

## Stoic Ethics

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### Introduction

The proper interpretation of the role of *nature* is among the most central, difficult, and debated topics in the study of Stoic ethics. Our sources make clear that, at several points in the exposition of their ethical system, the Stoics make an appeal to nature. We are told of numerous different Stoic formulations of the end or goal of life (the *telos*); most of them refer to some form of attunement to, or connectedness with, nature as the ideal to be strived for. Again, the Stoics have a complicated story to tell about human development – a development that might optimally result in the attainment of this ideal – in which the types of impulses given to us by nature figure prominently. And even for those who fall short of the ideal (which the Stoics were inclined to think included almost everyone who has ever lived), it is, they believe, possible to achieve a measure of what they call “value” (*axia*) by means of the judicious selection of a variety of items labeled “things according to nature” (*ta kata phusin*). The concept of nature, then, will play a central role in the present survey. I focus first on the Stoics’ conception of the ethical ideal, and of the character of the person who attains it. This is followed by an account of their picture of the optimal course of human development. The final main section is devoted to the condition, as the Stoics see it, of those of us who fail to achieve the ideal, and the ways in which we differ from those who do achieve it.<sup>1</sup>

Stoic philosophy, including Stoic ethics, underwent various developments over the several centuries in which it flourished. Most obviously, in the transition from the Hellenistic to the Roman periods ethics gradually came to occupy center stage, eventually to the almost complete exclusion of other areas of philosophy; in the earlier phase of Stoicism, by contrast, the other areas were treated as on a par with ethics (and, as will shortly become clear, strongly interconnected with it). There was also a gradual

1. Diogenes Laertius (D.L.) (7.84 = LS 56A) opens his survey of Stoic ethics with a division of topics that, he claims, was adopted by a number of authoritative Stoics beginning with Chrysippus. This reflects the Stoics’ pervasive concern with taxonomy. However, given the extremely interconnected character of all these topics, any such division is bound to be to some extent arbitrary; besides, it is not entirely clear how the topics in Diogenes’ list are to be divided up (see Inwood, 1999, p. 113, n.56). For both reasons, I have felt no need to adhere to Diogenes’ ordering. On Diogenes Laertius as a source, see Mejer, ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY AND THE DOXOGRAPHICAL TRADITION, in this volume.

decrease in the rigidity of the Stoics' ethical outlook, along with a gradual increase in interest in discussing conditions below the ideal, and in offering advice to ordinary non-ideal practitioners. The detailed plotting of these and other developments is too large a task for the present survey. The evidence suggests that Stoic ethics, like Stoic philosophy in general, first reached its fully elaborated state with Chrysippus. I will concentrate mainly on this "canonical" version of Stoic ethics, with occasional glances forward to the later Greek and Roman Stoics and, less frequently, backward to the ideas of the original Stoic Zeno. As we shall see, these excursions will sometimes be necessary in order to fill out the picture. There are also interesting and difficult questions about the relations between Stoicism (including the developments within it just mentioned) and the political and economic conditions of later antiquity. It has often been said that the ethical ideals prevalent in Hellenistic philosophy, including Stoicism, are a reaction to the demise of the city-state, and the resulting political impotence of almost everyone in the Greek world, that occurred in the wake of Alexander's conquests; at a general level the claim is attractive, but it deserves detailed scrutiny. Again, though, limitations of space forbid me from undertaking that project.<sup>2</sup>

### The Sage versus the Rest of Humanity

The Stoics spend considerable time describing the cognitive and ethical condition of a character referred to as "the sage" (*ho sophos*).<sup>3</sup> We are repeatedly told that "the sage does everything well." This follows, according to one report, from the sage's "accomplishing everything in accordance with correct reason and in accordance with virtue, which is a skill relating to the whole of life"; by contrast, the common person – that is, everyone except the sage – "does everything badly and in accordance with all the vices" (Stob. 2.66,14–67,4 = LS 61G).<sup>4</sup> As a result of this unerring conduct, and the

2. For a reassessment of this issue, see BROWN, HELLENISTIC COSMOPOLITANISM, in this volume. Other topics of considerable interest have had to be omitted. Most notably, there is the question of how, or in what sense, the Stoics can reconcile moral responsibility with their determinist – and indeed, providentialist – picture of the universe. There are also a number of intriguing issues in Stoic political theory. However, it is fair to say that these topics are not as central to the subject as those on which I do focus. On freedom and determinism, see Bobzien (2001), and in this volume, Sharples, THE PROBLEM OF SOURCES; on political theory see Schofield (1991).

3. Despite the Greek masculine pronoun, I prefer the gender-neutral translation "sage" to the traditional "wise man." Stoic theory does not accept the kind of gulf between men's and women's natures alleged by, for example, Aristotle; and at least some Stoics appear to have recognized the consequence that the highest levels of human attainment were as open to women as to men. Cleanthes wrote a book called *On the Fact that Virtue is the Same for a Man and for a Woman* (D.L. 7.175); and the Roman Stoic Musonius Rufus took up related topics in works entitled *Whether Daughters Should be Educated in the Same Way as Sons* (the answer is yes) and *That Women too Should Philosophize* (preserved in summary by Stobaeus: 2.235,23–239,29 and 2.244,6–247,2).

4. All translations are my own, including passages that appear in Long and Sedley (1987); the English versions in this chapter and in Long and Sedley are therefore not identical.

state of character that gives rise to it, the sage is said to achieve happiness; the rest of us are doomed to unhappiness. This rigid and stark division between just two types of people, sages and non-sages – the former, not surprisingly, being extremely rare – is a consequence of a number of Stoic theses about virtue, the good, and the *telos*.

### *Virtue and vice*

The Stoics hold that the only things truly good are the virtues (and, according to some accounts, certain other items necessarily connected to the virtues, such as virtuous actions and virtuous persons). Conversely, the only things truly bad are the vices. This leaves a huge number of things that we might have considered either good or bad in a third, intermediate category, namely the indifferent: for example, health, wealth, or reputation, along with their opposites, all qualify as indifferents (D.L. 7.101–103 = LS 58A). As we shall see in more detail later, this does not mean, at least for orthodox Stoics, that such things make, or should make, no difference to our motivations and behavior. But it does mean that they are irrelevant to our attainment of happiness (*eudaimonia*); one can be happy without health or wealth, or unhappy with them – indeed, one’s loss or gain of health or wealth makes no difference to whether or not one is happy. The attainment of the good, on the other hand, guarantees happiness; indeed, some Stoics are said to have *defined* the good in terms of its capacity to produce happiness (S.E. M 11.30).

