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The Stoic Theory of Virtue

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THE STOIC THEORY OF VIRTUE

Tad Brennan

Introduction

Virtue, say the Stoics, is the finest of all things, outshining pleasure, wealth, and even life itself, as much as the sun outshines a candle. Indeed, it is the only good thing, and all of the things that we mistakenly value and pursue are merely indifferents, with no tendency to bring us happiness. Virtue is necessary for our happiness, and sufficient for our happiness, and indeed the sole component and contributor to our happiness. Whoever has virtue is perfectly happy, and indeed no less happy than Zeus himself.

Alas, that none of us have it! For virtue is so demanding, requires such a pitch of perfection, that no human beings known to us—not even the founders of the Stoic school themselves—are truly virtuous. Not even close. We are all entirely vicious, and entirely wretched and miserable as a result. Nor is any of us more virtuous than another: all vicious people are equally vicious. It is possible to make progress towards virtue, the Stoics insist, but during this progress you are still thoroughly vicious and not even partly virtuous. The person making progress towards virtue is like a drowning man some distance beneath the surface of the sea: whether you are five feet underwater or five miles, you are drowning in either case. You might be getting closer to a place where you will be able to breathe, but that doesn’t mean that you are more able to breathe as you get closer. So long as you are vicious, you are also insane, and enslaved, and an enemy of all mankind. Only the virtuous—whom the Stoics refer to as “Sages”—are sane, free, and friendly, and only they are wealthy, good-looking, and lovable.

These are some of the extraordinary and counter-intuitive theses that the Stoics maintained about virtue. Considered in isolation from their theoretical context in the Stoic system as a whole, they look laughably implausible. When understood in light of the Stoics’ broader commitments and theoretical framework, they do not (in my opinion) gain much plausibility, but they do at least acquire some philosophical motivation and rationale. Whatever philosophical interest the Stoic theory of virtue has, can only be seen through examining its role in the larger structure.
For that reason, I want to turn now to a general overview of the Stoic system, in order to collect some pieces of theoretical and analytical machinery, before we return to a deeper examination of their theory of virtue. I shall attempt both to give a general picture of the role of virtue in Stoic ethics, and also to argue that one common way of understanding the definition of virtue cannot be right.

## Overview of Stoic System and Relevant Doctrines

### The Historical Background

The Stoic school was founded by Zeno of Citium around 300 BC. It reached the height of its philosophical sophistication under its third leader, Chrysippus of Soli, between 232 and 206 BC. It reached the height of its popularity a few centuries later, when Seneca (1 AD–65 AD), Epictetus (55 AD–135 AD), and Marcus Aurelius (121 AD–180 AD) made it the moral conscience of the Roman empire. Despite the attempts of Tertullian (160 AD–225 AD) to incorporate Stoic metaphysics into Christian theology, its rigorous materialism and exclusion of incorporeal entities led to its rejection by mainstream Christians, as well as its condemnation by the resurgent Platonists who followed Plotinus (205 AD–270 AD). By the fourth century, very few still identified as Stoics. But Stoic ethical treatises continued to be read by non-Stoics, and Epictetus’ “Manual,” with its numbered list of short, practical injunctions and prohibitions, was adopted wholesale by early Christian monastic movements, and set a pattern for the Rule of Benedict and later codes of conduct.²

Prior to founding the school, Zeno had studied with members of Plato’s Academy and members of the Cynic sect. Aristotle’s successor, Theophrastus, was active in Zeno’s time, but the Peripatetic school left few discernible traces on Stoicism. Chrysippus studied with Zeno’s successor, Cleanthes (331 BC–232 BC), and learned a great deal as well from the finest early critic of the Stoics, the Academic Skeptic Arcesilaus (320? BC–242 BC).

Chrysippus is said to have written over seven hundred books. Some hundred and fifty titles have been preserved in an ancient catalogue, including parts of his logical and ethical output; their range and variety, as well as the lacunae that they imply, make the total figure wholly plausible.³ Of this astounding output, nothing survives beyond quotations, paraphrases, and attributions in later authors, many of them critics of the Stoic school. Later Stoics always treated his views as authoritative, and when reports attribute a doctrine to unnamed “Stoics,” we assume it stems from Chrysippus.

### The Doctrinal Background

The Stoics divided their philosophy into Physics, Logic, and Ethics, and were, indeed, the first school to structure their system around this trichotomy. The contents of these three divisions differed to some extent from what their names might suggest to the modern ear. Stoic Physics, for instance, included theology,
ontology, determinism, and the nature of causation, as well as topics such as cosmology and the study of plants and animals. Logic included what we would think of as epistemology, theory of language, and rhetoric, alongside path-breaking research in formal logic and semantics. Stoic Ethics differed less from its modern namesake, but did also include political theory.

**Physics**

Perhaps the most striking feature of Stoic Physics was its thoroughgoing corporealism; the view that everything which exists, is bodily. Only bodies, the Stoics said, can act or be acted upon; since Zeus and the other gods are all active and interact with the cosmos, they must all be bodily; and since our souls both act and are acted upon by physical events, our souls, too, must be corporeal.

