Symposion

Theoretical and Applied Inquiries
in
Philosophy and Social Sciences

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STOICISM
AND
CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT

Introduction

Scott Aikin and William O. Stephens

Interest in Stoicism has been on the rise in recent years. To start, there are the popular and practical applications of the tradition. Blogs, YouTube channels, and popular publications explaining the insights of the school and showing its connection to a variety of other issues (whether to material minimalism, to athletic training, to psychological well-being) abound. Moreover, scholarly interest in the school is as strong as ever. Stoicism's development, its theoretical approach to the emotions, its model for duty and virtue, its anti-skeptical tools, and its model for intellectual aspirationalism are seen as rich sites for philosophical reflection. This is a period of Stoic renaissance.

We, the editors (Aikin and Stephens), believe that the Stoic tradition has much to offer. For that reason, we present the essays in this special issue of *Symposion* as contributions toward continuing the rich lineage of this tradition. The essays we have collected on the topic of *Contemporary Stoicism* offer a broad range of interpretations of what that subject means. It could describe the most up-to-date interpretive scholarly work on the ancients. Or it could refer to bringing contemporary issues to bear on, challenging, and even updating those ancient texts. Or it could involve the contemporary applications and extensions of the tradition's insights. Or it could articulate an interface between the scholarly uptake of the tradition and its popular applications. Stoicism, as a philosophical school, represents a picture of success in terms of its lasting influence and cultural relevance. Few philosophical figures or schools have this kind of purchase. Epicureans, Cynics, and Skeptics also have similar status, but beyond the odd person who might know about Socrates, existentialism, Buddhism, or utilitarianism, few other programs wield as much basic cultural clout. One of the troubles with influential cultural trends is that their impacts ripple well beyond what the originators had in mind. Ancient Cynicism is often confused with cynicism – the amoral worldview of putting one's own interests first. But the latter is precisely what the former would have abhorred. And Epicureans would find practices called 'epicurean' these days exactly the kind of things they avoided – better to have barley cakes and water than wine and fine dining. The contemporary picture of someone who is 'stoic' is not quite so wide of the mark from Stoicism as these others, but it is still inaccurate. The 'stoic' is without emotion, utterly detached and unfeeling. Not so for the Stoic, since the objective is not to eliminate all emotions but only those that undercut one's self-control, namely, disruptive passions. Moreover, Stoicism encourages maximal engagement with, not isolation from, the world.

To these ends, the Stoics approached philosophy as a system integrating their insights in the three main domains of philosophy – logic, physics, and ethics. In their ancient context, these areas were more expansive than they are in our contemporary usage. Logic extended from formal logic, to argumentation theory and rhetoric, to philosophy of language, to epistemology. Physics spanned the breadth of basic physics, metaphysics, ontology, cosmology, theology, philosophy of mind, and a theory of human nature and development. Ethics included theories of human relations and virtues, ethical principles and meta-ethics, and a theory of human flourishing. We are told that the Stoics thought these three domains were organically connected, like parts of an egg (the shell, the white, the yolk), or a fertile field (the fences, the crop, and the soil), or even an animal (the bones, the muscles and sinews, and the soul) (DL viii.40). This implied that logic, physics, and ethics are interrelated disciplines – one cannot, for example, do ethics without knowing what kind of creature we are finding norms for, and we cannot know those norms without a clear picture of good reasoning. A virtue of systematic philosophical approaches is that they can be robust and useful accounts in which practitioners may live – they are ways of life. A problem for systematic approaches is that they are highly vulnerable to being undermined, since if everything is essential to the system, the whole can be unraveled by a single patch of controversy. The recent interest in Stoic philosophy is exemplary, since the attention has been almost exclusively to Stoicism as an ethics. There is comparatively little uptake in Stoic logic or Stoic physics in its popular instances. In scholarly contexts, as controversial as Stoic ethics is, Stoic physics and logic have even steeper hills to climb with philosophical critique and defense.

This scholarly landscape occasions a question: to what extent *must* Stoic ethics depend on Stoic logic and physics?

Can one do Stoic ethics without the heavy metaphysics of Providentialism or the demanding epistemology of *kataleptic* impressions? (Moreover, one can ask, alternately, whether commitment to Stoic epistemology or physics really implies something in Stoic ethics, e.g. how does belief in *ekpyrosis* entail commitment to Stoic virtues?) To the question of how beholden Stoic ethics is to the other domains of Stoic philosophy, a variety of answers have been given. These are not exhaustive options, but they locate points of conversation in this volume represented in its articles.

> **Strong Stoic Minimalism:** Stoic ethics is free-standing. It does not depend on any particular physics or logic (Stoic or otherwise).

> **Modest Stoic Minimalism:** Stoic ethics stands free of global theories of Stoic physics and logic but depends on a Stoic theory of human nature.

> **Stoic Systemic Conservatism:** Stoic ethics depends on Stoic physics and logic, which are defensible with minor modifications.

> **Stoic Systemic Revisionism:** Stoic ethics depends on Stoic physics and logic, which must be revised considerably to be defensible.

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Versions of these four positions are identifiable in the ancients, and they all find contemporary expression with authors in this volume. Aristo of Chios held that one should be interested only in ethics and left physics and logic to the side (DL vii. 162). Marcus Aurelius held that his (quasi-Stoic) ethics bound him under conditions of either Providence or atoms in the void (*M*. ix.28). Aristo and Aurelius were strong minimalists, and Chuck Chakrapani's "Stoic Minimalism" carries on this tradition. Representatives of the modest minimalists can be found in Stobaeus's and Cicero's reports that the key thesis is that humans are rational and social and are thereby capable of enduring astonishing hardship (Stobaeus, *Anth*. 5b1; Cicero *De Fin.* 3.42). A case for this form of moderated minimalism is made in Christopher Gill's "Stoic Ethical Theory: How Much is Enough?" The systemic conservative approach is exemplified by Chrysippus's view that all of philosophy's programs are designed to, in concert, help us harmonize with nature (DL vii.88). Kai Whiting, Aldo Dinucci, Edward Simpson, and Leonidas Konstantakos's essay, "The Environmental Battle Hymn of the Stoic God," makes the case that Stoic theology is plausible by contemporary standards and has significant relevance to how we ought to view the crisis of the environment. Then there are the systemic revisionists, with which Seneca famously identified when he said the founders of the tradition are our guides, not our masters (*Ep.* 33.11). Scott Aikin's "The Stoic Sage Does not Err: An Error?" is a case for the revised program in Stoic epistemology and ethics, based on the thought that the requirements of never making mistakes are equivocal and need clarification, and these new interpretations yield significant differences in how the system works.

The cases for Stoic ethical minimalism (and some instances of systemic revisionism) generally come in three forms, with arguments that proceed according to the following lines:

Defensibility: Ancient Stoic physics/logic/theology is not defensible by contemporary standards, so Stoic ethics should not be derived from it.

Controversy: Ancient Stoic physics/logic/theology were sites of controversy among the Stoics, so Stoic ethics cannot depend on any one particular view.

Actuality: Contemporary (and some ancient) practitioners of Stoic ethics successfully practice the ethics without commitment to (or even knowledge of) Stoic physics/logic/theology. This shows it is a free-standing program.

If any of these argumentative lines have any plausibility, the revisionist and minimalist take the lead carrying on the Stoic tradition. The ancients may have had insights about some things, but it's possible for a philosopher to be right about those things, but wrong about how it all hangs together. Every systematic philosopher thinks it all has to come as a complete package, but they are not always right. Some parts of systematic programs are detachable without significant loss. (Consider, simply, the fact that arguments from poverty of the stimulus can establish epistemic nativism without a metaphysics of abstract objects, contrary to Plato's views on the matter; or consider the fact that one can

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be moved by Hegel's 'sense certainty' argument against empiricism without also being committed to Absolute Idealism, contrary to Hegel's announcement of the implication.)

A further topic of scholarly reflection is the relevance of the Stoic program to contemporary questions – how can a philosophical system from the ancient world inform us in the 21ˢᵗ century? In this regard, we've seen the case that Stoicism offers philosophical resources for accounts of autonomy that are consistent with the feminist insight that relations are central to our identity. Emily McGill's essay, "*Prohairesis* and a Stoic-Inspired Feminist Autonomy" argues that Stoicism has the tools for such a cutting-edge case, using this ancient program as a resource for developments in feminist theory. William O. Stephens's essay "Stoicism and Food Ethics" draws a line of connection between the ancient material minimalist viewpoints on consumption and our contemporary challenges of managing not only our personal health but the manifold harms of the vast 'meat industrial complex.' Tristan Rogers, in "Stoic Conservatism," argues that Roman Stoicism offers a model for conservative politics that, while being neither thinly cosmopolitan nor passively communitarian, encourages virtue to emerge from within societies. Finally, Alyssa Lowery contends in "Problems and Promises of Two Stoic Big Tents" that though popular Stoicism has problems of misplaced emphasis and even moments of moral failing, it should be seen as an extension of an expansive conception of the philosophical tradition.

With this collection of essays our hope is to spur discussion of its range of topics, demonstrate the value of studying ancient Stoic philosophers alongside contemporary philosophers in the Stoic tradition, and enthuse readers about lively, competing visions of what contemporary Stoicism is and ought to be. However its specifics are conceived, it is clear that contemporary Stoicism is thriving.

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Stoic Minimalism: 'Just Enough Stoicism' for Modern Practitioners[1]

Chuck Chakrapani

Abstract: Stoic Minimalism may be described as 'just enough Stoicism.' Just enough for what? Just enough to lead the good life. Just enough to cope with the stress of modern life. Just enough to not be rattled by the constant changes that characterize the times we live in. Just enough to be resilient in the face of misfortune. Just enough to have the freedom to reject unproven or unprovable concepts.[2] In essence, Stoic Minimalism is an attempt to retain whatever is valuable in ancient Stoicism and the freedom to discard whatever is unproven, unhelpful, or incompatible with our everyday lives. For the Stoic Minimalist, Stoic ethics is a logically self-contained system in which *rationality is the principle, wisdom is the means, and happiness is the end. The purpose of this paper is to expand on this theme.*

Keywords: Stoicism, Ethics, Stoic Minimalism, Eudaimonia.

1. What Stoic Minimalism Is and what It Is not

Stoic Minimalism focuses on Stoic practice. Stoic Minimalism focuses on those aspects of Stoicism that help us live better rather than debate better. Such aspects may or may not include what is considered important from an academic perspective.

Stoic Minimalism aims to define its terms such that they are lean and rational and not unnecessarily bloated, paradoxical, vague, or all encompassing. Because ancient Stoicism developed over five centuries, and Stoics didn't agree among themselves on the meaning of many basic concepts, many concepts such as 'living in accordance with nature,' 'god,' 'virtue,' and so on have bloated or multiple meanings in Stoicism. They could mean whatever one wants them to mean, providing rich fodder for academic arguments. (If we review academic papers on

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[1] This article is an expansion and formalization of the paper I wrote a few years ago: "Stoic Minimalism: Stripping the Dead Bark off Orthodox Stoicism," *Modern Stoicism*, October 20, 2018 *(*https://modernstoicism.com/stoic-minimalism-stripping-the-dead-bark-off-orthodox-stoicism-by-chuck-chakrapani/*)*. An extended but informal version of the concepts discussed in this paper can also be found in a series of open letters exchanged between the author and CBT therapist Tim LeBon. The letters are available in a book format: *Stoicism: Cobwebs and Gems*, published by The Stoic Gym, 2021. A free ebook version is available from thestoicgym.com or academia.edu.

[2] When I say 'unproven or unprovable concepts,' I mean unproven or unprovable concepts by modern inductive and deductive logic rather than by Stoic logic which covers a larger range of topics.

Stoicism, it becomes obvious that the academic arguments still swerve around what Stoics could have meant by such terms.[3])

Stoic Minimalism is not intellectually ambitious and does not attempt to rewrite Stoic philosophy. It is modest in what it seeks to do: to clear the cobwebs surrounding ancient Stoicism and adapt it to modern sensibilities without compromising the basic principles of Stoicism. It is like renovating a property – throwing out things that are no longer or never were useful, minimizing things that may only be marginally useful, and making sure that whatever remains is strengthened, polished, and preserved.

Stoic Minimalism is not against orthodox Stoicism but holds that Stoic ethics can be understood and practiced without the help of superfluous, vague, or dated concepts. It asserts that Stoic ethics is at the core of Stoicism and it is based on reason and not revelation. It argues that, if reason underlies Stoic ethics, we should be able to derive the principles of Stoic ethics logically without having to resort to things that are unproven, unprovable, or proven wrong.

2. The Rationale for Stoic Minimalism

Stoic Minimalism is not an academic intellectual exercise. It goes to the core of Stoicism. As Martha Nussbaum says in her interview with Roger Crisp,

> [The Stoics] … thought that philosophy should be not merely theoretical, but also practical. … people should be in charge of their own critical thinking.[4]

A similar stand is taken by Pierre Hadot.

> [Stoic philosophy] is not the deposit of philosophical concepts, theories, and systems to be found in the surviving texts of Graeco-Roman antiquity, the subject matter of courses of study in the curricula of modern universities. (Hadot 2002, 127)

If we accept Nussbaum's and Hadot's views of Stoicism (as Stoic Minimalism does), what we should be really concerned more about is the relevance and application of Stoicism to modern life rather than treating it as fossilized subject matter of courses of study in academe with all the trappings and obscure arguments that accompany such treatment. As A.A. Long points out, Stoics were *proudly committed to consistency using deductive methodology* (Long 2018). We

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[3] For instance, if we search in Academia.edu for academic articles that deal with (Stoic) god, nature, or ethics, we will find papers that rival the controversies that centre around the number of angels that dance on the head of a pin such as 'Stoic soul in Stoic corpses,' 'The compulsions of Stoic assent,' 'Stoic ontology and Plato's sophist,' and 'Quasi-being in Stoic ontology,' to name a few. I don't dispute the need for such scholarly papers but just want to point out how little relevance such distinctions have for average practitioners of Stoicism who approach Stoicism to better their lives.

[4] *Martha C. Nussbaum in conversation with Roger Crisp*. https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/oxford-think-festival-10th-18th-november-2018/.

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will follow this tradition. Our eventual aim is to follow the path defined by Epictetus:

> To assent to what is true, dissent from what is false, and suspend judgment when uncertain. (*Discourses* iii.3)

In areas of uncertainty, a Stoic minimalist is free to believe whatever she chooses to, provided it doesn't contradict the basic tenets of Stoicism. In the next section, I outline a framework for these tenets.

3. A Framework for Developing Stoic Minimalism

A framework is a set of propositions that give a structure to the discussion. It outlines logical means of accepting, rejecting, or revising what constitutes Stoic Minimalism. Here are the basic propositions of Stoic Minimalism.

1. *Stoicism is a eudaimonic philosophy. Its goal is happiness.* [All Stoics]
2. *Stoicism is a rational and deductive system.* [A.A. Long 2018]
3. *There is no obligation to accept things that are neither rational nor deducible.* [Corollary of (2) above]
4. *When multiple versions of the same concept are offered, the least complicated version should be preferred.* [Loosely based on Occam's razor].
5. *Concepts that are less widely agreed upon and for which there is no direct proof should be avoided, especially if we can achieve the same results without using those concepts.* [Corollary of (4) above]
6. *Metaphysical explanations that cannot be proven one way or another should be avoided.* [Corollary of (2) above.]
7. *Stoic Minimalism does not attempt to rewrite Stoic principles. It only aims "to assent to what is true, dissent from what is false, and suspend judgment when uncertain."*
8. *When established modern science conflicts with ancient Stoicism, ancient Stoicism may be modified to reconcile the two.* However, this should be done carefully, sparingly, and only when it is absolutely necessary, because modern science itself is subject to change. There is no need to modify Stoicism every time a scientific paper is published.
9. *Ancient expression of Stoicism may be modified to conform to modern usage and idiom of the day.* [Making Stoicism relevant to a wide variety of practitioners.]

With this framework in mind, we are now ready derive modern Stoic Minimalism from ancient Stoicism.

4. Traditional Stoic Theory

Ancient Stoics believed that Stoicism consisted of three aspects.

1. Physics   How the universe is organized and run.
2. Logic   How to establish what is true.
3. Ethics   How best to live our lives.

The essence of Stoicism for a practitioner is Stoic ethics, which deals with how best to live our lives. However, according to the ancient Stoics, Stoic ethics cannot stand on its own. On the face of it the ancient schema sounds reasonable. Who could possibly object to knowing how the world works (physics) and knowing

what is true (logic) before understanding how we can apply this to live our lives? But when we specifically examine the contents of Stoic physics and Stoic logic, a different picture emerges. So, before exploring Stoic Minimalism in detail, let's review briefly the contents of Stoic physics and Stoic logic to understand if we need these two disciplines to understand and practice Stoic ethics.

5. Stoic Physics: A Brief Outline[5]

Stoic physics covers both physics (the scientific understanding of how things work) and metaphysics (the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space.) As Tad Brennan points out,

> Stoic physics… included theology, ontology, determinism, the nature of causation, as well as topics such as cosmology and the study of plants and animals. (Brennan 2015, 32)

Stoic physics is a blend of what we call physics and the ancient Stoic notions of how everything works, not necessarily based on principles of physics.

> The Stoics wanted to understand Nature because Nature taken as a whole is the greatest thing there is, and we are parts of it. (Sellars 2015)

However, wanting to understand something and actually understanding it are two different things. The Stoics might have thought that they had identified the foundation of Stoic ethics. But did they? Before concluding one way or another, let's quickly review what the Stoic physics says.

5.1 Creation of universe

Our world has a starting point. Before that, only the perfection of Zeus (God or Reason) existed. Zeus or Reason is corporeal, and it is continuous in space. In the beginning, everything else was inert. Zeus pervaded through inert matter and created the living body and the cosmos. Creation started when divine fire condensed into a liquid. This liquid was partly vaporized and partly condensed into the earth, while the fire continued to exist. The fire has been the source of all objects and all changes to come. The principles inherent in fire drove the creation and development of our world.

5.2 The basis of rationality

We are influenced by two principles: active and passive. These two principles are based on four elements: Fire, Air, Earth, and Water. Air and Fire are light elements dominated by an active principle. Earth and Water are heavy elements dominated

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[5] This summary of Stoic physics is not based on a single source but on several sources I have consulted over the years. They include Sambursky (1959), Gaca (2000), Wiegardt (2009) White (2003), and Hahm (1977).

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by a passive principle. When we are influenced more by an active principle, we are rational and divine; when influenced by a passive principle more, we are less so.

The world is an interaction between the active principle (fire, air, or pneuma) and the passive principle. They constitute a dynamic continuum, fluid and in flux with no independent part. There is no void in the cosmos. It begins only at the edge of the cosmos.

5.3 Causal determinism and the nature of the soul

After having created the cosmos, Zeus set in motion an inexorable causal chain of events. So, all events in the course of history are connected, each cause producing an effect which causes the next effect.

The human soul consists of eight streams: five senses and three faculties (reproduction, speech, and command). All our cognition takes place in our command center. Command faculty controls the remaining seven streams of the human soul. It is a two-way street from the center to the surface and back. We are nurtured by Eros, the God of Love, the creative force. It unifies the opposites, bringing active and passive principles together (as noted by Gaca 2002 and Weigardt 2009). Life is created, nurtured, and reproduced through Love and it is as important as eating, resting, sleeping, and other important activities. As a rational being, one can experience love without attachment to any particular person, place, or thing.

Death occurs when the soul loosens its tension and separates from the human body. Even though the active and passive principles are thoroughly intertwined, they retain their unique properties and separate at death. The soul then joins with the 'World Soul.' In Stoic physics, there is no reward or punishment after death. There is no heaven, no hell. In fact, there's no after-life.

5.4 Hierarchy of beings

The entire cosmos is a rational animal but there is a hierarchy. The hierarchy is determined by the nature of the *pneuma* (divine breath) that shaped each layer.

- God has perfect logos and therefore he is on the top of the Stoic hierarchy.
- Humans come next. They have logos.
- Then come non-rational animals. They can perceive.
- Plants come fourth. They neither think nor perceive but they respond to their environment.
- All non-living stuff is inert and therefore at the bottom of the hierarchy.

6. Do We Need Stoic Physics?

As we discussed earlier, Stoic physics is deeply into metaphysics speculating on the origin, the development, and the ending of the universe and the individual.

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Chuck Chakrapani

Many modern Stoics – probably the majority – don't consider Stoic physics relevant. But there are others who still do. Let's briefly review the assertions of Stoic physics and see if they bear any relevance to the practice of Stoicism now.

The issue of the relevance of Stoic physics to Stoic ethics hinges on two questions:

1. Does what Stoic physics says correspond to the principles of modern physics?

2. If it does, does it make any difference at all to our understanding of Stoic ethics?

The latter question is the more important one because if Stoic physics has no bearing on Stoic ethics, then it would make little difference whether its principles are true and whether modern physics confirms it. So, let's look at the second question: Does Stoic physics have any bearing on Stoic ethics?

6.1 Do the principles of Stoic physics affect Stoic ethics?

Stoic physics asserts our universe begins and ends with fire. Let's examine the implications of the universe beginning and ending with water instead of fire. Would it have any bearing on Stoic ethics? There's nothing in our Stoic ethics – the principle of dichotomy, living in accordance with nature, living a virtuous life – that depends on how the universe began or will end.

Stoic physics informs us that we are rational when dominated by an active principle, such as fire or air. As with the previous one, we cannot prove this proposition either and, even if we could, it has no bearing on Stoic ethics.

Stoic physics says that the human soul consists of eight streams: five senses and three faculties. If the human soul is the same as our senses and faculties, does Stoicism accept an abstract notion of a soul? If the human soul is more than our senses and faculties, how is it defined and how does it relate to Stoic ethics?

Stoic physics believes that we are nurtured by Eros, the God of Love. We cannot prove this. Whether it is true or not, Stoic ethics will work equally well.

Stoic physics conceives of the entire cosmos as a rational animal with a hierarchy (God at the very top and non-living beings at the very bottom.) Again, this has no bearing on Stoic ethics. Even if the entire universe is an unconscious jumble of atoms, Stoic ethics would still work. As we shall soon see, even the Stoics who believed in Stoic physics such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius acknowledged this. We all assume some sort of rational world (such as the sun rising in the morning, seasons changing) which is broadly governed by cause and effect (such as gravity pulling things down, fire burning things, and so on). But there is no reason to view the entire cosmos as a rational animal.

Stoic physics views death as the soul loosening its tension and separating from the human body. If the human soul is no more than our senses and faculties, then this proposition has nothing to contribute to our understanding of death, since it has nothing to say as to why the tension between human body and soul is loosened.

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As we can see, there is nothing in the basic principles of Stoic physics that contributes to our understanding of Stoic ethics. We will return to this later to discuss more topics arising out of Stoic physics.

6.2 Evaluating the argument for Stoic physics

It is not just ancient Stoics such as Chrysippus and Cleanthes who believed that Stoic physics provided the foundation for Stoic ethics. Some modern scholars also believe it. For example, Pierre Hadot, an influential modern Stoic scholar and an ordained priest, believes that the discipline of assent can be derived from Stoic physics (1998). Some academics such as Massimo Pigliucci (2017) accept this assertion presumably under the assumption that Hadot's derivation is strictly based on logic. But Hadot's derivation is not based on formal logic. Rather it is an assumed connection.

From a strictly logical perspective though, if A can be derived from B, it does not follow that B is indispensable for deriving A; it may simply be one of the many antecedents from which it can be derived. It could also be a non-causal connection. Therefore, to demonstrate that Stoic physics is needed for Stoic ethics, one has to demonstrate not just that Stoic ethics can be derived from Stoic physics but also that Stoic ethics cannot be derived without Stoic physics. *To my knowledge, Stoic scholars haven't demonstrated that Stoic ethics can be derived from Stoic physics and ONLY from Stoic physics.* Without such a demonstration, Stoic physics cannot be considered the foundation of Stoic ethics. As a matter of fact, Stoic scholar Julia Annas points out that Stoic ethics can stand on its own two feet without having to be propped up by Stoic physics.

> I don't believe that we are under any obligation to conform our use of the term 'Stoic ethics' to the ethical part of philosophy as understood by the Stoics themselves. I am more comfortable using Stoic ethics as an independent area of Stoic inquiry that does not in any way depend on Stoic physics for its existence. (Annas 2014, 330)

A.A. Long, one of the most respected modern Stoic scholars, maintains that Stoic physics is foundational, and "Stoic ethics should be understood in terms of Stoic physics."(Long 2018, 23) And yet, he goes on, as Julia Annas points out,

> [T]o discuss impulse, emotion, virtue, and indifferents and the other ethical topics we find in the ancient sources and do so without once bringing in pneuma or the cosmos, indeed often locating Stoic understanding of these topics in engagement with Socratic and other traditions of ethical thinking. (Annas 2014, 215)

It is tempting to believe that Stoicism derives its ethics from a comprehensive understanding of the universe. But, so far as I can see, Stoic ethics is self-contained and can be derived from self-evident principles, as A.A. Long (2018) himself appears to have done. It can be treated as any other branch of social science. As Julia Annas contends this is exactly what even those who believe

is Stoic physics often end up doing. In any case, there is nothing new or revolutionary about focusing our attention on Stoic ethics to the exclusion of Stoic physics and Stoic logic. As Brad Inwood points out, **"**The narrow focus on ethical improvement is also an authentic component of ancient Stoicism." (2018, 106)

6.3 Stoic physics in its historical context

The rejection of Stoic physics, especially for a practitioner, is not a modern revisionist idea. Almost as soon as it was proposed by Zeno, one of his students, Aristo(n) of Chios challenged it. Aristo wanted to discard Stoic physics saying that Stoic physics "was beyond our reach" (Diogenes Laertius 7.161). Cleanthes stood against this view. Although Cleanthes' view on Stoic physics prevailed, Aristo continued to be influential for centuries to come. Some scholars believe that it was the writings of Aristo that finally transformed the 25-year-old Marcus Aurelius into a full-fledged philosopher, as evidenced in his letter to his rhetoric teacher Marcus Fronto (see Haines 1919, 218 and Richlin 2006, 142).

The acceptance of ethics as the sole purpose of philosophy goes all the way back to the Cynics, who greatly inspired Stoicism. The Stoic philosopher Posidonius of the middle Stoa did not reject Stoic physics or logic, and yet he "clearly treated ethics as the ultimate point of philosophy" (Inwood 2018, 36). The last undisputed scholarch of Stoicism, Panaetius, ignored Chrysippus and rejected the notion of a phoenix cosmos (Holowchak 2008).[6]

Later Stoics such as Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca did not explicitly reject Stoic metaphysics but gave it less prominence. They went out of their way to state explicitly (although not frequently) that many of these theoretical topics may be superfluous. For example, this quote with reference to metaphysical questions is attributed to Epictetus:

> What do I care whether matter is made up of atoms, indivisibles, or fire and earth?... Questions beyond our ken we should ignore, since the human mind may be unable to grasp them. However easily one assumes they can be understood, what's to be gained by understanding them in any case? It must be said, I think, that those who make such matters an essential part of a philosopher's knowledge are creating unwanted difficulties. (Fragment 1)

Marcus Aurelius expresses a similar view in several passages in *Meditations, emphasizing* that Stoic principles will work even if we don't accept Stoic metaphysics. For example,

> Either all things spring from one intelligent source and form a single body (and the part should accept the actions of the whole) or there are only atoms, joining and splitting forever, and nothing else. So why feel anxiety? (*Meditations* 9.39)

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[6] Panaetius did not reject Stoic physics completely but did not accept Chrysippus' version of it. What is of relevance here is that no matter who believed which version of Stoic physics, it made zero difference to Stoic ethics.

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Musonius Rufus also talked in general against the multiplicity of concepts and argued for a form of Stoic Minimalism.

> … nor is there any need that pupils should try to master all this current mass of precepts on which we see our sophists pride themselves; they are enough to consume a whole life-time. (Lecture 11)

Neither do all modern Stoics believe that Stoic physics relevant to Stoic ethics. For instance, Julia Annas (2014) has this to say about the (non-existent) relationship between Stoic physics and Stoic ethics.

> We find no texts in which virtue, impulse, and the like are derived from Stoic physics. (315)

Not just that. She goes a step further and concludes that

> We have no support for the claim that Stoic ethics can only be understood in terms of the concepts of Stoic physics. (315)

As we see from this historical account Stoic physics is not a universally accepted part of Stoicism, ancient or modern.

7. Causal Determinism

As we noted earlier, Stoics were causal determinists. Who can disagree with the cause-and-effect chain? Our entire learning is based on finding causes for things that happen. Even children understand the relationship between cause and effect. But strict causal determinism poses a dilemma. If there is a strict causal chain from the time things were set in motion, then it can't be interrupted. Presumably, the first cause, whatever it may be, had decided the rest of history. If someone apparently interrupts it, that interruption itself has to be the effect of an earlier cause. Even though you may think that you took it upon yourself to interrupt it, you did not. You are helplessly carrying out what is in fact your part in the causal link.

7.1 *The lazy argument and Chrysippus' reply*

So, it would seem that everything is predetermined. If everything is predetermined, what need is there for us to act? Why should we bother to go to a doctor when we are ill? Why should we take any responsibility for our actions? Why should we be virtuous? If we are immoral, that is predetermined. If we are not virtuous, that is predetermined too. So where is individual responsibility in all this and why should we bother to study Stoicism or any other philosophy for that matter? This argument is called the lazy argument. One may call it a 'lazy' argument, but as we will see, it is not a stupid one.

In an attempt to counter this 'lazy' argument, Chrysippus introduced a rather clever position known as *compatibilism*. It is based on the concept that there are two types of causes: *internal* and *external (*Cicero, *On Fate* 28.9*).*

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The *external* cause (for example, that you fall ill) may be predetermined, but the *internal* cause (your decision to go to the doctor) is generated by you. Another person, depending on *his or her* personality may have decided differently. Thus, both causal determinism and your freedom/responsibility are both preserved. You are free to act, even though everything is predetermined.

To explain compatibilism Chrysippus introduced a rather disingenuous analogy. Suppose there is a cone and a cylinder, each standing on end motionless. Even if it is predetermined that both would be pushed, they don't respond the same way. When a cylinder is pushed (an *external* act) and falls over, it rolls, compatible with its *internal* nature; when a cone is pushed and tips over, it spins, compatible with *its* internal nature. So, although the universe (the external cause) is deterministic, the individual (the internal cause) is free to make her choice and choose what is compatible with her nature. Suddenly, everything that is predetermined can be overruled and depending on what an individual decides to do (the internal cause), the course of events can be changed forever.

But wait a minute. Who determined my nature that is the cause of my internal decision? Surely, it couldn't have been me because I myself am a unit in the causal chain and my nature is a consequence of other causes. Who instilled in Donald Trump his potential responses and, in Mother Teresa, her potential responses? Who gave the cone the attributes of a cone and the cylinder the attributes of a cylinder? Since cones cannot choose to roll and cylinders cannot choose to spin*, they simply do not have a choice.* Marcus Aurelius reasons similarly: "A cylinder cannot move at will" (*Meditations* 10.33). We are back to hard determinism. The apparent freedom of cones to spin and cylinders to roll is an illusion. What they could possibly do when pushed is fully determined long before they were ever pushed. As Tad Brennan puts it, compatibilism is an unstable and unsatisfying compromise,

> ...the doctrine that Fate causes but Fate does not necessitate turns out to be an unstable and unsatisfying sort of compromise. (Brennan 2005, 278)

Stoic determinism suffers from the same shortcomings as the other aspects of Stoic physics – trying to answer unanswerable questions and then trying to justify them by logical-sounding arguments that don't add up.

7.3 Can we resolve this?

I believe that this is an unresolvable issue like the existence of God. I prefer to be an agnostic on unresolvable issues. I don't want to accept *any* answer because I cannot produce *the correct* answer. The foundations of Stoic ethics are logical and empirical. To claim that Stoic ethics needs the support of Stoic physics in any shape or form is a purely academic exercise and has no foundation in fact.