Perhaps surprisingly, this relegation of everything except virtue and vice to the category of the indifferent is said to have been supported by the conclusion that virtue is the only thing truly beneficial, and vice the only thing truly harmful (LS 58A). Health, wealth, and the like are described as no more beneficial than harmful, on the ground that benefiting is not “peculiar to” (*idion*) health or wealth, nor harming “peculiar to” sickness or poverty. That is, health and wealth are not, just as such, guaranteed to benefit, nor sickness and poverty guaranteed to harm (there are circumstances in which sickness or poverty is preferable to health or wealth); only virtue is guaranteed, just as such, to benefit, and vice to harm. One might have expected the moral to be that health and wealth benefit only some of the time, or from some points of view, whereas virtue benefits invariably. This is the position taken in two passages of Plato to which the Stoics are clearly indebted (*Meno* 87e–89a, *Euthd.* 280e–281e); here it is argued that health and wealth are not *inherently* beneficial, but can *become* beneficial when used with wisdom. But the Stoics, though clearly relying on the same kinds of considerations, draw the stronger conclusion that only virtue benefits (and only vice harms), period; for them, there is apparently no such thing as a merely temporary or contingent benefit or harm.

The Platonic precedent goes further than the point just mentioned. Like Socrates in a number of Platonic dialogues, the Stoics also conceive of virtue in strongly intellectualist terms. This is clearly connected with their conception of the human soul – or at least, of the “ruling part” (*hēgemonikon*) of the soul – as rational through and through, by contrast with the conception suggested elsewhere in Plato (the *Republic*, for example) and in Aristotle, according to which the soul has both rational and non-rational elements; if the soul is nothing but reason, then it is hard to see what virtue could consist in other than in the perfection of one’s reason. In any case, we are repeatedly

told that the Stoics took the virtues to be species of knowledge (*epistēmai*) and skills (*technai*) (e.g., Stob. 2.63,6–7 = LS 61D1). This point, in turn, is connected with yet another thesis of Socratic or Platonic origin, the inseparability of the virtues. (There was some internal dispute among the Stoics about how strongly to understand their interconnection; but Chrysippus, at any rate, seems to have opted for inseparability rather than outright unity.) That the Stoics adhered to some version of this thesis might have been inferred from the inherently systematic character of knowledge in general, on the Stoic view (Stob. 2.73,21–74,1 = LS 41H2–3, which actually cites the virtues as an example of this systematicity). However, we are also told explicitly (Plut. *St. rep.* 1046E = LS 61F1; Stob. 2.63,8–10 = LS 61D1) that, on the Stoic view, anyone who has any one virtue has all of them, and moreover, that to act in accordance with any one virtue is to act in accordance with all of them. The general idea is clear enough: in order to settle what action or actions any one virtue dictates in a given situation, the perspectives associated with the other virtues are also necessary. For example, the question of what risks or hardships it is appropriate to undertake in a given situation – in other words, the question of what the virtue of courage dictates – cannot be settled without attending to the worth of the various objectives that the act of undertaking them would promote; but for that purpose the other three canonical Stoic virtues – practical wisdom, moderation, and justice – are just as relevant as courage itself. The evidence suggests that Chrysippus went even further, arguing that each of these four virtues *includes* the perspectives that one would normally associate with the other three. This matter and the whole topic of the unity of virtue are well discussed in Cooper (1998).

### *The Telos (Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus)*

Why should virtue, so understood, be thought both necessary and sufficient for happiness? And why should the *lack* of virtue, so understood, be taken as entailing the active presence of vice (and unhappiness), with nothing between the two? To answer these questions, we need to begin to look at Stoic accounts of the *telos*, the end or goal of life;<sup>5</sup> it is here that the theme of nature begins to be important. The sources ascribe numerous different formulations of the *telos* to different Stoics, and two different formulations to Zeno, the school's founder; it is the earlier formulations that are relevant in the present context. Stobaeus tells us that Zeno gave as the *telos* "living in agreement" (*homologoumenōs zēn*, Stob. 2.75,11–12 = LS 63B1). He goes on to say that Zeno's successors, beginning with Cleanthes, took this to be an abbreviated way of saying "living in agreement *with nature*," and themselves preferred the longer, more explicit formulation; Chrysippus, he adds, devised the further version "living according to experience of things that happen by nature," thinking this to be clearer still. But

5. The Stoics distinguish between the *telos* and the "aim" or "target" (*skopos*); the latter is a certain optimal condition, specifiable without reference to any particular person, whereas the former is the actual exemplification of that condition in one's own life. See Stob. 2.77,1–5; 2.77,25–27 = LS 63A3. But this distinction and its ontological complexities need not detain us here.

Diogenes Laertius, while agreeing about Cleanthes' and Chrysippus' formulations, says that Zeno already defined the *telos* as "living in agreement with nature," citing Zeno's book *On Human Nature* (7.87 = LS 63C1).<sup>6</sup>

There is reason to believe that Zeno's shorter formulation was not in fact simply an abbreviation of "living in agreement with nature" (here I am in agreement with Striker (1996a, pp. 223–4) against Inwood (1995, p. 654)). For Stobaeus glosses the phrase "living in agreement" with the words "that is, living in accordance with a single consistent reason – on the assumption that those who live in conflict are unhappy" (2.75,12–76,1 = LS 63B1). It appears, then, that with this formulation Zeno had in mind the *internal* consistency or harmony of one's reason, rather than (as Stobaeus claims his successors understood him) agreement *with nature*. On the other hand, since Zeno apparently did also offer the longer formulation, we must assume that he took this internal consistency somehow to amount to the same thing as "living in agreement with nature"; for the *telos* is the *one* thing towards which one's life is or ought to be directed – by definition there cannot be more than one of them. If so, his successors' conflation of the two formulations (if it happened) would have been a simplification rather than a distortion.