All corporeal entities are composed of the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. Ordinary objects, such as a chair, a tree, or a human being, contain samples of all four elements. The first two, earth and water, were referred to as passive elements, while air and fire were referred to as active elements. Fire and air combine into a stuff called "pneuma," which is responsible for all of the cohesion and properties of any object; it is the pneuma in a stone which makes it one stone and also makes it hard, just as the pneuma in a tree makes it one tree and makes it a living thing. This active principle in each thing, which bestows on it its properties, is also in some sense Zeus or God; the sources are emphatic about this although far from clear about how the details worked out. Accordingly, the Stoics held that Zeus is present in every volume of the universe, no matter how small or mundane, and is actively making the mud muddy as well as making the heavens celestial. When considered as the universal moving agent in causal interactions, Zeus can also be called Fate or Destiny. Every event that occurs in the world, including every psychological event in our own minds, was caused by Zeus and has been determined to occur since the beginning of the cosmos.

When we ask what makes a ruby red, we are told first that currents of pneuma qualify it in this way. But, of course, sapphires are blue because of currents of pneuma as well; so we will wish to know why one parcel of pneuma makes things blue, when another makes things red. Here we learn that the pneuma acts differently in virtue of its internal disposition, where the difference of disposition is illustrated by such cases as the difference between standing and sitting, or the difference between a hand held open and the same hand clenched into a fist. A different school might have concluded that the cause of the ruby's redness was therefore the disposition, meaning by this an incorporeal element or structural property distinct from the body so disposed; and this was a conclusion that opponents of the Stoics sometimes pressed upon them. The Stoics, instead, claimed that dispositions should simply be identified with bodies so disposed: the quality of redness in the ruby may be described equally well as the ruby's active elements (fire and air), or its pneuma, or its pneuma so disposed, or the disposition of its pneuma.5
Now there is a class of pneumatic currents that play a role somewhat analogous to the role of substantial forms in an Aristotelian ontology. The rational soul or reason (logos) of an adult human being is one instance of this class; other instances include the non-rational souls (psykhai) of lower animals. The souls of animals give them their essence and their unity; they are a principle of cohesion that also determines their other properties. In addition, plants were held to be animated by (not souls but) “natures,” using the endlessly ambiguous word physis. Finally, coherent non-living substances such as a ceramic vase or a bronze bell were thought to gain their cohesion from their being held together by a “tenor,” or hexis. Each of these pneumatic organizing principles—reason, soul, “nature,” and “tenor”—was thought of as the source of the larger body’s unity, identity, and properties. If we strike a bronze bell, it will produce a ringing tone, and in doing so it behaves as a unified mass rather than a heap of discrete particles. The complex vibratory motion that pervades a ringing bell can stand as an image for the currents of pneuma that the Stoics imagined at work in every macroscopic unified body. Here too, Zeus and Fate pervade: if the bell rings, then it was caused to ring by causes that stretch back to the beginning of the cosmos, and could not have resulted in any other event. In the hierarchical system of “tenor,” “nature,” soul, and rational soul, each more complex kind of principle is also a member of the less complex kind. So my rational soul is also a soul by which I am an animal, and is also the “nature” by which I am a living thing, and is also the “tenor” by which I am a cohesive unified body. All four kinds can be called “tenors”; three can also be called “natures”; two can also be called “souls.”

Logic and Epistemology

Perceptual data from the external world are channeled by the sense-organs to the soul, where they leave an impression (phantasia) which the Stoics (following Plato and Aristotle) compared to the imprint left in wax by a seal-ring. The impression in an adult human being is also correlated with some propositional content (an axiôma), which makes it not only an impression of an apple, but the impression (e.g.) that the apple is red. If part of the content of the impression is conative, normative, or evaluative, then the impression will belong to the special sub-class of impulsive impressions. In an adult human, this might correlate with such propositions as “I want to eat that apple,” “eating that apple is what I should do,” or “that apple certainly looks good to eat.” But irrational animals, whose impressions are not correlated with propositional content, can still have impulsive impressions that represent objects, in some non-conceptual fashion, as desirable or dangerous, to-be-pursued or to-be-avoided.

When animals have such impressions they thereby have impulses to act, and act in accordance with them. Not so in humans; adult humans can entertain impressions, whether perceptual or impulsive, without thereby acquiring a belief, judgment, or impulse. Humans have the power to assent to impressions or
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withhold their assent from impressions. Belief and impulse (in humans) are species of assent, and without assent there is no belief and no impulse.

Some assents constitute cases of knowledge, e.g. my assent to the impression that this is my hand, when I know that this is my hand. There are two differences between knowledge-constituting assents and mere belief-constituting assents, one intrinsic to the assent involved, and one deriving from the impression towards which it is directed. For an act of assenting to count as knowing, the assent must be strong, rather than weak, where this means that no possible pressure could cause me to reverse my assent: not Socratic elenchus, not sophistical refutation-mongering, not the lure of pleasure, not the threat of torture. So far as the impression goes, it must have the special characteristic of being “katalēptic,” where this requires it to be true, made to be true by what is the case, and unlike any impression that could have come from what is not the case. (This is sometimes glossed in ancient sources as a matter of its being evident, clear, and distinct, but it is a matter of scholarly controversy whether the crucial differences between katalēptic and non-katalēptic impressions were internal to its content and accessible to introspection, or whether they also included its causal history and other external features that might not be introspectibly accessible.)

Katalēptic impressions are not terribly rare, and both virtuous and vicious people receive them all the time, e.g. my perceptual impressions of clear and distinct perceptibles in normal conditions. Strong assents, however, are as rare as Sages are, since only Sages are entirely immune from changing their mind after they have assented to something katalēptic. They cannot be seduced by pleasure or daunted by torture, of course. But they also cannot be deceived by any sophistry, since they know how to solve all of the paradoxes, including the Sorites and the Liar. And they cannot be caught in any contradiction, because they have no false beliefs. Indeed, this is part of why they will give their assent only to katalēptic impressions, so that they would never assent even to the sort of impression that is similar to one that could be false. The Stoic Sage is best thought of as an idealized epistemic agent in the first instance; their ethical perfections all stem from their epistemic perfection. This is a Stoic specification of the traditional Socratic idea that virtue is knowledge, and vice a matter of defective belief.

