

Dungeons, Dragons, and Stoicism

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In high school and college one of my favorite hobbies was playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. Most of my D&D buddies were engineering students. As budding engineers, their creative skills in crafting detailed maps and devising sophisticated combat systems made them excellent Dungeon Masters for our adventures. Some liked to role-play as magic-users or clerics or thieves. I was all about advancing my warrior characters. Like all D&Ders in the 1980s, we were greatly influenced by J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series. A few times I played a dwarf character who obtained a magic hammer. Some guys would play elves or half-elves sometimes. But by and large the characters we played were humans. Our imaginations were spurred by adventure movies like *The Four Musketeers* (1974) and fantasy films like John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981), which I am rather embarrassed to admit I have seen more than thirty-five times. But the swords and sorcery novels that most inspired my D&D role-playing were Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* series. And so, naturally, I named the character who would become my greatest warrior Konan with a K and patterned him after Howard's Cimmerian. When the movie came out in 1982 starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, James Earl Jones, and Sandahl Bergman, I was delighted.

Why did my high school chums and I devote hours on end to playing D&D and the feudal Japanese role-playing game *Bushido*? What made it so fun for us was that we could draw up our own characters and, as a group, animate them in our own narratives as if we were Tolkien and Howard. We worked together to create fantasy stories in which *we* played the starring roles as the protagonists. We were the heroes who would vanquish monsters and villains to win the day, grow stronger and more experienced, and then embark on the next daring adventure. D&D for us was thus a much richer exercise in imagination, cunning invention, and free-wheeling tactics than playing board games like *Risk*, *Alexander the Great* (1974), *The Siege of Minas Tirith* (1975), or chess.

We knew nothing about the interesting parallels between building heroes in a swords and sorcery role-playing game and Stoic ethics. In D&D how well your character handles encounters with hostiles and friendlies determines how many experience points you gain. As your character rises in experience points, you level up and gain more powers and proficiency as a warrior, magic-user, or whatnot. Vanquishing powerful baddies allows you to loot their lairs and win treasures. Treasures like magic weapons, shields, armor, potions, spells, and other useful devices give you advantages in your next quest. The goal is to become as great and powerful a hero as you can while braving death at every turn. But even if your character dies, you can urge your friends to use their resources to get your character resurrected so you can rejoin them for the next adventure. Sometimes the resurrection spell fails, and your character is lost permanently. If all members of your party of heroes are killed off with you, everyone loses. You go back to square one and create newbies. With luck, the dice will roll in their favor on their new adventures.

In Stoicism the goal is to make progress in gaining wisdom. There is only one kind of hero in Stoicism: the sage. There is no Conan the warrior, no Gandalf the wizard, no Bilbo

Baggins the thief. The only type of hero in Stoicism is the person who has overcome all vices after a long lifetime of mastering therapeutic practices. The monsters and villains to vanquish are those inside you: anger, fear, greed, gluttony, lust, and envy. D&Ders face the danger of death often. Slaying evil foes to win their treasure is part and parcel of the game. But in real life, unless you are a soldier or a law enforcement official, doing your duty would (almost) never require a Stoic to take someone's life. Instead, Stoics reflect on their mortality and the mortality of their family members, their friends, their companion animals, and their houseplants. Stoics remind themselves daily to reflect on death, illness, and loss to keep their focus on what is up to them.

Focusing on what is up to you is a lesson D&D can teach. The challenges the Dungeon Master throws at players are not up to them. How players respond to those encounters is up to them. (And the behavior of the players is, of course, not up to the DM.) When in battle, how the dice roll, and so the outcome of melees, is not up to you. But the tactics you choose are up to you. So, the frequent casting of dice in D&D is a good Stoic reminder that what happens to you is a matter of luck, that is, fate. What you try to *do*, in contrast, is up to you. Choosing to act bravely in the face of a fated encounter, for instance, is entirely up to you. The other virtues are also advantageous to a D&D role player. If you are self-controlled, you will not succumb to temptations that could result in non-player characters stealing your stuff or poisoning you. If you are just in your dealings with friendlies, then they are far less likely to stab you in the back (depending on how perverse the DM is!). And when you face evil adversaries, then justice and courage coincide and dictate defeating them.

But the differences between D&D and Stoicism are significant. In D&D the goal is to survive by overcoming foes, winning treasure, and gaining experience points so you can rise in level and keep growing more powerful. Gems and jewels, chests of gold, silver, and mithral, and magical baubles all aid your ascendance. So, material wealth and magic items are highly desirable, indeed, they are vital. For a Stoic, the only treasure is her own virtue. Material wealth is a preferred indifferent that is merely game equipment. It has no value in itself. It can be used virtuously or viciously, so it is a dispensable tool.