Academic credentials are not proof. Endlessly parsing and guessing what secondary sources might have meant is not proof. Belief is not proof. Obscure arguments are not proof. Tenuous connections are not proof.

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Evidence, at least in my view, is what stands up to logical scrutiny and empirical observations that can be proved, disproved, or modified.

As I have been saying, there is no evidence whatsoever that any aspect of Stoic ethics needs the support Stoic physics to be proven true. Not even a little. There is no evidence whatsoever to the claim that we need Stoic physics to understand Stoic ethics. Not even a little.

Let me conclude this section with these two earlier quotes from Julia Annas (2014), which are unequivocal and unambiguous.

> We find no texts in which virtue, impulse, and the like are derived from Stoic physics. (315)

> We have no support for the claim that Stoic ethics can only be understood in terms of the concepts of Stoic physics. (315)

8. Academic Contention

Of course, there is the academic contention that we *need* Stoic physics and Stoic logic because they provide the foundation for Stoicism.[7] Without necessarily challenging that point of view, I would like to relate my personal experience[8] as a practitioner. While I have been familiar with Stoicism for decades, I had not read much about Stoic physics and Stoic logic until the past few years. After studying Stoic physics more closely (including a full-length book on Stoic physics by Sambursky 2016) I can confidently say my understanding of Stoic ethics has not increased even marginally after my exposure to Stoic physics.

Stoic ethics has been found useful in healing professions. Stoic ethics has also been acknowledged as the source of some models of psychotherapy, especially Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive and Behavior Therapy (REBT). It is also used by the US military to build discipline as well as to overcome trauma. In all cases where the application of Stoic principles is the focus, Stoic physics has no role to play. I believe it is fair to say that the resurgence of Stoicism in the past decade is largely due to practitioners for whom Stoic physics and logic hold no relevance.

Because the Minimalist believes that Stoic ethics is a self-contained system that can be built on verifiable and self-evident truths (or on axioms if necessary), she avoids all religious and metaphysical explanations in preference to potentially

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[7] See for example, Massimo Pigliucci. *How to Be a Stoic*, 2018. Basing his arguments on Pierre Hadot's original exposition (*The Inner Citadel*, 1998), Pigliucci makes the point that discipline of desire and the virtues that relate to them (courage and temperance) are based on Stoic physics. Even if this is true, it does not follow that Stoic ethics can *only* be derived from Stoic physics and Stoic logic, and not in any other way. *A link between two concepts, even it is a sufficient condition, cannot be assumed be a necessary condition.*

[8] I am aware that this is just my personal experience. While personal experience is not proof, it nevertheless supports the argument that Stoic physics is not needed to understand Stoic ethics.

provable propositions. (A Stoic Minimalist, however, is not necessarily against religion or metaphysics.)

9. Stoic Logic: A Brief Outline

Stoic logic is broader in scope than the term logic implies in modern usage. While ancient Stoic logic included what we understand by logic today (a systematic study of the valid rules of inference), it included many other things including epistemology, such as development of reasoning in human beings.

Stoic logic is the study of *logos* and it includes speech and reason. It has two aspects: broad and narrow. The broad aspect deals with what makes us rational and the narrow aspect deals with proper ways to assess the true value of what is presented to us (sayables and meanings). In modern usage, the word 'logic 'refers to the narrow aspect.

Human beings are born with several preconceptions and an innate structure. But the mind at birth has no conceptual content. It is a blank slate, *tabula rasa*. Different stimuli – some real, some imaginary – make *impressions* on the soul. Stored impressions become memories. These memories are what we call *experience*. Memories are organized into categories to form common notions.

We judge the truth and falsity of new impressions based on our experience with the collection of past (similar) impressions. Such *judgments* are called reason. We assent to what appears true to us, dissent to what appears false to us. We withhold assent when we don't have a common notion to guide us.

Only human beings are capable of thought, and this is because we are capable of rationality. Other animals are not capable of rationality. Thought is mediated by language and has three aspects:

1. The signifiers (the spoken word, vocal or subvocal);
2. The signified (the meaning of that word); and
3. The denotation (the object referred to by the word).

Syllogisms are concerned with valid forms of deductive reasoning. Stoic logic went beyond simple syllogisms and included modal and propositional logic. Stoic contributions to logic are still considered very sophisticated.

10. Do We Need Stoic Logic?

When we ask the question "do we need Stoic logic?", we are *not* asking whether Stoic logic is useful or not. We are asking if we need Stoic logic to understand Stoic ethics. As we saw, Stoic logic broadly deals with two aspects: how our reasoning develops and what the rules of valid arguments are. The Stoic theory of how our reasoning develops may or may not be correct. Either way it has no implications for Stoic ethics. Stoic logic pertaining to deductive reasoning (syllogisms), modal, and propositional logic have been found to be valid and useful. However, we don't need the help of complex Stoic logic to understand Stoic ethics. In fact, the logic

that one implicitly uses in studying *any* subject such as natural sciences, social sciences, architecture, geology, or mathematics is sufficient to understand Stoic ethics.

No subject – be it science, mathematics, psychology, or any other – can be understood without some kind of logical reasoning. This is true of Stoic ethics as well. However, no special study of Stoic logic is needed to understand Stoic ethics any more than is needed to understand any other subject. While Stoic logic has contributed a lot to inductive and deductive reasoning, one has no need to study Stoic logic to understand and practice Stoic ethics. A vast majority of modern Stoics are not exposed to Stoic logic at all. An Amazon search yields no more than 3 books on Stoic logic, all of them obscure. Even general books on Stoicism do not pay much attention to Stoic logic. It is interesting to note that none of the popular modern Stoic books devote even a chapter to explaining what Stoic logic is even as they emphasize its importance.[9]

Logic is a very useful subject in its own right and the Stoic contribution to logic is substantial. But Stoic logic is not a prerequisite for understanding Stoic ethics.

11. Clarifying the Concepts: God, Nature, Virtue, and Ethics

Concepts like God, virtue, and ethics have religious overtones. However, many religions are largely based on faith while Stoicism is based on reason. So, what exactly did the Stoics mean by these concepts? This is an important question because demonstrating the logical basis of Stoic ethics would make it accessible to a wide variety of practitioners.

11.1 God in Stoicism

A generally accepted view is that the Stoics were pantheists and equated God with Nature or the universe, which is the totality of everything. Yet there are passages in Stoic literature that conceive of God not just as Nature, but a separate being with intent. Here is an example:

> How else could it come about so regularly … when he [god] tells plants to flower they flower, and to bud, they bud, and bear fruit, they bear it, and to bring their fruit to ripeness, it ripens … how else could it be that the moon waxes and wanes and the sun approaches and recedes… (*Discourses* I.14.3)

This passage gives the impression that God and Nature are not the same but God is a separate entity instructing Nature how to act. This impression is strengthened by Epictetus' assertion,

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[9] See for example, see recent books by Pigliucci (2017), William Irvine (2019), and Donald Robertson (2018) on Stoicism.

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> So, a wise and good man...submits his mind to him [God] who administers the universe (*Discourses* I.12.4)

God is not the universe, but someone who 'administers it.' Seneca also seemed to have in mind a separate entity that controls Nature:

> Seneca presents Nature as being under the control of a deity (Sellars 2019, 24).

It is possible other Stoics believed that the universe or Nature is identical with God. It is unclear whether the Stoics had an agreed upon view of God.

Nevertheless, we will go along with the view expressed by the modern Stoic scholar Christopher Gill (1995) who contends that God in Stoicism stands for the "inherent rationality and order" (xxi) of the universe. If we assume that most Stoics were indeed pantheists and equated God with the totality of Nature, the term God can be interpreted as 'the way things are' or 'the way things work.' The Stoic Minimalist accepts this definition of the Stoic God. We *don't have to* know why Nature, or the universe, works the way it does. Stoicism is a way of facing up to whatever happens. Therefore, to a Minimalist, it matters little whether a Stoic believes in God or is an atheist or is an agnostic. It has no bearing on the practice of Stoicism.

11.2 Ethics in Stoicism

Ethics, as we understand the word now, relates to moral right and wrong. Ethics is derived from the objectives of the system. Thus, for example, business ethics may be based on different principles compared to religious ethics. What then is Stoic ethics? Because Stoicism is a eudaimonic philosophy and its goal is eudaimonia (happiness or the good life, however one defines it), to a Stoic Minimalist whatever contributes to eudaimonia is ethical; whatever stands in the way of eudaemonia is unethical. The rest are indifferent.

11.3 Virtue in Stoicism

As with ethics, 'virtue' also has moral and religious overtones. What did ancient Stoics mean by virtue? Here we will again turn to Christopher Gill, "virtue is a form of expertise or skill, knowledge of how to live well" (2015). Virtue is wisdom and it has four components to it: Practical wisdom (knowing what is good and what is bad and what is neither), moderation (knowing what to select and what not to select), courage (knowing what to fear and what not to fear), and justice (knowing how to apportion things properly).[10]

To a Stoic Minimalist, virtue is a special skill that is needed to achieve eudaemonia. It is the perfection of wisdom, which has four aspects: practical wisdom, moderation, courage, and justice.

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[10] The definitions of virtues are based on Arius Didymus's conceptualization.

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11.4 'Living in accordance with Nature' in Stoicism

One of the fundamental themes in Stoicism is 'living according with Nature.' But what does this mean to a practitioner? Living according to Nature can be seen as reconciling with Nature.

Hierocles suggested that there are two main classes of reconciliation: internal and external. Internal reconciliation occurs when there is no conflict between us and our Nature (Ramelli 2009). External reconciliation occurs when there is no conflict between us and Nature that is external. A.A. Long calls these *human nature* and *external nature* (2018).

What is human Nature? Of all the animals, humans are the only ones who are endowed with reason. Human nature is rationality. So, we live in accordance with our internal nature when we live rationally. We try to exert control only on things we have control over.

What is 'external' Nature? It is what is presented to us, what we are faced with every minute of every day. It is reality itself. So, we live in accordance with our external nature when we accept reality as presented to us. We accept what is not under our control.

So, to a Stoic Minimalist, living according to Nature means living rationally (living according to human Nature) and not struggling against reality, no matter what it is (living according to external Nature.) We control what we can but don't struggle against what we cannot.

11.5 Concepts that are time- and context-specific

We often tend to judge the past with the wisdom of the present. We fail to take into account that what was seen as neutral or progressive at one time may be seen as offensive at some other time. We may consider ourselves progressive today but there is no guarantee that we will be so seen by generations to come.

In particular, there are passages (although not many) in Stoic literature which would perhaps be considered sexist if we judged them by present day sensibilities. Does it make Stoicism sexist? Stoics by and large didn't fight against slavery. Does that mean that Stoicism approved of slavery? Some Stoics believed in omens. Does that mean that Stoicism is superstitious?

Since Stoic philosophy does not say anything specific about these things, it is more likely that such beliefs were the beliefs of the time with no particular relevance to Stoic philosophy in general. This means that a Stoic Minimalist ignores time- and context-specific ideas that cannot be shown to be a part of Stoic philosophy.

12. Interim Summary

So far we have discussed

- Why Stoic physics does not have any relevance to a practitioner of Stoic ethics and so can be safely ignored;

- Why Stoic logic, useful by itself as it may be, is not needed to follow Stoic ethics;

- How terms such as God, virtue, ethics, and Nature can be understood and used without relying on metaphysical explanation; and

- Why we should ignore time- and context-specific references.

We are now left with only Stoic ethics without metaphysical explanations and without incidental concepts that are not relevant to our times. We call this Stoic Minimalism, and I outline its principles in the next section.

13. The Principles of Stoic Minimalism

Here then are the basic principles of Stoic Minimalism:

1. **Happiness may be defined as a life that flows smoothly, without friction.**

2. **Avoiding friction means being in harmony with Nature. In concrete terms this means that we should be rational (our Nature) and not struggle against reality (external Nature).**

3. **We are not bothered by events but by our thoughts about them. By managing our thoughts, we can cease to be bothered by events.**

4. **The basic principle of Stoicism is 'Some things are up to us and others are not'.** This first principle – that we can achieve happiness or eudaimonia[11] by confining our thoughts and actions to things under our control ('up to us') and ignoring what are not ('not up to us') – contains the wisdom needed to achieve happiness and is fundamental to Stoic ethics. However, this principle by itself is not enough to achieve the good life.

5. **To use the basic principle correctly, we need wisdom. Wisdom is made up of four cardinal virtues.** Even if we get rid of our anxieties and worries using the basic principle, it is quite possible that our decisions with regard to what is under our control could go wrong. For example, whether to control your anger or not is under your control. But if you choose to be angry, it may not lead to happiness. Therefore, the corollary to the third principle is that, to achieve excellence as conceived by Stoicism, we need special knowledge in four different areas: self, others, our desires, and our aversions. The special knowledge we need is *practical wisdom* (in all our dealings), *justice* (in dealing with others), *moderation* (in dealing with our desires), and *courage* (in dealing with our aversions). These four virtues are aspects of wisdom.

For the Stoic Minimalist, Stoic ethics is a logically self-contained system in which *rationality is the principle, wisdom is the means, and happiness is the*

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[11] *Eudaimonia* is a single concept with multiple shades of meaning. For example, when Socrates, Nelson Mandela, and Gandhi were thrown in prison, they had means of not being imprisoned in the first place or means of getting out. They chose not to because doing so would have put them in conflict with their nature and made them unhappy. In fact, Gandhi told the judge that he had no option but to send him to jail, which he was willing to accept completely, if the judge believed the law to be just. So, what to an outsider is an unflourishing life was indeed a flourishing one for them. They did not consider a preferred indifferent as the source of their happiness.

end. Anyone who accepts this definition, in my opinion, is a Stoic irrespective of whether they agree or disagree with anything else about Stoicism.

14. Conclusion

Any rational idea should be subject to refutation. How then can we refute Stoic principles if we claim that Stoicism is a rational system? The answer is simple. The refutation of any of the Stoic ethical principles can be done in the same way as it is done in other disciplines. For example, Stoicism holds that we have total control of our inner lives (Stoic dichotomy). What if science proves that while this is mostly true, there are parts of our inner lives over which we have no control? We just accept this and move the line between what we can or cannot control. This does not have to be a major issue. It does not call for a major rewrite of the basic principle. As I suggested earlier, this can be done, but it has to be done sparingly, carefully, and only when it is absolutely necessary. There is no need to revise Stoic ethics to conform to the latest scientific finding, which may itself change as we are exposed to more research.

There is a reason why the philosophy that provided solace to a Greek slave and a Roman Emperor 2000 years ago continues to provide solace to modern people from various walks of life (such as James Stockdale, Rhonda Cornum of the US military, presidents of many countries, corporate CEOs, modern psychotherapists, and hundreds of thousands of modern adherents to Stoicism.) The underlying philosophy of Stoicism works and it works well, even without having to conform to the latest scientific findings.

While a rational philosophy of life cannot be totally at odds with science, it would be a mistake to continually update Stoicism to conform to the latest research findings. Philosophy is not science and it does not have to change every time there is a new scientific insight. Science is always in a state of flux, while philosophy seeks relatively enduring truths and ideas. There are many ideas on which scientists themselves don't agree. Many scientific findings are overturned by subsequent research. It is a belief of Stoic Minimalism that the core concepts of Stoicism should be tampered with lightly, if at all.

By clearing the cobwebs of Stoic physics, metaphysics, and religiosity along with "its paradoxes, and the willful misuse of language, ... its extravagance," (Stock 1908, 1), and by paying greater attention to the differences in time, changes in language and culture over the past 23 centuries since Stoicism was first propounded, we come upon a timeless philosophy, simple, yet profound. This is Stoic Minimalism.

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Stoic Ethical Theory: How Much is Enough?

Christopher Gill

Abstract: How much theory is enough for a complete account of ancient Stoic ethics and for modern life-guidance? Stoic ethics was presented either purely in its own terms or combined with the idea of human or universal nature (or both). Although the combination of ethical theory with human and universal nature provides the most complete account, each of these modes of presentation was regarded as valid and can provide modern life-guidance.

Keywords: ethics, human, nature, Stoic, worldview.

Introduction

The question posed in my title has two possible meanings. One is: how much Stoic theory do we need to gain the benefits of Stoic life-guidance under modern conditions? The second is: how far do we have to refer to the Stoic worldview to provide an adequate account of Stoic ethical theory? Does Stoic ethical theory need to include reference to the Stoic worldview in order to be complete, and does the ethical theory depend conceptually on this worldview?

This has been a highly controversial question in modern philosophical responses to Stoicism. Lawrence Becker, for instance, assumed that ancient Stoic ethics depended on its worldview and argued that, since we now do not share this worldview, a contemporary version of Stoicism needs to be reconceived and grounded on a credible picture of human, rather than cosmic, nature. His view, that Stoic ethics needs to be reformed in this way has been adopted by other recent writers, including those who are engaged, unlike Becker, in presenting Stoic ethical principles as the basis of life-guidance.[1] On the other hand, Kai Whiting has argued that we have our own, contemporary, reasons for adopting a version of the Stoic worldview as well as Stoic ethical principles. He maintains that the combination of Stoic principles and a Stoic-type worldview can help us to construct a robust ethical basis to support a sense of environmental responsibility and effective environmental action.[2] These discussions have centered on the question how contemporary thinkers should use Stoic ideas for modern purposes. There is a parallel debate among scholars of ancient philosophy about how to reconstruct and interpret the original Stoic view on this question. Some scholars, including A. A. Long, have presented Stoic ethics as grounded, conceptually, on the Stoic worldview. Others, including Julia Annas, have questioned this supposition, and have pointed to evidence that Stoic ethical principles were sometimes

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[1] Becker 2017, 3-6, and ch. 5; Pigliucci 2017, ch. 6; Stankiewicz 2020, x, and 263-271.
[2] Whiting and Konstantakos 2019, 193.

presented independently, without reference to the worldview, or, alternatively, linked with ideas of human nature. This interpretative debate has been quite intense and has given rise to intermediate and nuanced versions of these positions.[3] These two kinds of debate (about the modern uses of Stoic ideas and about the precise character of the ancient Stoic theory) amount to two ways of asking, 'how much is enough,' in the second sense of this question.

Here, I aim to bring closer together these two kinds of dialogue, about the modern significance of Stoic ideas and about the scope and character of ancient Stoic ethical thinking. I also explore the implications of the second question posed (how far does Stoic ethical theory depend on their worldview?) for the first question (how much ethical theory is needed for modern life-guidance?). After preliminary comments on the ancient evidence for Stoic ethics, I give an overview of Stoic ethical ideas. I then turn to the question of the relationship between these ethical ideas and Stoic thinking on nature, in various senses, including their worldview. Subsequently, I discuss the implications of these ancient ideas for the modern use of Stoic ethical thinking, including its use for life-guidance. In these ways, I aim to offer an answer to the question 'how much is enough,' in both the senses outlined here.

1. Core Stoic Ethical Ideas

Before discussing the relationship between Stoic ethical ideas and their thinking on nature, I need to clarify what ethical ideas I have in mind, as I do shortly. However, this raises a preliminary question: what is the ancient evidence for these ideas? Those approaching Stoic ethics for modern purposes, especially for life-guidance, often focus on the writings of the Roman Imperial Stoic thinkers, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, which survive largely intact and are readily available in modern translations. However, these thinkers did not aim to present their own independent ideas but to convey, in distinctive ways, the philosophical teachings developed by a series of Hellenistic thinkers, from Zeno onwards. The writings of the Hellenistic Stoics have been largely lost. However, the best guide to their doctrines is usually taken by scholars to be certain ancient summaries, taken together with discussions of their ideas by Cicero, a highly informed thinker and writer, though not a Stoic, and by Seneca. In ethics, the most important works are Cicero's *On Ends* Book Three and two summaries by late writers of handbooks, Diogenes Laertius and Stobaeus, all of which seem to be firmly based on Hellenistic sources. These constitute the primary evidence for Stoic ethics, which can be supplemented by other discussions of Stoic theory by Cicero and Seneca, and also by the more informally presented works of Epictetus and Marcus, in so

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[3] See Long 1996, ch. 6; Annas 1993, ch. 4; Annas 2007, 58-87; Salles 2009, chs. 7-8. For reviews of the debate, see Gill 2006, 145-166; Brüllman 2015; Becker 2017, 75-88.

far as they are consistent with the other evidence.[4] The following outline of Stoic ethical ideas is based on this ancient evidence; the same goes for the subsequent discussion of Stoic ideas about ethics and nature.[5]

The idea seen in antiquity as most characteristic of the Stoic ethical position is that virtue forms the sole basis for happiness. This was, typically, contrasted with the view, derived from Aristotle, that happiness depends on the combination of virtue and what are sometimes called 'bodily and external goods,' such as one's own health and prosperity and that of one's family and friends.[6] This idea, along with the contrast with Aristotelian-type views, is central to Cicero's discussion of Stoic ethics in *On Ends* Book Three, one of the three main ancient summaries of Stoic ethical ideas, and is also accentuated in the other two.[7] This idea goes along with another, which is presented in ancient sources as a fundamental Stoic theme. Things such as health and prosperity, which are presented by Aristotle as 'good things,' alongside virtue, are characterized as 'indifferents' or 'matters of indifference' by the Stoics, when compared with virtue. This does not mean that such things have no value at all. For most Stoics at least, things such as health have a real or 'natural' value and are things that human beings naturally prefer to have rather than not; in their terms, they are 'preferable indifferents,' by contrast with 'dispreferable indifferents' such as one's own illness and poverty and that of one's family and friends. But, if they have positive value, why do they not count as good things, like virtue, and why are they still 'indifferents,' though preferable ones? They are 'indifferents' because they do not *make the difference* between happiness and misery. Happiness and its absence do not depend on whether we have these things or not but on whether we have and exercise the virtues (or not), and whether we 'make good (or bad) use' of these things, as the Stoics put it.[8]

These ideas may seem strange and unconvincing if we assume the standard English meanings of these terms. The virtues are often understood in modern English as *moral* virtues, generally taken to mean virtues which benefit other people and not ourselves. 'Happiness' is often assumed to mean a pleasurable or contented state of mind or mood. Claiming that virtue is the only basis for

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[4] For these primary sources (by Diogenes Laertius, and Stobaeus, thought to be based on Arius Didymus, and Cicero, *On Ends* 3, along with other important sources), presented continuously, see Inwood and Gerson 1997, 190-260; Inwood and Gerson 2008 (= IG in all subsequent notes), 113-205. See also Long and Sedley 1987 (=LS in all subsequent notes), sections 56-67. For discussion of these sources, see Schofield 2003, 233-256.

[5] For other overviews of Stoic ethical ideas, see Inwood and Donini 1999, 675-738; Sellars 2006, 107-134. See also Annas 1993, discussing Stoic ideas under different headings, e.g. "The Virtues", "Happiness".

[6] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.7-10.

[7] For translations of Cicero, *On Ends* 3, see (incomplete) IG, 151-161; also Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, trans. Annas and Woolf 2001. On the debate between Stoic and Aristotelian-type theories, e.g. that of Antiochus, see Annas 1993, 388-425; Russell 2012, chs. 5, 8.

[8] For primary sources on these topics, see LS 58 esp. 58 A-B, 61, esp. 61 A, 63, esp. 63 A. See also Vogt 2017, 183-199.

happiness, with these meanings in mind, seems strained and implausible. [9] However, the Stoics define these ideas differently, in a way that makes their claim much more intelligible, though it remains challenging. The virtues are described as forms of knowledge or expertise; the four cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, justice, and moderation or self-control), with their subdivisions, are seen as mapping the four main areas of human experience. The virtues, then, constitute forms of knowledge or skill in leading a good human life, one that benefits both oneself and the other people affected by one's life.[10] They are also, for the same reason, forms of expertise in living happily. Happiness is not conceived as a (long-term or short-term) mood or state of mind, though it carries with it a certain state of mind, marked by stability and equanimity. Happiness is seen as a form of life; the standard Stoic definitions of happiness include 'the life according to virtue' and 'the life according to nature.'[11] What sort of life constitutes happiness? It is characterized in various ways. These include a good human life, one that benefits both us and others affected by our life; and this characterization helps to show why the Stoics claim that virtue is the sole basis for happiness. Both happiness and virtue are also characterized in terms that bring out their essential similarity. The virtues enable human beings to live a life marked by a combination of rationality and sociability; and this kind of life is also seen as a happy human life.[12] The virtues are seen as constituting the best way to care for ourselves and others of our kind (other human beings); they are also conceived as constituting a form of internal structure, order, and wholeness. These same qualities are also seen as characteristic of a happy life.[13] Hence, although virtue and happiness constitute different types of entity (a form of knowledge on the one hand, and a form of life on the other), their fundamental character is the same. This helps to explain the otherwise surprising claim that virtue forms the sole basis for happiness. Virtue is a form of expertise that 'makes good use' of whatever 'indifferents' are available; and so happiness does not depend on the presence of specific 'preferable indifferents,' such as one's own health and prosperity and that of one's family and friends.[14]

These two distinctive Stoic ideas (about the relation between virtue and happiness and virtue and indifferents) are presented as core features of Stoic ethics in the ancient summaries and other writings. They are generally combined with two other distinctive Stoic ideas, about ethical development and about emotions. Stoic thinking about ethical development forms part of a broader theory

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[9] On the contrast between ancient and modern ideas of happiness, see Russell 2012, part 1.
[10] See LS 61 A, C-D, H; also Stobaeus 5b5 (IG, 127).
[11] See LS 63 A-B.
[12] See Stobaeus 5b1, 5b3, 6, 6e: see IG, 125-126, 132-133.
[13] For the idea of virtue and happiness as structure, order, and wholeness, see Diogenes Laertius 7.90, 100, Stobaeus 5b8, 5l, 11a (IG, 114, 116-117, 128, 140); Cicero *On Ends* 3.21, Cicero *On* Duties 1.98, Seneca, Letters 120.11; also Long 1996, ch. 9; Gill 2006, 150-157.
[14] See LS 58 A-B.

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of animal and human development, which is characterized as 'appropriation' (*oikeiōsis*).[15] The Stoics believe that the capacity to develop towards virtue and happiness is a natural one, in-built in all human beings, [16] and that this development can take place in any social and political context. However, they think that there are certain causes of corruption which are also in-built in human life and are reinforced by social influences; and this explains why so few people, as the Stoics believe, achieve complete virtue or 'wisdom.'[17] Hence, for the vast majority of people, the best that can be achieved is what they call 'making progress' towards virtue and happiness, a process that is ongoing and life-long.[18] Ethical development, in their view, has two main strands. One strand consists in working towards virtue and happiness, through an activity that forms part of any human life, namely 'selecting' between 'indifferents,' that is, things such as health and prosperity. The outcome of this strand consists in understanding fully the substantive difference in value between virtue and indifferents. It also consists in developing and exercising virtue, in part by selecting correctly between indifferents, and thus achieving the happy life (the 'life according to virtue'). The second strand also consists in working towards, and achieving, virtue and virtue-based happiness; but its special focus is not selection between indifferents but interpersonal and communal relationships. What is involved here is the development, in adult life, of two kinds of relationship, that is, with specific people and communities (one's family or friends, and one's own city or nation) and with the broader community of humankind. These two strands, while they can be analysed separately, are in practice interdependent and inseparable parts of a full human life.[19]

Stoic thinking on ethical development also underlies their ideas about emotions. They believe that development towards achieving virtue and happiness carries with it a substantive change in the kind of emotions one experiences. They see most human emotions (including fear, anger, intense desire, and grief) as based on mistaken judgements, specifically a certain kind of misjudgement. This is the mistaken belief that preferred indifferents, such as health and prosperity, one's own and that of one's family and friends, constitute what counts as good and determines happiness or its absence. Ethical development, progress towards virtue and happiness, by itself, brings about the removal of these misguided beliefs and emotions. In Stoic terms, it brings about 'absence of passion' (or freedom from misguided emotions); however, this does not mean the absence of all emotional states. Development also brings about 'good emotions' (such as wish, caution and

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[15] See LS 57; also Inwood 1985, ch. 6.
[16] See LS 61 K-L; also Gill 2006, 132-133, 180-182.
[17] See Graver 2007, 149-163.
[18] On progress in Stoic ethics, see Inwood and Donini 1999, 724-735.
[19] On these two strands, see Cicero, *On Ends* 3.16-22, 3.62-68; also LS 59 D, 57 F; on the two strands seen as integrated, see Cicero *On Duties* 1.11-15. On the first strand, see Gill 2006, 145-166; on the second, social, strand, see Schofield 1995, 195-205; Reydams-Schils 2005, ch. 2.

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joy), which are fully compatible with, and depend on, the kind of knowledge or expertise in living which is constituted by virtue. These emotions differ from 'passions' in their subjective effect on the person experiencing them; typically, they are not intense, overwhelming, disturbing or internally conflicted, as misguided emotions sometimes are. However, the most important difference consists in the belief-content, which reflects in turn the extent to which the person involved has or has not achieved virtue and happiness.[20]

2. And What about Nature?

I turn now to the question of the relationship between these core ethical ideas and the Stoic conception of nature, focusing, in the first instance, on the three main summaries of ethical doctrine. The first point to make is that, in these sources and others, Stoic ethics is presented in three different ways. Throughout most of the summaries, these ethical ideas are presented without much explicit reference to nature. When the ethical claims are argued for (such as the idea that happiness is based solely on virtue, or that things such as health are only 'preferred indifferents'), this is, often, without any reference to ideas about nature. However, all three summaries also incorporate some reference to nature, with variations in the extent to which the reference is explicit or implicit and is integrated or not integrated with the account of the ethical ideas.[21]

For instance, the summary in Stobaeus refers, consistently, only to human nature, in this connection, and makes virtually no reference to universal or cosmic nature.[22] One idea stressed is that human nature is, constitutively, rational and sociable; and this underlies the comments on natural human motives, on virtue, and on happiness. The virtues are presented as forms of knowledge of how to live rationally and sociably, and happiness is defined as a life 'according to nature,' meaning according to human nature. This passage is typical: "Since a human being is a rational, mortal animal, sociable by nature, [the Stoics] say that all human virtue and happiness constitute a life which is consistent and in agreement with nature."[23] This linkage between the characterization of virtue and happiness is, by implication, used to support one of the distinctive claims of Stoic ethics, namely that virtue is the sole basis of happiness. This claim depends partly on the

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[20] For primary sources, see LS 65 A-J; also Inwood 1985, ch. 5; Brennan 2003, 269-274; Graver 2007, chs. 2, 7-8.

[21] On primary sources for Stoic ethics, including the three summaries, see text to n. 4; on variations within Stoic thinking on this subject, see Annas 2007, 84-87; also Inwood 2009, 201-207.

[22] Contrast Stobaeus 6a, e (IG, 132-133, LS 63 A-B) with Diogenes Laertius 7.88-9 (IG, 114, LS 63 C) in this respect; Stobaeus 6a contains just one brief reference to universal nature. Stobaeus' summary is thought to be based on Arius Didymus, and through him, Chrysippus (Schofield 2003, 236).

[23] Stobaeus 6 (IG, 132).

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distinction between virtue and indifferents, discussed earlier.[24] But it is further supported by the presentation of virtue and happiness as sharing the same, essential, character: both, in different ways, express human nature, conceived as a combination of rationality and sociability. [25] Virtue does so as a form of knowledge and happiness does so as a form of life.[26] The Stoic philosophical move made here, of analysing ethics as, distinctively, *human* ethics can be paralleled in Aristotle, and also in some modern forms of virtue ethics, those of Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot. Interestingly, all these (ancient and modern) versions of ethics assume a rather similar conception of human nature, namely as a combination of rationality and sociability.[27] Hence, the appearance of the idea of nature, in the sense of human nature, in this summary of Stoic ethics, is readily intelligible from a philosophical standpoint.