There are katalēptic impressions of present perceptible states of affairs, so the Sage can have knowledge of the surrounding world. There are also katalēptic impressions of mathematical and logical axioms and arguments, so that the Sage has a ready store of those, as well as a stock of analytic truths on the order of “justice is a virtue” and “good things are not harmful.” But the Sage is not omniscient or prescient. She cannot receive a katalēptic impression of herself being alive tomorrow, and so she cannot know that she will be alive tomorrow, and must not assent to the impression (even if it is a true impression) that she will be alive tomorrow.

The Sages’ refusal to form beliefs about the future looks as though it might prevent them from engaging in ordinary deliberation, the formation of desires and intentions, and the initiation of actions. But the Stoics avoided this sort of paralysis by constructing
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their general theory of action in such way that it does not require beliefs about the future. When I do my shopping today, I do not need to believe that I will be alive tomorrow (and if I wish to avoid rashness and precipitancy, I ought not to believe it). All that I need is the belief that it is reasonable that I shall be alive tomorrow. This is a belief about a present state of affairs, i.e. the current reasonability of a proposition’s being true. And while I cannot have a katalēptic impression of a future contingent state of affairs, I can have a katalēptic impression of a present contingent state of affairs, sc. its currently being reasonable that P. The evidentiary basis for this impression, like the truth-makers for it, will be a lot of particular perceptible facts, plus some general laws of nature. From her knowledge of the general workings of the world, the Sage cannot know that a stone released from her hand will fall to the ground, but she can know that it is reasonable that this should occur. She cannot know that bread will nourish her this evening, but she can know that it is reasonable that it will. And knowledge with this content is sufficient to ground action and impulse.8

The sequelae of impressions and assent are of three sorts. First, there are memories, which are stored-up impressions. Second, there are actions; when we assent to an impulsive impression that, e.g., we ought to eat now, then the action of eating follows directly on the impulse. Third, there are alterations to one’s disposition to assent. The probability that one will assent to the impression, e.g. that this chocolate would be good to eat, is affected both by previous impressions of chocolate, and also by previous assents to similar impressions. Thus the Stoics can agree with Aristotle (e.g.) that we acquire our character by the actions that we perform, but they will analyze this by saying that we acquire our settled dispositions to assent to impressions through our earlier actual assents to impressions.

The Theory of Virtue

Our best account of the definition of virtue says that it is a “consistent disposition” or more literally an “agreeing disposition”: a diathesis homologoumenē. We shall learn more about the definition by pressing three questions:

1. What is a virtue a disposition of? What (in Aristotelian terms) is its substratum?
2. What is a virtue a disposition to do?
3. What is a virtue consistent with, or in agreement with?

What is a Virtue a Disposition Of?

Here are the most helpful pieces of primary evidence:

They say that virtue is an agreeing/consistent disposition. One sort of virtue is, generally, the perfection of any given thing, e.g. a statue. Another sort is untheorized, e.g. health. And a third sort is theorematic virtue, as for instance, wisdom.9

(SVF 3.197 = DL 7.89–90)
To suppose that the virtues are projected by opinion, and not grounded in nature, would be insane. For neither the virtue of a tree nor the virtue of a horse (as we call them, using the term loosely) is founded in opinion, but in nature. And accordingly, moral integrity and depravity must be determined by nature as well.

(SVF 3.311 = Cicero de Legibus I.16, 44)

Chrysippus made a massive mistake, not by his denial that any virtue is a capacity (for a slip like that is not big deal, and we do not disagree in that respect) but because he says that there are many knowledges and many virtues, but only one capacity of the soul. For there cannot be many virtues of one capacity, just as there cannot be many perfections of one thing. For each of the things that exist, there is one perfection, and a virtue simply is the perfection of the nature of each thing, as he himself agrees.

(SVF 3.257 = Galen PHP V.5.167, 446)

Virtue is nothing other than nature, brought to perfection and developed to the highest extent.

(SVF 3.245 = Cicero de Legibus I.8.25)

Several things emerge from these quotations. One is that there is a sense of the term “virtue” in which it may be applied to any given thing that has a perfection. Whatever can have a perfection, can have a virtue in this sense: even an artifact like a statue. This is the loosest and most general sense of the term “virtue,” familiar to us from (for instance) Socrates’ insistence in the Republic (353b) that a pruning-knife has a virtue.

There is a narrower sense of the term “virtue” in which it applies to natures and things that have natures, and so can be applied to trees and horses, but not to statues or pruning-knives. This sense is flagged in Cicero as still a loose or catachrestic sense, but not a sense wholly distinct from or unconnected with the sense in which we speak of human virtue. Indeed, he uses it as a premise to prove that human virtue must be grounded by nature, because the virtues (loosely speaking) of trees and horses are grounded in nature.

