

## Is Santa a Stoic?

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Others have compared Stoicism and Christianity. Instead, this time of year it's natural to wonder whether Santa is a Stoic.

Right away someone could object that only human beings are Stoics. Since Santa is an elf, Santa couldn't be a Stoic.

This objection fails. To embrace Stoicism as a way of life, one need only be rational. Since Santa obviously possesses reason (*logos*), he is fully capable of living in agreement with nature and perfecting his reason into virtue. The Stoics argued that the sage is friends with all other sages and the gods too, since the rationality of all beings everywhere in the universe brings them together into an enormous, collective cosmopolis. Thus, even extra-terrestrials in distant galaxies, so long as they are rational, intelligent beings, are fellow members of this cosmopolis. This would include Vulcans, Romulans, Klingons, Ferengi, and Cardassians, if they exist. So, being an elf in no way disqualifies Kris Kringle from being a Stoic.

A more serious objection is that Santa is too jolly to take being a Stoic seriously. This objection carries some weight, philologically speaking. The Greek term *sophos*, meaning 'wise man,' is a common term for the sage. But another term the ancients used for the sage is *spoudaios*, which literally means 'serious man.' Since Santa is jolly, he seems to be unserious.

This objection is faulty, too. It is a popular misconception that Stoics are emotionally flat. Having a sense of humor, jocular, and a merry personality in no way conflict with taking seriously progress (*prokopê*) toward the prescriptive ideal of sagehood. Santa is diligent in his duties. There are no stories of Santa being lazy, negligent, or flighty. He takes flight in his sleigh pulled by the reindeer, sure, but he is not flaky. His jolly affect does not indicate he lacks commitment to improving his moral character.

Consider the Big Guy's back story.

Prior to the advent of Christianity, Germanic people, including the English, celebrated a midwinter event called Yule. When Christianity spread it absorbed many Yuletide celebrations into modern Christmas. One such tradition was the Wild Hunt, often said to be led by the god Wodan (Odin). His many names include *Jólnir* ('Yule figure') and *Langbarðr*, meaning 'long-beard,' in Old Norse.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, a Christian bishop from the town of Myra (now Demre) in the Roman empire's province of Lycia (Turkey) became known for giving generous gifts to the needy. For example, three destitute daughters of a pious Christian man were at risk of resorting to prostitution just to get by. To save them from this sorry fate, the bishop presented the daughters with dowries. In Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and the Czech Republic he is

usually portrayed with a beard wearing the canonical robes of a bishop. This beneficent bishop was named Saint Nicholas.

Father Christmas dates to the reign of King Henry VIII in 16<sup>th</sup> century England. Father Christmas was pictured as a large man in green or scarlet robes lined with fur. He embodied a spirit of good cheer, bringing peace, joy, good food, wine, and revelry during Christmas. As England no longer observed the feast day of Saint Nicholas on December 6<sup>th</sup>, celebration of Father Christmas was moved to the 25<sup>th</sup> to coincide with Christmas Day.

Wodan's role during Yuletide probably shaped several traits of Saint Nicholas and Santa Claus. All three have long white beards. Saint Nicholas rode a gray horse at night, reminiscent of Wodan's eight-footed steed Sleipnir. In North American tradition, the eight feet of Sleipnir become a whole team of eight reindeer pulling Santa's sleigh. (Rudolph was evidently a later recruit.)

In the Netherlands and Belgium, the character of Santa Claus competes with that of Sinterklaas, based on Saint Nicholas. In Dutch, Santa Claus is known as *de Kerstman* ('the Christmas man'). In French, he is *Père Noël* ('Father Christmas').

Clement Clarke Moore's poem *A Visit from Saint Nicholas*, contains a few worrisome details.

First, his chubbiness. Does his plump belly, which, when he laughs, jiggles like a bowl full of jelly, suggest that Santa lacks the virtue of moderation? Is he a glutton? Is he overweight from drinking too much rum-laced eggnog? Second, he smokes a pipe. Does he lack the self-control to quit using tobacco?