We are also told that there was some question as to how to understand the word "nature" in the phrase "living in agreement with nature": does it refer to the nature of the universe, or to human nature specifically (D.L. 7.89 = LS 63C5)? Zeno's answer to this question is not reported. But his use of the two distinct, yet supposedly equivalent, formulations of the *telos* would be easily understood if the "nature" he had in mind was human nature; to render one's reason fully consistent might well be thought of as the perfection of one's nature as a human being. Chrysippus, however, is reported to have taken "nature" to refer both to human and to cosmic nature; his explanation of this, as summarized by Diogenes Laertius (7.88 = LS 63C3–4), is worth quoting in full.

Therefore the *telos* becomes living consistently with nature – that is, in accordance both with one's own nature and with that of the whole – doing nothing that is habitually forbidden by the common law, which is correct reason permeating all things, being the same as Zeus, who is the leader of the administration of the things that are. Now this itself is the virtue of the happy person and a smooth flow of life, whenever everything is done according to the harmony of the spirit in each person with the will of the administrator of the whole.

Among other things, this passage links the *telos* with virtue and with happiness, and this is no surprise (compare, e.g., Stob. 2.77,16–21 = LS 63A1–2); it also makes clear an important connection between the Stoics' ethics and their cosmology or theology.

6. One further distinction may be worth mentioning here, to forestall a possible misunderstanding. The Introduction included a reference to "things in accordance with nature," which are the kinds of things (such as health or wealth) that we generally have reason to select. The phrases "in agreement with nature" and "in accordance with nature" are by no means equivalent in Stoic ethics. I am currently focusing exclusively on the former; I address the latter, and the differences between the two, in the section titled "The Indifferent and Progress towards the Good."

We shall return to the subject of the *telos*, and some additional formulations of it offered by later Stoics (see pp. 540–7). But we are now in a position to make better sense of the issues left aside a few paragraphs back – why virtue should be thought necessary and sufficient for happiness, and why there is nothing between virtue and vice.

*The sufficiency of virtue for happiness*

The picture suggested is as follows. For the reasons noted earlier, virtue is to be understood as the perfection of one's reason. Now, to perfect one's reason is just to bring it into a state of supreme order and consistency. This order and consistency, as we have seen, is captured in Zeno's shorter formulation of the *telos*; it is also echoed by other passages that stress the consistency and orderliness of the sage's disposition and behavior (e.g., D.L. 7.89 = LS 61A; Plut. *Virt. mor.* 441C = LS 61B8; Sen. *Ep.* 120.11 = LS 60E8). Along with consistency, as some of these passages indicate, is firmness or unchangeability; another passage, quoting Chrysippus, also alludes to the "fixity" (*pēxis*) that comes with the attainment of happiness (Stob. 5.906,18–907,5 = LS 59I). Once one has achieved virtue, then, one's soul is as ordered and as stable as could possibly be hoped for. As we saw, it is plausible to think that Zeno saw this condition as the fulfillment of one's nature as a human being; and, given the Stoics' conception of nature as providentially ordered according to a rational plan, it is not surprising that they would think of humans as naturally designed to achieve a state of perfect psychic order and stability (analogous to that of Zeus himself – Plut. *Comm. not.* 1076A–B, partially reproduced as LS 61J) – where this state, in turn, is understood as perfected rationality.

But this state is also a state in which one is "in agreement with nature" as a whole, not simply with one's own human nature. One's own nature, of course, is a part of nature in its entirety; and the whole of nature is itself a unified system, rationally ordered down to the last detail. Now it might be suggested, for this reason, that in living in agreement with one's own nature, one is thereby automatically fulfilling one's role in, and so living in agreement with, nature as a whole. However, while true, this is less significant than it may seem, because those who *fail* to live in agreement with their own natures are also nonetheless fulfilling their roles in nature as a whole; their failure is as much a part of the rationally ordered plan as one's own success. One's own success might perhaps be thought of as a sort of *collusion* with the divine will; but all of us, successes or failures, have a place in the plan of the universe, since that plan covers everything that happens. The real reason why the perfection of one's reason is also a state of agreement with (universal) nature is slightly different. This is that included in the perfection of one's reason is a process in which one comes to *understand* the nature of the whole universe; one's actions are shaped by one's understanding of this nature, and one is motivated to act in such a way as to be in conformity with it and to advance its goals to the best of one's ability. Those who lack this understanding do in fact have a place in the plan of the universe; but those who have this understanding are *aware* of their place in this plan, and willingly follow the path ordained for them. This is not to say that they know every event that is going to occur; the Stoics stress that even the sage will often have to make choices under conditions of uncertainty. But they do know the general outline of the plan, and they do know, of

every event that does in fact occur, that it is part of that plan. And, given their willing attachment to the plan, this means that they can never be disappointed; no matter what happens, they are content with the outcome.

### *Why there is nothing between virtue and vice*

Sages are happy, then, in that their own natures are fulfilled, and in that they are, in a very strong sense, in tune with the world in which they live. One may now wonder why this should have anything to do with virtue, as commonly understood; the explanation of this will have to wait until a later stage. But we have at least some explanation of why happiness – that is, “a smooth flow of life” (D.L. 7.88 = LS 63C4; S.E. M 11.30) – should be thought to accompany the perfection of one’s rationality. And we can now also get some idea of why there should be thought to be a fundamental and exclusive division between those who have, and those who have not, achieved this state of perfection. Those who have not achieved it are out of touch with themselves and with the world in general. They lack the psychic order and stability of the virtuous, and they lack the sage’s willing identification with the course of events that unfolds in the world; it is therefore not at all the case that they can never be disappointed, and they cannot be said to enjoy “a smooth flow of life.” Now, since vice is defined, in simple opposition to virtue, as inconsistency or disharmony of the soul (Cic. *Tusc.* 4.29 = LS 61O1), it follows that anyone who lacks virtue is in a state of vice. Moreover, corresponding to the inseparability of the virtues is the inseparability of the vices; if one lacks any one virtue, one lacks all of them, and the lack of any given virtue entails the presence of the corresponding vice. Hence, as we saw earlier, anyone who is not a sage is both unhappy and guilty of all the vices. This is not to deny that some people are *closer* to achieving virtue than others; the Stoics recognized the possibility of progress (*prokopē*) in this direction, and we shall return to this topic. But still, for those not in a state of virtue – however close to or far from attaining that condition they may be – it is just as true of any one of them as of any other that they are in a state of vice, and that they lack happiness. It is in this sense that, as the original Stoics maintained, “all failures are equal” (D.L. 7.120 – though a pair of minor later Stoics, Heracleides of Tarsus and Athenodorus, are said to have disagreed (7.121)).