Now, in the strictest sense of “virtue,” only human beings can have virtues—indeed, only adult human beings. This is why the more general sense of virtue in which it applies to all natural things is loose or catachrestic. But the analytical connections between virtue and nature are the same, and need to be the same in order for the argument to go through. There is only one kind of nature whose perfection counts as a virtue in the strictest sense: rational nature, the nature of a rational being. A statue can be said to have statuesque virtues because of its perfection as a statue, and trees or horses can be said to have virtues because of the perfect development of their natures, but these perfections do not count as virtues, strictly speaking, because what is perfected is not the right sort of thing. Not just any nature can be perfected
into a virtue in the strict sense. However, nothing can be a virtue, in the strict sense in which it applies to human beings, or even in the moderately loose sense in which it applies to horses and trees, except by being the perfection of that thing's nature (and when we loosen the sense of “virtue” further, to speak of the virtues of statues and knives, we do so by a further loosening of our usage of “nature,” so that it can be applied metaphorically to the essence or function of the artifact).

What is the essence of a human being? Reason. When it is right and perfect, it constitutes the happiness of a human being. If each thing, when it attains its good, is praiseworthy and has reached the end of its nature; and if the good of a human being is reason; then if the human being perfects this, she is praiseworthy and has grasped the end of her nature. This perfect reason is called “virtue.”

(SVF 3.200 = Seneca ep. 76.10)11

Here again we see a general pattern, applicable to each thing (omnis res) that can be in better and worse states. When it has perfected whatever its essence consists in, then it has attained its good and reached its natural end and becomes praiseworthy (e.g. we say that it is a first-rate pruning-knife, or a fine horse). But the essence of humans is reason; so if the human perfects their reason, then they have attained their good and reached their natural end, and become praiseworthy in the terms that are uniquely applicable to human beings, e.g. when we say that this is a good, decent, admirable, etc., person.

If we consider humans, horses, trees, and statues, and what it is for each of them to be called virtuous, we will have the answer to our first question. For we saw earlier that each of these is made what it is, and given its cohesion and qualities, by pneumatic principles which are referred to as reason, soul, “nature,” and “tenor,” respectively. So, when we ask, “What is virtue a disposition of?” the answer will be, “It is a disposition of the pneumatic principle of the thing that has the virtue; e.g. the reason of a human being, or the ‘nature’ of a tree.”

We also noted the Stoic habit of maintaining their corporelism by identifying dispositions with the bodies that they are dispositions of. We can find an instance of that in a report that virtue is a disposition of the rational soul, which continues, “or rather, virtue simply is reason (logos) in agreement and stable and incontrovertible.”12 So we could say that the horse’s virtue is a disposition of its soul, or we could say that its virtue simply is its soul, disposed in a certain way. We can say that the virtue of anything that has a nature is the correct disposition of that nature, or we can say (as Cicero does above), that the virtue simply is the nature, in a certain disposition, using “nature” here to refer to the kind of pneumatic principle possessed by each living thing.

**What is a Virtue a Disposition to Do?**

Our second question asked what the disposition is a disposition to do. In one sense the answer simply is: to agree. But “agreeing” or “in agreement” here
functions more like an adverb than a verb. If you and I agree in our calculations, then you are calculating and I am calculating and we arrive at the same answers. If we agree in our mealtimes, then you dine and I dine and we both dine at eight. What we are doing, in the first instance, is not agreeing, but rather calculating or dining; the agreement is a property of the underlying actions.

The same applies to virtues. The badger that has the virtue of a badger will do very little first-order agreeing; rather, it will eat and sleep and hunt and burrow. What makes it a virtuous badger is the fact that it eats in agreement and it sleeps in agreement and so on; the agreement modifies the first-order actions that it undertakes. (We are postponing for a section the question of what its behavior agrees with.) We may give a more general characterization of the first-order activities such as hunting and eating by saying (as the Stoics do say), that the animal lives by impulse: it lives by taking in impressions of its surroundings and responding to them. All of its huntings and burrowings and matings, all of the activities that it performs as the animal that it is, are things that it does by the movements of its soul in response to impressions. And the question of the badger’s virtue is the question of whether its impulses are in agreement.

The same thought will apply to the plant, one level down, and the human, one level up. Plants cannot act: they do not take in impressions, and they have no impulses. But they do grow, and maintain themselves, and reproduce themselves, all under the guidance of their “natures,” and the question of whether a given plant is a virtuous one will be decided by whether its behavior in growth, reproduction, and self-maintenance is in agreement. Humans do have impulses, but only when they assent, and the totality of a human life may be rewritten as the history of its assents and suspensions (this is what Epictetus refers to as the “use of impressions”). A virtuous human is one all of whose assents are in agreement, one whose disposition to assent produces particular assents in a way that is in agreement.

So we have answered our second question: the disposition that is the virtue of a given substance is a disposition to do what that sort of substance does—to assent, or to have impulses, or to grow, or to cohere—in an agreeing fashion, agreeing-ly, or consistently. Restricting our focus to the human case momentarily, we can note that Epictetus has a special term for an individual’s disposition to assent: their prohairesis. An individual’s prohairesis is simply the totality of their dispositions to assent to any possible impression. My tendency to believe that sweet foods should be eaten, as well as my fairly reliable tendency to assent to “3 + 4 = 7,” are both part of my prohairesis. If my disposition were a virtuous one, then my prohairesis would be the same thing as my virtue. Since my dispositions are not virtuous, my prohairesis is the same thing as my vice. And in both cases, my virtue or my vice or my prohairesis are all the same thing as my rational soul, which in some sense is the same thing as me, thus allowing Epictetus to repeatedly insist that each person simply is, most essentially, their prohairesis.
**What is a Virtue Consistent With, or In Agreement With?**

Finally, we can ask: what is the standard of agreement or consistency? With what does the behavior of a virtuous aspidistra, antelope, or Athenian agree or consist? A number of strands of evidence converge on the answer: nature. So a virtuous human will be one that assents in agreement with nature; a virtuous animal one that has impulses and acts in agreement with nature; and a virtuous plant will be one that grows in agreement with nature.

