

NOT FOR QUOTATION OR CIRCULATION.

This is the penultimate draft of a chapter to be published in The Oxford Handbook on the Philosophy of Virtue, Edited by Nancy E. Snow (Forthcoming, From Oxford University Press in 2018). The published article will also include an extensive bibliography.

## Stoic Virtue

Lawrence C. Becker

### **Abstract**

The Stoics notoriously held that virtue was the perfection of human-scale rational agency; that such perfection was rare but humanly possible; that it was both necessary and sufficient for happiness; that it was, in fact, the only unqualified good for human beings; and that it was an all or nothing achievement – there were no intermediate degrees of virtue. The mere recital of that list of Stoic doctrines has often been enough to disqualify Stoicism as a viable form of virtue ethics. This chapter, however, describes Stoic ethics as a systematic and attractive alternative to Aristotelian ethics. The argument is that the usual caricatures of Stoicism can be erased, and that contemporary virtue ethics can benefit from working in the Stoic tradition – particularly with its naturalistic account of moral development.

**Keywords:** emotion; moral development; moral motivation; moral psychology; naturalism; naturalistic ethics; practical wisdom; rational agency; stoicism; virtue ethics; virtue.

## Stoic Virtue

Stoic ethical doctrines are too easily dismissed, either by caricature or by consignment to the category of historical interest. It is true that Stoicism needs a good deal of exposition to be made plausible as something of continuing theoretical interest for ethics. But the effort to get an accurate exposition is rewarding.

The primary aim of this chapter is descriptive and explanatory. Section 1 describes Stoic naturalism, including Stoic cosmology and theology. Section 2 describes, expands, and implicitly defends the Stoic account of natural moral development. Section 3 describes and defends the Stoic account of virtue. Extensive bibliographic material on the topics of all three sections may be found in the Appendix and Bibliography.

But the secondary aim of the exposition here is to indicate ways in which the ancient Stoic conception of virtue can be the basis for a variety of contemporary ethical theories. The aim is not to outline any particular attempt to do this, but merely to indicate the range of available possibilities – both with and without Stoic theology.

### 1. Stoic naturalism

The Stoics standardly divided philosophy into three parts: logic, physics, and ethics. In all three the Stoics were uncompromising naturalists.

Stoic *physics* included topics in what we now call the physical, biological, and behavioral sciences, together with cosmology, metaphysics and theology. Stoic *logic* included topics in philosophy of language, epistemology, rhetoric, and various branches of formal logic, including modal and temporal logic. It included propositional logic as well, which the Stoics apparently invented. Their *ethics* included not only what we call ethics and

moral philosophy, but social and political philosophy – all of it construed broadly enough to intersect in a fundamental way with the part of physics we would call the physiology and psychology of moral development. The general idea was a systematic one: to get the logic right; get the physics right; and then to make sure that the ethics was consistent with the logic and the physics.

In their physics, theology, and metaphysics, the Stoics were thoroughgoing corporealists (materialists; physicalists) and determinists – both about the universe at large and everything operating within it. There was nothing “above” nature – not god or the gods; not the soul. They thought that the human mind was a corporeal object, infused throughout and inseparably integrated with what is popularly called the body. (Today we might think of this mind as the human body’s nervous system;<sup>1</sup> its active, animating system, extending from the brain all the way through the body and its sensory organs out to the superficial sensory nerves in the skin.) The Stoics thought that reasoning was a deterministic physical process, as were changes in and around every physical object. They rejected the idea that anything other than a body could physically interact with another body. They thought that the universe itself was a single, integrated and rational being, functioning (as god) deterministically and providentially. They thought that human beings, as parts of the universe, had an assigned function within it – particularly in terms of their capability for rational activity. They did not, however, think that human beings were parts of god in a functional sense – that is, parts of the universe’s own active, animating, rational agency; its own nervous system, so to speak.

In their ethics, the Stoics were also uncompromising naturalists. Their guiding maxim was that human beings should act in accord with nature, after first determining

what things are within their control to achieve, and then by making sure their rational activity was guided by practical intelligence wholly toward ends consistent with virtue. At that point practical intelligence becomes practical wisdom, and rational activity in accordance with it amounts to making progress towards Stoic virtue.

The ethics the Stoics constructed in terms of the maxim of following nature was a holistic and integrated form of naturalistic virtue ethics. Finding that a particular end was in accord with nature was evidence that it *might* be permissible, nothing else considered. Finding that it was natural and necessary was evidence that it *might* be required, nothing else considered. But seemingly licit, and seemingly required ends multiply, and often conflict. So we need practical intelligence to sort things out. Specifically, it needs to guide us by a set of priorities that are in accord with nature *all-things-considered*.

As a first approximation, the Stoics would probably think of “priorities in accord with nature” as those that develop from the complex of natural impulses typical of human infants – that is, those impulses stemming from, and typically productive for, self-preservation and the whole complex of associated infant pursuits, including social relationships. These impulses are further complicated during the long – perhaps even lifelong – process of moral development. Along the way, they are organized, modified, and embedded in dispositions through which they are channeled toward some behaviors and away from others. Within such dispositions our impulses function as motivating factors toward the ends characteristic of each particular disposition.

In healthy children living in a reasonably hospitable physical and social environment, such motivated, dispositional ends typically have the makings of a set of natural virtues very like the inventory that has been more or less standard in Western

philosophy since Plato – that is, courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom (the core or cardinal virtues, together with practical wisdom), enlarged with an inventory of social and cooperative virtues such as love, kindness, sympathy, benevolence, trustworthiness, generosity, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> Impulses and dispositions of a more directly self-interested sort are usually taken for granted as natural also, though sometimes in conflict with the social and cooperative ones. The story of how such dispositions can eventually become specifically Stoic virtues is an interesting one. See sections 2 and 3. And we might initially suppose that the story would centrally involve a careful analysis of the standard inventory of these distinct virtues.