The position may now seem less paradoxical and extreme than it looked at first. But the picture now needs to be filled out by an account of the development towards the state of virtue that the Stoics think will ideally take place, and of the differences that they take to exist between the kinds of decision-making open to the sage and to the rest of us.

## The Ideal Course of Human Development

The Stoics have much to say about a state labeled *oikeiōsis*. There have been many attempts to translate this term: “appropriation” (Long and Sedley, 1987), “congeniality” (Inwood and Gerson, 1997) and “affiliation” (Inwood and Donini, 1999) are some recent examples. It is characterized in one source (though this does not appear to be a formal definition) as “a perception and apprehension of what is one’s own (*tou oikeiou*)”

(Plut. *St. rep.* 1038C). It is an orientation, or set of orientations, given to us by nature (either from birth or in the course of our natural development), and has recently been well described as “a foundation in nature for an objective ordering of preferences” (Baltzly, 2000).

### *Initial oikeiōsis – Self-preservation*

Our initial *oikeiōsis* takes the form of a natural orientation towards our own constitutions, from which it follows that we have, from the moment we are born, a natural impulse towards self-preservation (D.L. 7.85 = LS 57A1–2; Cic. *Fin.* 3.16; Plut. *St. rep.* 1038B = LS 57E). This is supported by an a priori teleological argument: of the various imaginable options as to how humans (and other animals) might be designed, it is by far the most likely that a providential nature would design us so as to have this kind of fondness for ourselves (D.L. 7.85–86 = LS 57A2–4). But it is also supported by observations of a broadly empirical kind. Animal and infant behavior is said to support the hypothesis of a natural impulse towards self-preservation (rather than, as the Epicureans claimed, towards pleasure) (Cic. *Fin.* 3.16–17; Sen. *Ep.* 121.5–9). In addition, we are said to be endowed with a *perception* of ourselves and all our parts; this theme is prominent in the meager remains of the later Stoic Hierocles’ *Elements of Ethics* (see, e.g., LS 57C). On these various grounds, then, the Stoics conclude that our natures initially incline us to do whatever is needed for our survival at minimum, but also, more ambitiously, for our health and flourishing.

### *Developed oikeiōsis – Reason and virtue*

But the story does not end there. The natural development of human beings (and here the parallel with other animals ends) also includes the emergence of reason, and this profoundly affects the character of our *oikeiōsis*. Seneca speaks of a number of different stages in the development of our constitutions, and of a different *oikeiōsis* corresponding to each stage (*Ep.* 121.14–16). The specifics of this account may be Seneca’s own creative supplement to the original Stoic position. But it is clear that that position included the notion that our *oikeiōsis* does not remain constant, and that there is a shift away from the initial narrow attachment to our own self-preservation. Instead, as reason comes on the scene, acting rationally itself comes to be what we are naturally oriented towards (D.L. 7.86 = LS 57A5; Cic. *Fin.* 3.21–22 = LS 59D4–6). Now reason, as we saw earlier, is both the source of and the awareness of the good; the only good is virtue, and virtue just is a state of perfected reason. Thus the gradual emergence of reason is identical with progress towards the good, and also towards our understanding of the good. This does not happen automatically, but requires concerted effort on our part; however, our natures do incline us in that direction (Sen. *Ep.* 120.4). And, again to recall, once we achieve the state of perfected reason and virtue, our natures have achieved *their* perfection; however, this state is also one of harmony with, and understanding of, nature as a whole.

What happens to the initial orientation towards self-preservation when (or if) we achieve this state of perfected reason? Though the sources are not as explicit on this point as they might be, it clearly does not by any means disappear. As we shall see in



the next section, there is a whole host of activities, described as “according to nature” and directed towards our continued existence as healthy, prosperous members of the human species, in which it is in the sage’s interest, just as much as in the interest of the rest of us, to engage; it is fair to think of these as the developed expression of the natural impulse towards self-preservation that has been with us since birth. But what happens as one achieves the state of perfected reason is that these activities come to be seen in a wider context. One’s orientation is now no longer towards one’s self-preservation alone; rather, as noted in the previous paragraph, it is towards doing whatever reason or virtue dictates – which is also towards doing (in so far as this is within one’s capabilities) whatever nature as a whole, or Zeus, dictates. Most of the time there will be no conflict between these two; that is, we will generally have reason to assume that the continuation and enhancement of our normal flourishing is what nature as a whole (or Zeus) dictates. But there will be exceptions to this, and in these cases the orientation of the sage’s fully developed nature will go *against* the activities that a pure impulse towards self-preservation would dictate. Epictetus quotes Chrysippus as saying “If I really knew that it was fated for me now to be ill, I would even have an impulse towards that” (*Diss.* 2.6.9 = LS 58J). Chrysippus does not take himself to be a sage, and treats this imagined state of knowledge as purely counterfactual; for him, acting so as to preserve his health is always, or almost always, going to be the course that reason recommends. And even the sage, as was noted earlier, will regularly have to act in ignorance of the specific events that Zeus or nature has in store. But sometimes it will be clear to the sage (and on rare occasions it may even be clear to the non-sage) that reason, virtue, or nature dictates an action contrary to one’s self-preservation – for example, the sacrifice of one’s life for the good of humanity as a whole.