Before presenting the evidence in favor of this interpretation of the definition of virtue, I should note that my view is in conflict with a widely held view, according to which the definition is read as claiming that “virtue is a consistent disposition,” where “consistent” is understood as a short-hand for “self-consistent.” On this view, the right answer to the question, “with what does the disposition agree or consist?” is, “itself.” Here, for instance, are Long and Sedley explicating their translation “virtue is a consistent character.”

Virtue, then, is rational consistency, a character of the soul’s commanding-faculty . . . A person’s reasoning faculty is conceived as being either consistent or inconsistent; this consistency, or the virtues it promotes, is analogous to the straightness of a perfectly straight line.15

Sometimes this sort of view is developed into a view that the Stoics were concerned about inter-temporal regularity of behavior: the Sage’s character is consistent because he wakes at 6 every morning. Or sometimes the consistency is thought to rest on their reliance on a stable set of maxims and rules of behavior: the Sage decides what to do by consulting a list of ethical principles, and these principles do not change over time.

But however we develop the thought that virtue is a logically consistent disposition, it seems to me to be a misreading of the definition. It is a misreading even though, on the reading I advocate, it will turn out that the Sage’s soul does in fact possess various kinds of self-consistency. But it is a misreading, insofar as it encourages us to look for the standard of consistency or agreement inside the soul of the Sage, when in fact the standard is external to their soul. The standard of agreement, i.e. what a virtuous human disposition assents in agreement with, is nature in general, both human nature and cosmic nature, where this can also be thought of as the beliefs and impulses—the assents—of Zeus himself.

Now it follows from the nature of that external standard that the Sage cannot be in agreement with that standard if their beliefs or dispositions to believe are contradictory. Zeus’s own thoughts contain no contradictions, and no successful imitation of a consistent thing can contain inconsistencies. Thus, the Sage’s rational self-consistency (in the sense of their never being simultaneously committed to P & ~P) is entailed by the sort of external standard with which their virtue is in agreement. But what the definition of virtue actually refers to is the agreement, not the self-consistency.
Another way to put the same thought: in their understanding of what is right about the right reason of a virtuous human being, the Stoics are correspondence theorists, not coherence theorists. Your soul’s perfection, your soul’s getting it right, means its being in conformity with the will of Zeus. It means focusing outward, on the world and what you can learn from it about the intentions of Zeus, rather than inward, on your own internal consistency. Certainly inter-temporal consistency can be of no interest to a genuine Stoic: if Zeus now wills me to wake at 5, what does it matter that I have habitually woken at 6? What could be more essentially vicious, more essentially egotistical and impious, than placing more importance on my past behavior than on the current commands of Zeus?

One reason to prefer my parsing of the definition comes from the fact that the definition is clearly intended to apply to more things than rational human beings. If the definition is understood as a criterion of agreement, we can see what it means to say that a horse or a tree is a virtuous one. The activity of this organism is in agreement with the natural norms for that sort of organism. If it is a horse, then its virtue consists in doing excellently what nature in general, and the nature of horses in particular, requires horses to do. And there is no problem in seeing how this pattern can apply to rational human beings, and generate the right specification of their virtue: they ought to do excellently what nature in general and their nature as human beings requires them to do, which is first and foremost to assent and suspend in a certain way, to regulate their beliefs and impulses by their knowledge of nature. However, if we start from the idea that the definition simply says “virtue is the logical consistency of one’s reasoning faculty,” then it is very hard to see how this could be applied, even loosely, to horses and plants.

Here is another way of arriving at the same conclusion. All of the actions of a virtuous human being belong to a class of actions known as “kathêkonta,” variously translated as “proper functions,” “befitting actions,” “duties,” and so on. They are, speaking very broadly, what one should do in each case, whether one is virtuous or not. If I (who am not virtuous) do the right thing, perform the correct action, then I have done a befitting action, no matter what my thoughts or motivations were in doing it. Had a Sage been in the same circumstances, she would have done the same thing. However, when the Sage performs a befitting action, they do so from their special virtuous disposition, which makes their action a perfectly befitting action, or a perfect action, or a virtuous action (a katorthôma). Having this special disposition is not essential to its being a befitting action: what makes it befitting is that a certain kind of justification could be given of it (in principle, if not by the agent), a reasonable justification, which shows how a Sage could have arrived at an impulse to perform it by reflecting on the probable course of nature and commands of Zeus. The fact that I am unable to offer such a justification does not preclude me from performing a befitting action, although it does preclude me from performing a perfectly befitting action, i.e. a virtuous action.
It is a fact of the first importance that, according to the Stoics, “befitting actions extend also to plants and animals; for befitting actions can be observed in them as well.”16 Of course, no plant or animal could provide the sort of justification of what makes their action befitting that a Sage could offer for their own action. And likewise, no plant or animal can do something that is genuinely virtuous, when “virtue” is used strictly. But plants and animals can still perform their proper functions or befitting actions, and when they do so, they come as close as such organisms can come to being virtuous in the strict sense, and they are virtuous in the looser sense. So the fact that the Stoics stipulate that there is a general theory of the befitting action, which applies with the appropriate modifications up and down the scala of natural things, should reinforce our conviction that they also designed their definition of virtue so that it would apply up and down the same scala. And if it is to do that, it cannot be understood as meaning “a reasoning faculty that manifests logical self-consistency.” It cannot mean that in general, even if its specific application to the case of human beings does entail that requirement in their case.