But the Stoics do not seem to have been much interested in developing their theory (as opposed to their teaching and practical advice) by focusing on the separate virtues that they so carefully classified.<sup>3</sup> Rather, their account of moral development led them to focus on the centrality of rational agency and the way it comes to dominate (or fail to dominate) human activities. Perfecting rational activity became their preeminent concern. After all, if an act of kindness is unwise because it is not consistent with nature all-things-considered, then it isn't truly virtuous. This is so even if, looking at that kind act in isolation, *nothing-else-considered*, it does look virtuous.

So the Stoics mostly turned their attention away from the separate virtues and toward virtue in the singular. They held that human virtue was the *perfection* of human rational activity operating in ways consistent with nature, and thus consistently with the natural way in which human beings functioned within the universe. They held that virtue so conceived was the *only* thing that was *ultimately* good for human beings. Everything else that was at all beneficial was properly regarded as a matter of indifference. They held that

such virtue was the source of human freedom, and through that, was not only necessary but sufficient for human happiness (*eudaimonia*). They held that in its perfection, virtue was an all-or-nothing matter; it was not a matter of degree. They held that making progress toward virtue required a steady practical control over one's emotions and attachments, and perhaps the elimination of the extreme passions, though certainly not the elimination of "good" emotions (*eupatheiai*). They held that all human beings with the ordinary inventory of human capabilities were capable of virtue and should be treated accordingly. The Stoics were thus universalists; cosmopolitans.

This list of Stoic doctrines is merely a high-altitude map of the terrain – one that obscures significant differences among major Stoic thinkers on many topics. (See the Appendix.) The genius of Stoicism, for present purposes, is in its account of the natural development of moral agency, and the way it can come to be motivated and dominated by the effort to make progress toward virtue through practical wisdom.

## 2. The natural course of human moral development

For the Stoics, human moral development followed a course of events that was natural in the sense that it was self-initiating, self-sustaining (in terms of motivation) and self-sequencing. Moral development was much like human physiological development generally, then, which produces a predictable array of changes through infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age. Our bodies grow in size and strength, and then gradually decline in those ways. We acquire improved function in autonomic systems (respiration, digestion, immune response, etc.), coordinated movements of our limbs, manual dexterity, visual discrimination and much more. Those things also gradually diminish with age, or are

lost. And these predictable changes will standardly produce new things, like teeth or reproductive fertility, on a built-in schedule, and the consolidation of existing things, such as the bones of the skull. Such development can of course be helped or hindered by human interventions, by good or bad nutrition, and good or bad fortune generally. But if we have the ordinary human inventory of physical endowments, and get the care we need to survive and thrive, these predictable things will happen more or less on a preset schedule.

Moreover, this natural schedule of events is robust. It takes quite an extraordinary set of misfortunes – either in our endowments or circumstances – to defeat it altogether.

Human moral development was similar, the Stoics held. It could be helped or hindered by an extraordinary abundance or shortage of physical or psychological endowments or circumstances, but in the ordinary course of events the components of virtue tended simply to unfold in a predictable sequence of self-initiating, self-sustaining, and self-sequencing events from infancy through childhood and into adulthood.

The Stoics apparently thought that by early adulthood, in the ordinary course of events, human beings would have become active, more or less effective rational agents and have a collection of dispositions and attachments corresponding roughly to the standard list of virtues (or, alas, vices). That collection might not be unified or even coherent, and the dispositions might not be steady or strong in terms of effectively motivating conduct. So what would remain were the changes needed to align these components properly so that making progress toward Stoic virtue (and genuinely Stoic versions of the separate virtues) would become the dominant motivation of one's rational activity. For that, they apparently thought at least a rudimentary Stoic moral education was necessary. This could be available to anyone, in just the right accidental external circumstances, but it always

required persistent effort on the part of the agent, and often went better with the help of a good Stoic handbook, and a good Stoic teacher.

A good deal of philosophical work remains to be done in distilling a detailed account of moral development as the Stoics might have – or could have – understood it. In particular, more needs to be done on the development of rational agency, the way it can become thoroughly infused with practical wisdom, and the way it can then come to be uniquely motivated and uniquely infused throughout the moral emotions and separate moral virtues. What follows merely lays out the materials needed for such continued work. It gives an account of what one finds (and doesn't find) in the texts, together with some brief discussion of its philosophical potential.

## 2.1 THE CRADLE ARGUMENT: INFANT AGENCY, COMPLEX MOTIVATION, AND *OIKEIŌSIS*.

2.1.1 *Infant agency is motivationally complex.* The Stoics insisted on beginning ethical theory with some observations about nature equipping us, from birth, with a special form of sub-rational agency pointed toward its own survival, health, and development. In a complementary way, parents and adults generally are equipped with “tender feelings” toward infants and young children. Such tender feelings are important because they help to motivate older children and adults to protect infants and young children, and to provide them with the care they need in order to survive and thrive. But the Stoic insistence on starting with careful attention to infant agency generated what has been called a “cradle argument” that is a central feature of Stoic ethical theory.<sup>4</sup>

For one thing, their cradle argument allows the Stoics to see infants and young children as goal-directed agents even before we can plausibly speak about them as rational

or moral agents. They initiate activity of many sorts, including but not limited to those emphasized by Aristotle (seeking nutrition, imitation, habituation) and Epicurus (pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance). Even initially, the Stoics emphasized, infant behavior is more accurately described as self-preservation than merely pleasure seeking and pain avoidance. Infants seek many things relevant to self-preservation, including food, safety and security, and they will repeatedly try things, explore things, and tolerate discomfort in the process. Even sub-rational infant agency is motivationally complex.

