for those who are dependents; whereas poverty prevents that. Though these things should be, overall, items of our moral indifference, it is appropriate to prefer one to another, given the role they play in a life of active virtue. So, there are *preferred indifferents*.

Stoicism's stark contrasts yield reason to propose these nuanced third categories that allow for some flexibility and movement to the Stoic program. And so, Epictetus' *Enchiridion* is written not for sages, but for those 'making progress.' (*Ench.* 13) And it directs these progressors in planning and managing matters in their lives to "make use of impulse and its contrary, rejection, though with reservation, lightly, and without straining." (*Ench.* 2) Epictetus's audience is that of fallible, unwise folk who strive to improve. And so, too, Seneca writes to Lucilius, an Epicurean-curious friend, in need of reminders to do better (*Ep.* 2.6). The result is that Stoicism offers concepts for the non-ideal practitioner, but those concepts surveyed arise purely within the domain of ethics. I propose there are analogous notions on the epistemic side.

#### 4. Truth and Epistemic Duty

Diogenes Laertius reports that Sphaerus of Bosphorus travelled to Alexandria to visit King Ptolemy. Ptolemy was aware of the No Errors thesis and Sphaerus confirmed that the wise assent to no false propositions. Ptolemy put him to the test – he had *wax pomegranates* brought to the table. Sphaerus reached out to take one, and Ptolemy cried out, "You have given your assent to a presentation that is false!" Sphaerus replied:

I assented not to the proposition that they were pomegranates, but to another, that there are good grounds for thinking them to be pomegranates. Certainty of presentation and reasonable probability are two totally different things. (DL 7.177)

Notice that the case has exactly the same form as the indiscernibility problems posed by the Academics – that the impression is (practically) indistinguishable between true and false instances. One option for Sphaerus could have been to reply:

You got me, King Ptolmey. But this isn't proof that the wise do not err, only proof *that I'm not wise*. I am only a progressor, and I make lots of errors. I'm working on it, so thanks for the reminder. In fact, it shows that a wiser version of me – one who is *really wise* – doesn't err, right?

That would be doubling down on the aspirationalist line with the NET. But Sphaerus didn't say that, but rather introduces a *third class* of presentations, the reasonable. The difference is between (a) a certain presentation and commitment *that these are pomegranates* and (b) a presentation that makes it so that one can hold *that it's reasonable that these are pomegranates*. Assenting to (b) still allows Sphaerus to act and reach out. And further, Sphaerus discovers that the initial impression was false, and it is by way of other, coordinating, impressions. Ptolemy points and laughs, the pomegranate is waxy and does not smell sweet. Sphaerus learned something in the process and came to see that they were not pomegranates, but carved wax.

There is an epistemic intermediate for the ethical intermediate of those making progress, that of assenting to what is *reasonable* and being open to correction in the process. And with this, there are two goods we discover in the process. There, first, is the good of achieving the truth over time – Sphaerus makes his correction *because of his fallible assent and his actions*. Only because he had the initial false impression and assented to what it reasonably supported and then discovered that the impression was false did he correct it and then ascertain the truth. And, second, there is the good even in the initial assent – he nevertheless assented to something *reasonable*. The wax fruit *looked like pomegranates*, so he assented to it being reasonable that they are *pomegranates*, not that they were apples or books. The impression was enough for that purpose, but not for the purpose of excluding carefully carved wax. The same might be said for many other skeptically indiscernible cases; and so, the impression of your best friend Greg approaching may not be sufficient to distinguish him from his (possible) twin, Frank. But it is enough to distinguish him from your worst enemy, a bus, or a pile of leaves. That's not nothing.

Let us return to the moral concepts to make this case clearer. Consider a Stoic exemplar, Cato the Younger. His army was defeated in battle twice – once at Pharsalus, then later at Utica. In both instances, he pursued his Stoic civic duty of defending the Republic. Though he failed to win the battles, he nevertheless succeeded. The ends of Cato's actions were to preserve the Republic and also to do his duty in pursuing that goal. He can be thwarted in the first. Julius Caesar and his legions saw to that. In the second, as Seneca puts it:

Cato could not be defeated though his party met defeat; was not this goodness of his equal to that which would have been his if he had returned victorious to his native land and arranged a peace? (*Ep.* 71.8)

Winning the battles, a successful defense of the Republic, those for Cato were *preferred indifferents*. Doing his duty to the state and to those around him, those were the things within Cato's powers, and those are the things that we praise Cato for. He cannot be thwarted in his performance of those duties by others or by fate. Even if he loses those battles.