Here is another way of considering the matter, from the definition of the telos or final end. The final end for human beings can be characterized structurally as what everything else is rationally or properly done for the sake of, while it is not done for the sake of anything further. Or it can be characterized evaluatively by saying that it is the same thing as eudaimonia, or living happily and well. Most substantively, however, the Stoics defined it as living in accordance with a certain kind of standard or norm. This norm is given different verbal formulations by different Stoics, but they all insisted that the formulations were in some sense equivalent, and merely expressed the same doctrine in slightly different terms.

One characterization, then, is that the final end is to live in accordance with virtue (kat’ aretên). Another characterization says that the end is to live in agreement with nature (homologoumenos têi phusei). Chrysippus clarified this by saying that when one attempts to live in agreement with nature, one lives through one’s knowledge and experience of the things that happen by nature, where the nature in question is one’s own nature, and the nature of the cosmos, which is the same thing as Zeus, pervading all things. One’s knowledge and experience of nature stand to nature itself in this context somewhat as Kantian maxim stands to practical law: they are the subjective and objective aspects of the same norm. “And this, he said, is the virtue of the happy person, when she performs every action through the agreement (sumphônia) of her personal daemon with the will of the Governor of the Universe.”17

To live in such a way as to attain one’s end, then, is to live in accordance with an external standard of nature, both human nature and cosmic nature, i.e. the will of Zeus. But to live in this way is also, equivalently, to live according to virtue. This is a further reason to conclude that virtue is defined in terms of agreement with an external standard, not as inward-looking logical consistency.
The correct translation of the definition is not “virtue is a consistent disposition,” but rather “virtue is a disposition in agreement, or agreeing disposition,” where the norm is given by the nature of the thing whose virtue it is, and the nature of the cosmos in general.

When we consider that the language of “agreeing” or “consisting” appears in the definition of the \textit{summum bonum}, we can see more reasons why self-consistency cannot be the issue for the Stoics. I have already granted that a Sage must not have any contradictory beliefs or commitments at any given time, since they are trying to conform their beliefs and impulses to the will of Zeus, which is itself consistent at any given time. But while this sort of internal consistency may be a plausible sine qua non for a happy life (at least it has seemed so to rationalists through the ages), it seems radically impoverished as a full account of an agent’s end. What is so end-like, so ultimately good, about logical consistency?

One answer sometimes given by advocates of the internal reading is that tranquility—the absence of internal conflict—is itself a desirable mental state. But this is to confuse Stoics with Epicureans. The Stoics never said that tranquility was their end.\textsuperscript{18} And the feelings that might be produced by an absence of mental conflict are no more desirable, for a Stoic, than the feelings that are produced by upheavals of thought. Feelings of this sort, like all pleasure and pain, are absolutely indifferent.\textsuperscript{19} It was the Epicureans who advocated a pleasurable state of numbed insouciance as their end, and for them the mere absence of internal conflict would look like an end in itself. For the Stoics, mental agony of the most exquisite kind would be simply another instance of agony, and thus indifferent. Of course, the agony might be occasioned by false or conflicting beliefs or rash assent, and those are genuinely bad things. But they are bad for epistemic reasons, not because of how they feel. And their replacement by a set of consistent beliefs, while a sine qua non of the good, is not the good itself.

A different and better answer given by advocates of the internal reading is that internal consistency—logical consistency—is the end for human beings because it is a perfection of one’s reason, and human beings are essentially rational agents. This is a better answer insofar as it avoids the mistake of making the Stoics into Epicureans of introspection, who shrink from mental pain and pursue mental pleasure. But it still puts the emphasis in the wrong place. What is valuable about having an extensive stock of knowledge such as the Sage has—knowledge about nature, physics, theology, goods and evils, propositional logic, and more—is that it puts one in contact with the world; it allows one to follow, to the extent that it is possible for a human to do so, the dictates of nature and of Zeus. It allows us to know what is good in the cosmos, and to act so as to further it. These, too, are perfections of our rational nature, and positive perfections rather than mere absences of vice. Finally, those who give the Stoics mere internal consistency as their end make them the easy prey of Skeptics; for the fastest way to have no contradictory beliefs is to have no beliefs at all.
Retrospect and Comparative Overview

From this perspective on Stoic virtue and its role in Stoic ethics, we might want to ask a series of questions about the relations between virtuous persons, virtuous actions, right actions, goodness, and happiness. Do some of these notions ground or justify others? Are some of them derived from or dependent on others? Answers to these questions would help us to see how the Stoic theory of virtue compares to other theories of virtue and to other ethical theories.

Consequentialist theories will tend to treat the virtues as dispositions to produce outcomes that are good, deontological theories as dispositions to perform actions that are right or obligatory. In both cases, the notion of virtue is posterior to the notions of goodness or rightness. It is characteristic of more ambitious forms of virtue ethics to claim that virtue is prior in some strong sense; facts about which actions are correct or obligatory are grounded in their relation to the virtues.20

For instance, one virtue-ethical theory may argue that an action’s rightness simply consists in its being the action that a virtuous person would judge to be right, and that the agent’s virtue of character is prior to and independent of the rightness of the actions. Another may argue that an action’s rightness consists in its being a virtuous action (a kind action, a courageous action, etc.), and that a person is virtuous if they are especially good at discerning and producing virtuous actions. Here, virtue is a property of actions in the first instance, and virtue as a character trait is derivative from it, as is correctness of actions.