In D&D glory is won by vanquishing baddies, amassing treasure, and becoming the most powerful warrior, wizard, cleric, or thief you can. In Stoicism, glory is a dangerous illusion. Fame is empty, the worthless noise of clacking tongues, as Marcus Aurelius says. True heroism in Stoicism is simply living as a fully sane person. To be fully sane is to be devoid of all harmful emotions, all frenzied passions. To be fully sane is never to suffer anger; never to feel envy; never to covet what belongs to another. To be fully sane is never to worry about what foolish people think, say, or do; never to fret about getting ahead in the workplace. To be fully sane is to fear nothing. To have eradicated all false beliefs, and especially all false beliefs about what is truly good (virtue), what is truly bad (vice), and what is truly neither good nor bad (everything else), is to become fully sane. The fully sane person is the real hero, the only hero, according to Stoics. This is the prescriptive ideal that is the Stoic sage.

Whereas the D&Der loves the game because of its excitement and adventure, Yoda offers the sage reminder that a Jedi (read: a Stoic progressor) craves not these things. The only attribute a Stoic cares about on her player-card is wisdom. Wisdom teaches the Stoic that suffering grievous wounds in a melee isn't to be feared because it is not an evil. Neither is becoming the victim of a nasty spell. Nor is being killed outright to be feared. This is true not because your

buddies can try to get your character resurrected—this is make-believe. But Stoicism teaches the reality that death is both final and routine. All living things feed on dead bodies and are fated to become dead bodies themselves which will feed nature and its recycled, invariably temporary, life forms. So, death is necessary, not terrible. Success in Stoicism is progress toward wisdom. Power is not measured by how horrific the monsters you slay are. Power is not measured by the potency of your magic items or the number of men-at-arms you command or whether you ride a fearsome, flying steed. Power is not even measured by becoming a very high-level champion whose exploits become the legends bards sing about. The only real power, Stoics teach, is the self-mastery of someone who has, over an arduous lifetime, achieved wisdom. Though we are all fools, we can inch toward that goal if we dedicate our efforts to it week after week and month after month.

So, then, what kind of D&D player most closely resembles a Stoic? Surely not a thief. We know what Epictetus says about the person who boosted his iron lamp. There are no magic spells one can cast to bewitch adversaries. No wizardry can overcome the violent passions of fear, anger, greed, and lust. Can bad habits be purified by clerical healing? No. That is more magical fantasy nonsense. The warrior isn't very Stoic either—rushing into the fray, slashing away at baddies with his sword. Sure, facing dangers takes courage. But it is wisdom that teaches the Stoic that she has no enemies. All goblins, kobolds, orcs, trolls, and ogres are the Stoic's fellow beings. All dragons, beholders, and wraiths are fellow members of the one great cosmic city, the universe. They do what they do believing that it is right for them to act that way. They err out of ignorance, not out of malice. If the Stoic cannot educate them to reform their evil ways, then she must accept them, tolerate them, and even try to do them good, to whatever extent she can. So, I suppose that the D&D character type closest to a Stoic progressor is the paladin. The paladin devotes herself to being unswervingly lawful and good. The paladin is above all bribes, beyond all temptations, immune to coercion, seduction, or avarice. The paladin does the right thing for the right reason, no matter what. The paladin does not hesitate to sacrifice herself to save either a crony or a (lowly) non-player character. The paladin strives to be incorruptible and impeccable.

In my twenties, playing a hoity-toity paladin character held no appeal. The daring of a swashbuckling warrior like Conan struck me as snazzy. That was long before I learned about Epictetus's heroes. Socrates is Epictetus's greatest hero, with Diogenes the Cynic in second place, and the brawny Heracles probably third. Heracles was, I must think, at least partly the model for Robert E. Howard's Conan. Back in college I knew nothing about Seneca's hero Cato the Younger, who took his own life rather than bow to the conqueror Julius Caesar. The men the ancient Stoics heroized were admirable for their wisdom and exemplary commitment to virtuously fulfilling their roles at all costs. The only monsters they defeated were their own frailties, false beliefs, and bad habits. The only treasure they won was the self-respect that comes only with progress toward virtue. They escaped the dungeon of laziness and subdued the dragon of desiring things not up to them.