Returning to Sphaerus, an analogous line can be taken. It is Sphaerus's activity that is within his own control, and he pursues the end of truth by way of reasonable paths to it. Those paths can be thwarted – just as Cato's were thwarted by Caesar and his legions, Sphaerus's path to truth was thwarted by Ptolemy and his carved wax.

Sarah Wright has recently proposed a form of Stoic fallibilism based on the thought that we can think, in these cases, that 'truth is a preferred indifferent.' (2012, 123) Stoic ethics is a deontological attitude that holds that the moral good is solely in the duty done, not in the consequences. So, too, Stoic epistemology may be supplemented with this thought, that there is one epistemic duty under one's control, but one cannot control those outcomes of whether one has the truth or not. And so, we may give credit for doing one's epistemic best, even when one's results are false beliefs. Wright asks us to consider an analogy with archery, a *stochastic* practice with two constituent goods, a *telos* and a *skopos*. The *telos* of archery is developing the skills of expert archers; the *skopos* of archery is that of hitting the target. Notice that these ends are not identical, as expert archers may miss (due to, for example, a gust of wind or a broken arrow) and non-expert archers may hit the target by luck. The *skopos* in these enterprises, Wright notes, is beyond the full control of the practitioner, but the *telos* is entirely within their control (2013, 270). Credit is a matter of identifying the skill in the act – identifying a shot as *lucky* is a way of saying that it was successful, but not crediting the agent with success.<sup>6</sup> The result, as Wright sees it, is that a properly Stoic epistemology is one wherein "we limit our evaluations to the epistemic act itself, and not include the outcome or success of that act." (2013, 273)

Returning to the Sphaerus case, we may ask: *is being fooled by wax fruit enough to show that Sphaerus is not wise?* Was it, properly considered, *an error?* We are now in a position to appreciate the insight of Sphaerus's reply, one that does not concede he is not wise but of invoking the reasonability of his judgment. Wright's take on this is that we can see how there is not a problem with the sage being fooled, as it can be addressed with a fallibilist Stoic epistemology (2012,

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that achieving the skill of a practice and achieving the objectives of the practice are not identical, they are nevertheless internally related. It is hard to think of an agent having developed a high degree of skill at a practice who has a poor record of successes. Expert archers usually hit their targets. See Christiana Olfert's (2020) overview of the later Hellenistic controversies over the connection between trying one's best and success.

116). The result, then, is that, given this revision, the Stoics have a way of keeping the NET, but what is necessary is clarity on what the errors are and are not.

## 5. Qualifying the No Errors Thesis

A qualified version of the NET can be developed from this critical and reconstructive line of argument. However, it will require some other revisions, but they are tolerable within a broader qualified Stoic program. Let's start with an axiological principle in need of revision. I will then turn to the qualified No Errors thesis.

One of the curious theses of Stoic value theory is the famous paradox that all sins are equal. Call this the *Equality of Error* thesis (hereafter, EET). Diogenes Laertius reports Chrysippus reasoning that just as one truth is not *more true* than another or one falsehood *more false* than another, no virtue is better than another and no sin is any worse than another (DL 7.120). And again, just as sticks are straight or not – there are no degrees of justice or injustice, virtue or vice (DL 7.127). Cicero reports this as the third of the *Paradoxa Stoicorum* – that all transgressions are equal (20). And so, on the EET, any error is enough to stain one's character. Given this thesis and ethical cognitivism, we can see a direct line to the No Errors thesis about the wise. From a perspective internal to the Stoic system, they are identical.

Marcus Aurelius is an outlier on the EET. He approvingly notes that the Aristotelian Theophrastus held that moral errors committed out of pursuit of pleasure are worse than those done out of anger or pain, "as the angry man is more like a victim [...] the other man rushes into wrongdoing on his own." (M 2.10) There is an appreciable *magnitude* of error – that some are worse than others. One's spouse arrives home late. This can provoke an unpleasant tone of voice and curtness on their arrival or throwing all their belongings into the yard. One's impatience with a student's selfishness can be in the form of delaying an email reply or simply failing the student in the course. None of these reactions would be virtuous by Stoic lights, but it seems right that some slips are more momentous than others. For sure, *all cases of hitting the mark are alike, but it does not follow that all cases of missing it are alike*. In archery, there are cases of the bullseye and then there is what's not, but surely misses that are only an inch off are different from those over the target and into the woods or, more egregiously, into one's foot. Some misses are just worse than others, as some moral errors are worse.