Happiness may enter in various ways as well: one theory may develop a substantive account of human happiness that makes no reference to the virtues, and then say that the virtues simply are those traits whose manifestations most conduces to happiness so described. Against this, another theory may provide independent accounts of the virtues, and then flesh out its account of happiness by saying that a happy life is one that contains significant episodes of virtuous behavior.21

What, in Stoicism, is prior to what? The answers are not immediately evident. We are given a great many biconditionals: something is good if and only if it partakes of virtue; an agent is virtuous if and only if all of their actions are virtuous; a life is happy if and only if it is a life of virtue; an action is perfectly correct if and only if it is a virtuous action. But what here is foundational?

To begin with, it seems to me that the Stoics did not make the character of virtuous people the foundation of their system, and so did not ground the rightness of actions or the goodness of outcomes by saying, e.g., that actions are right or outcomes are good exactly because and to the extent that they stem from or produce a certain kind of character in agents.

This is not to deny that the actions of virtuous agents can be used, epistemically, as an indication of rightness in actions: if we are trying to decide what to do, then we may be sure that we will do the right action if and only if we do what
a Sage would do. \(^2\) (The heuristic convenience of this method is somewhat undercut by the empirical absence of any actual Sages.)

That the Sage’s actions are infallible indices of rightness in action is not undermined by the fact that the very same action will be a \textit{katorthôma} or virtuous action when performed by a Sage, and only a \textit{kathêkon} or befitting action when performed by a non-Sage. (Talk of “the very same action” is elliptical here. What the Sage and non-Sage can do are to perform two actions which belong to the very same type, when sameness of action-type is restricted to extensional or observable properties, and disregards the agent’s dispositions and motivations.) Since I do not have the virtues, I cannot perform a virtuous action; but I can still perform an action of that very same extensional type, and indeed I should perform an action of that type, since only it is correct.

But the correctness of the action is not grounded in the fact that a virtuous person would perform it. Its correctness is grounded in those considerations that a Sage herself would attend to in deliberating about what to do: what makes the action correct is that a certain kind of justification can be given for it, in principle, showing that it is reasonable that this action is in accordance with nature and the will of Zeus. \(^3\) The Sage’s virtue makes them extremely good at understanding nature and at discerning the will of Zeus; it plays no deeper role than that in making the action correct. To this extent, Stoic ethics is not a kind of virtue ethics.

Virtue does play a role in making a correct action “perfectly correct,” i.e. a perfect action or \textit{katorthôma} rather than a mere \textit{kathêkon}. But this is simply a matter of stipulation, in that the perfectly correct action is defined as a correct action done from a virtuous disposition. So we can say both that the virtuousness of a virtuous action is posterior to the virtue of the agent performing it—the very same action, if not performed by a virtuous agent, would not have been a virtuous action—and also that the correctness of a virtuous action is in no way grounded in the virtue of the agent.

Happiness, meanwhile, cannot act as a good anchor for the system, because the happy life has no fixed content other than its being a life of virtue. For any other determinate life-activities, experiences, aims, or goals that one could use to formulate an account of human flourishing, the Stoics declare that those things are inessential to happiness. A happy life is not, e.g., one in which one enjoys health, moderate prosperity, and warm intimacy with a small circle of family and friends. All of that is indifferent to happiness, and if there are traits that make it more likely that one’s life will contain those things, the Stoics would not call them virtues. But the Stoic account of happiness is even less determinate than, e.g., an Aristotelian account which says that a happy life should contain episodes of liberality, or courage. Here the trouble is that the Stoics say that every action that a Sage performs is a virtuous action, and is performed with all of the virtues. So the Sage makes sandwiches courageously, and folds his arms liberally. The Sage can spend her life in the desert never encountering another human
being, and yet manifest the virtues of sociability and philanthropy in brushing sand from her feet. It is not clear that the Stoics place any constraints on the concrete, describable episodes that a life must have in order to be a happy life; all that we know is that it must be virtuous. And that it will be virtuous, if lived by a Sage. This, of course, is a feature that the Stoics are eager to build into their account: it allows their Sage to triumph in any circumstance. Aristotelian liberality requires the agent’s fortuitous access to money, and Aristotelian courage requires their fortuitous exposure to danger. The Stoic can live a life of perfect virtue, and perfect happiness, no matter what their surroundings may be. But the cost of this ultimate adaptability is that their notion of a happy life is too thin and formal to ground their notion of virtue.

The only constraints on the life of happiness are that the life has to contain some preponderance of things according to nature over things that are contrary to nature; if the Stoic (whether a Sage or not) currently has, and thinks it reasonable that they will continue to have, a preponderance of things contrary to nature (e.g. ill health or torture or servitude), then the correct action will be to end their life. The Stoic will interpret this pattern of indifferents—for health and torture are still absolutely indifferent—as evidence that it is the will of nature and of Zeus that they should die, and they will act in conformity with their best evidence. Here as elsewhere, what is foundational is not virtue or happiness or right action, but nature, both the nature of the agent and of the cosmos.