### *Oikeiōsis and other-regarding motivations*

This last example points towards one further feature of the Stoics’ account of *oikeiōsis*. Several texts refer to an *oikeiōsis* towards other human beings. The most obvious instances of this are the natural attachments that we have towards our children and, in general, towards those related to us (Hierocles 9.3–10 = LS 57D1; Cic. *Fin.* 3.62 = LS 57F1). But it is also suggested that we have a natural attachment towards *all* other human beings, which explains our coming together into societies (Hierocles 11.14–18 = LS 57D2; Cic. *Fin.* 3.63 = LS 57F2). At least the latter aspect of this “social *oikeiōsis*,” as it has been called, is probably to be understood as developing along with – indeed, as part of – the development of reason; that is, it is simply a component in the picture already outlined. This is certainly what is suggested by a passage of Cicero’s *On Duties*, a work heavily indebted to the Stoic Panaetius. The passage refers to this natural fellowship of human beings, and especially of parents towards their children; but this is cited in the course of an account of the development of the four cardinal virtues, and is explicitly said to be something that our reason (itself identified with the higher development of our nature) is responsible for (*Off.* 1.11–14). And once this “social *oikeiōsis*” is in place, we will rank the common advantage above our own advantage (*utilitatem* – Cic. *Fin.* 3.64 = LS 57F3; cf. Epict. *Diss.* 2.10.3–4 = LS 59Q3). We can now see why virtue, understood in the abstract as the perfection of one’s reason, should be thought to include the kinds of qualities, such as justice, that

essentially involve the fair, considerate or humane treatment of others – qualities that popular thought would have regarded as among the virtues, and that the Stoics themselves agreed were virtues. We can also see how, in a deeper sense, concern for others is compatible with – or even inseparable from – self-interest. As Epictetus puts it, Zeus “has designed the nature of the rational animal in such a way that it cannot achieve any of its own goods unless it contributes something to the common advantage” (*Diss.* 1.19.13). Our own good is virtue, and virtue includes acting in the interests of others; that is just the way that human beings, together with the universe, function.

There may, however, be limits to the coherence of this account. Justice, and perhaps other virtues as well, seem to require the *impartial* treatment of all who are affected, regardless of the level of one’s personal connections with them. It is not easy to see how this is to be built on a foundation of natural attachments; even if we accept that there is a natural attachment to all other human beings, we must surely also admit that the degree of such attachments will vary greatly, depending on the closeness to oneself (in various senses) of any given person. We have a passage of anti-Stoic polemic that effectively exploits this tension between what is empirically plausible and what is ethically desirable (Anon. *In Tht.* 5.18–6.31 = LS 57H). On the Stoic side, Hierocles speaks of a person’s being surrounded by a series of concentric circles, each containing different groups of people. The largest circle includes the entire human race. The smaller circles include sub-groups of humanity, and the smaller the circle, the closer one’s attachment to the people it contains; the smallest circle (except for the one that simply contains oneself) includes only one’s immediate kin (quoted in Stob. 4.671,7–673,11 = LS 57G). Hierocles urges us constantly to draw the circles together as much as possible – in other words, to treat the people in the larger circles as if they were members of the smaller circles, and so to move as far as one can towards equality in one’s attachments. But this metaphor seems to concede that complete equality is not a practical possibility.

### *The rarity of the sage*

We have been speaking at some length of the achievement of perfect rationality. It is worth repeating that this state of perfection is generally regarded as an extremely rare accomplishment. This may not have been true in the very earliest period; in his *Republic* Zeno described a city of sages, and it is by no means certain that he regarded this as an unattainable utopia.<sup>7</sup> But Chrysippus is quoted as acknowledging at one point that his ethical pronouncements will strike us as on the level of fiction, not on the level of ordinary humanity (Plut. *St. rep.* 1041F = LS 66A); it may have been Chrysippus’ much more detailed delineation of the sage’s condition that made fully apparent the extraordinary difficulty of attaining this condition. Diogenes Laertius reports (7.91) that Chrysippus, Cleanthes, Posidonius, and Hecaton all stated that virtue is teachable, and then adds “that it is teachable is clear from the fact that people become good from being bad.” This makes it sound as if the attainment of goodness

7. However, see now Brouwer (2002), which argues that neither Zeno nor any other Stoic took *himself* to be a sage.

is something observable and common. However, it is not clear that this additional comment closely reflects anything that the Stoics in question said. Certainly the more standardly reported view is that the sage is rarer than the Phoenix (a mythical bird of which there is just one specimen alive at any given time). Starting at least as early as Panaetius, the Stoics had an interest in offering advice that might be of some practical use to those who are not sages. The standards for sagehood were not relaxed; but, as noted in the Introduction, the need to talk about (and to) others besides the sage was increasingly recognized (see, e.g., Cic. *Off.* 1.46 = LS 66D; Sen. *Ep.* 116.5 = LS 66C). This was not, however, more than a shift of emphasis; the resources for discussing the condition of the non-sage, and how one might progress towards the condition of the sage, were present in Stoic ethics from the start. The next section takes up these matters.

## The Indifferent and Progress towards the Good

### *Distinctions within the indifferent*

We have seen that the Stoics recognize nothing as either good or bad besides virtue and vice respectively; all the other things that we might be inclined to regard as having positive or negative value they consign to the category of the indifferent, on the grounds that these things make no difference to whether or not one achieves happiness. This does not, however, mean that they are or ought to be without effect on our motivations – or, for that matter, that they lack value. Within the category of the indifferent the Stoics make a threefold distinction among indifferents that are “in accordance with nature” (*kata phusin*), “contrary to nature” (*para phusin*) and neither. Examples of the first group are health, strength, and the proper functioning of one’s sense organs; examples of the second group are disease, weakness, and disability (Stob. 2.79,18–80,3 = LS 58C1–2 – complete version only in vol. 2). Indifferents that are in accordance with nature are said to have “value” (*axia*), and those contrary to nature to have “disvalue” (*apaxia*); to have value, in the relevant sense, is to be the kind of thing that one has reason, in normal circumstances, to select (*eklegein*, Stob. 2.83,10–84,2 = LS 58D).<sup>8</sup> Indifferents that have a considerable amount of value are called “preferred,” and those that have a considerable amount of disvalue are called “dispreferred” (Stob. 2.84,18–24 = LS 58E1–2); this leaves those with neither value nor disvalue, as well as those with a small amount of either, in the category of neither preferred nor dispreferred.<sup>9</sup> A preferred indifferent is therefore something that there is typically strong reason to select.