2.1.2 *Complex motivation yields the beginnings of practical intelligence.* For another thing, though the point is not explicitly emphasized in the texts, one should note that the cradle argument allows us to see that many of the activities initiated by infants and young children are by their nature, though not by the child's intention, aimed at the further development of the child's agency itself, along with health, growth, and self-sufficiency. For example, as the complexity of agentic motivation continues to increase through childhood and adulthood, the motivation for managing this complexity will also arise and begin to increase. Initially, the goals will be to avoid paralyzing ambivalence or frustrating activity and to seek satisfying activity through the reduction of complexity. This amounts to the beginnings of practical intelligence. Success with practical intelligence initiates, and repetition sustains, what later becomes the motivation for the development of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and for giving it a hegemonic role in our activities.

2.1.3 *Oikeōsis, social oikeiōsis, and attachments.* And finally, the cradle argument allows the Stoics to introduce a distinctive element of their account of what eventually becomes moral development. *Oikeiōsis* is the term they use for the way in which human beings appropriate or incorporate things external to themselves into the range of things

that matter to them almost as much as self-preservation. Through *oikeiōsis* we come to love externals in much the same way as we love ourselves. We thus begin the process of becoming *as attached* to externals as to ourselves.

The process is a familiar one. The infant has several small blankets, of different colors, weights, and textures. At first the infant accepts any of them, and merely seeks out the nearest one. But soon, sometimes, one blanket becomes the favored one – the one always sought out, even though all of the blankets remain acceptable. And eventually, perhaps, the favored blanket becomes indispensable. The infant becomes so attached to it that when it is not available, the infant is temporarily inconsolable. It is as if the infant feels the loss of the blanket as a threat to self-preservation, or security. The same goes for attachments to particular toys, foods, routines, ways of being held. Such attachments persist beyond the usefulness of our favorite things, and we want to preserve them just in order to preserve them – for their own sakes, as it were. The blanket may become so worn, tattered, and torn that it is useless as a blanket. But the attachment remains.

We become attached to other people in this way also, through *oikeiōsis*. At first the attachment may be purely instrumental or even accidental in origin. We favor the people who help and care for us, and who provide food, shelter, and other necessities. Then we become attached to them, at first just because when they are around, things tend to go better for our activities. But once we have appropriated another in this way, we can become attached to the other in much the same way we are attached to ourselves. And the attachment tends to persist well beyond its instrumental or accidental origin. We want to preserve those other people just in order to preserve them – for their own sakes.

2.1.4 *The persistence and strength of attachments.* The persistence of attachment thus becomes a prominent factor in Stoic accounts of virtue. It is obviously a remarkable source of non-egoistic motivation, and *oikeiōsis*-driven attachments are prominent factors in Stoic accounts of all the aspects of virtue (including justice) that require genuine concern for the well-being of others. Furthermore, insofar as some aspects of justice or of practical wisdom lead us to universalize such attachments to all human beings, *as* human beings, they lead us toward cosmopolitanism and (in contemporary theory) toward commitments to human duties and rights.

But such attachments are also a notorious source of moral problems. For example, we may wind up with stronger attachments to mere things (money, reputation) than to our own children. We may wind up with such strong attachments to our own children that we ourselves thrive only through their success or failure.

The Stoics confront problematic attachments in ways that many people find unnatural or even inhumane. They seem to recommend a continuous form of inner detachment – in which one may groan on the outside, apparently in sympathy with a grieving friend, while remaining tranquil inside. The Stoics would categorically reject the labels unnatural and inhumane. And though they sometimes may have spoken harshly about these matters to adult students (not an unknown or especially inhumane technique), they can easily dispose of this whole objection by pointing out how genuine friendship often requires providing help to a friend disabled by grief, and thus requires in the helping friend not only empathy and consolation, but also a form of temporary detachment much like what Epictetus recommends.<sup>5</sup> After all, one might need to *act effectively while grieving*: to call others for assistance, or care for the grieving friend's young children. It takes little

imagination to connect that case to all sorts of ordinary emotion-management problems. And what is necessary for the helping friend might also (at least sometimes) be necessary for the grieving friend herself, might it not?

2.1.5 *Social oikeiōsis*. An interesting question remains, within Stoicism, about whether *oikeiōsis* always works outward from each agent's temporally prior egoistic concerns to that agent's secondary non-egoistic concerns for others. If so, it looks as though the form of universalized concern that the agent would naturally develop for others would most likely be a form of radiating benevolence – hottest at the originating center, and progressively cooler as one moves outward from the center.

Some Stoics, however, might have thought that non-egoistic moral motivation was traceable to direct, natural, pro-social impulses for the well-being of others. At the very least, even if attachments to others always do grow out of the ground of self-preservation, that ground might be made especially fertile and complicated by our innately social nature. This, combined with Stoic universalism, might even motivate an impulse toward a form of universal *equal* benevolence rather than radiating benevolence.<sup>6</sup> We would expect such motivation to show up in self-sacrificial aspects of virtuous activity.