Wright's proposal, on the cognitive level, is that there is a difference between *being fooled* and *being befooled*. Sphaerus was *fooled*, as he was given what was otherwise good sensory evidence, but he got a false commitment on its basis. He followed what was reasonable, as he had no antecedent reasons to doubt his inference from this appearance. To be *befooled*, however, is to exhibit a kind of credulity or willful refusal to follow one's evidence. Wright's example is from the tale of "How Boots Befooled the King." Boots convinces the king's counselor that he has a bag of wisdom. If the counselor were to climb into the bag, he would be

granted boundless knowledge. What an amazing offer! The counsel promptly climbs in, and Boots wraps him up. And thereby, he did not simply *fool* the counsel, but he *befooled* him. He revealed that the counsel was “lacking a kind of basic understanding of the world that one ought to have, given one’s experiences.” (2012, 114) Climbing into a bag will not confer wisdom, and to believe that one could gain wisdom by climbing into a bag is an indicator that one is not wise. So, it’s clear that there are errors that indicate that one is not wise.

The relevant contrast is the following: assuming that there are errors of different magnitude, that between *being fooled* and *being befooled*, it is possible to *be fooled* without jeopardizing one’s wisdom. Consider the following. Imagine a practical joke on Socrates with one of his friends dressing up as Xanthippe, wig and all, to tell him that he needs to come home for dinner amidst an involved philosophical conversation. If he mistakes the imposter for his wife, this would not make him unwise. We might imagine, similarly, Cato surveying his formidable army before the battle of Pharsalus and expecting that he will win the day. Though he was wrong, he was not foolish in thinking so, and we would not think that his false belief undoes his wisdom. And then there is being befooled, which might take the form of Socrates believing that he would be able to hop into Crito’s wagon and steal away from Athens before his execution and be able to practice philosophy as he had before. Or we can imagine Cato believing that if he prayed hard enough and did the right sacrifices, Aeneas, Romulus, and a host of Rome’s honored fallen warriors would rise from their graves, join his army at Pharsalus, defeat Caesar, and save the Republic. Such lunacy would obliterate any pretense of wisdom by demonstrating a fundamental failure to grasp how the world works.

This distinction between being fooled and being befooled seems intuitive enough. However, there is a more significant issue to be addressed here: the fooled/befooled distinction bears on empirical and contingent facts, not on principles of how one ought to live. So, for sure, there are errors, and some empirical errors are worse than others to the point where they impugn one’s status as wise, but it seems possible for one to have all the facts of the world right but still be unwise. One can err about the norms.

Imagine the following. Just before the battle of Pharsalus, Cato sees that the Republican cause is lost. To save his skin, he turns his sword on the others opposing Caesar. He’s right *on the facts about the winning side*, but he’s wrong about loyalty and the political principles at stake. Socrates can see that the vote at his trial will go against him, so he asks his rich friends to bribe the jury and to poison his accusers the night before the big day. Seneca sees correctly that Nero will never be virtuous, and he knows that his virtue will irritate the emperor. So he renounces philosophy and becomes Nero’s favorite *bon vivant* and yes-man. Here, errors are not so much failings to understand the world and how it works, but perhaps arise from understanding all too well how the world works. They are rather errors that impugn the wisdom and virtue of these (counter-factual) characters. So, orthogonal to Wright’s distinction between *being fooled* and *being*

*befooled*, there are errors of moral judgment that are *of magnitude* and ones that are not.

Errors of moral magnitude are those that are serious breaches of moral norms. Those not of magnitude have negligible moral consequence. Consider the failure to express gratitude. Such a failure is arguably a moral error, but what makes it arguable is the magnitude of the error. It is certainly an error, but it is a *slight* error, one easily forgivable. Alternately, consider the error of not keeping one's word when others depend on one's fidelity. This is certainly a moral error, and it is one we might hold is central to our social natures. Finally, consider the error of not caring when an error has been correctly pointed out, a kind of *meta-error*. Perhaps, returning to the failure to express gratitude – there would be an added error, and one of magnitude, if the person who failed to express gratitude, upon being presented with the fact of that error, said they did not care. It seems that taking steps to redress and repair the error is a constitutive moral requirement – to fail that repair would not only be an error, but it is one that reveals a deeper flaw of character. And so, consider Cato, now after the Battle of Utica. He asks a colleague to bring his sword so that he may do his bloody duty. The colleague brings the sword, but Cato fails to thank him, perhaps because he is steeling himself for the deed to come. This seems an error, but one that we can say does not mar Cato's status as wise. Further, if the error were brought to his attention, Cato may pause to call the colleague back to properly thank him.