Rotundity often symbolizes abundance or forgiveness in certain Eastern religions. Traditionally portrayed with a big belly and smiling or laughing is Budai, the nickname of the ancient Chinese monk Qici. Stories tell of his love of food and drink. So, he is also known as 'Laughing Buddha' or 'Fat Buddha.' *Budai* literally means 'cloth sack,' because he totes a bag with him as he wanders. Venerated as Maitreya Buddha by Chan Buddhists, he was said to have lived around the tenth century in the Wuyue kingdom. Though Budai's jolly demeanor, sense of humor, and eccentric way of life distinguish him from most Buddhist masters, his resemblance to Santa is striking. So, Santa's jelly belly could be due more to elven genes than lack of appetite control. As for his pipe, it might contain benign herbs like cloves or peppermint instead of tobacco. Besides, Mr. Claus need not be a sage possessed of all the virtues to qualify as a Stoic progressor.

It is undeniable that Santa is a *Provider*. Hence, he enacts divine Providence with his unsurpassed gift-giving. Santa is *benevolent*. He brings cheer and goodwill, doing more than anyone to spread peace on Earth. Santa is a *Benefactor*. He materially benefits billions of children the world over as a supremely benignant cosmopolitan. These are strong Stoic credentials.

Kringle's other abilities also astound. Never mind his power to descend narrow chimneys and levitate back up them. *He knows who has been naughty and who has been nice*. How does he get this knowledge? The song *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* states that "He sees you when you're sleeping, He knows when you're awake." This suggests that Santa engages in continuous global

surveillance of all human beings. But to regard him as an Orwellian spy conflicts with his munificence and mission of spreading peace and joy. It seems far more likely that he directly perceives our inmost desires and thoughts, both good and bad. If so, then his insight into human hearts resembles the immense knowledge of the Stoic sage. The sage holds no false beliefs, knows in detail how the cosmos works, and aligns her will completely with every event. Moreover, with his power to know a person's naughty and nice intentions and motivations, Santa closely resembles the Stoic Epictetus' concept of the *daimōn* in each of us.

Zeus has furnished every individual with a custodian in the form of an individual guardian spirit (*daimōn*) and has entrusted him to the protection of this unsleeping and undeceivable being. Is there any better or more caring guardian to which he could have entrusted each of us? And so, when you close your doors and make it dark inside, remember never to think that you're by yourselves, because you aren't: God is there with you and so is your guardian spirit (*daimōn*). (*Discourses* 1. 14. 12–14; Waterfield trans. modified)

Claus's awareness of naughty and nice characters looks a lot like Epictetus' guardian within.

For the ancient Romans, Saturnalia was a celebration something like Christmas is for us today. "When children come up to us clapping their hands and saying, 'Hurray! Today's the Saturnalia!' do we respond by saying, 'There's nothing to cheer about'? Of course not. We too clap along with them" (*Disc.* 1. 29. 31; Waterfield trans. modified). Similarly, modern Stoics must not grumble 'Bah, humbug!' like Scrooge when children shout Christmas greetings but express the same holiday cheer.

We marvel at Santa's patience as legions of kids squirm on his lap, listing their Christmas wishes. Kris Kringle is obviously great with children. "It's impossible to resist the charm and exuberance of small children—impossible not to join in their games, crawl on the ground with them, and babble baby talk with them?" (*Disc.* 2. 24. 18; Waterfield trans.). Sounds like Santa, eh?

So, is he a Stoic? In the end, we'd have to know whether Santa believes that the only good is virtue, the only bad is vice, and everything else is an indifferent that can be used well; that virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness; that the goal is to live in agreement with nature; that perfecting reason into virtue is a lifelong challenge nobler than any other; that eliminating anger, fear, spite, envy, and all negative emotions frees us from misery; that vicious deeds result from ignorance; that justice requires all intelligent beings to cooperate in promoting social harmony in our shared cosmopolis; that our duties flow from our natural and acquired roles; that it is wise to do our best with what is up to us and accept the rest, etc.

What is clear is that Santa is a role model Stoics can admire, like Socrates and Cato the Younger. But is Santa a myth? Heracles was mythic, but ancient Stoics admired him all the same.