## 2.2 CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: SECOND-ORDER COMPLEXITY, PRACTICAL WISDOM

2.2.1 *The relative silence of Stoic texts about childhood development*. The Stoics seem to jump from the matters just discussed to the point at which rational agency has replaced infant agency, and rational activity is beginning to be coordinated and controlled by the more developed forms of practical intelligence, though not yet full-fledged practical wisdom. But any full account of the natural course of moral development will have to pay

attention to the ways in which the childhood process leading up to rational agency is self-initiated, self-transformative and motivated.

A convenient way to do this is to focus on healthy (i.e., non-self-destructive; non-self-defeating, non-pathological) intellectual development in childhood. If we find that the ordinary course of it (for healthy individuals in a hospitable environment) leads to the development of rational agency and a prominent place for the development of practical intelligence, we can be confident that the Stoic story about natural moral development continues through childhood. This will be especially important if we find that such development into rational agency is every bit as robust as the development of sub-rational agency during infancy.

It seems very likely that this is so. It certainly is consistent with the best accounts of the psychology of child development now available.<sup>7</sup> And it is consistent with what the Stoics themselves could have observed, and doubtless did observe: the increasing complexity of the child's self-concept, practical activity, and practical intelligence; language acquisition; evaluation of alternatives, deliberation, and choice; control of impulsive behavior; powers of memory, perception, anticipation and prediction; new impulses in adolescence that dramatically complicate the development of standard virtues and/or vices. And so on. For us, this is also supplemented by contemporary developments in cognitive neuropsychology, particularly in a developmental account of our "executive functions" or executive system.

*2.2.2 From practical intelligence to practical wisdom.* Practical intelligence is compatible with the pursuit of vicious ends as well as virtuous ones. Psychopathic serial killers, for example, may have a good deal of practical intelligence, but no practical *wisdom*

at all. Certainly not practical wisdom in the Stoic sense – that is, practical intelligence directed wholly toward wise (virtuous) ends, and ultimately to Stoic virtue itself.

The movement from practical intelligence to even the beginnings of practical wisdom is naturally emergent in the sense that conflict among the ends embedded in separate virtues and vices emerges in daily life, and we are thus motivated to resolve the tension caused by the conflict. But there is a special problem with it that eventually needs a strong Stoic response. It is simply that people often develop unwise, deeply habitual forms of practical intelligence. They may develop the habit of resolving more or less all conflicts among competing ends in the same limited way, nothing-else-considered. (When in doubt, just be prudent. Or just do as you please. Or just do as you're told.) This moves practical intelligence only toward what we might call prudential intelligence, or feel-good intelligence, or obedient intelligence rather than toward practical wisdom.

The obvious Stoic response is to help people make their repeated efforts at coherence and conflict resolution consistent with ends that are wise in an *all-things-considered* way. It is only that form of practical intelligence that can move us toward the practical wisdom required for making progress toward Stoic virtue.

*2.2.3 The brink of adulthood.* In any case, all of these developments leave things on the brink of adulthood in just the place Stoics want to address: the way in which adults can become attached to Stoic virtue itself – that is, to the perfection of rational activity guided by practical wisdom wholly toward wise ends, all things considered. This adult continuation of moral development is not entirely naturally emergent. If it were, we could expect almost everyone to become a Stoic, and the Stoics didn't expect that. So the

attachment to Stoic virtue itself needs a special, naturally emergent push. That push is described in the rest of this section, and the following one on Stoic virtue.

### 2.3 ADULT DEVELOPMENT: COSMIC HEGEMONY, HUMAN FREEDOM, HUMAN LIMITS, PRACTICAL WISDOM

2.3.1 *The relevance of Stoic cosmology and theology: then and now.* Here is some of what the ancient Stoics seem to have agreed to emphasize for adult moral development on the basis of their cosmology and theology. a) Cosmology and theology established that the universe itself was rationally, providentially, and wisely formed, so that for human beings, acting in accord with it was obviously also rational and wise, at least in some ultimate sense. b) Cosmological and deterministic principles identified the source and scope of human freedom and responsibility, and thus established the importance for human beings of getting their conduct right – of getting it in accord with nature. c) The cosmology and the nature of human freedom supported the notion that all human beings who become rational agents have a special status within the universe – a status that extends to all of them and supports cosmopolitan principles. d) The cosmology/theology was both inspiring and reassuring. Inspiring because it was imaginative and beautiful in its depiction of relentless divine activity. Reassuring because it yielded the thought that each of us, no matter how insignificant, has a predefined role to play in the divine scheme of things. The Stoics probably thought that all of these matters arose as intellectual discoveries and were probably most effective in moral development when they were discovered or communicated during late childhood and early adulthood.

The question is whether these elements of Stoic physics, metaphysics, and theology remain necessary for contemporary ethics in the Stoic tradition. If we keep the Stoic

theology, that means giving up the notion of god as a supernatural being. It is unclear how else one could stay within the Stoic tradition in theology. If their theology is unacceptable, however, one still has three choices.

a) One choice is to keep a supernaturalist theology and incorporate into it some version of ethics in the Stoic tradition. Renaissance neo-stoicism proceeded in this way,<sup>8</sup> and some scholars pursue evidence of such a Stoic influence in early Christianity,<sup>9</sup> and in much later Christian thinkers such as Joseph Butler.<sup>10</sup>

b) A second choice is to reject both supernaturalist theology and the Stoic version of a naturalistic one – and then adopt a different naturalistic theology (perhaps by rejecting the Stoic commitment to a providential god, as Spinoza did), before proceeding to one's own ethics. This can look very much like working in the Stoic tradition, either intentionally or unintentionally, as it does in the case of Spinoza.<sup>11</sup>

c) The third choice is to abandon theology altogether, and proceed to develop a naturalistic virtue ethics in the Stoic tradition, arguing for a similar account of moral development, a similar moral psychology, and a similar account of Stoic virtue.<sup>12</sup>

Each of these three choices can have a strong claim to be working in the Stoic tradition, even without Stoic cosmology and theology. It is obvious that some parts of Stoic physics are no longer plausible: for example, geocentric astronomy. But the question remains whether the Stoic account of mind, and of the mental aspect of the universe as a whole (providential or not with respect to human beings) remains plausible. If it does, then the following reminders about the ways the Stoics deployed their cosmology and theology in their ethics may be useful. They do connect directly to the Stoic story about adult moral development, and in most respects they can be translated into secular language.