The NET can now be re-cast with these two distinctions. The wise do not err in the sense that their errors (a) do not result from significant failures to understand the world on the evidence they have, and (b) are not moral errors of magnitude. The wise can err if those errors are those arising from misleading empirical evidence or are errors of minor moral magnitude. And so, a person would fail to be wise if she were to harbor baseless assumptions about government cabals or if she were to be in error that she is free to pursue her own desires without consideration of others and their needs. And she would be unwise if she were to err in some way (even minor), and, upon discovering it, did not try to make restitution and repair. But it seems that the wise can err with misleading or complicated empirical matters without their wisdom being imperiled. And they may make slight moral errors, so long as, once recognized, they promptly correct them. What these moral errors are can remain indeterminate for our purposes, so long as this class can be populated in principle. Perhaps it could be failing to express proper gratitude or caring for oneself insufficiently amidst doing one's duty to others. It could be in over-committing oneself to more than one can reasonably manage. Seneca articulates a similar view, that the wise may yet err, as we are limited and incomplete things:

Whoever it may be, let us say to ourselves on his [the person who erred] behalf that even the wisest of men have many faults, that no man is so guarded that he does not let his diligence lapse, none so seasoned that accident does not drive his composure into some hot-headed action, none so fearful of giving offence that he

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does not stumble into it while seeking to avoid it [...]. If the wisest do wrong, whose sin will not have good excuse? (*De Ira* 3. 24.4-25.2)

The reasoning is for the sake of forgiving errors in those who are not wise, but Seneca's premise is that the wisest err, too. These errors do not make it so that they are not wise, but this is precisely because they work to mitigate them. Sometimes these errors even arise from virtues. But since the wise err, so Seneca reasons, we should be more forgiving. And, for our purposes, the important lesson is that *the wise do err*.

## 6. Yes and No

I have argued that the NET was an error, but, properly qualified, it is not an error. Stoic wisdom and virtue are predicated on cognitive success, so cognitive failure threatens those goals. However, the means to that success admit of significant skeptical challenge. Consequently, the virtue and wisdom it makes possible is put in jeopardy. I've argued here that with concepts from Stoic ethics (those of *preferred indifferents* and *progressors*) and a modification of the Equal Errors thesis, the No Errors thesis can be qualified to keep to its original spirit. The wise person does not err in ways that either arise from significant distortions of what her evidence supports or is an error of moral magnitude. So long as the domain of relevant errors is restricted, the No Errors thesis can be revised to keep with the aspiration that motivated it.

The No Errors thesis, if unqualified, is an error. If qualified, it is not an error. So is the No Errors thesis an error? Given this arrangement of points, the answer is: Yes and No. The appeal of the qualified version is that it is amenable to the notion of intellectual progress, as one may enact one's wisdom in making corrections. So there is a sense that progressors, too, exhibit a kind of wisdom so long as it is directed at the ideal of becoming completely wise. Sphaerus's false belief is corrected in the process, and Cato's (hypothetical) failure of gratitude is corrected as he comes to be aware of it – part of (progressor's) wisdom is making corrections. But this point with the qualified version of the No Errors thesis concedes that *errors, when made explicit, are not tolerable by the wise*. These errors must be corrected – though we may forgive them for their errors, they must correct them and eliminate them. Even a qualified NET seems to put us on an aspirationalist path behind the unqualified NET. In making the corrections they do, our exemplars of wisdom must see themselves as incompletely wise – even if their errors are small and correctable.<sup>7</sup> They must see their errors as errors of the

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<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that René Brouwer (2014) holds that it is likely the case that there were Stoic sages, but they did not see themselves as sages. Socrates is exemplary, as he held himself to be ignorant, and disavowed wisdom. The insight here may license a stronger thesis, that the wise, on the view here, may *never* see themselves as wise. Brian Johnson's (2014) case is that it is best, in light of these difficulties, to focus on progressors, since it seems that it's *our* only option, but maybe even sages must take this perspective, too.

sort that must be corrected, and they resolve not to be fooled again in the future. Sphaerus will think twice about fruit offered by Ptolemy, and Cato will guard himself against failing to acknowledge help. Seen from this perspective *internal to the practitioner of Stoicism*, the qualified NET is simply doubletalk. What else is a failure to achieve what one is supposed to achieve and that stands in need of correction but an error? Qualifying the No Errors thesis, in the end, makes it no longer the *No Errors* thesis.

The No Errors thesis, as I see it, is one of many Stoic Paradoxa. It is a stark and uncompromising principle of a stark and uncompromising system. There are means of making it less stark and more compromising, but these qualifications require broader internal revision of the Stoic system. And even then, it seems the unqualified view must still be an organizing commitment of those practicing it. By my estimate, the No Errors thesis is an error if and only if Stoicism itself is an error. Whether the uncompromising, unqualified principle and the philosophy it animates or its compromising and qualified counterpart is more appealing may ultimately depend on whether the latter remains recognizable as Stoicism.

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