This point, taken on its own, is relatively straightforward. Stoic thinking on the ethical significance of universal or cosmic nature is more complex and raises various kinds of questions. I begin by highlighting the main connections between the Stoic worldview and ethical doctrines, and then considering how these connections are understood in Stoic thinking. The most relevant Stoic account of their worldview comes in their theology, which falls (rather strangely from a modern standpoint) within 'physics' or philosophy of nature, conveyed in works such as Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* Book Two.[28] What is offered in such writings is a highly 'ethicized' account of nature, designed to show that the world and the universe as a whole are good.[29] Two main grounds are given for the goodness of the universe (and world). One is that the universe is characterized by rationality; and its rationality is demonstrated by the presence of structure, order, and wholeness. The regular pattern of movement of the planets in (what we call) the solar system is taken as the most obvious indicator, along with other such regular patterns (night and day, the seasons and so on) in the world.[30] The second salient feature is the providential care of the universe, and its in-built divinity, for all elements in the universe and the world. Within the world, although human beings, as constitutively rational animals, are special recipients of providential care, this care is also extended to all aspects of the natural world, including living

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[24] See text to nn. 7-8.

[25] For this set of ideas, see Stobaeus 5b1, 5b3, 5b5, 6, 6e (IG, 125-127, 132-133).

[26] For the contrast, see Stobaeus 5b5, 6a (IG, 127, 132).

[27] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7; also Hursthouse 1999, chs. 9-10; Foot 2001.

[28] For translation, see Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. Walsh 1997. See also a selection of texts in LS 54.

[29] See Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* (hereafter *NG*), 2.37-39, Diogenes Laertius 7.147 (LS 54 A); also Mansfeld 1999, 458-460.

[30] See Cicero NG 2.15, 2.43, 2.49-59, 2.154-156.

things and other natural entities, such as sea and air, which are seen as making up a cohesive whole, which has its own inherent goodness.[31]

The most obvious point of connection between this worldview and ethics comes in accounts of development, conceived as 'appropriation' (*oikeiōsis*). In Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* Book Two, nature's providential care is presented as indicated by the fact that animals, including human beings, have the bodily equipment and instinctive motives to maintain life and take care of themselves and also to procreate and care for their offspring. In effect, animals 'internalize' in this way the providential care of universal nature.[32] A similar point is made in Stoic writings on development, which fall within ethical theory: animals are presented as appropriating themselves, by maintaining life, and appropriating others of their kind, by procreating, in a way that reflects nature's appropriation of the animals themselves.[33] In other words, in animals, including human beings, the motives of care for oneself and care for others of one's kind are presented as a reflection of broader natural patterns in the world and universe that express goodness.

A second point of connection is this. In a well-known ancient quotation from the Stoic thinker Chrysippus, virtue and happiness at the human level are presented as 'harmonizing' oneself with the reason and order in-built in the universe, a passage cited early in Diogenes Laertius' summary of Stoic ethics.[34] The exact significance of this passage is not spelled out and has been variously interpreted by scholars. However, one possible meaning of the passage is that virtue and happiness, at the human level, correspond to the features taken as expressing goodness in nature as a whole.[35] These features are rationality, as shown in the structure, order, and wholeness of the universe and world, and providential care for all the elements in the universe. In Stoic ethical writings virtue and happiness are repeatedly associated with the qualities of structure, order, and wholeness. In the theory of development, the emergence of virtue and happiness is sometimes characterized in this way; also human development is presented as the realization, in a rational form, of the in-built animal motives of

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[31] On providential care for all aspects of nature, see Cicero, *NG* 2.73-153, including plants (2.83), sea and air (100-101); on special care for human beings as rational animals, see 2.154-168, especially 2.154, also 2.133. See Frede 2002, 85-117.

[32] Cicero *NG* 2.120-4, 128-129.

[33] See Diogenes Laertius 7.85 (LS 57 A(2)); Cicero, *On Ends* 3.62; on these two in-built animal motives underlying 'appropriation', see also LS 57 A-F. See also Schofield 1995, 193-199, and Klein 2016.

[34] "The virtue of the happy person and his good flow of life are just this: always doing everything on the basis of the harmony of each person's guardian spirit [= his mind] with the will of the administrator of the whole [= Zeus or the divinity in-built into universal nature]", Diogenes Laertius 7.88 (LS 63 C(4)), LS trans. modified.

[35] Chrysippus defined happiness as 'the life according to nature' in the sense of both human and universal nature: Diogenes Laertius 7.89 (LS 63 C(5)).

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care for oneself and for others of one's kind.[36] These are all features that help to make sense of the idea expressed in Chrysippus' statement that human virtue and happiness correspond, at the human level, to the best qualities of nature as a whole. This is a second connection between ethical theory and the Stoic worldview.

How did the ancient Stoics themselves conceptualize these connections? Two main types of analysis are offered in our sources. One line of thought is that core principles of ethics are, in some sense, explained by key features of the worldview; a recurrent idea is that universal nature forms the 'starting-point' (*archē*) for making sense of Stoic thinking on what is good and bad or on virtue and happiness. This statement in Cicero's *On Ends* 3 is typical:

> The starting-point for anyone who is to live in accordance with nature [that is, to achieve happiness] is the universe and its government. Moreover, one cannot make correct judgements about good and evil unless one understands the whole system of nature and indeed the life of the gods, as well as the question whether human nature matches universal nature.[37]

Comments of this kind seem to present accounts of the worldview (falling within Stoic physics or theology) as authoritative for ethics or as conceptually prior to, or more fundamental than, ethics.[38] However, this idea seems to conflict with the way in which the branches of philosophical knowledge are generally understood in Stoicism. The Stoics, while subdividing philosophical knowledge into logic (or dialectic), ethics, and physics (or philosophy of nature), also stress that, ideally, these branches of knowledge should be seen as making up an organic unity. There is no indication that any one branch is epistemologically superior to any other or authoritative over it.[39] The implication is, rather, that the relationship between them is a reciprocal or equal one. Which of these two lines of explanation fit better with the way the connections between the Stoic worldview and ethics are presented in the ancient sources? Also, how far are these competing ways of analysing the relationship between branches of knowledge consistent with each other?

If we examine closely the way in which the main relevant ideas are presented in Stoic ethics and theology, I think the reciprocal model emerges as more appropriate than a hierarchical or foundationalist one. Although the quotation from Chrysippus (about happiness and universal nature) appears early in the ethical summary of Diogenes Laertius, this idea is not worked out systematically throughout the rest of the summary. In fact, in this summary as well as the other two, the core ethical principles are analysed largely in their own terms; they are, certainly, not shown as derived from ideas about universal nature in the

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[36] See references in nn. 13, 31-33.
[37] Cicero, *On Ends*, 3.73 (trans. Annas and Woolf 2001). See also LS 60 A.
[38] For this view, see Long 1996, 145-151; also Striker 1996, 228-231.
[39] See LS 26 A-E; also Annas 2007, 58-63.

way that the Ciceronian statement, and some others, might lead us to expect.[40] Also, as noted earlier, in Stobaeus' summary universal nature, by contrast with human, barely appears at all.[41] We should not be misled by the reference to theology and divine providence into supposing that Stoicism resembles Judaeo-Christian thinking in this respect, in which God serves both as a transcendental creator of the world (and universe) and as the ultimate source of moral principles, sometimes framed as laws.[42] There is also a contrast with certain modern moral theories, such as Kantian deontology and Utilitarianism, in which moral rules are presented as based on, or derived from, foundational principles (the Categorical Imperative or the Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number).[43] Also, if we look at the Stoic characterization of theology, what is striking is the extent to which the central claim (that the natural universe and its in-built divinity are good) presupposes a pre-existing understanding of the ethical notion of goodness. Similarly, and in a further contrast with Judaeo-Christian thought, the goodness of God or the universe is not assumed or postulated, but needs to be argued for, using criteria that apply also to goodness in human beings.[44] In this respect, just as Stoic ethics is informed by Stoic physics or worldview, so Stoic physics or at least theology (a subdivision of physics) is informed by Stoic ethics.[45] In these respects the presentation of the points of connection between these two branches of knowledge supports the reciprocal model rather than a hierarchical one or foundationalist one.[46]

This conclusion raises the further question: why is the Stoic worldview sometimes presented as foundational (or, at least, as a 'starting-point') for ethics, as in the Ciceronian passage cited earlier.[47] Of course, given the incomplete and indirect nature of our evidence for Stoic philosophy, not all such questions can be answered.[48] However, we can see that such comments (and also the prominent reference to universal nature at the start of Diogenes Laertius' summary) can serve a useful conceptual purpose, though not, I think, that of showing that the Stoic worldview forms the basis for Stoic ethics. Such comments underline that,

[40] See Diogenes Laertius 7.88; also 7.90-91, which reviews the core ethical ideas (discussed here in text to nn. 6-20) without mentioning universal nature again.
[41] See text to n. 22.
[42] For Judaeo-Christian, God-given laws, see Exodus 20 (the Ten Commandments), Matthew 22: 35-40 (Jesus' commandments). The Stoic idea of 'natural law' is quite different from these laws and is not directly linked with the divinity in-built in universal nature.
[43] On the contrast between ancient ethics and modern moral theories in this respect, see Annas 1993, ch. 22; on modern principles of this kind, see Korsgaard 1996, chs. 1-4.
[44] See text to nn. 29-31; also Brüllmann 2015, 115-117.
[45] In LS 26 C, theology is presented as the final part of physics and as preceded by study of logic and ethics.
[46] See also Gill 2006, 162-166, supporting the reciprocal view of the relationship between the branches of knowledge.
[47] See text to n. 37.
[48] See text to n. 4.

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for Stoicism, it is not only the concept of human nature that is ethically significant, but also that of universal nature. On this point Stoicism seems closer to Plato, at least in the *Timaeus*, a text which seems to have been an important prototype for Stoic thinking in this respect, than to Aristotle, who stresses the ethical significance of human nature.[49] In other words, for Stoicism ethics should not just be seen as *human* ethics (though it is partly that, as Stobaeus' summary shows); it is also human ethics viewed in the context of nature as a whole.[50] The connections between ethics and worldview are worked out from ethical and theological standpoints, and both are weighted equally without either standpoint being seen as authoritative for the other.

3. Modern Responses to Stoic Thinking on Ethics and Worldview

I return to the question posed at the start, about how much is enough for contemporary versions of Stoicism and how far we moderns can accept the Stoic position on the relationship between ethics and worldview. I focus initially on the second version of this question: does Stoic ethical theory need to include reference to the Stoic worldview in order to be complete? Subsequently, I refer to the first version of this question: how much Stoic theory do we need to gain the benefits offered by Stoicism as life-guidance?

      I noted earlier that Becker and some other contemporary thinkers argue that, if we adopt Stoicism now, we should do so in a reformed way that excludes reference to the Stoic worldview, though it can and should refer to human nature.[51] It is worth highlighting, first, that in doing so, they are adopting one of the ways that ancient Stoicism was, in fact, presented, as we can tell from Stobaeus' summary of Stoic ethics, which also matches the approach in Cicero's *On Duties*.[52] In this respect, their version of Stoicism is not reframed, but simply one that selects one of the ancient options. A second point arises in connection with universal or cosmic nature. Becker, at least, assumes not only that ancient Stoic ethical theory refers to the Stoic worldview; he also assumes that the core principles of Stoic ethics were seen in antiquity as depending on, or derived from, the distinctive features of the Stoic worldview.[53] However, I have just argued that this is a less plausible way to interpret Stoic thinking on ethics and worldview. Ancient Stoic thinkers saw significant connections between ethics and worldview

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[49] On Aristotle and human nature, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7; on Plato's *Timaeus* as an influential text for the Stoics, see Gill 2006, 16-20.

[50] Chrysippus combines reference to human and universal nature in his definition of happiness (Diogenes Laertius 7.89, LS 63 C (5)); he seems also to have provided the basis for Stobaeus' summary of Stoic ethics; see Long 1996, 130; also Schofield 2003, 236. So this combination of human and universal nature may be characteristic of Chrysippus, the major theorist of Stoic philosophy.

[51] See text to n. 1.

[52] Compare Stobaeus 5b3 (IG, 126) and Cicero, *On Duties* 1.11-15; also text to n. 61.

[53] This is implicit in Becker 2017, 5-6.

and regarded theology and ethical theory as mutually informing. But they did not see ethics as grounded in physics in the way that some contemporary thinkers find conceptually unacceptable. Of course, contemporary thinkers may object not only to Stoic thinking about the relationship between ethics and worldview but also to the Stoic worldview and the Stoic conception of human nature. These objections raise further and more complex questions, which are not taken up here. However, my discussion may defuse a concern about the ancient Stoic understanding of the relationship between ethics and worldview.

My discussion of ancient Stoic thinking on this topic is also relevant for the use of Stoic ideas to support contemporary environmental ethics. Whiting has argued that the Stoic approach to ethics is particularly helpful for contemporary environmental ethics precisely because ancient Stoic ethics recognized significant connections between ethics and the natural world.[54] I agree with this view, though I would also stress that our use of Stoic ideas for this purpose must be a selective one; there are certain Stoic ideas, notably about relations between human beings and other animals, that we would not want to adopt from the standpoint of environmental responsibility.[55] I think the idea that the world constitutes a type of natural structure, order, and wholeness has a special relevance and force in supporting current efforts to address climate breakdown. This breakdown is an index of natural *disorder*, and as such it is a condition we have powerful reasons to prevent or modify. Further, this disorder is primarily a product of human action, thus strengthening the ethical grounds for prioritizing environmental action. To this extent, reference to the Stoic worldview can have a positive moral benefit today. Also potentially relevant is the linkage made by the Stoics between order at the level of universal nature and order at the human level, where it is identified with virtue and happiness.[56] Arguably, in our current situation, we cannot achieve internal order (virtue and happiness) unless we act in a way that promotes environmental order. From this point of view, the Stoic connection between worldview and ethics is a positive feature and one we have reason to adopt, rather than a conceptual obstacle to contemporary versions of Stoicism. In arguing for this view, we do not need to assume that, according to the ancient Stoics, the worldview provides the fundamental ground for ethics. We need only adopt the interpretation recommended here that, according to the ancient Stoics, accounts of ethics and worldview are mutually supporting.

I turn now to the first version of the question posed earlier: 'how much (theory) is enough' to form the basis for life-guidance that provides the benefits offered by Stoicism? Of course, the answer depends on how far the person concerned is prepared to go in her exploration of Stoic thought and, thus, on the

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[54] See text to n. 2. See also Stephens 1994.

[55] There are some markedly anthropocentric features in the Stoic view of relationships between human beings and other animals: see Cicero, *NG* 2.158-61, *On Ends* 3.67. This point is developed in ch. 7 of the forthcoming book cited in n. 77.

[56] On order in universal nature and in human virtue, see text to nn. 13, 30.

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kind of benefit she can reasonably expect to gain. However, I focus on the case of someone who aims to take this process as far as can be done, and thus to gain the greatest possible benefit from the process. In this case too, the question arises whether the completion of this process depends on an understanding of the Stoic worldview. In considering this question, I focus on the conceptual underpinnings of a response often seen as typically Stoic in ancient and modern thinking. This is the kind of 'tough-minded' response involved in carrying out a right action or enduring extreme suffering or loss and doing so with equanimity and without experiencing 'passions' such as fear, anger, or resentment. In Stoic ethical thinking, this kind of response is seen as one of the characteristics of fully achieved virtue (or 'wisdom') and virtue-based happiness: hence, in a famous image, the wise person is happy on the 'rack' or torture.[57] The question addressed here is whether this response is conceived as resting, crucially or necessarily, on an understanding of the Stoic worldview or whether it can also be based on other kinds of understanding.

The short answer to the question whether this response necessarily depends on an understanding of the Stoic worldview is 'no.' Ancient writings present this response as based either, purely, on an understanding of core Stoic ethical ideas, or on a combination of those ethical ideas with an understanding of human or universal nature (or both). This point matches the mode of presentation found in the three ancient summaries of core ethical ideas outlined earlier, which are framed either in purely ethical terms or in ethical terms combined with the idea of human or universal nature. Book Five of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* provides an illustration of the first type of presentation. The question addressed there is what kind of philosophical framework can best provide the basis for the 'tough-minded' response, especially for enduring disaster or suffering without loss of peace of mind. Cicero's answer is that Stoicism provides the best basis because of its distinctive ethical thesis that happiness depends wholly on virtue, and not (as in theories of an Aristotelian type) on the combination of virtue and bodily and external goods, such as one's own health and prosperity and that of one's family and friends. [58] Cicero's discussion is not framed from a Stoic standpoint but from a non-doctrinaire one (that of Academic Scepticism, which is Cicero's favoured stance).[59] However, the idea that such a response can be based on this core Stoic thesis appears in contexts framed in more orthodox Stoic terms, such as Cicero's *On Ends* 3, and does so without reference to the Stoic worldview.[60]

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[57] See Cicero, *On Ends* 3.42, 5.85: on this type of Stoic image, see Gill 2006, 88-95.
[58] See Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.12-14, 21-22, 47, 68-76, 82.
[59] See Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.32-3. On Cicero's philosophical stance, see Woolf 2015, chs. 1-2, and on *Tusculans* Book 5, see Woolf 2015, 241-247.
[60] See Cicero, *On Ends* 3.42, linked with the contrast between the Stoic and Aristotelian positions on virtue and happiness, 3.41-44, more broadly 3.30-39; for a similar conjunction of ideas, see Cicero, *On Ends* 5.79-86, especially 5.84.

Christopher Gill

Cicero's *On Duties*, a work based on a Stoic prototype and on Stoic ideas, is close on this topic to the ethical summary of Stobaeus. The overall approach incorporates a combination of standard Stoic ideas on virtue and indifferents and on human nature, understood as a combination of rationality and sociability. Conspicuously, at certain key points in Books One and Three, Cicero supplements his argument with reference to ideas about human nature, especially those related to sociability and community. [61] Book Three of *On Duties* centers on offering guidance in situations where performing right actions, those in line with the virtues, especially justice, involves giving up what are normally seen as benefits or advantages, that is, in Stoic terms, 'preferred indifferents.' [62] The work concludes with an extended illustration of the 'tough-minded' response, in which the Roman exemplary figure Regulus is presented as doing the right thing, in political and military terms, even though it requires him to leave his family and friends in Rome and go back to torture and death in Carthage. In fact, the justification of his act is couched in terms of virtue (specifically, the virtues of courage or 'greatness of spirit' and justice) and (loss of) advantages, without explicit reference to human nature in support of these ideas. [63] However, the prominence in *On Duties* of the idea of human nature, especially in connection with the virtues and social community, means that this combination of ideas forms part of the background for this climactic example as well as of the framework of guidance throughout Book Three.

The third way of presenting the basis for the Stoic 'tough-minded' response is by reference to the Stoic worldview; and this is a prominent theme in the Roman Imperial Stoic writings of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus. As already indicated, reference to the Stoic worldview plays several roles in Stoic ethics. Chrysippus uses the idea of 'harmonizing' oneself to universal nature as one way of characterizing virtue and virtue-based happiness;[64] and, accordingly, the idea of 'harmonizing' yourself to nature in this sense is often used as one Stoic way of promoting the aspiration towards virtue and virtue-based happiness. It is also used in connection with the adoption of a tough-minded response to what is normally seen as misfortune or disaster. Marcus uses this idea repeatedly to prepare himself for his own death, sometimes alluding to Chrysippus' famous statement about 'harmonizing' yourself to nature. Here is one such passage:

> What is brought about by the nature of the whole and what maintains that whole is good for each part of nature. Just as the changes in the elements maintain the universe so too do the changes in the compounds [including human beings]. Let

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[61] Cicero, *On Duties* 1.11-15, 1.50-59, 1.105-106, 3.21-28, 3.53. On Stobaeus and human nature, see text to nn. 23-25.

[62] Cicero, *On Duties* 3.7-19.

[63] Cicero, *On Duties* 3.99-115, especially 3.99-100, 3.104 on the virtues illustrated.

[64] See text to nn. 34-36.

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these things satisfy you; let these be your doctrines ... so that you do not die grumbling on, but positively, genuinely, full-heartedly grateful to the gods.[65]

It is worth noting that for Marcus, as for other Stoic thinkers, reference to universal nature is not the only way of supporting this kind of response; he also cites purely ethical considerations, notably the virtue-indifferents contrast or the idea of human nature as rational and sociable.[66] It is also significant that Epictetus stresses that appeals to the Stoic worldview or to its in-built divinity only have a positive effect if directed at those who are virtuous or at least are progressing in that direction.[67] So we should not suppose that Stoic thinkers believe that reference to universal nature is sufficient by itself to bring about ethical progress. What, then, does reference to the nature of the universe add to these other factors? I think the passage just cited from Marcus gives us an indication, bearing in mind the close association between this theme and accepting one's own death or that of others close to you. In Stoic theology, as outlined earlier, the goodness of the universe, along with its in-built divinity, is seen as manifested in order and regularity, expressed in alternating patterns of day and night, lunar, solar and planetary cycles, and the seasons.[68] As Stoic thinkers point out, the growth and death of living things, including human beings, forms an integral part of this pattern.[69] Hence, Stoics encourage us to view our lives and deaths within this broader framework and in this sense, as well as the others just noted, to see ourselves as aiming to live 'the life according to nature.'

In addition, Stoic thinkers are compatibilists regarding causation. They present the overall course of (determined) events as providentially shaped and, in some sense, working out 'for the best.'[70] Thinkers such as Marcus and Epictetus also present this as a factor which, along with others, can be used to underpin the tough-minded response.[71] Although this idea is a recurrent one in Stoic writings, it is not entirely easy to specify in what sense the course of events does work out for the best in Stoic thought or how this idea is interconnected with other aspects of Stoic ethics. As ancient critics of Stoicism pointed out, there are various features of Stoic thought that suggest that events do *not* generally work out for the best.[72] These feature include the fact that the vast majority of humankind do not develop ethically as they should (towards complete virtue and virtue-based happiness or

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[65] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.3, trans. in Gill (2013); also 2.4, 2.17.4-5, 5.8.9-11. See also Gill (2013, xlix-lii, lxiii-lxvii). On Marcus's view of death and transience see Stephens 2012, 108-150; Sellars 2021, 96-102.

[66] See Marcus, *Meditations* 3.4.7, 3.6, 3.7, 5.1,

[67] Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.2.13-16, 1.27.12-14, 2.22.15-17; on this point, see Brennan 2005, 237-238.

[68] See text to n. 30.

[69] See Marcus, *Meditations* 4.43, 5.4, 5.23, 6.36; Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.87, 91-92.

[70] See LS 54 and 62, especially 62 C (on Stoic compatibilism).

[71] See Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.6.9-10; Marcus, *Meditations* 3.4.5, 3.11.4.

[72] For ancient criticisms of Stoic ideas about providence, see Cicero *NG* 3.65-92; for Stoic defences, see LS, vol. 1, pp. 332-333.

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'the life according to nature'), a fact seen by Stoics as caused by deep-rooted tendencies in human nature as well as by widespread error in human societies.[73] If we ask what features of their worldview support their belief in the providential working out of events, the most plausible ones, again, are those highlighted earlier on the interface between Stoic theology and ethics. Stoics see universal nature as creating the conditions, broadly speaking, in which the component forms of life within the universe can come into being and flourish, in part through having the instinctive motivation to care for themselves and others of their kind. When combined with the Stoic theory of natural development as appropriation, this implies that human beings, as rational and sociable animals, are naturally capable of developing towards virtue and happiness, whether in fact they do or do not.[74] Human ethical development brings with it the capacity both for right action and emotional resilience in the face of difficulties and disaster (in Stoic terms, loss of 'preferred indifferents'). Thus, the world as a whole and the working out of events are providentially shaped in the sense that human beings have the in-built natural capacity to make this kind of tough-minded response despite adverse circumstances. It is, perhaps, the linkage between these two ideas that explains why, in thinkers such as Epictetus and Marcus, the theme of the providential working out of events and of resilience in the face of disaster are often linked.[75] However, if so, this linkage depends not just on beliefs about the Stoic worldview but also beliefs about virtue and indifferents and human nature.

What, then, are the conclusions of this review of ancient Stoic thinking for the question, 'how much is enough' to provide a basis for modern life-guidance and the potential benefits of this guidance? I think the conclusions are clear. To judge from the ancient presentation of the basis of the tough-minded response, there are three possible answers to this question. All three answers involve an understanding of the core principles of Stoic ethics outlined earlier. The first answer consists solely of this understanding, as illustrated by Book Five of Cicero's *Tusculans* and other passages. The other two answers, both of which are tenable, combine the understanding of core ethical principles and of human or universal nature. A further, most complete option would include and integrate all three factors. This is, apparently, what Chrysippus advocated.[76] This option would obviously be 'enough' to match ancient Stoic criteria for the highest possible level of ethical understanding, though it would raise the most questions regarding the compatibility between ancient and contemporary thinking about nature. It may be helpful to restate my conclusions in a way that differentiates them from other contemporary responses to Stoicism. On the one hand, the combination of ethical principles and ideas about human, but not universal, nature (Becker's approach) has a firmer basis in ancient Stoic thought than Becker recognized or than is

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[73] See text to n. 17.
[74] See text to nn. 16, 22-3, 32-3. See also Frede 2002, 95-109.
[75] See Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.6.37-43, 2.6.9-10, 3.5.7-11; Marcus, *Meditations* 2.3, 2.17.4-5, 4.49.
[76] See n. 50.

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generally recognized by those who follow Becker. On the other hand, the combination of Stoic ethical principles and ideas about universal nature (or both universal nature and human nature) is, when closely examined, more conceptually credible and less remote from contemporary thinking than is often supposed. Also, this combination has the advantage that it opens the way to framing a response to the current environmental crisis that draws on Stoic ideas and thus enlarges our philosophical resources for this objective. Overall, and regardless of whether my conclusions are accepted by other advocates of Stoic life-guidance, I hope this discussion contributes to fuller exploration of the resources of Stoic ethical ideas both for contemporary philosophical reflection and for life-guidance.[77]

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[77] The themes of this discussion are explored much further in a forthcoming book, *Learning to Live Naturally: Stoic Ethics and its Modern Significance*.

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The Environmental Battle Hymn of the Stoic God

Kai Whiting, Aldo Dinucci,

Edward Simpson, and Leonidas Konstantakos

Abstract: In Stoic theology, the universe constitutes a living organism. Humankind has often had a detrimental impact on planetary health. We propose that the Stoic call to live according to Nature, where God and Nature are one and the same, provides a philosophical basis for re-addressing environmental degradation. We discuss the value of the logocentric framework and aligning oneself with Divine will and natural law (as stated by reason) in order that living beings can thrive.

Keywords: environmental ethics, God, Stoic theology, Stoicism.

1. Introduction

Stoicism, with its call to 'live according to Nature,' invites its practitioners to view their wellbeing in light of humankind and Earth as a whole. Marcus Aurelius captures this idea succinctly when he writes "that which is not in the interests of the hive cannot be in the interests of the bee." (*Meditations* 6.54)[1] The tool to work with in Stoicism is not faith but reason, and reason must prevail. If one is to argue for the existence of God (or anything else for that matter), then one must have a clear philosophical basis for doing so. This basis must be defendable via rational argument and not mere opinion or cultural precedent. Given the fundamental importance of recognizing virtue (the only good) and distinguishing it from vice (the only bad) – something that Cicero states can only be done by understanding the reality in which we live – faith-based statements are not an acceptable premise (*De Finibus* 3.7; see also Hahm 1978, particularly chap. 5).

With this in mind, we make the case that believing in God, as understood from the uniquely Stoic pantheistic position, is a rational decision that enables a person to develop a virtuous character. We build this case upon various Stoic concepts including Hierocles' circles of concern and the Stoic theory of 'appropriation' (*oikeiosis*). We argue that if Stoicism maintains its theological elements, it could be considered an 'environmental' philosophy, due to its logocentric framing. The latter acknowledges that all beings, living and non-living, share in the *logos* (Divine Reason). It is in this context that we reflect on the benefits that a rational understanding of God brings to Stoic practitioners and the universal community (*cosmopolis*). We evaluate how the ancient Stoics arrived at

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[1] As translated by Haines (1916).

their belief in God and their logocentric (reason-centered) understanding of the cosmos. We explore the notion of reason and delve more deeply into how a logocentric framing of the world, as opposed to a strictly anthropocentric (human-centered) or biocentric (Earth-centered) framing, can help moderns tackle environmental challenges.

At no point do we advocate for a 'religious' interpretation of ancient Stoic texts, whereupon the words become sacred and binding. Such a position is profoundly dogmatic, given that the only 'rule' in Stoicism is that 'virtue is the only good' and, even then, each person will perform their virtuous actions according to their personal proclivities and circumstances (Annas 2016). That said, while Stoicism was never a religion, the philosophy has spiritual aspects that ought to drive ethical conduct for the benefit of the individual and the wider world (Long 2018).

2. Stoic Theology

The ancient Stoics believed that the human *telos* (goal) was 'to live according to Nature'[2] because it was only by living in harmony with oneself, others, and the natural world that one could hope to experience a state of flourishing (*eudaimonia*). For the Stoics, striving 'to live according to Nature' meant living excellently (*arete*) because that was thought to be the purpose for which humankind was designed. Doing what one was designed to do was also thought to be the most appropriate way to conduct one's roles and to undertake appropriate/prescribed actions (*kathekonta*) towards oneself, one's smaller community (neighborhood), and one's wider community (*cosmopolis*). All such actions involved being consistently just, courageous, temperate, and wise (see Stephens 2011, 36–39).

The Stoic understanding of the exact nature and number of roles that a person has stems from the writings of Panaetius. His ideas were captured and developed by Cicero in *On Duties* (particularly 1:107-115) and, to a certain extent, Epictetus in the *Enchiridion.* For Epictetus, roles are divinely assigned and, therefore, living according to Nature (playing one's part well) is following the will of God:

> Remember that you are an actor in a drama, which is as the playwright wishes; if the playwright wishes it short, it will be short; if long, then long; if the playwright wishes you to play a beggar, it is assigned to you in order that you good-naturedly play even that role; and similarly if you are assigned to play a disabled person, a public official, or a lay person. For this is what is yours: to

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[2] This is both the natural world and one's own nature. For the Stoics, human beings have a self preservation instinct and a social/communal instinct. Destroying the environment in which we live is an irrational and anti-social thing to do. A useful analogy is health: though we might never meet anyone who is perfectly healthy, it is a person's natural state. Doing anything to purposely deteriorate our bodily health for money, social status or for the mere sake of it is foolish. Likewise, living harmoniously is to be morally healthy; that is, wise, just, brave, and temperate.

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finely play the role that is given; but to select itself is the role of the divine playwright. (*Enchiridion* 17)[3]

Epictetus' view of God, along with that of Cleanthes, is the one that moderns would, perhaps, most readily associate with the personal Abrahamic God (see Long 2002). Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* (see *Enchiridion* 53), for example, can easily be interpreted by a person who is unfamiliar with Stoic doctrine to fit a scenario where the writer is calling out to a transcendent personal deity (Asmis 2007). In this respect, Cleanthes' hymn can be viewed in the same vein as the psalms of the Jewish King David:

> O Zeus, giver of all, shrouded in dark clouds and holding the vivid bright lightning, rescue men from painful ignorance. Scatter that ignorance far from their hearts and deign to rule all things in justice. (Cleanthes, *Hymn of Zeus*[4], quoted in Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 1.25.3)

On deeper reflection, those familiar with Stoic cosmology will recognize Cleanthes' hymn as an oratorical celebration of an imminent, rather than transcendent God, whose natural law, rather than personal instructions, compel humankind to 'live in accordance with Nature' (Asmis 2007). Evidence for Cleanthes' belief in an immanent divinity can be seen by the fact that he agreed with Zeno (and Chrysippus) that the cosmos was a living animal, born in the manner of other living animals. For Cleanthes, it followed that, like animals, God's body is finite, insofar as the cosmos is finite (Arius Didymus, quoted in Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.* XV 15, 817b[5]= *SVF* 2.528) and that, like the rest of creation, God is a composite of a physical soul (*pneuma*, or active matter) and body (extensional matter).