The extremist Stoic Aristo of Chios is reported by Sextus Empiricus to have objected to the very notion of preferred indifferents – and, by implication, to the whole idea of assigning value or disvalue to indifferents (*M* 11.64–67 = LS 58F). The main reason,

8. Not to be confused with “choosing” (*haireisthai*), which is the appropriate stance to take towards the good.

9. D.L. 7.106 equates being preferred with having value; but this is probably a simplification of the more complex account preserved in Stobaeus.

according to Sextus, is that the things labeled “preferred indifferents” are not invariably worth selecting; for example, sickness will be preferable to health if the healthy are being forced by a tyrant to participate in atrocities. It is not entirely clear that this was Aristo’s own reasoning, rather than Sextus’ elaboration on Aristo’s basic contention; Diogenes Laertius 7.160 also makes clear that Aristo was opposed to distinctions of value within the indifferent, but does not offer this or any other reasoning in favor of this opposition. However, if Aristo did justify his view in the way Sextus suggests, he was missing the point. The orthodox Stoics are quite happy to accept that preferred indifferents are not invariably to be selected over dispreferred ones; indeed, to recall, that was precisely the basis on which they refused to call such things beneficial and therefore good. The labels “preferred” and “dispreferred” apply to types rather than to individual instances; to call health a preferred indifferent is to say that it is *by nature such as to be* (generally) worth selecting, and the existence of occasional instances in which sickness is preferable to health does not undermine this in any way.

### *The Kathēkon – Meaning and definition*

The taxonomy of the indifferents, then, gives us a naturally based framework for decision and action.<sup>10</sup> However, it does not take us very far by itself. Another Stoic concept of great importance in this area is that of the *kathēkon*. This term is not easy to translate. Zeno is said to have offered an explanatory etymology, *kata tinas hēkein* (D.L. 7.108 = LS 59C2), but this too has been understood in multiple ways. The interpretation that I find most satisfactory is to translate the etymology as “coming down on certain persons” – that is, a *kathēkon* is an action that it *falls to* a certain person to do, or that it is that person’s *place* to do – and to translate *kathēkon* itself, in line with this, as “incumbent” (see Cooper, 1996, p. 269 with n.22). Cicero translates *kathēkon* by *officium*, which in turn has generally been translated “duty.” As the etymological gloss (interpreted in the way just mentioned) suggests, this is by no means wholly misleading. However, the term “duty” has connotations in modern moral philosophy, and in standard contemporary usage, that cannot be assumed to be part of the Stoic concept; I shall therefore avoid referring to *kathēkonta* as duties.

More helpful than an inspection of the word *kathēkon* itself is the definition given of it. We are told that a *kathēkon* is an action “which, when it has been done, has a reasonable defense” (D.L. 7.107, Stob. 2.85,14–15 = LS 59B1). Now, as Brennan (1996, p. 330) points out, it is token or individual actions, not types of actions, that are the things that are actually done; hence the term “when it has been done” (*prachthen*) makes clear that a *kathēkon* is a token action, not a type – my giving my mother a special gift on her seventieth birthday, for example, rather than the action-type “honoring one’s parents.” *Kathēkonta*, then, are actions that admit of a certain type of justification, labeled “reasonable” (*eulogos*); the crucial question is what is meant here by “reasonable.”

10. It should not be supposed, incidentally, that this taxonomy is limited to items that are, in an intuitive sense, “natural” rather than products of society; our sources make clear that preferred indifferents include such things as wealth, reputation and lofty social class, and dispreferred indifferents their opposites (e.g., D.L. 7.106).

On one view, the “reasonable” justification in question is a justification that it would be open to any sensible person to provide, a justification that proceeds by giving reasons of a common-sense variety for the action. And on this view, one might expect that the actions that qualified as *kathēkonta* would be actions that promoted the preferred indifferents and avoided the dispreferred indifferents. However, there are several reasons for thinking that the Stoics must have intended the term “reasonable” in a much more stringent sense. First, the word *eulogos* and cognates appear in several other contexts in Stoic ethics where it is clear that it is “reasoning” of the *sage’s* variety that is at issue (see Brennan, 1996, pp. 326–7); in the absence of any indication of an ambiguity in usage, one would expect it to have the same connotation here. Second, Diogenes says, in what sounds like an alternative way of putting the same point, that *kathēkonta* are those actions that “reason enjoins us to do” (*logos hairei poiein*, 7.108 = LS 59E2). Presumably “reason” in this context means “reason functioning as it should”; but for the Stoics this, in turn, can only mean “reason functioning in the perfect way exemplified by the sage.” Finally, if “reasonable” were understood in the more relaxed way suggested above, then it would follow that there would be some cases in which a *kathēkon* was in fact a *wrong* action, despite admitting of a reasonable justification. However, it seems clear (*pace* Inwood, 1999, pp. 109–10) that there are no actions that are *kathēkonta* and wrong; rather, the sources repeatedly indicate that the *kathēkon* is just whatever action is in fact the correct action to perform in the circumstances (see, e.g., Cic. *Fin.* 3.59 = LS 59F4; Stob. 5.906,18–907,5 = LS 59I, with Brennan, 1996, p. 329).<sup>11</sup> It appears, then, that the “reasonable” justification that the Stoics speak of in this context is the justification that the infallible reason of the sage would generate. If so, there is no reason to assume that one’s *kathēkonta* will always be those actions that secure the preferred indifferents; if, in a given circumstance, sickness is preferable to health, then it is the action that makes one sick, not the one that keeps one healthy, that will be the *kathēkon*.

### *The kathēkon and rules*

Unfortunately, there seems to be some confusion on this point in our sources. We occasionally find lists of types of action cited as examples of *kathēkonta*; Diogenes Laertius, for example, lists honoring one’s parents, brothers and country, and spending time with friends (7.108 = LS 59E2). However, if the *kathēkon* is the correct action in any given circumstance, this cannot be right; for there will be some circumstances in which honoring one’s parents, etc., will be the *wrong* thing to do. Indeed, the Stoics were emphatic on the non-existence of any exceptionless rules, at least at this level of generality; hence their reported view that the sage will even engage in incest and cannibalism if circumstances warrant (which was gleefully exploited by the Stoics’ opponents – e.g. S.E. M 11.191–195).