2.3.2 *The universe as a hegemonic rational being.* The Stoics held that the universe, operating providentially through its “governing faculty” (*hegemonikon*) has produced a very old and thoroughly deterministic environment. Perhaps it is a cyclical one, going through long periods of expansion and complication followed by conflagration and contraction, leading again to expansion. But perhaps not. The Stoics disagreed among themselves about this. In either case we humans have had no choice in this; no choice in the time or place of our births, or the nature of our endowments and the way they unfold throughout our lives. We had no choice about the fact that we are mortal, and that much of the universe is apparently not directly “for” us because it is lethal for us. Even the parts that are for us in the sense that we can survive and thrive in them can be shaped by us only in superficial ways, and only by extensive cooperative human activity. We run up against the hegemonic activity of the universe/god whenever we run up against our limitations as individual human beings, and the limitations of organized, cooperative human activity. We run up against it when we face the defeat of some particular goal-directed activity we choose. We learn that it is futile to oppose the hegemonic activity of the universe, and it is self-defeating to stake our happiness on our success in opposing it.

2.3.3 *Human beings as hegemonic agents.* Human beings are parts of the universal rational being. Though we are not parts of its divine *hegemonikon*, we are of special significance because we can develop something like its ordered, integrated goal-oriented and rational activity. As such beings, we each possess a human-scale cognitive governing system or *hegemonikon* and some limited degree of freedom to determine the details of some causal chains. Human freedom is thus compatible with a thoroughly deterministic world – though not, perhaps, with a thoroughly predetermined world in which every detail

of how things happen, down to the precise number, position, and size of each grain of sand at each moment is fixed prior to the creation of anything. The ancient sources are somewhat confusing on this metaphysical point. The normative point, however, is that if we wish to be free, we need to focus on the ways in which our rational activity is actually an indispensable part of various causal chains.

The idea may be something like this. Some causal chains do not run through human beings at all. For example, a list of causes leading up to the formation of the sun will not be able to make any mention of prior human existence at all, let alone the existence of a particular individual. And a list of other causal chains, for example the chain leading to the birth of a particular son, say Sam, even though it must mention Sam, will not be able to mention his rational agency – his deliberation and choice. Some other causal chains, however, *must* include reference to Sam’s deliberation and choice – if, for example, *but for* those activities of his rational agency, the event X at the end of the chain would not have occurred. Instead, a different event Y would have occurred. It might be that the *only* difference between X and Y will be that Sam’s rational agency was not involved in Y. But notice that in that case X and Y are nonetheless *different* events.

The point is simply that determinism is not fatalism. The Stoics did not hold that things within the control of human beings were fated to happen (or not) no matter what the human beings involved chose to do. And just as we can accidentally cause something to happen, or negligently allow something to happen, we can deliberately make some things happen. Rational agents experience this, correctly, as a power of their agency – to contribute, or not to contribute, to particular chains of events. This power can properly be regarded as a form of freedom, even though rhetorically we can make it seem an empty

form of it. We do so by describing our deliberation and choice as something that *could not have been otherwise*, given antecedent conditions. But oddly, rhetorically, we can make it seem a nonempty form of freedom as well. We do that by describing our deliberation and choice as something that *would not have been otherwise*, given antecedent conditions. Metaphysically, much more remains to be said to make a Stoic account of human freedom acceptable. But the same is true for any account of human freedom currently available.

2.3.4 *Recognizing which things are within our control.* In order to follow this line of thought about freedom ethically, however, we must devote an increasing part of our activity as rational agents throughout late childhood and adulthood to the effort to recognize accurately the difference between things that are within our control and things that are not. Things may of course be in various mixtures of those categories: partly but not fully up to us; partly but not fully up to us *yet*; partly but not fully up to us *now*, though they once were; etc. Some things may be within our control if and only if we engage with others in cooperative ventures for mutual benefit. Commerce, for example, and peaceful coexistence. Some things may be within our control only insofar as they are coordinated with others according to the same conventions, rules, or patterns of behavior. Language use, for example, and rules of the road.

The Stoic normative point about this remains unchanged. It has two parts. The first is that our attitudes, attachments, and emotions, as well as what we choose to do and how we choose to do it are always, ultimately, within our control *if we have learned to manage these things effectively*. That calls our attention immediately to the importance of developing these management powers in advance, before they are needed. And that is tantamount to calling our attention to the importance of perfecting our rational activity by

integrating it thoroughly into the activity of practical intelligence of the sort that leads to practical wisdom. See section 3 below.