Cleanthes did not simply 'believe in' his metaphysical assumptions. He came to them by developing proofs (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.32). In line with his conception of the cosmos as an animal, Cleanthes held that the sun was the mind/soul of God, that the universe was God's body and that both the mind and body were sentient and in complete harmony with each other. It was this harmony that Cleanthes believed resulted in the benevolent care which "preserves, nourishes, increases, sustains, and gives sensation" (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.40 = *SVF* 1.504) to all components of the universe: the sea, air, rocks, plants and animals, including humans (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.75-6; Long and Sedley 1987, 54J). For the ancient Stoics, the life-giving care provided by God was a sign that the universe was worthy of reverence and respect, something that could be shown through dedicated study and application of natural philosophy (a discipline that combines natural sciences and philosophy). This understanding of the universe led Posidonius to argue that:

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[3] Translation by author based on Hard and Gill (2014) and Johnson (2013).
[4] As translated by Ellery (1976).
[5] As translated by Gifford (1906).

> [The objective of life is] to live engaged in contemplating the truth and order of the universe, and forming himself as he best can, in nothing influenced by the irrational part of his soul. (Posidonius, as cited by Clement of Alexandria in *Stromata* 2.21)[6]

Posidonius was admired across the Graeco-Roman world for his prolific contributions to anthropology, astronomy, botany, geography, history, hydrology, mathematics, meteorology, seismology, and zoology. Those who recognized his endeavors included the Greek astronomer and mathematician Ptolemy, the Roman physician Galen, the Greek geographer and historian Strabo, along with the Roman statesmen Seneca the Younger, Cicero, and Pompey. Thus, Posidonius was hardly a candidate for what some moderns might refer to as an unscientific, ignorant, or naïve person. For him, the Stoic theological position drove scientific enquiry rather than hindered it. That is not to say that the Stoics viewed all religious practices as scientific. Seneca in *On Superstition* (a book that has since been lost) is vehemently critical of 'god-appeasing' practices that invoke mutilation and other forms of physical punishment. As Augustine states:

> Seneca was quite outspoken about the cruel obscenity of some of the ceremonies: "One man cuts off his male organs: another gashes his arms. If this is the way they earn the favor of the gods, what happens when they fear their anger? The gods do not deserve any kind of worship, if this is the worship they desire." (*City of God* 6.10)[7]

Augustine then quotes Seneca's position on how the sage would recognize superstition for what it is and understand that cultish customs have little connection with the truth. He concludes that:

> Doubtless philosophy had taught him (Seneca) an important lesson, that he should not be superstitious in his conception of the physical universe; but, because of the laws of the country and the accepted customs, he also learnt that without playing an actor's part in theatrical fictions, he should imitate such a performance in the temple. (*City of God* 6.10)[8]

While there were certainly religious aspects to ancient Stoicism, it was not a religion, at least not in the conventional sense. The need for Stoics to be flexible when it comes to assimilating certain religious beliefs and cultural matters is stated by Epictetus in chapter 31 of the *Enchiridion*. The Stoics *qua* Stoics did not argue that any book or building was sacred, nor that any theological belief should be set in stone (Clement, *Stromata* 5.12:76 = *SVF* 1.264; Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.33-34). Even the divinations offered by the Oracle of Delphi, the advice of which led Zeno of Citium to establish Stoicism, were to be considered in a measured manner. Furthermore, the Oracle would only speak to those seeking wisdom if it was clear that they understood, and would abide by,

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[6] As translated by Wilson (1985).

[7] Modified by authors, based on translation by Bettenson and Evans (2003).

[8] Modified by authors, based on translation by Bettenson and Evans (2003).

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three maxims. These were 'know yourself,' 'nothing to excess' and 'surety brings ruin' (as stated by Plato in *Charmides* 165). Divination was by no means a science, but it was an introspective and spiritual practice which demanded a reasoned approach and not a blind commitment to faith in the gods (cf. Cicero, *On Divination* 1.3, 1.19). No one was forced to seek the Oracle (in the same way that no one should be forced to see a counsellor) and equally there is no evidence to suggest that any particular Stoic was seen as an apostate and ex-communicated for involving (or not involving) themselves in cultural rituals and traditions (Sadler 2018). The Stoics Chrysippus and Cornutus, for example, re-interpreted some pre-existing and traditional Graeco-Roman religious ideas in order to incorporate them into Stoicism. Panaetius doubted divination and the conflagration (the belief that the cosmos will end cataclysmically, becoming fire), while still professing a belief in God (*Testimonia* 130–140). Any Stoic who was committed to and *properly understood the fundamental principles* was free to question or reject earlier Stoic ideas on the basis of reasoned argument, as Seneca makes clear in his letter to Lucilius (33.11).

2.1 Stoic Pantheism

The Stoic god and Stoicism's metaphysical stance do not fit neatly into a theist, pantheist or panentheist box because they are a complex amalgam of these positions (see Long 2002, 147). That said, Cicero states that Cleanthes and the Stoics after him were "pantheists in so far as they acknowledge that God and the world are identical." (Cicero in Zeno, Cleanthes Fragment 4, 22)[9] Certainly, Stoic theology is in line with Owen's (1971) definition of 'pantheism' as the belief that "god is everything and everything is god or that the world is either identical with god or, in some way, a self-expression of his nature" (Owen 1971, 8). A contemporary interpretation of what very much constitutes the Stoic worldview of a pantheistic benevolent and omnipresent divinity is expressed by the primatologist De Waal:

> The way our bodies are influenced by surrounding bodies is one of the mysteries of human existence, but one that provides the glue that holds entire societies together. We occupy nodes within a tight network that connects all of us in both body and mind. (2010, 63)

Pantheistic beliefs, particularly those operating from a biocentric perspective, tend to be inclined towards, and associated with, human thoughts and actions that tread lightly on Earth (Taylor 2011). The resulting ethical frameworks extend moral obligations beyond humanity to encompass non-human beings and non-living things, such as rocks (Levine 1994). Biocentric ideals, such as Naess' (1973) Deep Ecology or Leopold's Land Ethic (see Lenart 2010), model a non-hierarchal reality where humans and non-humans are

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[9] As translated by Pearson (1891).

considered equal in *every* respect. Such a position raises ethical questions regarding the legitimacy of the assumption that humans are superior to other animals and should thus enjoy superior rights or be favored in any way over them, or indeed the Earth itself (Gadotti 2008a; 2008b; Gadotti and Torres 2009; Taylor 2011). Such ideas clearly contradict the Stoic belief that the capacity for rational thought and action possessed by humankind bestows upon them a special place in the natural order:

> First of all, a human being, that is to say, one who has no faculty more authoritative than choice, but subordinates everything else to that, keeping choice itself free from enslavement and subjection. Consider, then, what you're distinguished from through the possession of reason: you're distinguished from wild beasts; you're distinguished from sheep. What is more, you're a citizen of the world and a part of it, and moreover no subordinate part, but one of the leading parts in so far as you're capable of understanding the divine governing order of the world, and of reflecting about all that follows from it. (Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.10.1-3)[10]

It is important to note that Stoicism does not promote purely anthropocentric values, especially as these often come into conflict with the Stoic obligation to care for the universal community, which is by no means restricted to human society (Whiting and Konstantakos 2019; Stephens 1994). Instead, Stoicism relies on a logocentric/anthropocentric hybrid, which acknowledges the superiority of human actions relative to non-human beings *only* when human individuals behave rationally according to their role, as assigned to them by Divine Reason (i.e. *logos*). Those subject to Divine Reason are not asked to satisfy capricious whims of a jealous God. There is no favoritism nor 'chosen people' tasked with interpreting or communicating God's commands. In Stoicism, following God's will is instead the act of harmonizing one's own nature and idiosyncrasies with the rational active principle that pervades the whole universe and is responsible for life, as Epictetus points out:

> How else, after all, could things take place with such regularity, as if God were issuing orders. When he tells plants to bloom, they bloom, when he tells them to bear fruits, they bear fruit, when he tells them to ripen, they ripen. (*Discourses*, 1.14.3)[11]

There are various examples of shared beliefs between Stoicism and biocentrism. A key one is provided by Naess (1995, 14), when he asserts that we are all in, of and from Nature from the very beginning. Another one is stated by Vaughan, who emphasizes that pantheism "recognizes both our biological and psychological dependence on the environment [and the fact that] we are actually interdependent and interconnected with the whole fabric of reality" (Devall 1995,

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[10] As translated by Hard and Gill (2014).
[11] As translated by Dobbin (2008).

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103). There is thus a degree of understanding within both philosophies that the planet constitutes a living organism to which we are all bound.

One well known biocentric hypothesis used to describe the homeostatic relationship between a living Earth and its inhabitants is the Gaia hypothesis, proposed by Lovelock and Margulis (1974). Gaia is conceived as a holobiont that self-regulates its physicochemical cycles, which, when operating as it should, works to maintain the conditions that are conducive to plant and animal life. If the cycles are disrupted or deteriorate, then the optimal conditions for life on Earth are affected. In this respect, Gaia can be used to explain how the environment drives evolutionary processes via various intertwined feedback loops. While some proponents of Gaia have ascribed a literal 'mind' or 'agency' to Earth, Lovelock does not. Instead, he views Gaia through a thermodynamic lens whereby Earth, like any system moving towards a steady state, responds automatically to certain inputs (Radford 2019). For Lovelock, such reactions are not with any sense of foresight or *telos* (Lovelock 1990).

Neither Lovelock's position on Gaia nor those of some of his more zealous followers coincide with the Stoic position, which is that the universe is benevolent and perfectly rational. For Stoics, God is not a mindless feedback system (as Lovelock or, for that matter, Spinoza conceived). Nor is 'He' vengeful or angry with humans because of their failure to care for the planet they inhabit. In Stoicism, there is no heaven or hell. In any case, if there were a hell, all but the sage (the completely rational virtuous Stoic) would be in it (Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 5B12-13; *SVF* 3.654; 3.604; 3.660; 3.663; 3.103). With the caveat that some people are more likely to progress towards sagehood than others (Cicero, *De finibus* 4.20), those who do not wish to live according to Nature (knowingly or unknowingly) do not enter hell, but instead punish themselves on Earth. This punishment occurs because they are unable to reflect on what it means to live the 'good life':

> There are some punishments appointed, as by a law, for such as disobey the Divine administration. Whoever shall esteem anything good, except what depends on the Will, let him envy, let him covet, let him flatter, let him be full of perturbation. Whoever esteems anything else to be evil, let him grieve, let him mourn, let him lament, let him be wretched. (Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.11.1-3)[12]

Another Stoic incompatibility with Gaia and other biocentric positions is that no individual species or specimen has intrinsic value. Earth itself has no intrinsic value either and, although deservedly worthy of moral consideration, is by no means 'special' or 'sacred.' In Stoicism, it is the ability to reason, which is seen as the defining characteristic that sets humans (including Neanderthals, see Whiting, Konstantakos, Sadler et al. 2018) apart from the rest of the animal and plant kingdom. It is therefore *logos* (reason) that Stoics value beyond all else. Another key contradiction between the Stoic logocentric and a biocentric position

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[12] As translated by Carter (1807).

is the philosophical lens through which one looks. Those sympathetic to biocentric ideology argue that our ethical values should stem from our shared planetary kinship that enables us to see through the 'planet's eyes.' This is taken to mean that humanity ought to obtain its norms and values from Earth's, or at least an animal's or plant's, perspective. As discussed in Whiting and Konstantakos (2019), there is nothing in Stoic thought that suggests that we should, or even could, view the universe through such a lens. In fact, it would be a false impression to believe that we know what or how a particular animal or plant feels or thinks. At the most, we could be more sympathetic to an animal's or plant's own call to live according to Nature and choose to behave in such a way that enables co-existence (see Whiting et al. 2020).

3. Stoic Environmental Ethics

Environmental interpretations, visions, and applications of contemporary Stoic practice are becoming increasing common within Stoic literature. Issues raised include those linked to animal conservation (e.g. Konstantakos 2014), climate breakdown (Johncock 2020), environmental education (Whiting, Konstantakos, Misiaszek et al. 2018), and sustainable food production (e.g. Whiting et al. 2020). The impact of human encroachment upon the environment (including natural aesthetics) is also discussed in ancient Stoic texts. The longest excerpt was written by Seneca:

> Now I turn to address you people whose self-indulgence extends as widely as those other people's greed. I ask you: how long will this go on? Every lake is overhung with your roofs! Every river is bordered by your buildings! Wherever one finds gushing streams of hot water, new pleasure houses will be started. Wherever a shore curves into a bay, you will instantly lay down foundations. Not satisfied with any ground that you have not altered, you will bring the sea into it! Your houses gleam everywhere, sometimes situated on mountains to give a great view of land and sea, sometimes built on flat land to the height of mountains. Yet when you have done so much enormous building, you still have only one body apiece, and that a puny one. What good are numerous bedrooms? You can only lie in one of them. Any place you do occupy is not really yours. (*Letters to Lucilius*, 89.21)[13]

In addition to Seneca's comments, Musonius Rufus gave various lectures that contained content that we would now readily associate with environmental matters. Musonius was chiefly concerned with agricultural practices and food consumption and how they could both be a source of virtue or vice:

> The earth repays most beautifully and justly those who care for her, giving back many times what she receives... To me, this is the main benefit of all agricultural

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[13] As translated by Graver and Long (2015).

tasks: they provide abundant leisure for the soul to do some deep thinking and to reflect on the nature of education. (Discourses Lecture 11, 1-3)[14]

It is likely that both Seneca and Musonius would be highly critical of the way in which human society has developed with little regard for the natural world. In Stoicism, virtue is not a theoretical concept in the sense that it cannot be obtained merely by thinking about it. Instead, virtue is necessarily made manifest in our actions and reactions towards the world around us, which includes non-human species and the natural environment. The excellent character (*arete*) of a flourishing agent (*eudaimon*) is built on that understanding. In which case, and as Long (1996b) points out, Stoic theology is integral to the Stoic conception of virtue, precisely because it provides the justification as to why virtue is sufficient and necessary for the life well lived.

Given that God is believed to permeate through and constitute all that exists, it follows that, for Stoics, Nature is both the source and ultimate reference for both facts and values. By extension, it is also the yardstick that ought to be used to measure one's thoughts and actions because it states not only what *is* the case but what *ought* to be the case (Long 1996). As explained in Whiting and Konstantakos (2019):

> Nature is the *sine qua non* for the evaluation of reason and no reasonable proposition can exist or be understood outside of it. Nature is also the cause of knowledge and truth. It is the basis for everyone's (and everything's) being and reality. Even moral truths, which are not founded on scientific fact, but rely on coherence or intuition, are grounded in the subjective experience of our own nature and the objectivity of the natural world generally. This reality helps us understand that we are all part of Nature, as an interconnected and interdependent web of connections that we cannot separate ourselves from. Instead, what sets humans apart is a rationality that enables us to glean divine wisdom, and absolute truth, in the form of natural laws.

The objective truth that can be found in natural law provides the rationale as to why Stoics are called to 'live in accordance with Nature.' As a fundamental principle of Stoic virtue ethics, it does not only apply to moral duties or obligations (which would be a deontological position). Nor is it the mere performance of appropriate actions (*kathekonta*). After all, there are many people or corporations who want to be *seen* doing the right thing without having to truly engage in *doing* the right thing for the right reason. If one simply engages in 'environmentally friendly' practices to appease shareholders then they are no more virtuous than the person who is actively destroying the environment or ignorant of environmental problems in the first place. This is because although the consequences will certainly be different, they will be no wiser, no more just, no more self-controlled or courageous. Progressing towards *eudaimonia* requires Stoics to grapple with reality and, as the environment is intrinsic to that (whether one accepts the Stoic theological position or not), no one can reasonably expect to

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[14] As translated by King (2010).

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achieve *eudaimonia* without considering the state of the environment and the impact humans have had on it. This is fundamentally what the Stoic biologist Steve Karafit asserts when he states that one cannot claim to be progressing towards the goal of Stoic virtues at the cost of environmental sustainability (Karafit 2018).

In some respects, environmental concerns have been integrated into the contemporary Stoic worldview through the addition of the 'environment' to the Stoic 'circles of concern' by Whiting, Konstantakos, Carrasco et al. (2018). The 'circles of concern' is a theoretical model conceived by the Stoic Hierocles to depict an individual's social relationships, moral obligations and responsibilities to the self, family, friends and the wider cosmopolis (Stobaeus, *Anthology* 4.84.23 = 3:134,1–136,2[15]; cf. *Anth.* 4.27.23 = 4:671,3–673,18[16]). The expansion of the circles of concern is a way of acknowledging that all the preceding circles (from the 'self' to the 'whole of humanity') rely upon the sustenance and support offered by Earth. The most all-encompassing circle explicitly captures the moral duty humans have, as Aldo Leopold states, to 'preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.' (Leopold 1949, 224-225) Preservation is not undertaken because any particular species or specimen is special or has the 'right to life' but rather because, in a given set of circumstances, such an action is, morally speaking, obligatory.

The contemporary scholars Martha Nussbaum and Richard Sorabji (see Sorabji 1993; Nussbaum 2006) have criticized the ancient Stoic position on obligations towards animals, focusing on the following claims by Chrysippus and Epictetus:

> Life had been given to the pig as a form of salt to keep it from going rotten and to preserve it for human use. (Chrysippus, as recorded by Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.154–62)

> God created some beasts to be eaten, some to be used in farming, some to supply us with cheese, and so on. (Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.6-18)[17]

It is our view that such claims should be evaluated alongside other Stoic statements that appear to contradict, or, at the very least, place caveats on what is being said by either Epictetus or Chrysippus. For one thing, Musonius Rufus, who was Epictetus' mentor, would have vehemently contested any opinion that suggested that God made animals to be eaten. On the contrary, he stated that:

> One should choose food suitable for a human being over food that isn't. And what is suitable for us is food from things which the earth produces: the various grains and other plants can nourish a human being quite well. Also nourishing is food from domestic animals which we don't slaughter. The most suitable of these foods, though, are the ones we can eat without cooking: fruits in season, certain vegetables, milk, cheese, and honeycombs... a meat-based diet [is] too crude for

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[15] Meineke edition.
[16] Wachsmuth and Hense edition.
[17] As translated by Dobbin (2008).

humans and more suitable for wild beasts... The fumes which come from it are too smoky and darken the soul. For this reason, those who eat lots of meat seem slow-witted. (*Lectures* 18A.2 and 18A.3; see also 18B)[18]

While Musonius' claims are certainly unscientific from a *modern* standpoint, given that diet and exercise was considered to be a way in which virtue would manifest (see Tieleman 2003, 94:163), Musonius' obviously considered it his moral duty, as a Stoic teacher, to highlight which foods and food preparations would constitute an (in)appropriate action. In this respect, he clearly had grounds to believe that cooking and eating meat damaged one's moral character. He did not concur that the Divine purpose of animals was to 'be eaten.' Instead, he appealed to virtue as a reason for *not* eating them. Likewise, while Chrysippus believed that pigs existed for human consumption and that other animals were created so that humans could make use of them for their own purposes, he also stated that this should be done justly (Cicero, *On Ends* 3.67, Long and Sedley 1987, 57 F(5)). It is, thus, not a definitively Stoic position to argue that humans can automatically claim dominion over animals and treat them how they would like.

Any Stoics who are cruel, or careless about others being cruel towards animals could hardly claim that they were being just or self-controlled. No philosophical acrobatics or unusual interpretations of Stoic doctrine are required to argue that commercially intensive farming practices that do not allow a calf to receive milk from her mother is against Stoicism. Firstly, it is a rejection, or a dismissal, of a cow's needs to respond to God's call for her to live according to her own nature. Secondly, it is a rejection of the ancient Stoic recognition that humans, as animals, share certain characteristics, motives, and instincts with other members of the animal kingdom. The main shared instincts are the preservation and the caring for oneself, procreation and the looking after one's young and other members that belong to one's kind. These instincts then form the foundation of communal bonds (Dinucci 2016). It is this behavior which led to the development of the distinctly Stoic theory of 'appropriation' (*oikeiosis*) by Hierocles (Ramelli 2009; Long and Sedley 1987, 57, esp. A, F(1)). Through this ethical framing, which is itself a product of our sharing in the *logos*, Stoics acknowledged that animals were capable of partaking in mutually beneficial activities both within their own species and across such divides (Cicero, *On Ends* 3.63, Long and Sedley 1987, 57 F(2)). Cleanthes' observation of this reality, upon studying an ant colony, led him to acknowledge that Stoic arguments (including his own) that stated that reason was restricted to God and humankind were incorrect. He concluded that ants showed a collective 'mind' and that they were therefore 'not destitute of reason power.' (Aelian, *Nat. An 11*) This train of logocentric thought is also present in Musonius Rufus' lectures:

But you will agree that human nature is very much like that of bees. A bee is not able to live alone: it perishes when isolated. Indeed, it is intent on performing the

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[18] As translated by King (2010).

> common task of members of its species – to work and act together with other bees. (*Discourses* 14.3)

Under a Stoic framework it is important to remember that collaboration among species is patterned on the collaborative and benevolent nature of God, which is shared throughout the cosmos via the *logos*. One of the more nuanced features of Stoic theology is the fact that the cosmos, and consequently God, is *not* 'perfect,' at least not in the same way the Abrahamic tradition suggests. This is because while God is morally perfect in the sense that 'His' mind and actions are always appropriate and benevolent, humankind plays a role in bringing about absolute perfection when Nature itself cannot, as Musonius Rufus states:

> For nature plainly keeps a more careful guard against deficiency than against excess, in both plants and animals, since the removal of excess is much easier and simpler than the addition of what is lacking. In both cases human common sense ought to assist nature, so as to make up the deficiencies as much as possible and fill them out, and to lessen and eliminate the superfluous. (*Discourses* 21.2-3)[19]

Musonius' words highlight the fact that when humans work together with Nature they flourish as individuals and facilitate flourishing for all those who surround them, including the environment. The more that individuals cooperate with Nature, the more Nature is able to respond in kind. This means that while God might possess 'imperfections,' humankind is still provided with what it needs to achieve *eudaimonia* (cf. Aulus Gellius, 7.1.7).

4. Discussion

The purpose of this discussion is to highlight the fact that Stoicism can provide a framework for solving the environmental challenges that persist in the 21st century. We have put forward the case that Stoic theology presents a method of reasoning that helps individuals to understand their roles and, consequently, the obligations they have towards themselves and others to maintain Earth's conditions in such a way that all entities can live according to Nature:

> He then who has observed with intelligence the administration of the world, and has learned that the greatest and supreme and the most comprehensive community is that which is composed of men and God, and that from God have descended the seeds not only to my father and grandfather, but to all beings which are generated on the earth and are produced, and particularly to rational beings – for these only are by their nature formed to have communion with God, being by means of reason conjoined with him – why should not such a man call himself a citizen of the world, why not a son of God? (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.10.1)[20]

We have argued that if humans reject Divine Reason, the universe will degenerate and we will all fall into a vicious cycle. Gill and Galluzzo (2019) made

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[19] As translated by Lutz (1947).
[20] As translated by Long (1877).

a similar argument when supporting the extension of the circles of concern by Whiting, Konstantakos, Carrasco, et al. (2018). They stated that the inclusion of the 'environment' explicitly highlighted the moral obligation that humans have to act upon their capacity for reason on behalf of plants, animals and the planet. They argued that this was even more necessary given that humankind has, through intensive fossil fuel extraction and mass deforestation, among other things, negated or sufficiently reduced Nature's ability to offer providential care.

It is certainly possible that the collective failure to recognize that Nature, as the body of God, is worthy of reverence and respect, has contributed to the planetary imbalance that we are experiencing today. As Whiting and Konstantakos (2019) and Whiting et al. (2021) point out, a lot of socioenvironmental injustice has occurred precisely because some human values lie in contrary to what cultivates a morally good character. It is also clear that social conventions have not always acknowledged the role of Nature in providing providential care but have, in fact, diminished such care to the detriment of human wellbeing and planetary health. From a Stoic perspective one ought to ask: How just, self-controlled, or wise is it to encroach upon and squeeze indigenous human communities and non-human populations (animals or plants) out of existence? How virtuous is it to value money over clean air and water?

Modern society's faith in neoclassical economics has propagated beliefs (e.g. economic growth is infinite on a finite planet) which, while not theological, are religious propositions. They are 'religious' in the sense that it is difficult to challenge the orthodoxy, even in the environmental discourse, which promotes the 'need' and 'sustainability' of infinite growth as a means to ensure wellbeing (Raworth 2017; Whiting, Konstantakos, Carrasco et al. 2018). Fewer positions could be further from what Zeno, Stoicism's founder, proposed in his *Republic*, which stated that the ideal city would have no monetary exchanges because its population would value virtue over accumulated wealth (Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.33-34). Arguably, the belief in the 'truth' or the 'science' behind economic rules such as supply and demand (prices) is even more widespread and universally shared than a belief in God (Harari 2016). Furthermore, while religious and anti-religious groups will almost certainly disagree about the existence and characteristics of God, any debate among them regarding the 'benefits' and 'ills' of neoclassical economics would be much more limited in scope, with any fervent opposition to the current economic model seen as a fringe, or even an irrational, position (Foster 2000).

If the argument against the Stoic God is that one cannot scientifically prove the existence of God, one must also acknowledge that a Stoic cannot scientifically prove that virtue is the only 'good' and vice the only 'bad' either. Furthermore, holding that 'virtue is the only good' neither immediately nor necessarily leads to the idea that humanity is behaving appropriately when taking care of the universal community, which includes the environment. That is not to say that all the Stoic 'proofs' for God are correct either. The following, for example, is a fallacy:

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> If the gods do not exist, nothing in the universe can be superior to humans, the only beings endowed with reason. But for any human being to believe that nothing is superior to his or herself is a sign of insane arrogance. There is then something superior to humankind. Therefore, the gods exist. (Chrysippus 112-20)[21]

While Stoicism has elements of religiosity or spirituality, it is not a faith. It does not call its practitioners to have a faith in science either. Instead, it calls Stoics to think and act virtuously, as their roles and the facts at hand dictate. To obtain facts, one must consistently observe reality and collect empirical evidence to aid such observations. The obtaining and interpretation of facts is not an end in and of itself but instead paramount to harmoniously striving for the 'good life.' Those who see the value in Stoic theology must, in order to operate coherently, appreciate that a science-based understanding of reality helps humanity to understand what is at stake should the climate break down, toxins enter rivers, and animal populations approach extinction. Taking the time to evaluate facts will help Stoics to distinguish true impressions from false ones. The facts themselves will not tell Stoics what they ought to do. A two-degree centigrade average rise of the global temperature, due to fossil fuel burning, is neither good nor bad per se. If the average global temperature were twenty degrees centigrade lower, then it is likely that many of us would be advocating for further fossil fuel extraction and use. In Stoicism, a practitioner is always called to ask whether an action would lead to justice or not; whether it would be wise or not. The facts alone will not provide the answer either way, it is reason that will.

Marcus Aurelius advocated the use of taking the 'view from above' in order to properly understand one's position and role in the world relative to the whole. In some respects, it is only by looking through a God (logocentric) shaped lens that one can fully appreciate what Marcus meant. Reflecting deeply on the universe's interdependent and interconnected web frees humankind to pursue truth based on respect for Nature. It also enables each of us to act in ways that acknowledge that we are all part of a limb that belongs to a much bigger animal – one that flourishes when we work together and withers when we do not. Is it possible that we could care for such an animal if we remove God from Stoicism? Perhaps. Maybe we could lean on our secularized norms and values? It is certainly possible, but why have faith in those?

Acknowledgements

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[21] As translated by Dragona-Monachou (1976).

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The Stoic Sage Does not Err: An Error?

Scott Aikin

Abstract: The Stoics held that the wise person does not err. This thesis was widely criticized in the ancient world and runs afoul of contemporary fallibilist views in epistemology. Was this view itself an error? On one line, the view can be modified to accommodate many of the critical lines against it. Some of these lines of modification are consistent with traditional Stoic value theory (for example, importing the notion of preferred indifferents into epistemic considerations). However, others require larger modifications to Stoic axiology (in particular, a revision of the equality of errors thesis). A version of the no errors thesis emerges as defensible against the criticisms of the view, but there is then the question as to whether it is an orthodox Stoicism.

Keywords: academic skepticism, epistemic deontology, infallibilism, Stoic epistemology, Stoicism.

The Stoics held that the wise person (*spoudaios/sophos/sapiens*) does not err. Call this the *No Errors Thesis* (NET)*.* Given that Stoicism is a form of cognitive clarification of human nature, the good, and how the world works, knowledge is the central player in such a story. False opinions are the prime explanation for vice and unhappiness. So the path toward virtue and happiness is through knowledge. Consequently, the NET seems clearly true: the wise, insofar as they are wise, do not err.

This tight piece of Stoic reasoning came under heavy criticism from the Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptics, and it is hard to see the view surviving these challenges in any robust form. Thus, it's worth asking: *Was it an error to say that the sage does not err?* My answer here is: *Yes and No.* On the face of it, this answer is cheating, but two distinctions from Stoic ethics (first, between progressors and sages, and second, between the simply indifferent and preferred indifferents) and a modification of another Stoic doctrine of the Equality of Errors will make this answer more palatable. My plan is to proceed as follows. First, I will motivate the Stoics' NET; second, I will present the ancient skeptical challenges. Third, I will motivate and outline the notions of progressors and preferred indifferents in Stoic ethics and make the case that there are epistemological counterparts to them. Fourth, I'll introduce a qualification to the Equality of Errors thesis. To close, I'll show that there are reasons internal to the Stoic tradition to say that the NET is right, and some reason to say it's wrong but revisable.[1]

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[1] This essay is an ambivalent contribution to the roughly named 'reformed Stoicism' movement, represented most prominently by Becker (1998) and Stankiewicz (2020). On the one hand, I see some revisions as salutary, especially those of taking Stoic ethics as free from implausible

Scott Aikin

1. Casting the NET

That the wise person does not err was a Stoic commonplace. Sextus Empiricus quotes one of Zeno of Citium's theological arguments:

> One may reasonably honor the gods; but those who are non-existent one may not reasonably honor; therefore, gods exist. (M 9.133)

The implicit premise here is that reasonable commitment is never in error – so, if one reasonably honors the gods, they must exist. Stobaeus directly reports:

> [The Stoics] say that the wise person (*ton sophon*) never makes a false supposition. (*Ecl*. 2.111.18)

Diogenes Laertius explicitly attributes the NET to the Stoics:

> [The Stoics] say that the wise person (*ton sophon*) will never form mere opinions, that is to say, he will never give assent to anything that is false. (DL 7.121)

Cicero, in setting the stage for the skeptical problem of the criterion, characterizes the Stoics as committed to the NET:

> Nothing is further from the picture we have of the seriousness of the wise person than error. (*Acad*. 2.66)

And Epictetus connects the NET to his project of self-perfection:

> Make beautiful your moral purpose, eradicate worthless and false opinions. (*Dis*. 3.1.43)

For Epictetus the consequences are clear: one must assent to the true and reject the false and suspend judgment with the uncertain – breaking this rule threatens one's wisdom (*Dis*. 1.28.2; 1.7.5).

There are two convergent Stoic arguments for the NET: from the ethics of assent and the other from moral cognitivism. The argument from the ethics of assent is that it is a misuse of the direction of the mind to assent to what is false – reason demands that we assent only to what is true. This is why Diogenes Laertius reports that Zeno held the wise person is the 'true dialectician,' who can discern the true from the false (DL 7.83). And Stobaeus reports that the Stoics held that hasty assent risks error and is a trait of the "incautious and base man and are not attributes of the man of ability who is perfect and virtuous." (*Anth.* 2.111.18) In short, we have an intellectual duty to avoid false commitment, so the wise suspend judgment with impressions that are not clearly true.

The argument from moral cognitivism runs that the source of moral error is cognitive error. We are virtuous only if our commitments about our actions are held rationally and are true. So the chief matter in becoming good person is to master the principles of judgment. Diogenes Laertius reports:

Stoic metaphysics. I am inclined less to think that Stoic epistemology and ethics are easily separable, and many of the arguments here depend on their deep ties.