On the other hand, a great many Stoics wrote books called *On the Kathēkon*, and these books do appear to have been devoted to practical guidance, including

11. Long and Sedley (1987) include a passage of Philo of Alexandria which appears to imply that *kathēkonta* can be wrong (59H); but there is no reason to think that Philo is following strict Stoic doctrine.

prominently the provision of rules of conduct. As suggested earlier, Panaetius appears to have given a greatly increased emphasis to this aspect of Stoic ethics; but books with this title are attested for Stoics all the way back to Zeno (see Sedley, 1999, esp. p. 137). Our main surviving evidence of this side of Stoic ethics consists of two long letters of Seneca (*Ep.* 94, 95); but it is clear that this was always considered an important topic. Now, it is difficult to see, in light of the point just mentioned, how these rules could have been anything more than provisional and defeasible guidelines; the only thing that is a *kathēkon* in all circumstances whatever is living virtuously (D.L. 7.109 = LS 59E4) – anything more specific will always admit of exceptions. (For this interpretation, and for reference to several others, see Inwood (1999); on this specific point see also Brennan (1996, p. 331).) However, as a matter of general policy, it clearly makes sense, for example, to take care of one's health; this, then, will normally be a *kathēkon*, and it might well be helpful to have an account of such types of action, including an account of why they are normally *kathēkonta* and how one can learn to spot the exceptions. It is this kind of agenda that appears to be reflected in a distinction, also reported in Diogenes Laertius, between *kathēkonta* that are not dependent on circumstances and *kathēkonta* that *are* dependent on circumstances – where taking care of one's health is the leading example of the former, and mutilating oneself and getting rid of one's property are examples of the latter (7.109 = LS 59E3). Again, this cannot be a distinction between actions that are invariably *kathēkonta* and actions that are not; as we have seen, taking care of one's health is not invariably the right thing to do. Rather, it must be a distinction between actions that are *kathēkonta* when special circumstances do not obtain (i.e., normally), and those that are *kathēkonta* only when special circumstances do obtain (see Sedley, 1999, p. 132).

### *The sage's "Right actions"*

The performance of *kathēkonta* – much of the time – is well within the capabilities of the non-sage. For to say that an action *has* a reasonable justification is not to say that the agent must be capable of *giving* that justification. By definition, the non-sage does not have a full understanding of what makes certain actions *kathēkonta*. But such a person can nonetheless do the kinds of things that will, for example, preserve his or her health, and these very often will in fact be *kathēkonta*. The difference between the sage and the non-sage, then, is not in the performance of *kathēkonta* – indeed, someone on the verge of becoming a sage might even succeed in performing *nothing but kathēkonta* (Stob. 5.906,18–907,5 = LS 59I) – but in the frame of mind in which they are performed. Quite simply, the sage's actions are all expressions of virtue or perfected reason; they may often be externally indistinguishable from the actions of a non-sage, but they derive from the stable and harmonious disposition described earlier, and that makes all the difference. The Stoics use the term "right action" (*katorthōma*), and also the term "perfect (*teleion*) *kathēkon*," to designate that special sub-class of *kathēkonta* that are expressions of the sage's virtue (Stob. 2.85,18–86,4 = LS 59B4). Stobaeus gives acting with practical wisdom and with justice as instances of "right actions." Unfortunately, he again creates the potential for confusion by listing "marrying, being an ambassador, engaging in dialogue and things like this" as instances of *kathēkonta* that are *not* "right actions." In fact, any one of these actions would be a "right action"

if performed by a sage; for, to recall, *everything* that the sage does is an expression of virtue. However, it is true that they are not “right actions” in and of themselves.

*The telos (Diogenes and Antipater) and the duality of “nature”*

It should be clear by now that the sage’s attitude towards the indifferents is not one of complete lack of interest. On the contrary, as we have seen, the *kathēkon* will in most cases involve the securing or retaining of preferred indifferents, or the avoidance of dispreferred indifferents; hence the “right action,” the action that the sage will perform, will in most cases consist in the securing or retaining of preferred indifferents, or the avoidance of dispreferred indifferents, in a virtuous way – that is, as an expression of perfected reason. Again, the crucial difference between the sage and others is the frame of mind, or the state of character, that gives rise to these actions. Now, some Stoics after Chrysippus actually incorporated this point into their formulations of the end. According to Diogenes of Babylon, the end is “reasoning well (*eulogistein*) in the selection and rejection of the things in accordance with nature”; and Antipater is reported to have devised two different formulations (to which we will shortly return), both specifying a similar kind of orientation to the things in accordance with nature (Stob. 2.76,9–15 = LS 58K). The differences among these various formulations probably reflect a complicated debate on the topic with the Academic Carneades (see Long and Sedley, 1987, commentary on section 64; Striker, 1996b). But it is clear that all of them reflect a conception of virtue as involving the correct attitude towards the indifferents – a conception that was present in Stoicism from the start.

Carneades was not the only one to find something problematic in this conception. If selecting and rejecting the things in accordance with nature (normally selecting them, but in special cases rejecting them) is what the sage is supposed to do, how can it be claimed that the *achievement* (or, in special cases, the successful avoidance) of the things in accordance with nature is something that the sage considers irrelevant to happiness? Why aim for things that, by one’s own account, make no difference whatever to one’s level of well-being? This objection is pressed in a number of ways by several different authors (see Long and Sedley, 1987, section 64). The Stoics reply that it is not, in fact, the achievement or avoidance of the things in accordance with nature that one is aiming for; rather, what one is aiming for is the condition in which one performs the selection or rejection of these things in an infallible way – in other words, the life of the virtuous person. But to many there seemed to be something deeply paradoxical about attaching supreme importance to a condition in which one selects various things, but no importance to the things themselves. The Stoics, for their part, never climbed down on this point; we find it restated, essentially unchanged, in Seneca (*Ep.* 92.11–13 = LS 64J).

It should also be clear by now that the concept of nature plays a role in this account at two different points (see Striker, 1996a, p. 224). On the one hand, there are the things “in accordance with nature,” which are a certain subset of the indifferents – the more significant of them constituting the *preferred* indifferents; these are the kinds of things that, other things being equal, will tend to promote the flourishing of human beings. On the other hand, there is the life “in agreement with nature,” the achievement of which is the end; this is the life of the sage, whose perfected rationality constitutes

the highest development of human nature, and who is also in harmony with the cosmic nature that governs everything. Now, as we have seen, the virtuous and perfectly rational person who is living “in agreement with nature” will generally pursue the things “in accordance with nature.” However, there is by no means a complete correspondence between the achievement of the former and the pursuit of the latter. First, to repeat, there are some cases where pursuing the things “in accordance with nature” is the wrong thing to do, and hence *not* something that a person living “in agreement with nature” would do. Second, what really matters to the sage (and what distinguishes the sage from others), is the virtue or perfect rationality with which these things are pursued, not their actual attainment; the things “in accordance with nature” are, after all, only indifferents, whereas virtue or perfect rationality, the achievement of which is both necessary and sufficient for living “in agreement with nature,” is a good.