The second part is that when we accurately recognize our limits we should then judge our success not by whether we get to the final goal of some activity, but rather by whether our activity in pursuit of that goal was as close to perfect as it could be, given our circumstances and constitution. Once the arrow leaves the bow, many things that are not within our control (the wind, people standing in front of the target, or a suddenly moving target) can intervene to prevent the arrow from reaching the target. But if we have pointed the arrow and drawn the bow to account for the distance to the target and the wind, and waited for the target to be clear, and otherwise made the shot perfectly, then we have done everything that is within our control to hit the target. When we make the shot perfectly, regret for missing the target is not appropriate; it leads us away from the effort to act appropriately (the effort to make the shot perfectly). And it leads us toward the implicit and unwise – even impious – belief that underwrites unwise regret generally: namely, that we are somehow responsible for the parts of nature that do not “belong” to us at all, but belong only, perhaps, to others or to the universe alone.

### 3. Stoic virtue

We can now say, on the basis of the way the preceding sections have developed, that Stoic virtue can be described, schematically, as follows.

*To have virtue is to do, and be, and know, and feel the appropriate things as guided by practical wisdom in pursuit of wise ends, at the appropriate times, in the appropriate ways, in the appropriate amounts, for the appropriate reasons,*

*and to do so reliably, as a matter of settled traits of rational agency, across a very wide variety of situations, both expected and unexpected.*

The ancestor of this is in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109a. But then the Stoics go on to argue for a trio of notoriously austere doctrines about virtue: that it is the only good; that it is sufficient for happiness; and that it is an all or nothing achievement. With the addition of those doctrines, the contrast between the Stoics, Aristotle, and everyone else gets quite striking. This is so even though there is considerable overlap between the Stoics and others elsewhere (e.g., on the unity of the separate virtues, the list of them, and the central role of wisdom and practical wisdom in achieving virtue).

Although these Stoic doctrines about virtue are not naturally emergent, the Stoics insist that they are logically implied by the nature of the universe, human nature, and the natural course of human moral development. We can give an account of the logical implications roughly as follows.

### 3.1 VIRTUE AND THE INTEGRATED MORAL PERSONALITY

3.1.1 *Attachment to competent forms of rational agency.* It is through active, competently effective agency that we have freedom in a deterministic world. Through this we can reliably make a limited range of things happen, and to the extent that they are within our control, make them happen as we want them to happen. Given the complexity of our goals and activities as well as the very limited extent of our control over the outcomes of our activities, such power is very attractive.

When we discover this power we understandably begin to reach for it repeatedly, and favor it for its instrumental value. As we discover the range of situations in which it is

instrumentally valuable – and the range of situations in which the lack of it destroys the possibility of eudaimonistic outcomes – we invite its appropriation through the natural process of *oikeiōsis*. We invite the formation of a settled disposition to make competent rational agency a pervasive and, directly or indirectly, a controlling feature of our activities.

3.1.2 *Attachment to making progress toward perfecting rational agency.* Once we develop a strong disposition for competent rational agency, and discover the limitations of mere competence, we will have developed a preference for improving that disposition toward its excellent, and ultimately perfected forms. If competence is good, excellence is better, and perfection is best. Such a preference understandably develops into the motivation to make progress toward the perfection of rational agency, and the internalization of such motivation into a powerful disposition and attachment. The practice necessary for such progress is difficult, and continuous as long as we continue to encounter new tasks, or old tasks in new circumstances. So even when we are motivated to make such progress, we may have to be doubly motivated to do the necessary practice. (Think of being motivated to become physically fit but finding it difficult to stay motivated to exercise.)

This is a difficult step in moral development – one that the Stoics recognized as requiring constant attention and the constant reinforcement of reminders. They developed handbooks, exercises, and teaching techniques devoted to this step in moral development, and to its related ones with respect to emotions, attitudes, and detachment.

3.1.3 *Attachment to making progress toward the perfect integration of the virtues.* Emotions, attitudes, dispositions, attachments, powers of detachment, and goals must all be consistent with each other and with wisdom and practical intelligence. The same is true of the traits we identify as the separate moral virtues – justice, courage, moderation,

benevolence, and so forth. It is the integration of our moral psychology generally that determines whether we are on the path toward virtue or toward vice.

Merely being pointed in the direction of virtue will fail to be virtuous unless it has the appropriate underlying impulses – impulses that come from being motivated to be just, courageous, temperate, benevolent, and so forth. We need to be oriented toward those ends, but we also need to be moved to action toward them. And we also need the right kind of motivation *in each case* – motivation constituting the appropriate priority in each case. When benevolence is the appropriate priority, purely calculated benevolence, without the appropriate concern for the well-being of others, is not actually benevolence, because it is not done from benevolent motives. Purely expedient fairness, or merely the appearance of justice, is not fairness or justice, either.

If our activity is to be rational and virtuous overall, all of these impulses and motives must be prioritized, modulated, and managed by practical intelligence into a single coherent and internally consistent trait – virtue in the singular. Insofar as that happens, practical intelligence becomes practical wisdom directed wholly at the wise ends of Stoic virtue itself.

3.1.4 *Stoic emotion*. The Stoics are often challenged to explain how the integration of emotion and practical wisdom can be achieved without producing a life of more or less flat affect – of the sort that is now the dictionary definition of the Stoic. And in fact the ancient Stoic use of the term *apatheia* seems to the incautious to establish the point. But the Stoics did not use it to mean “without emotion,” but rather the presence (always) of an *appropriate* sort of emotion. The Stoics had an account of *eupatheiai*, or good emotions. And the Stoics were quite aware of the natural inevitability what they called *propatheiai* –

sometimes very sudden and strong affective reflexes, prior to the addition of the cognitive elements (beliefs) they thought necessary for full-fledged emotions. Even the Sage may go pale or tremble reflexively in a violent storm aboard an overloaded ship.