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> Hasty judgment in assertions have an impact on events, so that those who are
> not well-exercised in handling presentations turn to unruliness and aimlessness.
> (DL 7.48)

In turn, passions of grief, despair, and anger are 'irrational mental contractions'
that impel unacceptable action (DL 7.111). Epictetus reasons:

> [T]he function of the good and excellent man is to deal with his impressions in
> accordance with nature. Now, just as it is the nature of every soul to assent to the
> true, dissent from the false, and to withhold judgment in a matter of uncertainty,
> so it is its nature to be moved by desire toward the good, with an aversion toward
> the evil, and feel neutral about what is neither. (*Dis.* 3.3.2)

And Seneca outlines the connection between correct judgment and living properly:
"Virtue is nothing else but right reason," (*Ep.* 66.33) and the corollary that vice and
misery are a consequence of error (*Ep.* 78.14). [2] The lesson of Stoic ethical
cognitivism is that, since ethical success is predicated on cognitive success, the
truly virtuous by necessity assent only to the true.

The convergence of the arguments from ethics of assent and moral
cognitivism yields a clear motive for the Stoic NET. In this context, it is useful to
place the NET among the famous Stoic paradoxes as another item of Stoic
contemplation and revelation. That is, the familiar paradoxes, such as that only the
wise person is rich, happy, or a real friend, or that virtue is sufficient for happiness,
are all stark statements of Stoic value theory. One holds them and thinks them
through as a Stoic cognitive exercise of clarity. One rekindles the dogmata in
considering and understanding them.[3] The NET is another of the Stoic paradoxes.

2. Kataleptic Impressions and Skeptical Critique

The Stoics were committed to the NET. How, then, did they think they could
pursue this end of making no errors? The answer was to propose a criterion of
truth, that of *kataleptic impressions.* Of our impressions, some are true and some
false. Of those that are true, there is a subset that are of a special epistemic quality.
Diogenes Laertius reports the Stoics' account of them as follows:

> The presentation meant is that which comes from a real object, agrees with that
> object, and has been stamped, imprinted, and pressed seal-fashion on the soul,
> as would not be the case if it came from an unreal object. (DL 7.51)

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[2] For accounts of Stoic moral cognitivism, see Long (2004), Brennan (2005), Stephens (2007
and 2020), Irvine (2019), MacGillivray (2020), and Klein (2020). Sellars (2006) complicates this
picture, as he holds that there is a parallel tradition of *training* necessary for the full
development of the Stoic virtues. But even with this addition, right reason is still necessary.

[3] See Seneca's *De Providentia* 4.6 and Epictetus's *Enchiridion* 52 for examples of other under-
appreciated paradoxa, such as that the wise surpass the gods in achieving wisdom and that
philosophical progress has its own self-undercutting problems. I spend some time on them in
my 2017 and 2020a. See Holowchak (2008) for the case that the paradoxa are central features
of the Stoic tradition.

Kataleptic impressions, then, have four defining characteristics:

(i) They are caused by existing things.

(ii) They accurately represent their source objects.

(iii) They are impressions stamped on minds.

(iv) They are such that they could not have come from what does not exist.

Conditions (i) and (ii) make it so that kataleptic impressions are true of what they are of and from. Condition (iii) makes it so that they are accessible to the minds of inquirers, and (iv) provides their *infallibility.* It is the modal element of this condition (iv) that, on the one hand, provides the tools for the sure criterion of truth for the wise. But, on the other hand, it makes the notion of kataleptic impressions open to skeptical challenge.

How kataleptic impressions provide the tools living up to the NET is not difficult to see: the wise assent only to kataleptic impressions. This guarantees that they will never have false opinions, and what commitments they have will be true. Moreover, not only will they be true, but they, given the modal requirement of kataleptic impressions in (iv) above, they *cannot* be false. And once one has aggregated a number of kataleptically-grounded commitments, an architecture of knowledge may be erected on that foundation.

It was at this foundation that skeptical critique chipped. The challenge was simply the question: *are there ever impressions that cannot be wrong*? Recall that requirement (iv) of kataleptic impressions is a modal requirement – that it is *not possible* that they could come from what they are not of. But it seems that *any* impression has that possibility. Think of your best friend, Greg. If Greg had an identical twin, Frank, it would be impossible for you tell them apart. No impression you have of Greg can be kataleptic. So, all it takes is for it to be possible for Greg to have a twin for your impressions of him not to be kataleptic. This is true for any object of your attention – think of a possible but practically indistinguishable other object, and you have a reason to hold that condition (iv) does not obtain for your impressions.[4] Further, gods can trick or manipulate us and our experiences, as Hera does Herakles, tricking him into attacking his own children (*Acad.* 2.89 and Sextus's M 7.405). So long as any of those possibilities obtain for our impressions, it seems that condition (iv) does not obtain for them. So they cannot be *kataleptic.* But since it's clear that these are possibilities for all our impressions, none can be *kataleptic.*

The Stoic ancient answer was to meet the skeptical challenge head-on and argue that there, in fact, *are* kataleptic impressions. Parents of twins can tell them apart, and many can, with training, acquire very sensitive capacities with

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[4] This was the line of argument from the Academy in Cicero's *Academica* 2.56 and from the Pyrrhonists in Sextus Empricus's *Against the Logicians* M 7.409. For accounts of the dialectic between Stoic epistemology and the skeptics, see the following: Frede (1983), Reed (2002), Hankinson (2003), Hensley (2020), and Aikin (2020b).

complicated phenomena. All one needs is time and patience, and the capacity to identify kataleptic impressions is within our reach. And we, with a life of experiences, can build a system of kataleptic impressions to yield something like wisdom. This was the ambitious epistemological program proposed by Antiochus of Ascalon, and Cicero outlines it in his *Academica*. The near universal response to Antiochus was that the program was not within the power of any human to achieve with the breadth of items that are needed for wisdom. In short, such a foundation can be built, but it is unlikely to be broad enough to build much upon.

The second ancient reaction to the challenge was a mixed Academic-Stoic tradition, one that maintained that the wise do not err, *but they do so by not assenting to anything.* Cicero attributes it to the Academic Arcesilaus after his conversations with Zeno:

> [H]e thought that we shouldn't assert or affirm anything, or approve it with assent: we should always curb our rashness and restrain ourselves from any slip. But he considered it particularly rash to approve anything false or unknown, because nothing was more shameful than for one's assent or approval to outrun knowledge or apprehension. (*Acad.* 1.44)

In essence, Cicero argues that a philosopher, in taking the Stoic's principles to heart, *can* maintain the NET – but *by becoming a skeptic.*[5] Of course, this view saves the Stoic NET, but it does so by jettisoning the rest of Stoicism, since the NET was supposed to be something that ensured what survived its critical scrutiny would be worth living by, and this was supposed to be the Stoic *dogmata*. The problem, as Saint Augustine of Hippo observed in his *Contra Academicos*, is that if wisdom is now simply not making errors by not assenting to anything, it is not so much the kind of wisdom we'd sought in the first place (CA 3.4.80).

The result, as revealed by the ancient controversies, is that Stoicism's No Errors thesis and the epistemology it necessitated was not only under significant scrutiny, but it was considered, perhaps, an error itself. Cicero, himself, expresses deep sympathy with the Stoic philosophical program and he integrates its insights about ethics and metaphysics in his own thought. But he decides he cannot be a Stoic, because the demands of certainty necessitated by the Stoa are not ones he thinks he can achieve (*Academica* 2.66; *De Officiis* 1.2.6; *De Natura Deorum* 3.95). At this stage, it appears that Stoicism's NET is an error. However, I think there is a path forward for saving a qualified version of NET with two concepts from Stoic value theory, those of *preferred indifferents* and *progressors,* and by modifying the Stoic paradox of the Equality of all Errors.

3. Progressors and Preferred Indifferents

Stoicism is thick with stark contrasts. Two of regular vexation are (a) the paradox that there are only two kinds of people, the wise and the mad (Cicero, *Paradoxa*

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[5] Harald Thorsrud (2009) has argued that the best approach to interpreting Academic skeptical arguments is as posed internal to the Stoic program.

Stoicorum 77), and (b) the fundamental divide between what is up to us and what is not, the former being the things of moral importance, and the latter being things of moral indifference (exemplary for this distinction is Epictetus's *Enchiridion* 1). The problem for Stoics was that these stark divisions were perhaps *too stark*. Surely of those who are not wise, some are doing better than others. The Stoic analogy is that those who are not wise are like those drowning – they are under the water's surface, and so whether it is one inch or a mile, they cannot breathe. The reply is that though they are all under the metaphorical water's surface, there are those who are swimming toward the surface instead of sinking deeper. Call them *progressors*. They are not wise, but they are taking steps to correct their foolishness.

Of the things not up to us, the indifferents, there are many things that can help us do our duties more effectively than others. Health, for example, allows one to be attentive and active, whereas illness prevents that. Wealth, too, provides one with opportunities to provide for those who are dependents; whereas poverty prevents that. Though these things should be, overall, items of our moral indifference, it is appropriate to prefer one to another, given the role they play in a life of active virtue. So, there are *preferred indifferents*.

Stoicism's stark contrasts yield reason to propose these nuanced third categories that allow for some flexibility and movement to the Stoic program. And so, Epictetus' *Enchiridion* is written not for sages, but for those 'making progress.' (*Ench.* 13) And it directs these progressors in planning and managing matters in their lives to "make use of impulse and its contrary, rejection, though with reservation, lightly, and without straining." (*Ench.* 2) Epictetus's audience is that of fallible, unwise folk who strive to improve. And so, too, Seneca writes to Lucilius, an Epicurean-curious friend, in need of reminders to do better (*Ep.* 2.6). The result is that Stoicism offers concepts for the non-ideal practitioner, but those concepts surveyed arise purely within the domain of ethics. I propose there are analogous notions on the epistemic side.

4. Truth and Epistemic Duty

Diogenes Laertius reports that Sphaerus of Bosporus travelled to Alexandria to visit King Ptolemy. Ptolemy was aware of the No Errors thesis and Sphaerus confirmed that the wise assent to no false propositions. Ptolemy put him to the test – he had *wax pomegranates* brought to the table. Sphaerus reached out to take one, and Ptolemy cried out, "You have given your assent to a presentation that is false!" Sphaerus replied:

> I assented not to the proposition that they were pomegranates, but to another, that there are good grounds for thinking them to be pomegranates. Certainty of presentation and reasonable probability are two totally different things. (DL 7.177)

Notice that the case has exactly the same form as the indiscernibility problems posed by the Academics – that the impression is (practically) indistinguishable between true and false instances. One option for Sphaerus could have been to reply:

> You got me, King Ptolmey. But this isn't proof that the wise do not err, only proof *that I'm not wise*. I am only a progressor, and I make lots of errors. I'm working on it, so thanks for the reminder. In fact, it shows that a wiser version of me – one who is *really wise* – doesn't err, right?

That would be doubling down on the aspirationalist line with the NET. But Sphaerus didn't say that, but rather introduces a *third class* of presentations, the reasonable. The difference is between (a) a certain presentation and commitment *that these are pomegranates* and (b) a presentation that makes it so that one can hold *that it's reasonable that these are pomegranates.* Assenting to (b) still allows Sphaerus to act and reach out. And further, Sphaerus discovers that the initial impression was false, and it is by way of other, coordinating, impressions. Ptolemy points and laughs, the pomegranate is waxy and does not smell sweet. Sphaerus learned something in the process and came to see that they were not pomegranates, but carved wax.

There is an epistemic intermediate for the ethical intermediate of those making progress, that of assenting to what is *reasonable* and being open to correction in the process. And with this, there are two goods we discover in the process. There, first, is the good of achieving the truth over time – Sphaerus makes his correction *because of his fallible assent and his actions.* Only because he had the initial false impression and assented to what it reasonably supported and then discovered that the impression was false did he correct it and then ascertain the truth. And, second, there is the good even in the initial assent – he nevertheless assented to something *reasonable.* The wax fruit *looked like pomegranates,* so he assented to it being reasonable that they are *pomegranates*, not that they were apples or books. The impression was enough for that purpose, but not for the purpose of excluding carefully carved wax. The same might be said for many other skeptically indiscernible cases; and so, the impression of your best friend Greg approaching may not be sufficient to distinguish him from his (possible) twin, Frank. But it is enough to distinguish him from your worst enemy, a bus, or a pile of leaves. That's not nothing.

Let us return to the moral concepts to make this case clearer. Consider a Stoic exemplar, Cato the Younger. His army was defeated in battle twice – once at Pharsalus, then later at Utica. In both instances, he pursued his Stoic civic duty of defending the Republic. Though he failed to win the battles, he nevertheless succeeded. The ends of Cato's actions were to preserve the Republic and also to do his duty in pursuing that goal. He can be thwarted in the first. Julius Caesar and his legions saw to that. In the second, as Seneca puts it:

> Cato could not be defeated though his party met defeat; was not this goodness of his equal to that which would have been his if he had returned victorious to his native land and arranged a peace? (*Ep.* 71.8)

Winning the battles, a successful defense of the Republic, those for Cato were *preferred indifferents*. Doing his duty to the state and to those around him, those were the things within Cato's powers, and those are the things that we praise Cato for. He cannot be thwarted in his performance of those duties by others or by fate. Even if he loses those battles.

Returning to Sphaerus, an analogous line can be taken. It is Sphaerus's activity that is within his own control, and he pursues the end of truth by way of reasonable paths to it. Those paths can be thwarted – just as Cato's were thwarted by Caesar and his legions, Sphaerus's path to truth was thwarted by Ptolemy and his carved wax.

Sarah Wright has recently proposed a form of Stoic fallibilism based on the thought that we can think, in these cases, that 'truth is a preferred indifferent.' (2012, 123) Stoic ethics is a deontological attitude that holds that the moral good is solely in the duty done, not in the consequences. So, too, Stoic epistemology may be supplemented with this thought, that there is one epistemic duty under one's control, but one cannot control those outcomes of whether one has the truth or not. And so, we may give credit for doing one's epistemic best, even when one's results are false beliefs. Wright asks us to consider an analogy with archery, a *stochastic* practice with two constituent goods, a *telos* and a *skopos.* The *telos* of archery is developing the skills of expert archers; the *skopos* of archery is that of hitting the target. Notice that these ends are not identical, as expert archers may miss (due to, for example, a gust of wind or a broken arrow) and non-expert archers may hit the target by luck. The *skopos* in these enterprises, Wright notes, is beyond the full control of the practitioner, but the *telos* is entirely within their control (2013, 270). Credit is a matter of identifying the skill in the act – identifying a shot as *lucky* is a way of saying that it was successful, but not crediting the agent with success.[6] The result, as Wright sees it, is that a properly Stoic epistemology is one wherein "we limit our evaluations to the epistemic act itself, and not include the outcome or success of that act." (2013, 273)

Returning to the Sphaerus case, we may ask: *is being fooled by wax fruit enough to show that Sphaerus is not wise?* Was it, properly considered, *an error*? We are now in a position to appreciate the insight of Sphaerus's reply, one that does not concede he is not wise but of invoking the reasonability of his judgment. Wright's take on this is that we can see how there is not a problem with the sage being fooled, as it can be addressed with a fallibilist Stoic epistemology (2012,

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[6] It should be noted that achieving the skill of a practice and achieving the objectives of the practice are not identical, they are nevertheless internally related. It is hard to think of an agent having developed a high degree of skill at a practice who has a poor record of successes. Expert archers usually hit their targets. See Christiana Olfert's (2020) overview of the later Hellenistic controversies over the connection between trying one's best and success.

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116). The result, then, is that, given this revision, the Stoics have a way of keeping the NET, but what is necessary is clarity on what the errors are and are not.

5. Qualifying the No Errors Thesis

A qualified version of the NET can be developed from this critical and reconstructive line of argument. However, it will require some other revisions, but they are tolerable within a broader qualified Stoic program. Let's start with an axiological principle in need of revision. I will then turn to the qualified No Errors thesis.

  One of the curious theses of Stoic value theory is the famous paradox that all sins are equal. Call this the *Equality of Error* thesis (hereafter, EET). Diogenes Laertius reports Chrysippus reasoning that just as one truth is not *more true* than another or one falsehood *more false* than another, no virtue is better than another and no sin is any worse than another (DL 7.120). And again, just as sticks are straight or not – there are no degrees of justice or injustice, virtue or vice (DL 7.127). Cicero reports this as the third of the *Paradoxa Stoicorum* – that all transgressions are equal (20). And so, on the EET, any error is enough to stain one's character. Given this thesis and ethical cognitivism, we can see a direct line to the No Errors thesis about the wise. From a perspective internal to the Stoic system, they are identical.

  Marcus Aurelius is an outlier on the EET. He approvingly notes that the Aristotelian Theophrastus held that moral errors committed out of pursuit of pleasure are worse than those done out of anger or pain, "as the angry man is more like a victim […] the other man rushes into wrongdoing on his own." (M 2.10) There is an appreciable *magnitude* of error – that some are worse than others. One's spouse arrives home late. This can provoke an unpleasant tone of voice and curtness on their arrival or throwing all their belongings into the yard. One's impatience with a student's selfishness can be in the form of delaying an email reply or simply failing the student in the course. None of these reactions would be virtuous by Stoic lights, but it seems right that some slips are more momentous than others. For sure, *all cases of hitting the mark are alike, but it does not follow that all cases of missing it are alike.* In archery, there are cases of the bullseye and then there is what's not, but surely misses that are only an inch off are different from those over the target and into the woods or, more egregiously, into one's foot. Some misses are just worse than others, as some moral errors are worse.

  Wright's proposal, on the cognitive level, is that there is a difference between *being fooled* and *being befooled*. Sphaerus was *fooled*, as he was given what was otherwise good sensory evidence, but he got a false commitment on its basis. He followed what was reasonable, as he had no antecedent reasons to doubt his inference from this appearance. To be *befooled,* however, is to exhibit a kind of credulity or willful refusal to follow one's evidence. Wright's example is from the tale of "How Boots Befooled the King." Boots convinces the king's counselor that he has a bag of wisdom. If the counselor were to climb into the bag, he would be

granted boundless knowledge. What an amazing offer! The counsel promptly climbs in, and Boots wraps him up. And thereby, he did not simply *fool* the counsel, but he *befooled* him. He revealed that the counsel was "lacking a kind of basic understanding of the world that one ought to have, given one's experiences." (2012, 114) Climbing into a bag will not confer wisdom, and to believe that one could gain wisdom by climbing into a bag is an indicator that one is not wise. So, it's clear that there are errors that indicate that one is not wise.

The relevant contrast is the following: assuming that there are errors of different magnitude, that between *being fooled* and *being befooled,* it is possible to *be fooled* without jeopardizing one's wisdom. Consider the following. Imagine a practical joke on Socrates with one of his friends dressing up as Xanthippe, wig and all, to tell him that he needs to come home for dinner amidst an involved philosophical conversation. If he mistakes the imposter for his wife, this would not make him unwise. We might imagine, similarly, Cato surveying his formidable army before the battle of Pharsalus and expecting that he will win the day. Though he was wrong, he was not foolish in thinking so, and we would not think that his false belief undoes his wisdom. And then there is being befooled, which might take the form of Socrates believing that he would be able to hop into Crito's wagon and steal away from Athens before his execution and be able to practice philosophy as he had before. Or we can imagine Cato believing that if he prayed hard enough and did the right sacrifices, Aeneas, Romulus, and a host of Rome's honored fallen warriors would rise from their graves, join his army at Pharsalus, defeat Caesar, and save the Republic. Such lunacy would obliterate any pretense of wisdom by demonstrating a fundamental failure to grasp how the world works.

This distinction between being fooled and being befooled seems intuitive enough. However, there is a more significant issue to be addressed here: the fooled/befooled distinction bears on empirical and contingent facts, not on principles of how one ought to live. So, for sure, there are errors, and some empirical errors are worse than others to the point where they impugn one's status as wise, but it seems possible for one to have all the facts of the world right but still be unwise. One can err about the norms.

Imagine the following. Just before the battle of Pharsalus, Cato sees that the Republican cause is lost. To save his skin, he turns his sword on the others opposing Caesar. He's right *on the facts about the winning side*, but he's wrong about loyalty and the political principles at stake. Socrates can see that the vote at his trial will go against him, so he asks his rich friends to bribe the jury and to poison his accusers the night before the big day. Seneca sees correctly that Nero will never be virtuous, and he knows that his virtue will irritate the emperor. So he renounces philosophy and becomes Nero's favorite *bon vivant* and yes-man. Here, errors are not so much failings to understand the world and how it works, but perhaps arise from understanding all too well how the world works. They are rather errors that impugn the wisdom and virtue of these (counter-factual) characters. So, orthogonal to Wright's distinction between *being fooled* and *being*

befooled, there are errors of moral judgment that are *of magnitude* and ones that are not.

Errors of moral magnitude are those that are serious breaches of moral norms. Those not of magnitude have negligible moral consequence. Consider the failure to express gratitude. Such a failure is arguably a moral error, but what makes it arguable is the magnitude of the error. It is certainly an error, but it is a *slight* error, one easily forgivable. Alternately, consider the error of not keeping one's word when others depend on one's fidelity. This is certainly a moral error, and it is one we might hold is central to our social natures. Finally, consider the error of not caring when an error has been correctly pointed out, a kind of *meta-error.* Perhaps, returning to the failure to express gratitude – there would be an added error, and one of magnitude, if the person who failed to express gratitude, upon being presented with the fact of that error, said they did not care. It seems that taking steps to redress and repair the error is a constitutive moral requirement – to fail that repair would not only be an error, but it is one that reveals a deeper flaw of character. And so, consider Cato, now after the Battle of Utica. He asks a colleague to bring his sword so that he may do his bloody duty. The colleague brings the sword, but Cato fails to thank him, perhaps because he is steeling himself for the deed to come. This seems an error, but one that we can say does not mar Cato's status as wise. Further, if the error were brought to his attention, Cato may pause to call the colleague back to properly thank him.

The NET can now be re-cast with these two distinctions. The wise do not err in the sense that their errors (a) do not result from significant failures to understand the world on the evidence they have, and (b) are not moral errors of magnitude. The wise can err if those errors are those arising from misleading empirical evidence or are errors of minor moral magnitude. And so, a person would fail to be wise if she were to harbor baseless assumptions about government cabals or if she were to be in error that she is free to pursue her own desires without consideration of others and their needs. And she would be unwise if she were to err in some way (even minor), and, upon discovering it, did not try to make restitution and repair. But it seems that the wise can err with misleading or complicated empirical matters without their wisdom being imperiled. And they may make slight moral errors, so long as, once recognized, they promptly correct them. What these moral errors are can remain indeterminate for our purposes, so long as this class can be populated in principle. Perhaps it could be failing to express proper gratitude or caring for oneself insufficiently amidst doing one's duty to others. It could be in over-committing oneself to more than one can reasonably manage. Seneca articulates a similar view, that the wise may yet err, as we are limited and incomplete things:

> Whoever it may be, let us say to ourselves on his [the person who erred] behalf that even the wisest of men have many faults, that no man is so guarded that he does not let his diligence lapse, none so seasoned that accident does not drive his composure into some hot-headed action, none so fearful of giving offence that he

> does not stumble into it while seeking to avoid it [...]. If the wisest do wrong, whose sin will not have good excuse? (*De Ira* 3. 24.4-25.2)

The reasoning is for the sake of forgiving errors in those who are not wise, but Seneca's premise is that the wisest err, too. These errors do not make it so that they are not wise, but this is precisely because they work to mitigate them. Sometimes these errors even arise from virtues. But since the wise err, so Seneca reasons, we should be more forgiving. And, for our purposes, the important lesson is that *the wise do err.*

6. Yes and No

I have argued that the NET was an error, but, properly qualified, it is not an error. Stoic wisdom and virtue are predicated on cognitive success, so cognitive failure threatens those goals. However, the means to that success admit of significant skeptical challenge. Consequently, the virtue and wisdom it makes possible is put in jeopardy. I've argued here that with concepts from Stoic ethics (those of *preferred indifferents* and *progressors*) and a modification of the Equal Errors thesis, the No Errors thesis can be qualified to keep to its original spirit. The wise person does not err in ways that either arise from significant distortions of what her evidence supports or is an error of moral magnitude. So long as the domain of relevant errors is restricted, the No Errors thesis can be revised to keep with the aspiration that motivated it.

The No Errors thesis, if unqualified, is an error. If qualified, it is not an error. So is the No Errors thesis an error? Given this arrangement of points, the answer is: Yes and No. The appeal of the qualified version is that it is amenable to the notion of intellectual progress, as one may enact one's wisdom in making corrections. So there is a sense that progressors, too, exhibit a kind of wisdom so long as it is directed at the ideal of becoming completely wise. Sphaerus's false belief is corrected in the process, and Cato's (hypothetical) failure of gratitude is corrected as he comes to be aware of it – part of (progressor's) wisdom is making corrections. But this point with the qualified version of the No Errors thesis concedes that *errors, when made explicit, are not tolerable by the wise.* These errors must be corrected – though we may forgive them for their errors, they must correct them and eliminate them. Even a qualified NET seems to put us on an aspirationalist path behind the unqualified NET. In making the corrections they do, our exemplars of wisdom must see themselves as incompletely wise – even if their errors are small and correctable.[7] They must see their errors as errors of the

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[7] It is for this reason that René Brouwer (2014) holds that it is likely the case that there were Stoic sages, but they did not see themselves as sages. Socrates is exemplary, as he held himself to be ignorant, and disavowed wisdom. The insight here may license a stronger thesis, that the wise, on the view here, may *never* see themselves as wise. Brian Johnson's (2014) case is that it is best, in light of these difficulties, to focus on progressors, since it seems that it's *our* only option, but maybe even sages must take this perspective, too.

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sort that must be corrected, and they resolve not to be fooled again in the future. Sphaerus will think twice about fruit offered by Ptolemy, and Cato will guard himself against failing to acknowledge help. Seen from this perspective *internal to the practitioner of Stoicism*, the qualified NET is simply doubletalk. What else is a failure to achieve what one is supposed to achieve and that stands in need of correction but an error? Qualifying the No Errors thesis, in the end, makes it no longer the *No Errors* thesis.

The No Errors thesis, as I see it, is one of many Stoic Paradoxa. It is a stark and uncompromising principle of a stark and uncompromising system. There are means of making it less stark and more compromising, but these qualifications require broader internal revision of the Stoic system. And even then, it seems the unqualified view must still be an organizing commitment of those practicing it. By my estimate, the No Errors thesis is an error if and only if Stoicism itself is an error. Whether the uncompromising, unqualified principle and the philosophy it animates or its compromising and qualified counterpart is more appealing may ultimately depend on whether the latter remains recognizable as Stoicism.

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Prohairesis and a Stoic-Inspired Feminist Autonomy

Emily McGill

Abstract: The idea that the ancient Stoics are (proto)feminists is relatively common. Even those critical of this position acknowledge that certain features of Stoicism render the philosophical program appropriate for a feminist reimagining. Yet less attention has been paid to developing a positive theory of Stoic feminism. I begin this task by outlining Stoic insights for a feminist conception of personal autonomy. I argue that, present in the Stoic doctrine of *prohairesis*, we find a dual conception of personal autonomy according to which socially constructed selves maintain an individualist autonomy. This individualist view of autonomy is in line with Stoic compatibilism about freedom and selfhood, which I use as structural analogies to motivate my account. I then highlight potential feminist payoffs of a Stoic-inspired view, particularly for the contemporary feminist debate about autonomy under oppression.

Keywords: autonomy, Epictetus, feminism, oppression, *prohairesis*, Stoicism.

Introduction

Relational autonomy is a collection of theories designed to take seriously a feminist idea that both selfhood and autonomy are socially constructed. Traditional accounts of autonomy are dismissed because they presuppose an individualistic conception of the self, and because they posit an individualistic, rationalistic, and masculinist conception of autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 3). This former claim arises in part because the character ideal of a perfectly autonomous man has been someone who is wholly self-made and independent from social relationships, and in part because the attribution of autonomy has typically required that selves are atomistic, isolated individuals (cf. Code 2000). The latter claim arises because of the *internalist* nature of mainstream accounts of autonomy. Internalist accounts define autonomy by appealing to internal features of persons; agents' preferences, beliefs, and actions are autonomous based on their psychological states, and specifically by the processes through which they come to form or undertake these preferences, beliefs, and actions.

The problem with both types of individualism, according to relational autonomy theorists, is that they prevent an accurate understanding of the social realities of marginalized and oppressed groups. Specifically, they cannot account for the ways that oppression threatens autonomy. Instead, relational autonomy theorists hold that autonomy is partially constituted by social circumstances rather than just by internal psychological states. They embrace a type of view called *externalism*, according to which social relationships make up at least part of

what it means to be autonomous. A key motivation for relational theories of autonomy, then, is that social accounts of selfhood and autonomy can better conceptualize and work to eliminate oppression. Theories of relational autonomy are therefore *pure social* views of personal autonomy: both the self and autonomy are socially constituted.

However, I believe it is possible to build an internalist conception of personal autonomy without denying the social nature of selves or the causal impact of social relationships on autonomy. We can call this a *dual* conception of personal autonomy because it denies the central intuition of pure social views – that both selfhood and autonomy must be socially constructed in order to build a distinctly feminist account of autonomy.

Motivation for such a dual view can be found in ancient Stoicism. In fact, dual views of other phenomena arise across the Stoic program. Their view of freedom maintains that we are both determined and free, and their view of selfhood holds that we have both individual and socially constructed identities; they are *compatibilists* in both arenas. I consider the implications of embracing a similar sort of compatibilism about personal autonomy. Using the Stoics' views of both freedom and identity as structural analogies, and drawing from Epictetus' discussion of *prohairesis*, I outline Stoic insights for a feminist conception of personal autonomy – a compatibilist project that acknowledges the social nature of selves while maintaining an individualism, or internalism, about autonomy.

Though a Stoic-inspired account of autonomy would be internalist, I argue that there are potential payoffs for the contemporary feminist debate about autonomy under oppression; the structure of Stoic compatibilism thus provides an avenue of response for feminists who wish to question pure social accounts of autonomy. The Stoic insights I outline can therefore apply to a robustly feminist theory of autonomy. I see this project as an extension of arguments which hold that the Stoics are feminists (Hill 2001, 2020; Grahn-Wilder 2018), or at least that Stoicism as a program is compatible with feminism (Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014). Taking these arguments seriously, I offer one small piece of a positive theory of Stoic feminism. While I will ground my discussion in Stoic texts, including especially the works of Epictetus, this paper is not primarily an exegetical project; rather, I enter the discussion as a contemporary Stoic examining how these ancient texts might provide a new angle from which to examine current debates in feminist autonomy.[1]

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[1] Here I follow Seneca: "Will I not walk in the footsteps of my predecessors? I will indeed use the ancient road – but if I find another route that is more direct and has fewer ups and downs, I will stake out that one. Those who advanced these doctrines before us are not our masters but our guides. The truth lies open to all; it has not yet been taken over. Much is left also for those yet to come." (*Ep*. 33.11; Stephens 2020, 22)

1. Epictetus on *Prohairesis*

The first step in highlighting Stoic insights for feminist autonomy is to understand how autonomy functions within Stoic ethics. To this end, I outline the concept of *prohairesis* as employed by Epictetus.[2] I believe we have reason to understand *prohairesis* as a sort of personal autonomy, so I will motivate this reading by providing a brief overview of the concept and connecting it to contemporary discussions of autonomy. Despite some difficulties with constructing a robust account of Stoic autonomy, there are philosophical and interpretive benefits for reading *prohairesis* in broadly this way, especially as contemporary Stoics keen to apply Stoic principles to current philosophical debates.[3]

A key distinction for Epictetus is that between what is up to us and what is not up to us. Things that are up to us include "conception, choice, desire, aversion, and, in a word, everything that is our own doing." (E1)[4] Also within our control are our power of assent and how we use impressions (D II.18). Things that are not up to us include whatever is not wholly within our power, including "our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything that is not our own doing." (E1) This distinction between up to us and not up to us tracks the difference between internals and externals. Epictetus calls internals those things that are within our sphere of control, while externals fall outside of it. Externals, or things that are not up to us, should not bother or hinder us, Epictetus argues; the only things that should concern us are internals – those things which are up to us. Ideally, we will learn that only internals are the site of moral value (D II.1), and regard externals as mere indifferents.[5]

For Epictetus, *prohairesis* is something that is up to us. In fact, it is the quintessential internal; at times, Epictetus argues that *only* our *prohairesis* is within our control (D II.15.1). While we do not have power over the way that impressions impact us, we can determine for ourselves how we react to these impressions, how we form judgments based upon them, and whether or not we assent to them. All of these matters are determined by *prohairesis*, which tells us what to desire and believe as well as how to act (D II.23). Because *prohairesis* is quintessentially within our control, Epictetus likens it to our inner self, true self, or "the 'I' of personal identity." (Kahn 1988, 253) It is the seat of our personal autonomy; it helps make up who we are and determines how we act in the world.