Despite the fact that the two terms “in accordance with nature” and “in agreement with nature” have clearly distinct meanings and functions – but perhaps understandably – there is a tendency for their usage to be run together. Cicero, in a passage on *oikeiōsis* and natural human development referred to earlier (*Fin.* 3.20–22 = LS 59D2–6) uses both the terms “in agreement with nature” (*consentanea naturae*) and “in accordance with nature” (*secundum naturam*) to apply to the eventual attainment and understanding of the good; yet “in accordance with nature” also occurs in the same passage to refer to the preferred indifferents, pursuit of which is an early outgrowth of the initial impulse to self-preservation.<sup>12</sup> Stobaeus also at one point represents the end as “living in accordance with nature” instead of “living in agreement with nature” (2.77,19 = LS 63A1). And, if Stobaeus’ quotations are to be trusted, even the Stoics’ own formulations of the end illustrate the beginnings of a blurring of the distinction. Diogenes of Babylon, as we saw, gives as the end “reasoning well in the selection and rejection of the things in accordance with nature.” Here “things in accordance with nature” clearly refers, as we would expect, to indifferents that have value; the sage, as an expression of perfected reason, will sometimes select these and sometimes reject them. But Diogenes’ successor Antipater says that the end is “to live unceasingly selecting the things in accordance with nature and rejecting those contrary to nature,” or alternatively, “unceasingly and unalterably doing everything in one’s power towards obtaining the principal things according to nature” (Stob. 2.76,9–15 = LS 58K). And here it seems equally clear that “things according to nature” and “things contrary to nature” *cannot* refer to the indifferents that have value and disvalue respectively; for then it would not be the case that one should *invariably* select the former and reject the latter. Rather (if Antipater himself is not confused) these terms must refer to the things that, on any given occasion, the sage’s *correct* understanding of nature would dictate that one select and reject. These will still, of course, be indifferents, not goods; but in this usage, unlike the standard usage of Diogenes, preferred indifferents will always warrant selection and dispreferred indifferents rejection.

12. In the same passage *kathēkonta* are said to originate *ab initiis naturae*, “from nature’s starting-points.” But this, too, is potentially misleading. The relation of the *kathēkon* to nature is complex; as we have seen, the performance of *kathēkonta* is not simply equivalent to the pursuit of the preferred indifferents – as Cicero’s language might be taken to suggest.



### *Progress*

How is one to progress towards the condition of the sage? The Stoics were happy to admit this possibility, despite their insistence on the equality of all vice and the absence of any middle ground between virtue and vice. As they say, someone who drowns two feet below the surface of the ocean is just as drowned as someone who drowns many fathoms down (e.g., Plut. *Comm. not.* 1063A = LS 61T); the analogy illustrates the equality of vice, but also the possibility of different degrees of closeness to virtue. We have little from the Hellenistic period on the details of how one might be expected to make progress in this area. But it is clear that this was taken to involve a progressively greater ability to discern what the *kathēkon* is on any given occasion – a grasp of general rules as well as a grasp of when to deviate from them – alongside a progressively greater consistency and order in one’s own character. (The passage of Cicero cited in the previous paragraph is as good an illustration of this as any; for an analysis of this passage, and on the whole topic of moral progress, see Inwood and Donini (1999, sec. X).) The later period of Stoicism, in keeping with its more practical orientation, sees more extended attention devoted to the topic. Seneca offers a relatively detailed account of three stages of progress along the road to virtue (*Ep.* 75); there is some deviation here from the rigors of earlier Stoicism – for example, Seneca speaks (14) of a person being free from some of the vices but not yet from all of them – but the same basic points still apply. Epictetus also devotes a chapter specifically to the topic of progress (*Diss.* 1.4); but a great deal of his writing has to do, in one way or another, with the moral improvement of those of us who are not sages.

### *The passions*

Another thing that is involved in the transition from vice to virtue – and this also receives considerable attention in Seneca’s account – is the elimination of the passions (as the Greek term *pathē* is usually translated, though “emotions” is sometimes preferred). The Stoics offer a highly distinctive account of the passions as a species of defective belief; most, if not perhaps all, of these involve the mistaken view that something is good or bad which is in fact indifferent, together with an excessive and uncontrolled impulse to seek or avoid it. Naturally, the sage is altogether free of passions in this sense. This does not, however, prevent the sage from experiencing certain counterparts of the passions called “good feelings” (*eupatheiai*), which lack the objectionable elements of error and excess; to say, then, as popular conceptions of Stoicism might encourage one to say, that the sage is without emotions is at best an oversimplification. Whether this entirely exonerates the Stoic sage from the charge of being objectionably cold and aloof in interpersonal relations is another question; the answer suggested by a section of Epictetus’ *Handbook* (3) – a passage that can plausibly be seen as inspired by the standard Stoic position – is not encouraging.<sup>13</sup>

13. See, however, Reydam-Schils (2002) for a recent attempt to defend at least the Roman Stoics against this charge.

In the case of everything that attracts you or that fulfils a need or that you are fond of, remember to say what sort of thing it is, beginning with the smallest things. If you are fond of a jug, say “I am fond of a jug”; for when it is broken you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your child or your wife, say that you are kissing a human being; for when it dies you will not be upset.

The Stoic account of the passions and “good feelings” has been the subject of much recent discussion; see in particular the numerous essays on Stoicism in Sihvola and Engberg-Pedersen, 1998.

## Conclusion

Since antiquity, Stoic ethics has often been seen as impossibly high-minded, and the conception of nature with which it is intertwined questionable at best. Yet it has also been a source of inspiration in many periods, up to and including our own<sup>14</sup> – perhaps more so than any other ethical system developed by Greek philosophers. It is reasonable to suppose that the rigorous and uncompromising character of the Stoic ethical outlook has something to do with this. But its ability to speak to those who do not measure up to its ideals – however lofty those ideals may be – is surely another important factor.<sup>15</sup>

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14. A striking twentieth-century example is Stockdale (1993).

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