The Stoics described the difference between appropriate and inappropriate emotions in terms of the truth or falsity of the two sorts of beliefs typically involved in full-fledged emotions: beliefs about the world (e.g., whether there is in fact something under your bed that goes thump in the night) and beliefs about its connection to your well-being (e.g., whether it is in fact a threat). It is the individual's "assent" to such beliefs that gives emotions their impulsive power. Replacing false beliefs with true ones will alter the type or level of the affective component of the emotion. It can instantly change fright to relief, for example, to find that there is nothing under the bed, or nothing that is threatening. And that not only changes the affect, but may eliminate, or transform the impulse to act.

But that is not all there is to it. There might in fact be something threatening under the bed, and then one needs to be able to *act appropriately*. The Stoics surely must have been aware of the necessity, for action, not only of the appropriate emotional impulses but of the appropriate emotional tension or tenor required by various activities – even for the Sage, who has a firm grasp of the truth that virtue is the only thing that is ultimately good, and might thus regard whatever it is that goes thump in the night to be a mere dis-preferred indifferent. In the fragments we have, the Stoics are not always careful enough to make this clear.<sup>13</sup>

Strictly speaking, Stoic ethical theory requires modifying or eliminating emotions *only* where and when they compromise active, effective rational activity; where and when they compromise progress toward virtue; where and when they are unwise. Some Stoics

held, apparently, that this always happens in cases when the emotions or passions are extreme or protracted or pointless. To be consistent, however, they should have ruled out only emotions that were inconsistent with virtue, or inconsistent with making progress toward it.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2 VIRTUE, THE FINAL GOOD, AND HAPPINESS

3.2.1 *Virtue is the only good.* The Stoics held that virtue (in the sense of the perfection of rational agency) was not only *a* good for human beings, it was *the* good; it was *incomparably* good; it was the *only* thing that was *ultimately* good for us. Comparatively, everything else in the realm of beneficial things was a matter of indifference. Without virtue no amount of any other benefit or sum of benefits could be sufficient for a good life. And in the presence of virtue, the presence or absence of any other benefit could neither add nor subtract anything significant for a good life. After all, the presence of virtue – the perfection of rational agency – was the perfection of the very form of life for which we are naturally suited, and it is only in that form of life that we are free.

Objections to this from their contemporaries soon forced Stoics to develop what became their settled view of the matter. They continued to resist calling anything but virtue a good. But they acknowledged that many other things might be rank ordered against each other by an objective standard derived from human nature. Compared to each other, such “externals” might be either preferred or dis-preferred to one another. One prefers health to ill health, wealth to poverty, comfort to pain. But by comparison to virtue, all these preferences are matters of indifference – preferred or dis-preferred “indifferents.” One welcomed the preferred things if they occurred, or were “brought to one” as at a banquet.

One selected them if they were consistent with virtue. And one avoided the dis-preferred things when possible, and when that was consistent with virtue. But faced with the choice between a life of virtue and a life of health, wealth, and comfort, there was no contest.

Virtue was the only thing choice-worthy; the only thing worth *choosing*.

The Stoics' critics, then and now, have rarely been convinced on this definitional point. But the Stoics insist on it.<sup>15</sup> Why? Because it helps us to avoid confusing the one incomparably good thing that is in theory within our control (virtue) with things that are not even on the same scale of value. It is our active, effective, rational agency that gives us our freedom, and what little genuinely hegemonic power we have in the universe. Making progress toward its perfection (virtue) gives us, within our lives, a meaningful identity as a human person. And making progress toward it is something that is within our control, not only in theory but in practice.

3.2.2 *Virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness (eudaimonia)*. The Stoics notoriously hold that virtue is sufficient for happiness and good life. Their critics attack them for this on one or both of two grounds. One is that Stoics cannot be eudaimonists – counting happiness as the final good – if virtue is the only thing they recognize as good. The other is that it isn't plausible to think that virtue alone could generate happiness.

a) STOIC ETHICS IS EUDAIMONISTIC. Some critics have argued as follows. Virtue and happiness are distinguishable things. Distinguishable things cannot both be *the* final good. Eudaimonism treats happiness as the final good. But if virtue is the only good, then it (and not happiness) is the only candidate for the final good. So Stoic ethics cannot be eudaimonistic.

The Stoics answered (not always clearly) that in some human activities, success cannot be achieved directly. One must sometimes lead a moving target in order to hit it, or aim at a point above it in order to get the arrow to the target at all. This is true more generally in stochastic activities, such as medicine, where success (the final good of the patient's health) is not ultimately within our control. In such activities, our goal must be defined by things that are within our control, namely active, effective, and wise practical activity pointed at wise ends chosen from various probability distributions. Achieving that much brings us its own sort of joy, and if we are virtuous in the Stoic sense, that will be enough for eudaimonia. We will be additionally pleased if (for reasons ultimately beyond our control) the arrows actually hit the target, or the best medical practices actually cure the patient's disease. But if they don't, we may be displeased, but we will not *regret* leading a moving target, or operating in terms of best medical practices.