Despite the central importance of *prohairesis* within Epictetan ethics, there is disagreement about how it is best translated. Various translations include 'volition;' (Long 2004; Stephens 2007) 'the will' or 'free will;' (Dobbin 1991; Frede

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[2] I limit my discussion of *prohairesis* to Epictetus due to the central role it plays in his ethics, and to the lack of this concept in other (especially early) Stoics (Kahn 1988; Dobbin 1991) – although there is a connection to Panaetius.

[3] Thanks to Jonathan Trerise for pressing me on this point.

[4] I use Oldfather's translation of Epictetus throughout.

[5] For a detailed discussion of Epictetus' arguments regarding why we should only seek internals, see Stephens 2007, 10-16.

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2011) and 'moral purpose,' (Oldfather 1998) 'moral choice,' (Kahn 1988) [6] or 'good moral character.' (Hill 2020) But, in many discussions, *prohairesis* is also linked to personal autonomy by use of the terms autonomy or agency in its description (Dobbin 1991, 121-2; Stephens 2007, 18; Frede 2011, 80). [7] For example, Dobbin notes in his discussion of *prohairesis* that "Epictetus writes from the internal perspective, in describing man's unmistakable sense of personal autonomy," (1991, 121-2) and Stephens indicates that, for Epictetus, our *prohairesis* gives us "complete autonomy regarding things 'up to [us].'" (2007, 18) This indicates a tight connection between *prohairesis* and our current understanding of personal autonomy.

In fact, Epictetus' language about *prohairesis* is strikingly similar to contemporary discourse about personal autonomy. *Prohairesis* is something that gives us the power to choose between options (*Simpl.* 6.38-9). It is an internal power of persons, and as the source of our true selves, mimics mainstream ideas about autonomy as an inner citadel that helps define who we are as individuals (cf. Christman 1989, 3). [8] The association between autonomy and our inner selves aligns Epictetus with internalist accounts of autonomy, which similarly hold that our autonomy is constituted by internal psychological states or processes. I return to this point below.

Epictetus' insistence that *prohairesis* is a capacity also mimics current discussions of personal autonomy. He suggests in several places that our *prohairesis* is an invincible power, "free, unhindered, and unimpeded." (E1) He argues, for example, that externals cannot in themselves corrupt our *prohairesis*; only our own autonomy can do this (D I.19; I.29). This is consistent with the Stoic view that the virtuous person is invulnerable to harm. We should read his insistence as the setting out of an *ideal* or a *capacity*. In practice it is not the case that our autonomy will always remain unthwarted by externals. As an ideal, *prohairesis* may be "free, unhindered, and unimpeded," (E1) but, in practice, we often have to respond to externals that impact us in ways that both align with this ideal and depart from it. Many contemporary autonomy theorists similarly understand autonomy as an ideal (cf. Oshana 2006), even though non-ideal circumstances might impact the way we exercise our autonomy (Khader 2020).

[6] In Kahn, *prohairesis* as moral choice is linked to the will and to Seneca's use of *voluntas* (1988, 253-4). In Dobbin it is connected to Cicero's use of the same term (1991, 122).
[7] It is also sometimes linked to freedom, or even to freedom and autonomy together, as if these terms referred to the same concept. I think we have reason to believe that the Stoics understand *prohairesis* as distinct from freedom (*eleutheria*) (Bobzien 1998), at least in part because they utilize separate terms for each. While freedom and autonomy are adjacent concepts, they are not identical. This is complicated by the fact that, in English, we often use the terms interchangeably, and that the two concepts are often linked (Kahn 1988, 235; Bobzien 1998, 330-331).
[8] Even feminists who critique the inner citadel model can accept that personal autonomy helps define who we are. Mackenzie and Stoljar, for example, argue that autonomy is 'the defining characteristic of free moral agents.' (2000, 5)

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This idea that autonomy is a capacity we *possess* that we may sometimes struggle to *exercise* is present in Epictetus as well (cf. *Simpl.* 10.10-20).

But how, specifically, can we use the concept of *prohairesis* to inspire a contemporary theory of feminist autonomy? To answer this question, I turn to a discussion of the Stoics' compatibilist views of freedom and personal identity.

2. Dual Freedom

The Stoics are causal determinists, believing that everything in the universe is governed by fate. However, they also want to make room for moral responsibility, which requires that humans are to some extent free. This combination of views renders the Stoics compatibilists. One way to understand Stoic compatibilism is by appealing to their arguments about causation. In this section, I present a very brief overview of Stoic causal theory and then explain the implications for my argument that this view can serve as a structural analogy for a theory of personal autonomy.[9]

Consider an analogy drawn by Chrysippus between our character and a rolling cylinder (Cic. *Fat.* 42–3). The cylinder's rolling is caused by two things: an initial push that begins the cylinder's path, and an innate disposition of the cylinder toward rollability. The initial push, coming from an external source, is a necessary condition for the cylinder's movement. While the push is necessary, it is not sufficient. The innate disposition toward rollability, occurring within the cylinder itself, is what ultimately causes the cylinder to move; were the cylinder to possess a different disposition, even an external push would not compel it to roll. The external push is analogous to what the Stoics call antecedent causes of human action,[10] while the innate disposition is analogous to perfect causes (Cic. *Fat.* 41).[11] Perfect causes, the ultimate cause of actions from which we derive responsibility, occur within the object or agent. Fate, for the Stoics, is made up of antecedent causes rather than perfect causes. Perfect causes – without which actions cannot occur – are left up to agents; this is why agents are responsible for their actions.[12] As Bobzien explains, "Any comprehensive explanation of the action would involve the agent as the immediate and decisive causal factor of the action." (1998, 255)

When applied to human action, specifically, the case becomes slightly more complicated since humans uniquely possess the power of assent (Hankinson 1999, 492). In the case of the cylinder, an external push and an internal disposition are sufficient to produce action; the cylinder does not rationally agree to being moved.

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[9] For more detailed discussions, see Frede 1980; Bobzien 1998 (especially chap. 6); Hankinson 1999.

[10] More specifically, a proximate antecedent cause.

[11] Although see Bobzien 1998, 261.

[12] This does not mean that perfect causes exist entirely separate from fate; this would be to deny the Stoics' causal determinism. The view is rather that our assent to action is *initiated* by antecedent causes but not made necessary by them (Bobzien 1998, 258).

But human beings are different. We possess both internal dispositions and the ability to actualize these dispositions (or not). The Stoics call this ability to actualize, or to rationally agree to action, the power of assent. Very briefly then, extending the cylinder analogy, we get the following causes for human action. The antecedent cause maps onto impressions which strike us from the outside. These impressions act on our internal dispositions, the combination of which creates an impulse to action. While we have no control over the impressions themselves, we must either assent to an occurrent impulse and act or withhold assent and refuse to act (Sen. *Ep*. 113). This assent, or withholding of assent, is up to us. This model of causation thus creates a realm of free action within a deterministic system.

Central to Stoic compatibilism about freedom, then, is a dual causality: there are external and internal causes working together to produce an effect. One type of cause, external antecedent causes, are not within our control. The other type of cause, internal causes, including the power of assent, are within our control and therefore preserve the possibility of moral responsibility. This dual model of freedom, of internal and external, mapping onto the Stoic distinction between that which is up to us and that which is not up to us, provides a structural analogy for a Stoic-inspired theory of autonomy. As I show below, personal autonomy is also potentially causally impacted by external or social factors. However, just as external causes are not the complete story of Stoic freedom, they are not the complete story of a Stoic-inspired autonomy. Though external features may *contribute to* our autonomy, they do not on their own *constitute* it; this constitutive role is played by features internal to the agent.

3. Dual Identity

Just as the Stoics have a dual or compatibilist model of freedom, they also have a dual model of personal identity,[13] according to which we are both individual and socially situated selves. This model is apparent in several places, including the concept of *oikeiosis*, the Panaetian circles of obligation or *personae*, and Epictetus' theory of self-identity. In all of these places, the Stoics believe that there is no contradiction in supposing that we are both individual selves and social beings – while our many relationships contribute to who we are, what duties we have, and how we enact the virtues, we are still individuals capable of choice within these social spheres.

The Stoic concept of *oikeiosis*, or 'being akin to' or 'belonging to,' is at the center of the Stoic command to live in accordance with nature (DL VII.85). It is also central to their cosmopolitanism, since we are meant to feel an affinity toward all other rational beings. But it is not just to other rational beings that we are meant to feel a kinship; we are also fundamentally akin to ourselves, standing in a

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[13] Bates calls this the 'dual aspect of self-identity' in Epictetus (2014, 152), and Rorty references a 'Janus-faced' human nature in Stoicism as both particular and universal (1996, 350). Reydams-Schils also finds a duality in the Stoic definition of the self (2005, 16).

relationship of self-*oikeiosis* (Reydams-Schils 2005, 26; Stephens 2020, 32; Hill and Nidumolu 2021). This self-*oikeiosis* is what allows us to understand that we are "cognitively and physically individuated from others," and that our actions and decisions belong to us (Hill and Nidumolu 2021, 12). This understanding, in turn, is crucial for personal autonomy since we cannot self-govern without being (in some sense) separate individuals. However, this does not mean that we are social atoms; we are also always socially embedded (Reydams-Schils 2005, 17).[14] The concepts of *oikeiosis* and self-*oikeiosis* capture this dual identity.

But the Stoic dual model of identity is clearest in the work of Panaetius discussed by Cicero and accepted by Epictetus.[15] Cicero explains that, on the Panaetian view, we have two *personae* by nature: the first is our rational nature, which we share in common with all humankind, and the second is our individual nature, made up of our unique traits and endowments (Cic. *De Offic*. I.30.107). In addition to these two *personae*, Panaetius adds two others: a sphere of various relationships, and a sphere of individual choice (Cic. *De Offic*. I.30.115). The combination of individualism and social situatedness is apparent in both pairs of two *personae* (Grahn-Wilder 2018, 193-4): in the two *personae* granted by nature, we have both individual traits and traits that we share in common with others; in the second pair of two *personae*, we are individual persons situated amongst others and holding various duties and responsibilities toward them. In all four *personae*, it is our nature as individuals as well as our particular social circumstances that contribute to personal identity (Asmis 1990, 227), and to the decisions we make (Cic. *De Offic*. I.118-120).

Epictetus, too, accepts this Panaetian view (D II.10, III.23.4-5), according to which both our social identity and individual identity work together harmoniously to make us who we are (Rorty 1996, 352; Bates 2014, 154). For Epictetus, we are fundamentally individual persons who are also, secondarily, socially constructed. We are "individual people who live within particular

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[14] Epictetus makes our social embeddedness clear. He says: "What, then, is the profession of a citizen? To treat nothing as a matter of private profit, not to plan about anything as though he were a detached unit, but to act like the foot or the hand, which, if they had the faculty of reason and understood the constitution of nature, would never exercise choice or desire in any other way but by reference to the whole." (D II.10)

[15] There is disagreement about whether or not Epictetus' discussion of social roles is influenced by the four *personae*. Brian E. Johnson (2014), for example, argues that we do a disservice to Epictetus if we understand his role ethics as a direct descendent of Panaetius. A full response to Johnson is beyond the scope of this paper; however, I am not sure that viewing Epictetus as influenced by Panaetius requires making Epictetus a mere 'appendix,' as Johnson claims, nor does it mean that we must 'lose important details of Epictetus's account.' (2014, 136) Certainly there are differences between the accounts, as Johnson notes, but noting these differences does not require dismissing the many similarities any more than commenting on the similarities requires ignoring the unique contributions of Epictetus. The common use of the playwright example especially suggests to me that Epictetus is at least influenced by Panaetius (Cic. *De Offic*. I.113).

constraints: a certain time; a certain place; with certain other people with various personalities in a variety of relationships." (Bates 2014, 156) Our socially constructed identity is based on externals and is not up to us; Epictetus likens this aspect of our identity to acting in a play, where our character is "determined by the Playwright."[16] (E17) However, our essential nature is as an individual self with unique desires and intentions (Long 2004, 92). Many of our social relationships are inherited by us (Christman 2009, 45),[17] but the way we act within, and respond to, these relationships is something that we can decide. We may not write the play, but we choose how to act it out. The individual aspect of our identity is within our control, and without it we could not make use of our *prohairesis*.

Admittedly, the analogy of the Playwright is a source of criticism for Epictetus, since it is argued that this passage demonstrates how concessive he is to cultural conservatism (cf. McBride 2021). However, as contemporary Stoics we need not read the analogy this way. We can acknowledge that, in fact, we *are* cast into plays that we do not write; this is part of what it means to be socially constructed. Many of our relationships are unchosen by us and yet we find ourselves embedded in them anyway. But these relationships as well as our chosen relationships are open to revision; we have the freedom to end the roles we play and take up others of the same kind. To do so is to *co-write* the play.[18] Moreover, when Epictetus tells us to "play admirably the role assigned to [us]," (E17) contemporary Stoics could examine what it means to play a role 'admirably.' Acting admirably within systemic oppression might demand resistance (Hay 2011). In short, acknowledging the social aspect of our identities does not require a commitment to cultural conservatism.

To sum up, the structure of dual identity is similar to the structure of dual freedom. There are both external and internal causes of personal identity. Social relationships are external causes; they are often unchosen and therefore not up to us. Internal causes include our unique traits and desires as individual beings; these things arise from within us, more specifically from our *prohairesis*, and are therefore up to us. Just as Stoic compatibilism about freedom provides a structural analogy for a neo-Stoic personal autonomy, compatibilism about personal identity can as well. I now turn to a discussion of Stoic insights for contemporary autonomy.

4. Dual Autonomy

Using freedom and identity as structural analogies for a proposed compatibilism about personal autonomy is appropriate since both freedom and identity are

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[16] Note the similarities to the Panaetian example of acting in a play (Cic. *De Offic*. I.113).
[17] John Christman makes this point as part of his theory of personal autonomy. He notes that our relationships, and the values we derive from them, are often inherited. However, we may still autonomously endorse them. I discuss this point further in my discussion of adaptive preferences, below.
[18] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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closely related to personal autonomy. We often understand autonomy as a sort of freedom of the self, where autonomy is the self's ability to choose and freedom is the ability to act based on these choices (*Simpl.* 6.38-9). The key distinction in the concepts of freedom and identity between internal and external, which maps onto the Epictetan distinction between that which is up to us (internal features) and that which is not up to us (external factors), is a distinction central to his discussion of personal autonomy, as well. In this section, I situate Epictetus as an internalist about autonomy, and then briefly highlight Stoic insights for personal autonomy – an internalist account modeled on *prohairesis* and structured according to Stoic compatibilism about freedom and identity. In particular, I examine the Stoic-inspired ideas that socially constructed persons can maintain an individualist autonomy, and that external features play a contributory rather than a constitutive role in our autonomy. These ideas are both significant because they help carve a middle ground between strongly externalist and strongly internalist theories of autonomy – the former of which place too much determinative weight on social relationships and the latter of which are charged with not weighing them heavily enough. A compatibilist view can readily acknowledge both the social nature of selves and the causal impact of relationships on personal autonomy, without granting them the stronger, constitutive role that they play within externalist accounts.

As I have shown, there is a common structure to Stoic compatibilism about self-identity and freedom – there are both internal and external factors that contribute to each. In a Stoic model of identity, we are fundamentally individual persons, yet we are also secondarily situated in social relationships (Bates 2014). For example, in the Panaetian model accepted by Epictetus, one sphere of identity is made up of our various relationships, which are externals and not up to us. A second sphere is made up of individual choices, which are internals and therefore up to us. It is this sphere that constitutes the 'I' of personal identity (Kahn 1988, 253), which allows us to understand that we are differentiated from others in a way that makes our actions truly ours (Hill and Nidumolu 2021, 12). In a Stoic model of freedom, there are external antecedent causes that initiate action – like the push that begins the cylinder's rolling (Cic. *Fat.* 42–3) – yet internal causes, like our power of assent, are ultimately responsible for what we do (Bobzien 1998, 255). Just as in the model of identity, external antecedent causes are not up to us, while the internal power of assent is within our control. Put another way, in both cases external causes are *contributory* factors, but internal causes are *constitutive*.

We can structure personal autonomy in an analogous way, based largely on Epictetus' discussion of *prohairesis*, which maps onto an internalist account of autonomy. Recall that internalism is a view which holds that autonomy is determined by internal, psychological states of persons, including (for example) how we deliberate about preferences or actions, or whether or not we endorse preferences or actions upon reflection. Internalism is contrasted with externalism, which holds that features of our social environment determine our autonomy

status; to be autonomous, a person must exist in specific autonomy-enabling social conditions, such as a lack of domination or oppression (Oshana 2015; Warriner 2015; Johnston 2017; Mackenzie 2019). Contemporary feminist Marina Oshana explains the contrast in her endorsement of externalism: "Autonomy is not decided 'from within,' or on the basis of the evaluative perspective of the individual whose autonomy is at stake," she argues, "external criteria constitute autonomy and external criteria measure autonomy." (Oshana 2006, 50) Epictetus disagrees with the sort of view adopted by Oshana. As an internal, autonomy must be a capacity within us rather than something occurring externally; this is required by his insistence that *prohairesis* is up to us. Whether or not we exist under systemic oppression is not within our control, and therefore cannot determine *prohairesis*.[19]

Moreover, Epictetus clearly distinguishes between externals and autonomy in a way that an externalist cannot:

> 'But,' says someone, 'if a person subjects me to the fear of death, he compels me.'
> 'No, *it is not what you are subjected to that impels you*, but the fact that you decide it is better for you to do something of the sort than to die. Once more, then, it is the *decision of your own will which compelled you*, that is, moral purpose [*prohairesis*] compelled moral purpose.' (D I.17, emphasis mine)[20]

In this passage, Epictetus considers the idea that things outside of us, which are not up to us, could be the cause of our actions. He dismisses this idea and argues that it is our autonomy *responding to these externals* that determines how we act. This argument relies on there being a distinction between the determinants of our autonomy and the external features of our environment. This distinction means that Epictetus simply cannot be an externalist about autonomy.

Although externals do not constitute our autonomy as they would for an externalist, Epictetus acknowledges in several places that they are still related. On his view, internal features of persons *constitute* what it means to be an autonomous agent, even though externals may *contribute* to it. This is structurally similar to the way that social relationships contribute to our identity even though our individual traits fundamentally constitute it, and the way that antecedent causes contribute to our actions even though ultimately they are determined by us. For example: "What, then, are the external things? *They are materials for the moral purpose* [*prohairesis*], in dealing with which it will find its own proper good or evil." (D I.29, emphasis mine) Here Epictetus notes that our *prohairesis* directs us in a way that may be influenced by externals; even though the externals

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[19] As I note below, there is liberatory potential to the idea that *prohairesis* perseveres through systemic oppression; in particular, this view can empower the oppressed who are trying to maintain agency in the face of injustice. Epictetus' own lived experiences as a slave may have contributed to his insistence that *prohairesis* is something up to us and not constituted by unjust externals. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for noting Epictetus' possible motivation here.
[20] Remember that this is a Stoic-*inspired* view, so we need not accept the claim that threats of death cannot compel us in order to accept the distinction between autonomy and externals.

themselves are not the site of moral value, the way our autonomy *responds* to these externals is. In fact, Epictetus even acknowledges that externals can injure us – "Where there is some loss affecting our body or our property, there we count it injury…" (D II.10.27) – but he resists the idea that they can injure our *prohairesis* understood as an ideal capacity (D II.10.27-30).

That externals and autonomy are related means that his internalist account can acknowledge the extent to which social factors influence or impact an agent's autonomy, which in actuality often departs from its ideal. Although Epictetus argues that *prohairesis* is 'by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded,' (E1) I have argued that this is a claim about autonomy as a capacity we possess, while in actuality we often fall short of this ideal.[21] Indeed, Epictetus readily acknowledges how difficult it is to achieve this ideal, as when he draws a distinction between the educated and the uninstructed person, the latter of whom allows their *prohairesis* to be led entirely by externals rather than by their own autonomy (D I.29). While the Stoic sage is able to realize the true nature of *prohairesis* as unimpeded, the autonomy of Stoic progressors – that is, most of us – is often influenced by externals (Long 2004, 217).

Finally, the fact that Epictetus is an internalist does not mean that he fails to take seriously the social nature of persons, as we have seen. His endorsement of the four *personae* clearly shows that he accepts, to some degree, the social construction of selves. That he holds both views – internalism and social construction – is significant, since it demonstrates that it is possible to hold both views simultaneously. Though for an internalist autonomy is a feature of individual persons, and is therefore in some sense individualistic, persons are deeply socially embedded. Epictetus thus teaches that internalist accounts of autonomy need not ignore the social nature of persons, even though this is a common contemporary criticism (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 16). Contemporary internalists have also argued for this sort of dual model. For example, John Christman argues that "there is nothing about a social conception of the 'self' that is incompatible with an individual conception of autonomy." (2004, 246)[22] Here, Christman defends what I am calling, following the Stoics, a compatibilism about personal autonomy – social selves can still maintain an individualist (or internalist) autonomy.

That internalism is compatible with social construction is one insight that we can apply to a contemporary Stoic-inspired theory of personal autonomy; this is what renders such an account a dual model rather than a pure social model. But there are other insights that we can apply as well. In particular, we can look to Stoic compatibilism about freedom and identity to see how compatibilism about

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[21] There is also a distinction to be drawn between autonomy as ideal capacity and the ability to exercise this capacity, which would be a claim about *eleutheria* (D II.1).
[22] Christman also provides a valuable disambiguation of what it means to say that selves are socially constructed, noting that there are more and less plausible ways to understand this claim (2004, 144-146).

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autonomy is meant to work. It is here that we draw on the distinction between contributory and constitutive roles of externals.

A common contemporary criticism of internalist autonomy is that it cannot adequately acknowledge the ways in which external social relationships, including especially relationships of domination and oppression, impact our personal autonomy. The claim is that externals must play a constitutive role in our autonomy if we are to give them the serious attention they deserve in our social-political theorizing. But, using insights from Stoicism, we can see that this is not the case. Like Epictetus, contemporary internalists about autonomy acknowledge that our autonomy can sometimes be undermined by social circumstances. What matters is the mechanism by which this undermining occurs. For externalists, oppressive circumstances on their own undermine autonomy, since autonomy consists in the presence of autonomy-enabling social conditions. For example, externalist Rebekah Johnston argues that our social positioning "in terms of status *itself*, and not just *that* one must react or *how* one reacts to this positioning, matters to autonomy." (2017, 319) This constitutive claim amounts to an argument that non-oppressive social circumstances are *required*, or are *necessary conditions*, for autonomy (Oshana 2006; Mackenzie 2008; Stoljar 2015).

Contrast this externalist position with Epictetus, who says that externals are 'materials for' our *prohairesis* rather than constituents of it (D I.29). This is reflective of the internalist position according to which oppressive circumstances may undermine autonomy by distorting the psychological processes that an agent undergoes when determining how to act. For example, internalist Andrea Westlund (2009) argues that oppressive socialization may deprive us of our ability to answer for our actions; we may act automatically, without critical reflection, and without being able to explain the reasons behind what we do. Here it is the *causal impact* of externals on agents that may threaten their autonomy, not the presence of these externals as such.[23] This is a causal, contributory claim

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[23] An example may help illuminate the distinction between internalist and externalist accounts. Consider the case of Yan, who is routinely sexually harassed at work. This harassment takes place within a broader system of sexist oppression that contributes to the idea that women's claims are 'hysterical' and that harms of harassment need not be taken seriously as oppressive harms. Yan reports the behavior to her boss and human resources and is motivated by her experience to take up feminist activist work in her local community. In other words, she actively resists her oppression. On an externalist account, even active resisters like Yan fail to be autonomous since they exist in oppressive circumstances that definitionally undermine their autonomy (Oshana 2015). Because external circumstances constitute autonomy, and because these external circumstances must be rid of oppression in order for an agent to be autonomous, Yan cannot be autonomous under our current system of sexist oppression. An internalist, on the other hand, might argue that active resisters like Yan are often *exemplars* of autonomy (Meyers 2000). Even though Yan lives in a world in which women's claims are not taken seriously, she can still autonomously choose to fight against her oppression. Her autonomy can persist because unjust externals, while they may contribute to her autonomy status, do not constitute it. To use Epictetus' language, the decision to resist is *up to her*.

rather than a constitutive one. As Christman explains, for externalists "social conditions of some sort must be named as conceptually necessary requirements of autonomy rather than, say, contributory factors." (2004, 147-148) Internalists replace this conceptual claim with a contingent one, in a way reminiscent of Epictetus – it is the way our *prohairesis* responds to externals, rather than the externals themselves, that determines how well our autonomy lives up to its ideal. But this does not mean that externals are entirely irrelevant to autonomy – not even for the Stoics!

These two key insights – that internalist accounts of autonomy can readily incorporate the social construction of persons, and that such accounts acknowledge the causal (but not constitutive) impact of social factors on our autonomy – have potentially significant feminist payoffs. Before turning to a discussion of these payoffs, however, I should address looming objections.

5. Can There be a Stoic Feminist Autonomy?

It is now a relatively common view that the Stoics are feminists or proto-feminists, or that Stoicism as a philosophical program is conducive to feminism. Different features of Stoicism have been offered as support for this claim. For example, the Stoics believe that everyone, regardless of gender, has equal citizenship in the *cosmopolis*. They also argue that women are equally capable of exercising reason (Hill 2001). However, there are initial reasons to doubt the connection between ancient Stoicism and contemporary feminist debates about *autonomy*. I consider three potential objections to the feasibility of my project as a feminist project: an objection from rationality, an objection from individualism, and an objection from adaptive preferences.

First, at times the Stoics might seem committed to exactly the sort of rationalistic model of autonomy that has led feminists to question the usefulness of the concept. It is true, for example, that the Stoics draw a tight connection between *prohairesis* and reason and insist that only our rational faculties are wholly within our control. This has led some scholars to note an association between Stoicism and toxic masculinity (Táíwò 2020),[24] or to connect Stoicism with patriarchal societies that instruct men to practice 'emotional stoicism,' shutting down emotions if they become too much to bear (Hooks 2004; Táíwò 2020).

Second, the Stoic challenge to understand those with whom we are in close relationships as externals or indifferents might seem to promote an unacceptable sort of individualism. It might look like an encouragement to strive for complete independence from social circumstances.[25] If it is the case both that we should

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[24] On Stoicism and toxic masculinity, see also Zuckerberg (2018).

[25] Isaiah Berlin seems to attribute this view to the Stoics. He argues that, on an individualistic conception of autonomy, we may be tempted to escape 'into the inner fortress of [our] true sel[ves],' (2008, 185) what he calls a retreat into the inner citadel (2008, 181).

only desire those things which are up to us, and that our social relationships are out of our control, then a way to achieve *eudaimonia* would be to remove ourselves from these relationships. The goal of *eudaimonia* would be achieved only by "doing away with all of our social attachments and retreating into the inner citadel of the soul." (Braicovich 2010, 204) But feminists have argued against the inner citadel model of autonomy, claiming that such independence is neither possible nor desirable and traditional theories of autonomy have been rejected on these grounds.

Finally, the Stoic move to maintain autonomy in the face of social injustice may be thought objectionable since it seems to require adaptive preferences. Stoics like Epictetus argue that being averse to something leads to misfortune if the circumstances to which we are averse actually obtain. If, however, we can control our aversions so that we are only averse to things within our power, then we will never meet misfortune (E1). This looks like an endorsement of adaptive preferences, which arise when people come to hold preferences that are oppressive to them (Cudd 2006, 181). For example, women might adapt their preferences so that they no longer desire to hold positions of power in the workplace, since submissiveness is a trait thought to be appropriate for women under patriarchy. That their preference aligns with the values of their own systemic oppression is what renders the preference adaptive. Compare this with Epictetus, who says: "Whoever, therefore, wants to be free, let him neither wish for anything, nor avoid anything, that is under the control of others; or else he is necessarily a slave." (E14) Here it seems Epictetus tells us to adapt our wishes so that we no longer desire things that are outside our sphere of influence. Commentators have noted this feature of Stoicism, calling it a "morally repellent consequence" of Stoic autonomy (Zimmerman 2000, 25).[26] This criticism also applies in the political sphere. If we can preserve autonomy only by adjusting our desires to current circumstances, then Stoic autonomy is insufficient for feminist political goals; if we must merely adapt our preferences to injustice, the Stoic program gives us "pessimism about prospects for changing such oppressive circumstances." (Zimmerman 2000, 28) Instead of working to eliminate oppression we should accept it as our lot. We should become like the dog who chooses to run alongside the cart so that he is not dragged behind it. "Resistance is futile," teach the Stoics, "insurrectionists will be dragged." (McBride 2021, 114)

I believe these objections rest on misunderstandings of Stoicism and that therefore they do not provide reason to doubt the feminist potential of this project. Regarding the objection from rationality, presumably what is objectionable about rationality is not rationality *per se*, but rather that it has been attributed exclusively to men and denied to women. The opposite of rationality, which in this objection is emotion, has been ascribed to women and denied to men. Rationality

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[26] This is how Isaiah Berlin understands Stoic freedom – that "I could render men (including myself) free by conditioning them into losing the original desires which I have decided not to satisfy." (2008, 31) He attributes this view specifically to Epictetus and Cicero.

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is then praised while emotion is denigrated. In other words, it is the gendered nature of rationality that makes it objectionable. But the Stoics explicitly reject the idea that rationality is male-coded; rationality is granted to all people, regardless of gender (Hill 2001; Grahn-Wilder 2018, 195). Rationality is simply not a masculine trait, nor is emotion a particularly feminine trait; people of all genders are equally capable of feeling emotion, and equally capable of exercising reason. The gender-neutral nature of rationality for the Stoics robs the objection of some weight.

Second, the objection from individualism does not properly situate Stoic autonomy within Stoic ethics. I have shown that the Stoics do not fail to appreciate the socially embedded nature of human beings. Indeed, one reason the Stoics emphasize the distinction between up to us and not up to us is because they take seriously the potentially devastating impact of externals. To attribute to the Stoics a thoroughgoing disregard for relationships is to misunderstand their views of socially constituted identity and social obligations. Nor do the Stoics recommend wholly removing ourselves from our social ties. In fact, we have strict duties to those around us based on our particular relationships with them (E30; *Simpl.* 82.47-91.24). Withdrawing into ourselves at the expense of those around us would be a clear violation of our social duties (Reydams-Schils 2005, 17).

Finally, there are two ways to respond to the adaptive preferences objection. The first is to examine exactly what is wrong with adaptive preferences in the first place; merely pointing out that a preference is adaptive is not sufficient to demonstrate that the preference is problematic. A standard argument holds that adaptive preferences are objectionable because they are autonomy deficits (cf. Cudd 2006). But this is not always the case. It is true that we may sometimes choose to align our preferences with oppressive circumstances, but several feminists have argued that this choice may still be an autonomous one (Narayan 2002; Khader 2011; Sperry 2013).[27] Indeed, Epictetus seems to endorse a version of this feminist view in response to the objection from deficiency, which argues – against Epictetus' view of *prohairesis* – that deficiency may compel us to desire certain things, in which case these desires would not be up to us:

> Some of these people say that deficiency is the cause [of 'belief and desire, and in general choice and *prohairesis*.' (*Simpl.* 8.38-39)] For is there anyone hungry or thirsty or shivering who does not desire food and drink and warmth, whether

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[27] For example, Elizabeth Sperry devises the case of Cath, a women's rights attorney who decides to shave her legs since judges treat female attorneys better if they wear skirts in the courtroom (2013, 893). Cath's preference to shave her legs aligns with an oppressive expectation that women's bodies should be smooth and hairless. However, Cath has thought carefully about the pros and cons of shaving, and has determined that, for her, the benefits outweigh the costs. Sperry argues that the mere fact that Cath's preference aligns with patriarchal expectations is not sufficient to show that the preference is inappropriately adaptive. Her choice to shave her legs is still autonomous. For the difference between adaptive preferences and inappropriately adaptive preferences, see Khader (2011).