Related Topics

Chapter 1, “Plato and the Ethics of Virtue,” Nicholas White
Chapter 2, “Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics,” Dorothea Frede
Chapter 22, “Kant and Virtue Ethics,” Allen Wood

Notes

1 I thank the editors for inviting me to contribute to this volume, Stephen Menn for pressing me to make my presentation less one-sided, and Ian Hensley for help with metaphysics. And as always, my deepest thanks go to Liz Karns.
3 Diogenes Laertius (=DL) 7.189.
4 Plutarch 1053F = LS 47M
5 See Menn (1999) for a full discussion of how qualities are identified with pneuma variously disposed.
6 Not every macroscopic body has such an organizing principle: ships and choruses are bodies that are assemblages of parts, whether adjacent or at a greater distance. It looks as though the Stoics may have adopted a principle of unrestricted composition for bodies, such that any collection of bodies, no matter how distant or diverse, is itself a body. But only some bodies are unified by having a unified pneumatic current whose vibrations exactly occupy the volume of the body. In an army, for instance, there is no pneumatic current that occupies all and only the bodies that compose the army. Each human member of the army has one such unifying pneumatic principle (their reason, rational soul, or logos). And there are currents that occupy all of the bodies in the
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army; at the very least, there is the unity of the cosmos as a whole, which grounds the cosmic "sympathy," and makes the cosmos coherent. But this current extends far beyond the army. There is no unified current that extends throughout all and only the bodily stuff that composes the army; it is thus a body, but not a unified one.

7 cf. SVF 2.1013 = Sextus Empiricus AM 9.78. In order to see that a rational soul is a kind of "tenor," note first that we are told that every unified body is contained by a "tenor." This class must include plants and animals, since the unified bodies are contrasted with proximate assemblages like chains and dispersed particulars like armies. Then, the unified bodies that have no souls or "natures" are characterized as those contained by a "mere tenor" (ψιλή ἕξις), i.e. a tenor that is not also a nature or soul. Finally, note that each unified body is said to be governed by exactly one "tenor." This rules out the possibility that I might be unified both by my rational soul and by some "mere tenor" that is distinct from my rational soul. That each unified body can be contained by only one "tenor" is again asserted at SVF 2.368.

8 For more details of the role of reasonable impressions in action, see Brennan (1996) and (2014).

9 A virtue is "theoretic" when it is constituted by the knowledge of theorems, as we shall see below, and "untheorized" when it is not.

10 Similarly in SVF 3.260 = Hippocr. de humoribus II XVI p. 303: “By ‘virtue’ they [the Stoics] intend the perfection of the nature of each thing.”

11 Seneca’s phrasing of this argument reflects the tendency noted just below to speak as though one can identify a disposition, the thing disposed in this way, and the thing itself. He first uses “ratio” to refer to the reason that is the essence of a human being, but may be in better or worse dispositions. When he then says that the good of a human being is “ratio,” this refers to the earlier ratio in a particular disposition, i.e. right reason or perfected reason. What a human needs to perfect is not the second sense of ratio in which it is right reason or their good—that ratio is already perfected. What the human needs to perfect is the first ratio, the reason through which they are humans, which can be in better and worse shape. This reason is my essence, but in me or any other vicious person it is not my good. Indeed, since it is the same as my vice, my perverted reason is the source of my misery, and so a bad thing.

12 SVF 3.459 = Plutarch 441C.

13 The word means something very different in Aristotle’s ethics; not a disposition but an act of deciding on a course of action as the result of prior deliberation, a deliberate decision. Scholarship has not yet discovered a good explanation for the word’s migration from one meaning in Aristotle to a very different meaning in Epictetus. My own speculations can be read at Brennan &Brittain (2002: 22–24).

14 E.g. Diatribes 1.17.27.1; 2.23.22.1; 3.1.40.1; 4.5.12.1.

15 LS 1.383 It is slightly puzzling that Long and Sedley (1987) move in the space of a few lines from saying that the consistency simply is the virtue, to saying that it promotes virtues.


17 SVF 3.4 = DL 7.87, SVF 3.12 = Stobaeus 2.76.3.

18 Chrysippus hardly mentions the term; there is only one place in Stobaeus SVF 3.111 where it occurs. Epictetus discusses tranquility often, treating it on a par with lack of passions, i.e. as a sine qua non of progress or virtue and as a good state for those who are already virtuous, but not the end.

19 The Stoics distinguished two senses of both pleasure and pain; in the sense in which those terms refer to judgments about value, they are false judgments and so outright wrong, not indifferent (e.g. SVF 3.85.6 = Plutarch 1042F, SVF 3.113.7 = Stobaeus 2.77.6). In the sense in which those terms refer to anything phenomenological, whether smooth sensations in the flesh or harsh sensations in the mind, they are utterly indifferent (e.g. SVF 3.70.6 = Stobaeus 2.57.19, SVF 3.136.13 = Stobaeus 2.80.22). Sometimes the difference was marked lexically, using “ponos” for the indifferent pain and “lupê” for the false judgment, but “hêdonê” was recognized to be ambiguous, see SVF 3.178.10 = DL 7.85.

20 Driver (1995) 111 fn. 1 introduced the convenient distinction between a theory of virtue and a virtue ethics proper, where the latter term is restricted to ethical theories that give virtue some foundational role.

21 The previous paragraphs lean heavily on Slote (2000: 327–328).
22 There are of course puzzle cases here, e.g. what a non-Sage should do in cases where the Sage should say "I am a Sage." But I set these aside, both because they will arise for any system which uses idealized agents as standards, epistemically or otherwise, and because they are probably soluble by attending more closely to what the relevant dimensions of sameness are in "doing the same thing," e.g. whether it is a matter of using the same words that the Sage uses, or of telling the truth when the Sage tells the truth.

23 Cf. the definition of the kathêkon as "that which, once done, receives a reasonable defense," in SVF 3.493 = DL 7.107, SVF 3.494 = Stobaeus 2.84.13, etc.

24 Cf. SVF 3.763 = Cicero de Fin 3.60.

References


Further Reading

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