So the answer is that Stoic virtue is the only goal we can choose that is within our control to achieve, and also gives us the best chance we have to have to hit the target. Sometimes targets and goals diverge in this way.<sup>16</sup> But it is no contradiction for the Stoics to recommend treating Stoic virtue, and the joy it brings, as the final good – overall, the wisest end for us to pursue – and at the same time engage in activities in which we also “wish” for something additional.

b) STOIC VIRTUE ADOPTS A WISE CONCEPTION OF *EUDAIMONIA*. Nonetheless, for some people dissatisfaction remains. How can we be satisfied merely with Stoic virtue when it fails to yield health, wealth, and other delights that are not entirely within our control? Wouldn't our happiness be greater with health, wealth, and other delights added to Stoic virtue, even if the Stoics insist on calling them indifferents? Wasn't Aristotle right to hold that while

virtue alone was sufficient for a good life, a life blessed with a modicum of good fortune was even better? If so, then virtue by itself cannot define the greatest good; the final good. And surely it is this final good that is *eudaimonia*.

The Stoics would reply by asking us to consider how we should respond – how it is appropriate to respond – to the delights and disappointments added to virtue by good and bad fortune. Is it wise to treat them as part of our final good? To make them an essential part of our overall aim? In doing so, we put them beyond the realm of things we can control. In doing so, we take *eudaimonia* out of the realm of goals we might plausibly achieve through our activities alone and put it instead into the realm of hopes that can be fulfilled only when good fortune is added to our activities. This sets us up for an inappropriately wholesale sense of failure when bad luck intervenes to keep us from achieving our (unwise) final good, and an inappropriately wholesale sense of success when good luck intervenes to push us the rest of the way to our (unwise) final good.

3.2.3 *Virtue is not a matter of degree.* The Stoics held that virtue is the *perfection* of active, effective rational agency, guided by practical wisdom toward wise ends. The Stoics insisted that like uniqueness, perfection did not admit of degrees. As they liked to say in support of this definitional point, one can drown in a puddle of water as well as at the bottom of the sea. But they did also insist that it was possible to be closer to or farther away from such perfection, and to make progress toward it. Achieving it was humanly possible, but such an achievement was exceedingly rare. The achievement is an ideal of sorts, but it is important for the Stoics to insist that it is a humanly possible one to achieve. It is not like the ideal of the imitation of a god. That is, it is not something that is metaphysically impossible for a human being to achieve.

The austerity here is understandable. We make progress toward Stoic virtue in the course of our moral development, which is always limited by the range of our experience. As our experience of the world gets wider and deeper, the repertoire of appropriate activities has to develop accordingly. And it is understandable that some skills, say those needed for appropriate conduct on a frontier, might get rusty after a long time in Rome. That is why making progress toward virtue is typically a perpetual task. And even if virtue, in its perfection, is achieved, one imagines that the Stoic Sage would not want to claim it – or perhaps would not even recognize it – thinking, wisely, that the achievement is not finished until the perfection is secure. And how would one know that it is secure? Count no one happy until he is dead.

In Stoic moral psychology, however, making progress toward virtue is motivated every bit as powerfully as is the goal of perfected virtue itself. Making such progress is also a source of joy. And the difficulty of both tasks – and the constancy of them over the whole course of one's life – certainly should silence the occasional complaint one hears about Stoics setting their goals too low by making sure they don't strive for things that are beyond their control.

*Acknowledgment.* For helpful suggestions on earlier drafts, thanks are due to Julia Annas, Charlotte Becker, Lloyd Gerson, Paula Gottlieb, Brad Inwood, Nickolas Pappas, Nancy Snow, Piotr Stankiewicz, and David Wyatt.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Suggested in A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley (trans, eds.), *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol.1 at 320. Thanks to Lloyd Gerson for the page reference.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the various ways in which the Stoics appropriated and interpreted the Platonic list of cardinal virtues, see Malcolm Schofield, "Cardinal Virtues: a Contested Socratic Inheritance," in A. G. Long, (ed.). *Plato and the Stoics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 11-28.

<sup>3</sup> For the classifications, see A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley (trans, eds.), *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. 1, §61, and Christoph Jedan, *Stoic Virtues: Chrysippus and the Religious Character of Stoic Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2009), chapters 4-7.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Brunschwig, "The Cradle Argument in Epicureanism and Stoicism." In *The Norms of Nature: Studies in Hellenistic Ethics*, edited by Malcolm Schofield and Gisela Striker, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 113-144.

<sup>5</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*. Translations by Robin Hard, with editorial material by Christopher Gill. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), *Handbook* at 16; *Discourse* I.11.

---

<sup>6</sup> Hierocles, *Hierocles the Stoic: Elements of Ethics, Fragments and Excerpts*. Translation by David Konstan; commentary by Ilaria Ramelli (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009) 90-91.

<sup>7</sup> Philip David Zelazo (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Developmental Psychology*. 2 volumes. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Jill Kraye (ed.), *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Vol. I: *Moral Philosophy*, 200-225, contains texts by Justus Lipsius and Francisco de Quevedo.

<sup>9</sup> Tuomas Rasimus et al. (eds.), *Stoicism in Early Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> A.A. Long, "Stoicism in the Philosophical Tradition" In Brad Inwood (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Ch. 15.4.

<sup>11</sup> A.A. Long, "Stoicism in the Philosophical Tradition" In Brad Inwood (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Ch. 15.2.

---

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence C. Becker, *A New Stoicism*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley (trans, eds.), *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. 1, §57, commentary. Epictetus does make the point very clearly, however, that emotional impulses cannot be virtuous unless they are "reasonable." See Discourse I.11 in Epictetus. *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*. Translations by Robin Hard, with editorial material by Christopher Gill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence C. Becker, "Stoic Emotion," in Jack Zupko and Steven K. Strange (eds.), *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 250-275, at 65-73.

<sup>15</sup> A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley (trans, eds.), *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. 1, §58.

<sup>16</sup> Brad Inwood, "Goal and Target in Stoicism," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 547-56.