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> they wish to or not? Is there anyone ill who does not desire health? (*Simpl.* 8.42-5)

Epictetus' response is that *prohairesis* and deficiency are compatible and that the person who desires food in the face of hunger may do so autonomously:

> But we ought to respond to the objection from deficiency that deficiency does not *implant* desire… Rather, what is capable of desiring, when it becomes deficient in something, *manifests its desire* in order to help with the deficiency. (*Simpl.* 9.43-52; emphasis mine)

In other words, while our preferences may sometimes be informed by our circumstances, they are not wholly determined by them; preferences that are adapted may also be autonomous.[28]

However, the worry remains that endorsing adaptive preferences might promote idleness in the face of injustice. This concern is a value theoretic version of the lazy syllogism (*De Fat.* 28), which charges the Stoics with promoting inaction. This is Zimmerman's point when he argues that Stoicism cannot provide us with the tools to fight oppression (2000, 28), since we should merely adapt our preferences to whatever injustices currently befall us as a way to avoid perturbation. In fact, though, the Stoics do not hold that we should just ignore or, worse, embrace injustice. The Stoics are clear that we exist in many sets of relationships and that acting appropriately toward those with whom we are in relationships is a matter of justice (*Simpl.* 82; E30). This includes acting appropriately toward fellow citizens (*Simpl.* 83.40). For example, Simplicius takes Epictetus' example of dining at a banquet (E36)[29] to make a point about our broader obligations of justice, or making sure that each person gets what she is owed (*Simpl.* 125). Simplicius urges us, as a matter of justice, to ensure that each person gets her share. This is one example of a place where the Stoics argue that we should act as justice demands.

Another response would be to grant that Stoicism does not *guarantee* that one will be a progressive about cultural change.[30] After all, the Stoics themselves tended toward cultural conservatism. However, if someone adopts a progressive social program, Stoicism offers tools for the fight against injustice.[31] Just as critics highlight the Stoics' focus on passivity, acceptance, and indifference, a contemporary Stoic could highlight the tools they provide for sustained resistance

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[28] It is important here to emphasize that adaptive preferences *may sometimes* be autonomous. My claim is not that adaptive preferences are *always* autonomous, but rather that we simply need more information to determine whether an adaptive preference is autonomous.

[29] "So whenever you eat in company with someone, remember to consider not only the value of the things set before you for the body, but also to preserve your respect for your fellow banqueter."

[30] Thanks to Scott Aikin for this point.

[31] See, for example, Whiting and Konstantakos (2021).

(Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014, 21; Norlock 2019, 8). Eliminating oppression is a long, difficult struggle. Stoicism can help us persist.[32]

6. Stoic Autonomy and Feminism

The connection between *prohairesis* and feminism has already been drawn by those who wish to argue either that the Stoics are (proto)feminists or that Stoicism is appropriate for a feminist reimagining. The focus of these discussions has been on Stoicism's insistence that all people, regardless of gender, share a capacity for reasoned choice through *prohairesis* (Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014, 19; Hill 2020, 399). But these arguments show that the equal possession of autonomy is itself a feminist idea; they do not yet demonstrate why *the structure of* the autonomy that we all equally possess is similarly fit for contemporary feminist debates. With objections set aside, I can move on to discuss positive feminist applications of Stoic insights for a compatibilist theory of autonomy.

Feminism is practically oriented; it is not merely a collection of theories, but it is also meant to have real-world implications for the recognition and combatting of sexist oppression. It shares this in common with Stoicism – it is meant to be practiced and lived, not just theorized. It is therefore a desideratum of any successful feminist theory that it makes contact with conditions on the ground. A Stoic-inspired compatibilist theory of autonomy is able to do just that, precisely because of its compatibilism. More specifically, the Stoic insight that externals are contributory to, rather than constitutive of, autonomy, has particular liberatory potential.

This contributory claim relates to Stoic invulnerability, or the idea that the virtuous person cannot be harmed – even by injustice. Consider Epictetus: "But this control over the moral purpose [*prohairesis*] is my true business, and in it neither shall a tyrant hinder me against my will, nor the multitude the single individual, nor the stronger man the weaker." (D IV.5.34) *Prohairesis* is something we can maintain even in the face of tyranny, but this does not make tyranny acceptable, nor does it mean that tyranny is good for us, nor still does it mean we should resign ourselves to the will of the tyrant. Rather, the lesson from this passage is that it is possible to be oppressed and yet remain autonomous agents. And, since *prohairesis* is our inner self or true self (Kahn 1988, 253), *we* survive oppression and injustice. This idea is empowering, especially since oppression is often dehumanizing.

Compare this to externalists, who are committed to the claim that oppression and autonomy are incompatible (cf. Stoljar 2015; Warriner 2015); for the externalist, autonomy cannot survive injustice. This results because of the constitutive role played by externals on such accounts (Khader 2020). Under oppression, on such a view, autonomy is irreparably damaged in a way that can only be repaired through large-scale social change and the eradication of unjust

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[32] I discuss this point in more detail below.

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domination. A worry is that such theories eliminate autonomy for the oppressed; if a lack of oppression and domination is required for autonomy, then many of us lack autonomy in our current non-ideal world. Externalists "ask agents to act as though very real obstacles are absent," (Khader 2020, 25) while Stoicism readily acknowledges the daily obstacles we face. Stoicism, in other words, is *designed* for the non-ideal. Our autonomy can survive even in the face of injustice.

I believe the persistence of autonomy is necessary for sustained resistance. Retaining a sense of ourselves as self-directing agents is required to navigate and overcome the difficult situations we face under oppression. As Epictetus argues, *prohairesis* allows us to 'confront [our] external impression' and 'not be carried away by it;' instead, we can say, "Wait for me a little, O impression; allow me to see who you are, and what you are an impression of; allow me to put you to the test." (D II.18.24-5) If we lose a sense of ourselves as self-directing agents, we may be passively 'carried away' by impressions. A woman may succumb to socialization that tells her she is less worthy than her male counterparts, or that she should merely acquiesce to the will of those around her – in other words, "an oppressed person can become what everyone already believes her to be." (Hay 2011, 26) People who resist, on the other hand, are able to reflect on their socialization and their preferences, and then act accordingly. This ability is a key part of what we call autonomy.

Kathryn Norlock, drawing on Lisa Tessman, notes that the political resister "will be in a position of perpetual struggle, with a constant demand for the virtues of resistance." (Tessman 2005, 205; Norlock 2019, 14) "Stoicism," she notes, "does not then allow us to shrug and give up, because we are also constrained to work out what we can do, rather than pretend we are not agents at all." (Norlock 2019, 15) If domination and oppression rob us of autonomy, why should we not merely 'shrug and give up?' (ibid.) But on a Stoic-inspired compatibilist theory of autonomy, we remain agents even though we are oppressed. Although our *prohairesis* is not the perfect autonomy of the sage, we are still able to control those things that are up to us. This includes the attitudes with which we meet new challenges, the stamina we bring to persistent injustices, and the knowledge that we can wake up tomorrow and decide to try again. These tools are not to be underestimated, and they depend upon us retaining our autonomy.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I apply Stoic insights to the contemporary feminist debate about autonomy under oppression. I argue that in Epictetus' concept of *prohairesis* we find an account of personal autonomy that can be structured analogously to Stoic compatibilism about both freedom and self-identity. According to the Stoic account of freedom, we are both determined and free. External antecedent causes are initial contributors to our actions, but our internal ability to assent is what ultimately constitutes free action in a deterministic system. According to the Stoic account of identity, we are both socially constructed and individual selves. Our

social embeddedness contributes to who we are, but our individual traits ultimately constitute our personal identity. On both accounts, external factors play a contributory role, while internal features play a constitutive role.

By analogy, a Stoic-inspired conception of personal autonomy would allow external social factors to contribute to our autonomy without yet allowing them to constitute autonomy. Such a conception would be an internalist account of personal autonomy, according to which autonomy is determined by psychological states or processes within persons. I contrast this type of account with externalism about personal autonomy, a type of view which holds that social factors play a constitutive role in an agent's autonomy. According to externalism, a person must exist in specific autonomy-enabling social conditions, specifically conditions free from domination and oppression, in order to be autonomous. This sort of view leads to the conclusion that oppressed agents lack autonomy. A Stoic-inspired compatibilist view, on the other hand, allows autonomy to persist through oppression. I argue that a Stoic-inspired compatibilist view is therefore fit for feminist theorizing, since it allows for continued feminist resistance against sexist oppression.[33]

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Stoicism and Food Ethics

William O. Stephens

Abstract: The norms of simplicity, convenience, unfussiness, and self-control guide Diogenes the Cynic, Zeno of Citium, Chrysippus, Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius in approaching food. These norms generate the precept that meat and dainties are luxuries, so Stoics should eschew them. Considerations of justice, environmental harm, anthropogenic global climate change, sustainability, food security, feminism, harm to animals, personal health, and public health lead contemporary Stoics to condemn the meat industrial complex, debunk carnism, and select low input, plant-based foods.

Keywords: food, meat, nature, Stoic, vegetarian, virtue.

Introduction

A simple way to distinguish two basic outlooks on food is to consider whether you live to eat or eat to live. This distinction traces back to an ancient source reporting that "Diogenes [the Cynic] said that other people lived to eat, but he ate to live." (Stobaeus 3.6.41; G182; Diogenes the Cynic 2012, 14) People who live to eat are gourmands, foodies, who pursue maximal gustatory pleasures believing that the good life is the pleasurable life. Foodies are hedonists. Stoics deny that the good is pleasure and so reject hedonism. Stoics define the good as living in agreement with nature. They believe that, for all animals, eating agrees with nature. But they believe that for human beings, eating in agreement with nature especially means eating in agreement with reason. Eating to survive is, for Stoics, a necessary but not a sufficient condition for living well. Stoics believe that perfected reason is virtue, so living in agreement with nature requires living virtuously. Consequently, eating in agreement with reason requires doing one's best to eat virtuously. Eating virtuously requires becoming wise about food and eating temperately and justly. For example, considerations of justice pertain to the availability and affordability of foods, known as food security. How food is produced and distributed is another matter of justice. The comparative nutritional values of various foods and health effects of different diets matter. Wise eaters are knowledgeable about these many factors and circumspect in deliberating about food. They make informed, thoughtful decisions in specific situations about which foods to obtain and when, what, with whom, and how to eat. I will argue that the guidance of wisdom, temperance, restraint, and justice is supplemented by what Seneca calls precepts

(*praecepta*).[1] Understanding food's purpose, its place in a good life, and how precepts help one avoid vicious eating constitute the Stoics' philosophy of food.

I will begin by reflecting on the ways in which Diogenes the Cynic's food ethics informed the ancient Stoics. Next, I will outline the philosophy of food of the Stoics of the Roman empire. Since antiquity, however, changes to how food is produced, distributed, and wasted, human population growth, and environmental impacts have been staggering. In light of this, I will argue that ancient Stoic food ethics must be refined by contemporary stoics[2] to target their local circumstances and global realities. For the sake of environmental sustainability, food security, public health, and global justice, wisdom prescribes more stringent food ethics to today's stoics.

1. Dog Food

The first Stoic, Zeno of Citium, was a student of the Cynic Crates. So it seems apt to examine some pertinent remarks attributed to the first Cynic, the original 'dog,' Diogenes of Sinope. Diogenes was unwaveringly committed to what today we call minimalism. He abhorred all luxury and decadence. He is said to have declared the love of money to be the mother-city (μητρόπολις) of all evils (D.L. vi. 50). He taught the sons of his master Xeniades that at home they should wait upon themselves rather than rely on servants and be content with plain fare and water to drink (vi. 31). We read that "He often thundered that the gods had made it possible for men to live easily, but this had been lost sight of, because we demand honeyed cakes, perfumes, and the like." (vi. 44; Laertius 2018, 280) Thus, it seems clear that he rejected greed and insisted on habitual self-sufficiency and simple food and drink. Diogenes deplores the vice of demanding treats like honeyed cakes. He links dietary depravity to political injustice when he says, "it is not among men who live on barley [τῶν μαζοφάγων] that you will find tyrants, but among those who dine on expensive delicacies." (Julian, *Orations* 6.198d; trans. mine). Is meat a decadent luxury?[3] Some texts may suggest so. When asked why athletes are stupid, he said, "Because they are built up of mutton and beef." (vi. 49; Laertius 2018, 283) This response could imply that eating *too much* mutton and beef makes athletes stupid. Or it could be construed to mean that sheep and bovines are stupid and athletes absorb that stupidity by eating them. On either interpretation, it seems clear that Diogenes judges it stupid to eat a lot of these kinds of meat.

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[1] Seneca discusses *praecepta* (precepts, prescriptions) and *decreta* (doctrines, principles) in *Letters* 94 and 95. Examples of the former he gives are 'weighty expressions' like "Nothing in excess," "A greedy mind is never satisfied," and "Expect others to treat you as you treat them." (*Letter* 94.43; Seneca 2015, 360) I propose "Meat and dainties are luxuries" as another such precept.

[2] I will refer to contemporary stoics as *neostoics* or, following Becker (2017), *stoics* with a lower-case s to distinguish them from ancient Stoics with a capital S.

[3] I understand *meat* to refer to any bodily part taken from an animal, whether terrestrial or aquatic. This excludes the edible part of fruits or nuts.

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On the other hand we also read that Diogenes once tried to eat raw meat but couldn't manage to digest it (vi. 34). Why would Diogenes try to eat raw meat if he believed, as I suggest, that food is necessary but meat is not? When asked what time one should eat lunch, the dog-philosopher said, "If you're rich, whenever you like; if poor, whenever you can." (vi. 40; Laertius 2018, 279) The wealthy have the means to eat not only whenever, but also mostly whatever they want. When hungry the poor must eat whatever they can get their hands on. Diogenes, who was several times bought and sold as a slave, often begged for food and had to scrounge for whatever he could find. We can imagine that on one occasion what he scrounged was a scrap of raw meat. Why didn't he cook it? Perhaps because he was very hungry and had no way to cook it. Or perhaps because he chose to test the limit of utmost need by seeing whether, like an actual dog, he could eat and digest raw meat. If cooking meat turned out to be dispensable, then such a lesson would allow him to bypass this nuisance, thereby increasing his self-sufficiency and 'easy living.' But the physiological lesson he learned was that though raw meat is fit food for dogs, it is unfit for Cynics. Cynics see the wisdom of emulating certain behaviors of canines, mice, and other animals that live in agreement with nature, calmly adapting to their circumstances better than most people do. But raw meat is dog food, not human food. Fortunately and conveniently, many plants can be eaten raw and digested. So, pragmatism about food dictated that when meat is a luxury, Diogenes disdained it. He recognized that *food* is a necessity, not meat. Plants, in contrast, are generally easier to acquire and require less or no cooking, thus making meatless meals usually simpler and easier.[4] After seeing a boy drinking with his hands, Diogenes threw away the only bowl he used to eat and drink from, saying "A child has outdone me in frugality." (vi. 37; Laertius 2018, 276)

It is worth noting that the frugal habits of Diogenes the Cynic in certain respects resemble those of today's freegans.[5] Freegans are vegans who reject consumerism and capitalist ideology and strive to avoid buying anything. Instead of using a large ceramic jar (*pithos*) for shelter as Diogenes did, freegans endorse squatting in abandoned buildings. Freegans practice guerrilla gardening in unoccupied city parks, wild foraging, and scrounging for discarded food. This includes dumpster diving into the wealth of food waste in the U.S. and other Western countries (Barnard 2016).

For the ancient Cynics, however, considerations of self-sufficiency, frugality, simplicity, practicality, and convenience guided eating. Their dietary austerity inspired Zeno of Citium, who "used to eat small loaves and honey, and drink a little fragrant wine." (vii.13; Laertius 2018, 318) His admiration for Cynic frugality made Zeno vegetarian. Chrysippus reportedly praised Euripides' verses that

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[4] It is said of Zeno of Citium that "His powers of endurance and the austerity of his way of life were unequaled; the food he ate was uncooked, and the cloak he wore was thin." (vii. 26; Laertius 2018, 323)

[5] 'Freegan' is a portmanteau of 'free' and 'vegan.'

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mortals need only Demeter's grain and draughts of clear water (*SVF* iii 706; Plutarch 1976, 501).

2. Seneca Scorns Fussy Feasting

Simple dietary habits are also endorsed by Seneca the Younger. For him the purpose of food is to relieve, not arouse, hunger (*Letter* 95.15–18). He argues that a human being's chief part (*prima pars*) is virtue itself, whereas the unserviceable and unstable flesh attached to it is a mere repository for food (*Letter* 92.10).[6] He believes that virtue limits our wants to our needs. Nature establishes our needs, and nature desires nothing except a meal. Hunger, he infers, is not ambitious. Hunger is satisfied to stop, and it does not much care what makes it stop. Once hunger is stopped, only the torments of a wretched self-indulgence look for ways to stimulate hunger after it is sated. Thus, only the vice of self-indulgence drives someone to keep stuffing his filled stomach (*Letter* 119.13–14).[7]

Since humans are smaller than larger animals, Seneca believes we can and should feed ourselves more easily than they do. "Has nature given us such an insatiable maw that although the bodies we are given are of modest size, we yet surpass the largest, most ravenous eaters of the animal world? That is not the case, for how small are our natural requirements! It takes only a little to satisfy nature's demands. It is not bodily hunger that runs up the bill but ambition. … those who … 'heed the belly' [belong] to the race of animals rather than of humans." (*Letter* 60.3–4)[8] Ambition drives vicious eating, and to eat viciously is to degenerate from a human being into a beast. Thus, Seneca advises indulging the body only to the extent that suffices for health. One must deal sternly with one's body, lest it fail to obey one's mind. "Let food be for appeasing hunger, drink for satisfying thirst." (*Letter* 8.5)

Food is more welcome to one who is hungry (*Letter* 78.22). Thus, it is wise to know when to stop eating and drinking, as nonhuman animals do (*Letter* 59.13). We ought to eat moderately (*Letter* 114.26–27), not greedily (*Letter* 94.22). Seneca believes that meals ought to be eaten during the customary times of the day (*Letter* 122.9–10) and in the company of others. He recommends reflecting carefully beforehand with whom you are to eat and drink, rather than what you are to eat and drink, for feeding without a friend is the life of a lion or a wolf (*Letter* 19.10).

Seneca cautions that luxurious eating causes many complicated diseases and disorders. He criticizes gourmandizing and fancy foods like mushrooms,[9] delicately prepared oysters, mussels, sea urchins, garum (fermented fish sauce),

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[6] Seneca rejects Chrysippus' view of a unitary soul in favor of Posidonius' dualist conception of the soul with rational and irrational parts.

[7] Note the Epicurean flair here.

[8] Quotations of the *Letters* are from Seneca (2015).

[9] It is difficult to know how easy it was to forage for mushrooms in Seneca's Italy, but he clearly rejects mushrooms as the dainties of mycophiles.

and filleted, deboned mullets (*Letter* 95.25–29). Seneca reports that he abstains from eating oysters and mushrooms because "These are not food; they are only tidbits meant to entice those who are full to eat some more (which is what the glutton wants, to stuff himself beyond capacity), for they go down easily, and come back up easily too." (*Letter* 108.15)

For Seneca the most shameful scourge that assails fortunes is the kitchen (*Ben*. 1.10.2). He deplores expensive delicacies. He tells the story of two men bidding against each other to buy a four and a half pound mullet. The winner paid the extravagant sum of 5,000 sesterces for the fish (*Letter* 95.42). Even worse, the emperor Gaius Caesar demonstrated supreme vice combined with supreme power when he dined one day at the astronomical cost of ten million sesterces (*Helv.* 10.4).

> How wretched are the people whose appetite is stimulated only by costly foods! But what makes them costly is not their exquisite flavor or some pleasant sensation in the throat but their rarity and the difficulty of obtaining them. Otherwise, if these people would willingly return to sanity, what need of so many professional skills that serve the belly? What need of imports, or of devastating forests, or of scourging the sea? All about us lie the foods which nature has made available in every place; but these people pass them by as if blind, and they roam through every country, they cross the seas, and though they could allay their hunger at a trifling cost, they excite it at great expense. (*Helv*. 10.5)[10]

Exotic seafoods, garum, and mushrooms take great time, labor, and resources to obtain. Seneca condemns all such dainties as decadent luxuries. In contrast, he praises Gaius Fabricius Luscinus for happily dining on the very roots and grasses he plucked from his fields. "Would he have been happier if he had crammed into his belly fish from distant shores, and exotic birds? If he had roused his slow and sickened stomach with shellfish from the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas? If he had arrayed a huge pile of fruits around highly sought-after beasts caught at great loss of hunters' lives?" (*Prov*. 3.6)[11] The availability of local crops makes importing foods from afar unnecessary and makes hunting dangerous animals unnecessary and reckless. Thus, only wasteful, dissipated fools demand exotic, imported foods.

Seneca believes that the needs of the body greatly outnumber the needs of the mind. "For the body needs many things in order to thrive, but the mind grows by itself, feeds itself, trains itself. Athletes require a great deal of food and drink, much oil, and lengthy exercises; but virtue will be yours without any supplies or expenses. Anything that can make you a good person is already in your possession." (*Letter* 80.3) The Stoics highly valued self-sufficiency. Seneca commends the mind's pursuit of virtue because it costs no money and requires no equipment. To build an athletic body requires much food, drink, and time-consuming exercises. He thinks that bodybuilding and the heavy diet that goes with it burden the mind

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[10] As translated by Gareth D. Williams in Seneca (2014).
[11] As translated by James Ker in Seneca (2014).

and make it less agile (*Letter* 15.2–3).[12] Instead, he instructs his friend to set himself a period of days in which he will be content with very small amounts of food, and the cheapest kinds, to dispel his fear of frugality (*Letter* 18.5). Seneca contends that fearless, frugal eating makes you a better person than a muscular physique does.

Seneca writes: "I like food that is neither prepared nor watched by troops of servants, not something ordered many days ahead and proffered by many hands, but available and easily so, with no exotic or precious ingredients. This will not run out on any occasion, or be a burden to my budget or my body, or be brought up in vomiting." (*Tranq*. 1.6)[13] On a trip with a friend the frugal Seneca lunched on dried figs, sometimes with bread (*Letter* 87.3).

Ultimately, Seneca's filial piety trumped his commitment to vegetarianism. In his youth he was taken with the philosophy of Pythagoras. Seneca's teacher Sotion explained both Pythagoras' and Sextius' reasons for abstaining from animal food. "Sextius held that a person could get enough to eat without resorting to butchery; and that when bloodshed is adapted to the purposes of pleasure, one develops a habit of cruelty. He also used to say that one should pare away the resources of self-indulgence, and he offered reasoning to show that variety in food is alien to our bodies and detrimental to health." (*Letter* 108.17-18) Pythagoras believed in the kinship of all living things and held that upon death souls transmigrate from one animal's body into the next, whether it be that of a human or a nonhuman. "Pythagoras instilled in humankind a fear of wrongdoing—more specifically, of parricide. For if some spirit related to them happened to be dwelling in a given body, they might, without realizing it, assault the soul of their parent with the knife or with their teeth." (*Letter* 108.19) Sotion reasoned that if these beliefs are true, then abstaining from animal foods means not harming anyone. If they are false, then vegetarianism is economical. Seneca, persuaded by Sotion of the savagery of eating flesh as lions and vultures do, adopted a vegetarian diet. He says this diet became easy and pleasant for him and made his mind livelier. Later, however, a vegetarian diet was seen as adherence to religions of foreign origin banned by the emperor. So, when his father asked him to give up that diet, Seneca complied. He returned to being a temperate kreophagist.

What should we make of a Seneca deferring to his father's uneasiness about his son's vegetarianism? A neostoic would take seriously fulfilling her role as a daughter or son to her father (see Johnson 2013). But I don't see her giving up her principled vegetarianism simply to appease her parent if the warrant for rejecting that diet is the appearance – to some – of affinity with a newfangled religion. If Seneca the Elder was made uncomfortable by his son's vegetarian diet because it offended his Romanocentric, religious conservatism, this would not be a good enough reason for a neostoic to return to eating flesh. Neostoics have no duty to

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[12] This resonates with Diogenes the Cynic's remark about meat-heavy diets making athletes stupid.
[13] As translated by Elaine Fantham in Seneca (2014).

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cater to their parent's parochialism. Being a good daughter does not require her to wear a particular style of clothing to appease her parent's sartorial strictures. Neither would be complying with her parent's food preferences. After all, the inferences other people draw about a neostoic's religious beliefs simply by observing what she eats are certainly not up to her. Seneca the Younger was persuaded by Sextius' arguments. If they were good arguments, then, out of respect for her parent and in defense of truth, a neostoic ought to try to persuade her parent accordingly. Failing that, a neostoic can agree to disagree with her parent about the diet that is right for her.

This episode related in *Letter* 108 raises a question about the philosophical justification of Seneca's diet. Was it Stoicism or Pythagoreanism that led him to abstain from meat? Transmigration of souls, after all, is a doctrine of Pythagoreanism, not Stoicism. While this is true, a Stoic need not accept metempsychosis to agree with Sextius that when bloodshed in eating is adapted to the purposes of pleasure, the habit of cruelty can result. Sotion reasoned that even if it is false that the soul of a deceased relative sometimes occupies the body of a nonhuman animal, and so killing and eating that animal would not commit the crime of parricide, vegetarianism remains 'economical.' This rationale fits nicely with the other reasons Seneca gives for dietary restraint: that (a) virtue limits our wants to our needs; (b) nature establishes our needs; (c) what we need is simply to remove hunger; (d) hunger is not ambitious; (e) ambition and greed trigger vicious eating. Seneca insists on eating moderately, not indulging in luxuries and delicacies. This means choosing foods that are easy to get, easy to prepare, inexpensive, and locally sourced. That Seneca reasons his way to these food ethics from the premise of the Stoic *telos* formula is plain: "Our aim is to live in accordance with nature, is it not? This is contrary to nature: tormenting one's body, swearing off simple matters of grooming, affecting a squalid appearance, partaking of foods that are not merely inexpensive but rancid and coarse. A hankering after delicacies is a sign of self-indulgence; by the same token, avoidance of those comforts that are quite ordinary and easy to obtain is an indication of insanity. Philosophy demands self-restraint, not self-abnegation." (*Letter* 5.4-5; cf. *Letter* 78.22-24) Seneca concludes that restrained, moderate, unfussy eating requires neither self-deprivation nor fasting. In rejecting rancid, coarse food, Seneca's comment suggests that, as long as one avoids extravagance, obsessive attention to preparation, and harmful attitudes toward food, reason accords with nature by recommending simple, wholesome, and *tasty* meals. Tasty foods would thus count as preferred indifferents, just as rancid, coarse foods would be dispreferred indifferents. Virtue requires not that we sacrifice taste, only that we always avoid greed, gluttony, finickiness, and self-indulgence in luxuries. That Pythagoreans would also decry these gustatory vices in no way undermines the authentically Stoic basis of Seneca's food ethics. Given the breadth of his treatment, Seneca serves as a fair representative of the Stoic philosophy of food. I

suggest that the textual evidence warrants ascribing to his food ethics the precept *Avoid luxuries like meat and dainties*.[14]

3. Musonius Rufus on Mastering Appetites

Musonius Rufus was born into the Roman social order of equestrians (*equitēs*). This socio-economic status implied an ample food budget. Musonius opposed the gustatory self-indulgence and lavish eating typical of Roman banquets (*convivia*).[15] Emphasizing the importance of daily practices, Musonius insisted that mastering one's appetites for food and drink is the basis for temperance, a vital virtue.[16] He agrees with Seneca that the purpose of food is to nourish and strengthen the body and to sustain life, not to provide pleasure.[17] Digesting our food gives us no pleasure, and the time spent digesting food far exceeds the time spent consuming it. It is not consumption but digestion that nourishes the body. Therefore, he reasons that the food we eat serves its purpose when we're digesting it, not when we're tasting it.

Musonius advocates lacto-vegetarian foods that are least expensive and most readily available: raw fruits in season, certain raw vegetables, milk, cheese, and honeycombs. Cooked grains and some cooked vegetables are also suitable for humans, whereas meat is too crude for human beings and is more suitable for wild beasts.[18] Musonius concurs with Diogenes that those who eat lots of meat seem slow-witted.

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[14] Meats include fish, oysters, and seafood in general. Dainties include mushrooms, condiments like garum and liquamen, and any comestibles that are expensive, laborious, or time-consuming to obtain, prepare, or serve. When a piece of meat or a dainty is the only thing one can eat, then it is not a luxury.

[15] Oswyn Murray writes: "The Roman *convivium* was modelled on the Etruscan version of the Greek symposium. These Italian feasts differed from their Greek prototypes in four important respects: citizen women were present; equality was replaced by a hierarchy of honour; the emphasis was on eating and the *cena* [main meal], rather than on the *comissatio*, or later drinking session; the entertainment was often given by one man for his inferior *amici* [friends] and *clientes* [free men who entrusted themselves to others and received protection in return]. The Roman *convivium* was therefore embedded in social and family structures, rather than largely independent of them." (2003, 387)

[16] The following remarks attributed to Musonius are from *Discourse* 18A and 18B: *On Food*.

[17] Musonius attributes to Socrates the wise saying that "the majority of people live to eat but that he ate to live. Certainly no reasonable being, whose ambition is to be a human being, will think it desirable to be like the majority who live to eat, and like them, spend his life chasing after pleasure derived from food." (Rufus 2020, 92; tr. modified)

[18] The Greek text reads: τὴν μέντοι κρεώδη τροφὴν θηριωδεστέραν ἀπέφηνε καὶ τοῖς ἀγρίοις ζῴοις προσφορωτέραν. "On the other hand he proved that meat was a more savage [or 'bestial'] kind of food and more fitting for wild animals." (tr. mine) An objection could be raised that although animal flesh may indeed be 'more savage,' circumstances may not universally rule it out. For instance, sailors whose food stocks run low could fish. When the rations of soldiers on campaign run out, they could eat deer. Neither Musonius nor Seneca discuss circumstances where meat is the only alternative to starving to death. Such scenarios were as rare in antiquity

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We are worse than nonhuman animals when it comes to food, Musonius believes, because we obsessively embellish our food's presentation and fuss over what we eat and how we prepare it merely to amuse our palates. Moreover, too much rich food harms the body. So, he infers that gastronomic pleasure is undoubtedly the most difficult pleasure to combat. Consequently, like Seneca, Musonius rejects gourmet cuisine and delicacies as dangerous luxuries. Craving gourmet food he considers most shameful and intemperate. Musonius thinks that those who eat inexpensive food can work harder, are the least fatigued by working, become sick less often, tolerate cold, heat, and lack of sleep better, and are stronger, than those who eat expensive food. He concludes that responsible people favor what is easy to obtain over what is difficult, what involves no trouble over what does, and what is available over what isn't. Habituating oneself in these preferences promotes self-control and goodness.

4. Epictetus on Fear of Hunger and Food Insecurity

Years of slavery shaped Epictetus' philosophy of food. Real slavery, he contends, is living in fear. So, he urges his students to get rid of all fears about eating. In one vignette, Epictetus considers the plight of a slave who is ordered to hold a chamber pot for his master. The slave must choose between obeying this command to hold the pot as his master evacuates his bowels and bladder or disobeying the command. If the slave disobeys, his master promises to beat him and not feed him dinner. Epictetus observes that earning a living is better than starving to death (*Disc*. 1.2.10), other things being equal. But the slave may decide that things are not equal. He may opt to preserve his dignity by disobeying, refusing to hold the pot, getting a beating, and going hungry.

When a student frets about being too poor to be able to eat, Epictetus scolds him for lacking the confidence to fend for himself as successfully as slaves and runaways do. A worrywart who fears starving must believe he is stupider and less resourceful than irrational beasts, all of whom are self-sufficient and provided with food and a mode of survival adapted to and in harmony with their nature (*Disc*. 1.9.8-9).[19] Epictetus notes that neither runaway slaves nor old beggars starve, so we have no good reason to worry that our food will run out. Instead, we

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as they are today. But when eating to live actually necessitates eating an animal, it seems plausible that Stoics permit it *so long as it does not compromise virtue*. For Epictetus' discussion of facing hunger virtuously, see below.

[19] This way of confronting those suffering from anxiety looks dangerously close to heartless victim-blaming. A more charitable interpretation suggests that Epictetus seeks to encourage the food-fretter by reminding him that he has succeeded in feeding himself in the past, so inductive reasoning warrants confidence that he can muster the resources to sustain himself in the future. Epictetus implies that giving in to worry about going hungry distracts you from figuring out how to find food. Diogenes the Dog and other animals do not let self-pity impede their foraging. Resilient optimism energizes problem-solving, thereby increasing the odds of getting your hands on food.

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should concern ourselves with becoming good. "Does any good man fear that he may run out of food? The blind don't run out of food, nor do the crippled; so will a good man run out of it?" (*Disc*. 3.26.27) [20] For Epictetus "dishonor, in truth, consists not in not having anything to eat, but in not having reason enough to preserve you from fear and distress." (*Disc*. 3.24.116) A good person uses reason to overcome fear and sorrow.

Epictetus believes that Zeus/God/nature both provides and takes away all our material possessions. "Another provides you with nourishment and possessions, and he can take them away again likewise, along with your body too. For your part, you should accept the material and work on it." (*Disc*. 2.5.22) And if God no longer provides food, then this means that, like a good general, God has given the signal to withdraw, God is sounding the recall,[21] opening the door, and saying to 'Come.' (*Disc*. 3.13.13-14) Epictetus says he will obey while speaking well of his commander and praising his works (*Disc*. 3.26.29). If starvation ever becomes inevitable, the Stoic accepts it calmly. In contrast, the non-Stoic who weeps about going hungry foolishly makes himself a slave to his fear. "As soon as you've eaten your fill today, you sit and moan about what tomorrow may bring, worrying about how you'll be able to feed yourself. If you manage to get any food, slave, you'll have it, and if you don't, you'll leave this world; the door stands open. Why grieve? What place is left for tears?;" (*Disc*. 1.9.19-20) for an account of Epictetus' Open Door policy on suicide, see Stephens (2014). Thus, Epictetus sees no reason to fear starving to death. God will either provide food or not. If so, then there's nothing to fear. If not, then there's no dishonor in exiting life when God decides it's our time. After all, only mortals need food and death is not to be feared anyway.

Today neostoics inhabit a world of billions of people with limited or uncertain access to food. This condition is known as *food insecurity*. Globally one in four people – 1.9 billion – are moderately or severely food insecure (Roser and Ritchie 2019). Nine percent of the world population – around 697 million – are severely food insecure. Eleven percent of the world's population are undernourished, meaning that their daily caloric intake falls below minimum energy requirements. Globally 820 million people are undernourished. Children suffer disproportionately. Twenty-two percent of kids under the age of five are 'stunted.' They are significantly shorter than the average for their age due to poor nutrition or repeated infection (Roser and Ritchie 2019). In 2019 in the United States 35 million struggled with hunger (Feeding America 2022). In 2018, before Covid-19, 14.3 million American households were food insecure.

Would Epictetus scold a hungry, undernourished child for shedding a tear? Certainly not. Epictetus scolds an *adult* who has 'eaten his fill' and then immediately frets about going hungry tomorrow. The Open Door Policy is for

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[20] Quotations of the *Discourses* are from Epictetus (2014).
[21] That is, calling for suicide.

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adults, not food-insecure children. Nonetheless, neostoics strive to become just *and* to push for just practices, policies, and institutions. Why? Because the Stoic concepts of social *oikeiōsis* and cosmopolitanism support an argument for communitarian and political activism.[22] Food insecurity is unjust. Epictetus is right that food insecurity, undernourishment, and hunger ought not to be *feared*, yet stoics will *oppose* them. Neostoics would regard these as urgent problems that governments and philanthropic organizations ought to ameliorate. In short, food insecurity results from inequitable, inefficient systems of food production and distribution. Such unjust systems should be reformed. Therefore, neostoics will do all they can to promote food security locally and globally.

What about those who can always access sufficient food? For the food secure, Epictetus agrees with Seneca and Musonius that the purpose of eating is not to feel pleasure (*Disc.* 3.24.37–38). We should take only what the body strictly needs in food, drink, clothing, and shelter and eliminate luxury and ostentation altogether (*Handbook* 33.7). Each gift in life is only loaned to us for a limited time, neither irrevocably nor forever, "like a fig or bunch of grapes, for a particular season of the year; so that if you long for it in the winter, you're a fool." (*Disc.* 3.24.86) We must adapt our desires to what is available, when it is available. Also, Epictetus denies that the conflicting opinions concerning food of Jews, Syrians, Egyptians, and Romans could all be right (*Disc.* 1.11.12-13). Whatever is done in accordance with nature, he states, is rightly done (*Disc.* 1.115). Criteria allow us to distinguish between what accords with nature and what conflicts with it. The criterion distinguishing colors is vision. The criterion distinguishing hot, cold, hard, and soft is touch. Epictetus grants that it is perhaps no great harm for a person not to know the criterion of odors and flavors. But serious harm results from ignorance of the criterion of good and evil, of what accords with nature and what is contrary to it (*Disc.* 1.11.9-11). As noted above, Epictetus rejects eating whatever tastes good. When asked how to eat so as to please the gods, he said by eating "as one ought and politely, and indeed with temperance and restraint." (*Disc.* 1.13.1) The proper scruples for eating are politeness, temperance, and restraint. We must understand these scruples so we can apply them correctly at every meal.[23] Over time, with experience and persistence, the Stoic assimilates this understanding through a process of digestion (see Tremblay 2019). Those who have digested their philosophical principles show it by eating, drinking, dressing, marrying, having children, and being citizens as a human being should (*Disc.* 3.21.1-5).

Epictetus advocates not vegetarianism but rather anthropocentrism: "God has constituted each [animal] according to its intended purpose, one to be eaten,

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[22] For Stoic communitarianism see Long (2007). A few of the many studies of the Stoic theory of *oikeiōsis* are Engberg-Pedersen (1990), Reydams-Schils (2002), and Klein (2016). On Stoic cosmopolitanism see Stanton (1968), Brown (1997), Sellars (2007), and Hill (2015).

[23] For competing views on how doctrines (*decreta*) and precepts (*praecepta*) operate in Stoicism, see Mitsis (1993), Inwood (1999), and Brittain (2001).

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another to be used in fields, another to produce cheese, and another for some comparable use." (*Disc*. 1.6.18)[24] Several of Epictetus' texts about domesticated animals defend this objectionable anthropocentrism. This raises a problem. How are we to reconcile Musonius' strict lacto-vegetarianism with Epictetus' anthropocentric defense of using and eating domesticated animals? We cannot. Given our best empirical scientific understanding of biology, evolution, and astronomy, we now know that Earth is at the center of neither this solar system, nor the Milky Way galaxy, which itself is not at the center of countless other galaxies (Becker 2017, xiii, 11-12). We now know that Homo sapiens is only one of four primate species with considerable intelligence, sociability, and communicative skills. Ethology teaches us today what Porphyry and Plutarch[25] knew in antiquity, that the *logos*, intelligence, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities that so many have, for so long, fancied to be the monopoly of our species are certainly shared in varying degrees by thousands of other species of cetaceans, octopi, terrestrial mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, and insects. So, neostoics should follow Becker and accept that science refutes anthropocentrism.

Epictetus follows Seneca in prescribing abstinence. Abstinence is required to discipline one's desires so as to follow nature in accordance with the ethical principles of Stoicism. "You should practice at one time to live like one who is ill, so as to be able, one day, to live like one who is healthy. Take no food, drink water alone; abstain from every desire at one time so as to be able, one day, to exercise your desire in a reasonable way." (*Disc*. 3.13.21) Ignorance (about how to eat agreeably with nature) is an illness requiring therapy (abstinence). Convalescence is achieved by eating and drinking only what is strictly necessary, eliminating all luxuries, and vanquishing all worries about food.

5. Marcus Aurelius Denies Dead Meat is Delectable

In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius often reminds himself to strip away the illusions that beguile people into craving fame, riches, luxuries, and carnal pleasures. For example, when beholding a fancy plate of meat or a pricey glass of wine, some see fabulous delicacies and swoon. Instead, Marcus cautions himself to perceive what they really are.

> Like seeing roasted meat and other dishes in front of you and suddenly realizing: This is a dead fish. A dead bird. A dead pig. Or that this noble vintage is grape juice… Perceptions like that – latching onto things and piercing through them, so we see what they really are. That's what we need to do all the time – all through our lives when things lay claim to our trust – to lay them bare and see how pointless they are, to strip away the legend that encrusts them. Pride is a master

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[24] Epictetus admonishes dinner guests to take only their polite share of the roast (*Disc*. 2.4.8).
[25] Newmyer (1999) treats Plutarch's dispute with the Stoics on the rationality of animals.

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of deception: when you think you're occupied in the weightiest business, that's when he has you in his spell. (*Med*. vi.13)[26]

I do not construe this text as an *argument* against meat. Rather, this 'stripping away' is an important psychological strategy for Marcus. He uses it to keep from attaching his desire to widely coveted externals. Here he reflects that to gourmandize meat is to prettify a cadaver. To glorify meat and alcohol is to bewitch oneself into cherishing calories. For Marcus, calories are garbage compared to a sound, insightful mind. His clear-sighted, sober perception about the corpses people unthinkingly gobble up extends to disdain toward living human bodies. He urges himself to despise his flesh, which is "a mess of blood, pieces of bone, a woven tangle of nerves, veins, arteries." (*Med*. ii.2) Marcus is revolted by his own body: "The stench of decay. Rotting meat in a bag. Look at it clearly. If you can." (*Med*. viii.38) Innards are grotesque to Marcus. The body's relentless craving for food, drink, and sex, coupled with its incessant aches, pains, nausea, fatigue, insomnia, injuries, and illness, lead him to see death as the end of enslavement to the body (*Med*. vi.28). If death is nothingness, then he will no longer have to put up with pain and pleasure and attending to the 'battered crate' that is his body, which is 'earth and garbage' compared to the mind and spirit it serves (*Med*. iii.3).[27] Neostoics certainly need not share Marcus' disgust for the human body to glean instruction from the Roman Stoics' philosophy of food.

The Roman Stoics decry luxurious eating and eating for pleasure. Seneca and Musonius Rufus regard meat as a luxury to eliminate. Nourishing grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits, nuts, and seeds sustain physical health. We need wholesome vegetarian foods in order to live well and cultivate virtues. Wisdom knows the difference between eating what we *need* for healthy activities (including the intellectual activities of reflection, contemplation, and deliberation) and eating what we *want* for pleasure. Meat is ordinarily prepared to taste pleasant, and we want it as a luxury. Meat is typically not chosen as a vital need. Luxurious habits manifest the vices of self-indulgence, gluttony, and wastefulness, vices of hedonism. Austerity, in contrast, is commended by wisdom as a habit for a sound, healthy character.

6. Meat is Complex

When thinking about their role as *eaters*, contemporary stoics not only practice politeness, restraint, and temperance but are also mindful of their roles as *consumers*. Food requires water and energy to produce. Per capita, citizens of developed countries consume far more energy, water, and natural resources than citizens of developing countries while generating far greater volumes of greenhouse gases. Consequently, temperance is not the only virtue operative in

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[26] Quotations of the *Meditations* are from Aurelius (2003).
[27] Nussbaum (2002, 45-49) projects this theme in Marcus to the view of externals in Stoic cosmopolitanism.

stoic food ethics. Food justice will also matter. But since food justice pertains to food industries, and food industries involve institutions, the following objection arises. Julia Annas observes that "the [ancient] Stoics have no systematic answer to the question, how justice as a virtue of the individual agent relates to justice as a virtue of institutions." (1993, 311) For precisely this reason contemporary stoics must step in to fill this void by identifying the injustices of today's food systems and articulating practical ethical norms to oppose them. So, justice as a virtue of the individual agent dictates actively working to reform or abolish unjust institutions, systems, and practices. This activism may well require the virtues of courage and persistence. Another virtue of stoic consumers is wisdom. Wisdom dictates debunking the misguided, destructive belief system of carnism. Carnism is the prevailing, violent ideology, supported by mostly unchallenged assumptions, that eating meat is natural, normal, necessary, and nice (Joy 2010). I suggest that wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance, as virtues of the individual consumer, dictate buying and eating food products that are as little implicated as possible in harms to human health, food industry workers, nonhuman animals, and the environment.

These considerations led Stephens (1994) to reconstruct five arguments for a veg*n [28] diet as a virtuous goal for people who are not food insecure. The *Argument from Distributive Justice* is that the Meat and Dairy Industrial Complex (MADIC) steers agricultural resources away from the poor to supply meat and dairy products to the affluent, thereby exacerbating food insecurity for the vulnerable and disempowered while catering to the preferences of the wealthy and powerful. Therefore, MADIC violates the principle of distributive justice.

The *Argument from Environmental Harm* is that MADIC causes serious, manifold, widespread damages to the environment. These include depleting fresh water and aquifers, water pollution, soil compaction, soil erosion, depleting soil fertility, deforestation, desertification, destruction of wildlife, reducing biodiversity, consumption of nonrenewable energies, and production of greenhouse gases that severely worsen global climate change (see also Shogry 2020 and Whiting et al. 2020).

The *Feminist Argument from Sexual Politics* is that meat-eating and patriarchy are intimately connected, as are vegetarianism and feminism. Meat symbolizes oppression and violence perpetrated against both nonhuman animals and women, so vegetarianism signally rejects our 'meat is king' patriarchal culture. The Cynics championed gender equality. Engel (2000) shows that, with some inconsistency, Musonius Rufus did too. Hill (2020) convincingly argues that neostoics embrace feminism (see also Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014).

The *Argument from Moral Consideration for Animals* is that exploiting nonhuman animals by breeding them into existence only to rapidly fatten them up in miserable, disease-infested conditions (in CAFOs) and, at a very young age,

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[28] A term designating both vegetarian and vegan.

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slaughter them as cheaply as possible, is wrong. Since anthropocentrism is untenable and veg*n alternatives abound, we can and ought to boycott MADIC products and abolish CAFOs.

Finally, the *Prudential Argument from Health* is that meat, dairy, and egg consumption is implicated in high cholesterol, obesity, atherosclerosis, heart disease, stroke, breast cancer, uterine cancer, cervical cancer, prostate cancer, lung cancer, kidney disease, and osteoporosis. [29] Heavy meat consumption shortens life expectancy. People with diabetes, hypertension, rheumatoid arthritis, kidney stones, diverticulitis, gall bladder disease, peptic ulcers, and asthma benefit by switching to veg*n diets. So, the virtue of prudence recommends balanced veg*n diets over diets in which animal products dominate.

Unsurprisingly, the values motivating these five arguments are more popular among political liberals. Western vegetarians tend to be liberals who value environmental protection, equality, and social justice while opposing hierarchy, authoritarianism, capital punishment, and violence (Nezlek and Forestell 2019, 549). Vegetarians are also more altruistic than omnivores and more likely to work in charitable organizations, local governments, or education (Nezlek and Forestell 2019, 549). In this vein, occupational injuries, psychological traumas, and abuses suffered by CAFO workers call for replacing MADIC with systems that protect agricultural laborers from harm and exploitation. (This includes farmers and workers in the avocado industry, who are often beaten, tortured, kidnapped, raped, or murdered.) As the world population approaches eight billion, water-related violence surges globally while meat and dairy consumption escalates in China and India (see Safi 2019).[30] Thus, the MADIC with its ballooning demands for fresh water and fossil fuels promises to contribute to greater geopolitical destabilization.

7. Wet Markets and Pandemics

One place humans come into contact with animals is at wet markets. Wet markets are typically large groups of open-air stalls selling fresh seafood, meat, fruits, and vegetables. At some wet markets live chickens, fish, shellfish, and other animals are slaughtered and sold. One explanation for the name is that live fish splash in tubs of water, melting ice keeps meat cold, and the blood and innards of slaughtered animals all make these markets wet places. In China, for many, wet markets are a staple of daily life. The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China is believed by some to be the source of COVID-19 (Maron 2020). Some wet markets also sell wild animal meat, colloquially known as bushmeat. The Huanan market sold live wild animals and the bushmeat of snakes, beavers, porcupines, baby crocodiles, and other animals. Close interactions with wild animals have caused numerous disease outbreaks in humans, including Ebola and HIV. Buying,

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[29] Though shellfish is high in cholesterol, fish is not generally implicated in these diseases.
[30] Meat more than milk in China and the reverse in India.

selling, and slaughtering wild animals for food is one way an animal-borne disease may infect people. Viruses can spread more easily when animals are confined in dirty, cramped conditions, such as in stacked cages, and get sick (see Foer 2009, Stephens 2019). When animals are under duress, viral pathogens can intermingle, swap bits of genetic code, and perhaps mutate to become more transmissible between species. Respiratory diseases like COVID-19 can infect food handlers or customers through exposure to an animal's bodily fluids (Maron 2020). "Some of the most common and deadliest human diseases are caused by bacteria or viruses of animal origin. In recent decades this trend has only increased, with an estimated 70 percent of emerging and re-emerging pathogens coming from animals. This includes avian flu, Ebola virus disease, influenza, leprosy, lassa fever, MERS-CoV, rabies, SARS, smallpox, tuberculosis, Zika fever, and other well-known diseases." (WHO 2020) The prevalence of zoonotic diseases results from our relationship with nonhuman animals. That relationship is complex, often unhealthy, and on the whole suspect.

Health is regarded by Stoics as 'a preferred indifferent.' So, Stoics select healthy foods except in bizarre circumstances in which selecting healthier foods would conflict with virtue. Wet markets endanger public health, just as CAFOs do. So why are wet markets and CAFOs so popular worldwide? Partly because Big Ag corporations are permitted to externalize much of their costs; partly due to the broader forces of capitalist industrialization; and partly because consumers have been habituated, through tradition, religious indoctrination, and aggressive marketing, to eat animals. The violent ideology according to which eating animals is normal, natural, necessary, and nice is termed carnism (Joy 2010). But there is nothing nice about the toll on human lives, human health, economies, and the education of students imposed by Covid-19. Pathogens are natural in a sense. Yet I argue that it is contrary to reason and virtue for stoics today to support food systems likely to spawn new pathogens. Justice, wisdom, simplicity, and self-interest obligate neostoics to prefer low-input plants and plant-based foods.

Should stoics favor locally produced food? First, importing food from afar is deplorable decadence, Seneca insists, whenever adequate fare is nearby (*Prov.* 3.6). Second, Seneca (*Otio* 4.1) and Marcus Aurelius (*Med.* vi.44) adduce twin commonwealths to which every citizen (*politēs*) belongs: the world (*cosmos*) and the city of one's birth (e.g. Rome, Chicago, Tokyo). Thus, this dual citizenship includes both local responsibilities, e.g. supporting local farmers, and global concerns, e.g. ameliorating global climate change and ocean pollution. Yet the most effective way for most Americans, for example, to reduce their diet's carbon footprint is not by buying local, but by eliminating or reducing their consumption of animal products (Leaves 2017). Stoic consumers have a duty to act individually and collectively to oppose carnism. Stoic citizens must promote more efficient, more sustainable, fairer, safer, non-violent food systems locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

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Which rules govern stoicism and food? "As Seneca emphasizes in *Letter* 71.1, advice is adjusted to situations, and situations are in flux. If one needs advice, one is not asking to be told the correct rule to cover the situation; one is asking how to balance various considerations." (Vogt 2020)

8. Conclusion

Diogenes the Cynic, the Roman Stoics, Pythagoras, Epicurus, and Porphyry all endorsed frugal diets and rejected ambitious eating, luxuries, and gustatory decadence. All the Roman Stoics advocated limiting eating and drinking to strict bodily need and quelling anxieties about food. The lessons for stoics are clear enough. Concerns about food insecurity and food sovereignty, the resource demands and manifold environmental harms of the MADIC, the costs to human health of diets based on animal products, the ongoing pandemic sprung from a wet market, past outbreaks of zoonotic diseases unleashed from CAFOs, and the violent ideology of carnism, prescribe veg*n precepts to stoics for whom meatless foods are available and affordable. Intensively produced animal products[31] are luxuries that extract too great a cost on the animals, the CAFO workers, the food-insecure, small farms, women, the environment, the climate, and public health. Contemporary stoics see no wisdom, justice, or temperance in eating animal parts whenever plants will do.[32]

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[31] This might exclude sustainably raised insects.

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Stoic Conservatism

Tristan J. Rogers

Abstract: What might a Stoic approach to politics look like? David Goodhart aptly describes the political divide pervading Western societies in terms of the 'somewheres,' who are communitarian, rooted in particular places, and resistant to social and political change, versus the 'anywheres,' who are cosmopolitan, mobile, and enthusiastic embracers of change. Stoicism recognizes a similar distinction. This paper defends a conservative interpretation of Stoic politics. According to 'Stoic conservatism,' cosmopolitanism is an ethical ideal through which we perform the obligations assigned by our communitarian role(s) in society. The view is 'conservative' in that it favors existing institutions as the starting point for virtue instead of reasoning *a priori* about what virtue requires. Stoic politics consists neither in cosmopolitan transcendence of particular attachments, nor in passive acceptance of the communitarian status quo, but in ethical improvement toward virtue, *within* the political structure of society.

Keywords: communitarianism, conservatism, cosmopolitanism, politics, Stoicism, virtue.

The administration of the great system of the universe, however, the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension; the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country: that he is occupied in contemplating the more sublime, can never be an excuse for his neglecting the more humble department.
        Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part IV, Sec. II, Chap. III

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in Stoicism (Irvine 2008; Holiday 2014; Becker 2017; Pigliucci 2018; Whiting and Konstantakos 2021). Stoic ethics is especially popular, as people seek alternative sources of moral instruction in uncertain and divisive times. But Stoic approaches to politics are comparatively rare. This is partly because there is no scholarly consensus on what the Stoic approach to politics *is*. While most Stoics believed that the wise person will participate in politics, no positive political program clearly emerges from any of our extant sources.

    What might a Stoic approach to politics look like? David Goodhart (2017) aptly describes the political divide pervading Western societies in terms of the 'somewheres,' who are communitarian, rooted in particular places, and resistant to social and political change, versus the 'anywheres,' who are cosmopolitan, mobile, and enthusiastic embracers of change. Stoicism recognizes a similar

distinction. "My city and state are Rome," Marcus Aurelius writes, "But as a human being? The world." (Aurelius 2002, VI.44) Yet the Stoics would not recognize the contemporary conflict Goodhart describes between the communitarian and cosmopolitan perspectives, as Marcus concludes that "for me, 'good' can only mean what's good for *both* communities." (Aurelius 2002, VI.44, emphasis added) So, according to Stoicism, we can (and should) be both a somewhere *and* an anywhere.

How does Stoicism reconcile cosmopolitanism and communitarianism? According to 'Stoic conservatism,' cosmopolitanism is an ethical ideal through which we perform the obligations assigned by our communitarian role(s) in society. The view is 'conservative' in the sense that there is an assumption in favor of existing institutions as the starting point for virtue, instead of reasoning *a priori* about what virtue requires. Stoic politics consists neither in cosmopolitan transcendence of particular attachments, nor in passive acceptance of the communitarian status quo, but in ethical improvement toward virtue, *within* the political structure of society. In this sense, Stoic politics is an early precursor to Edmund Burke's conservative insight that a political tradition ought to be reformed from within, according to an implicit moral standard.

While conservative characterizations of Stoicism are not uncommon, the conservative aspect of Stoic politics is often assumed to be an unmotivated result of Stoicism's radical ethical claims. I will argue that, on the contrary, conservatism fits well within Stoic ethics, as it reconciles its cosmopolitan and communitarian strands. I begin, therefore, with a presentation of Stoic ethics. Following this, I discuss the cosmopolitan and communitarian strands of Stoicism and argue for Stoic conservatism as an alternative. I argue further that Stoic conservatism finds its best expression in Cicero's adoption of Stoic natural law theory. Lastly, I suggest a novel interpretation of the 'disturbing theses' of early Stoicism (Vogt 2008), which appear flatly inconsistent with conservatism of any kind.

1. Stoic Ethics

Stoic ethics follows the ancient Greek ethical tradition in holding that *eudaimonia* (happiness) is the highest good. Implicit in Plato's dialogues and made explicit by Aristotle (2019, I.4, 1095a15-20), the thought is that happiness, understood as a good life, is what everyone desires as the highest good. While, as we will see, Aristotle's own view of happiness differs sharply from the Stoics on the question of the sufficiency of virtue for happiness, "[t]he Stoics," as A.A. Long (1996, 182) notes, "share with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus the doctrine that happiness is essentially a condition that depends upon a person's values, beliefs, desires and moral character."

The most basic Stoic ethical teaching, dating back to Zeno's teacher Polemo, is to 'live according to nature.' (Cicero 2001, IV.14) This can alternatively mean to align one's will with the providential nature of God, or to act on the basis of what preserves human nature. The latter interpretation takes the form of an argument

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from the development of human infants, who are said to "seek what is good for them and avoid the opposite before they ever feel pleasure or pain." (Cicero 2001, III.16) Like other biological organisms, what is good for us depends on our nature, so we can safely conclude that food, shelter, health, and resources are good for us. To pursue these things well is to do so in accordance with reason, which is the virtue (or excellence) specific to human beings qua rational beings. And so, to live according to (human) nature is equivalent to living according to (human) virtue, which Chrysippus, as reported by Diogenes Laertius, says "is equivalent to living according to the experience of events which occur by nature." (Inwood and Gerson 1997, D.L. 7.87)

The Stoics define 'value' (*axia*) in terms of "whatever is either itself in accordance with nature, or brings about something that is." (Cicero 2001, III.20) Living according to nature means selecting among things according to nature and rejecting those that conflict with nature. This is the beginning of ethical development. But it is not the terminus because while things in accordance with nature have 'selective value,' the Stoics argue that the activity of selecting itself has value that is truly worthy of choosing (not merely selecting). So, for instance, things like health and wealth are not truly good, while acting well in pursuit of such things – virtue – is good and valued for its own sake. It is this reflective realization that selecting well per se is of higher value than the selected things themselves that establishes the Stoic claim that virtue is the only truly choiceworthy good.

Stoicism stands out among the ancient ethical schools in holding that "virtue is sufficient for happiness," as Diogenes Laertius faithfully reports (Long and Sedley 1987, D.L. 7.127). Unlike Aristotle, who was unwilling to countenance this thesis, chalking it up to a 'philosopher's paradox,' (Aristotle 2019, 1096a) the Stoics embrace the initially counterintuitive idea that the virtuous person remains happy even under the worst circumstances. Admittedly, it can be difficult to take such a view seriously. But as usual there is more to the Stoic position than its shock value. Virtue satisfies the formal conditions for *eudaimonia* sketched by Aristotle (Annas 1993, 34-42). Human virtue is distinctive to human beings; it's within our control; we value it for its own sake, and so on. Whereas Aristotle felt the pull of common sense that led him to include external goods (e.g., honor, wealth, health, resources, etc.) in happiness alongside virtue, the Stoics avoid the possible instability of this view by restricting goodness to virtue alone (Annas 1993, chap. 18-19).

Stoicism accounts for the apparent value of external goods by assigning them to the category of 'preferred indifferents,' that is, things indifferent with respect to happiness, but worth selecting, since they are in accordance with nature. Hence, we have reason to prefer health to sickness, wealth to poverty, and so on. But it is a mistake to equate the apparent value of such things with the true value of virtue, which once attained, is unaffected by illness, poverty, and the like.

Importantly, the difference in value here is a matter of kind, not degree. *No* amount of external goods can outweigh the value of virtue.

2. Stoic Politics: Cosmopolitan, Communitarian, or Conservative?

Stoic politics stresses expanding the sphere of our moral concern beyond the self. Our concern for others begins in the family with parents' natural love for their children and ends with concern for all of human society (Cicero 2001, III.62). This is what the Stoics call social *oikeiosis*, meaning the process of adopting the interests of others as one's own on the basis of our common humanity. Like Aristotle (1998), who famously claims that "a human being is by nature a political animal," (1253a) the Stoics reason that "we are fitted by nature to form associations, assemblies and states." (Cicero 2001, III.63) Human nature is inherently social.

Hierocles, a later Greek Stoic, explains the sociality of human nature in terms of the image of concentric circles (Long and Sedley 1987, Stobaeus 4.671, 7-673, 11). The innermost circle is one's own mind, followed by one's immediate family members, extended family, local residents and neighboring townspeople, fellow citizens, and finally: "[t]he outermost and largest circle, which encompasses all the rest, is that of the whole human race." (Long and Sedley 1987, 349) According to Hierocles, moral progress consists in treating those on the outer circles as if they were members of the inner circles. Thus, you should treat a stranger like a fellow citizen, a fellow citizen like a neighbor, a neighbor or friend like a brother, and your family as if they were members of your own body. Hierocles' striking example shows the extent to which the Stoics stress the moral significance of the various social roles occupied by each person. The most important role for the Stoics, however, does not seem to be the roles that most people identify with, e.g., husband, father, citizen, and so on, but rather the role of human being as such. In this vein, Seneca writes,

> We must grasp that there are two public realms, two commonwealths. One is great and truly common to all…The other is that in which we are enrolled by an accident of birth – I mean Athens or Carthage or some other city that belongs not to all men but only to a limited number. (1995, 175)

Seneca's first commonwealth captures my role as a human being with the capacity for reason (and therefore virtue). Seneca's second commonwealth captures my role as a citizen in some existing state. How do these two roles fit together? For, following Hierocles, if I am reasoning about what virtues require of me from my role as a human being, it seems that I should show no partiality to my fellow citizens. Indeed, I should treat foreigners as if they were fellow citizens. Further, the existing laws and customs of the state in which I am a citizen may *not* be justified from the standpoint of my role as a rational human being.

This is the tension between the moral demands of Seneca's two commonwealths. Either I reason as a human being about what the virtues

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rationally require of me, independently of my role as a citizen in some existing state; or I act in the role of a citizen and follow the set of existing laws and customs, ignoring my role as a rational human being. At this point, it seems as though Stoic politics must run aground, as we are forced to choose between a high-minded, but impractical cosmopolitanism, and a practical, but morally unambitious communitarianism.

Let us investigate these options more thoroughly. According to Stoic cosmopolitanism, what matters most is my role as a human being with the capacity for reason. This qualification makes all human beings equal citizens in the republic of the cosmos, which, as the opening lines of Chrysippus' *On Law* state, is governed by law:

> Law is king of all things human and divine. Law must preside over what is honourable and base, as ruler and as guide, and thus be the standard of right and wrong, prescribing to animals whose nature is political what they should do, and prohibiting them from what they should not do. (Long and Sedley 1987, *SVF* 3.314)

Insofar as Chrysippus expresses a moral conception of law, articulating the directive nature of virtue, rather than a set of explicit laws, Stoic cosmopolitanism appears to have no clear political implications.[1] We should treat others equally, making no special distinction between citizen and foreigner. But practical politics has no genuine connection to the demands of virtue. So, unless the existing law of a state flagrantly violates the moral law, positive law has no bearing on virtuous action. It merely sanctions what we already have a moral obligation (not) to do anyway, e.g., positive laws against murder. Ironically, of course, cosmopolitanism and natural law are among the Stoic innovations that were most influential on later developments in Western political philosophy (see e.g., Hill and Blazejak 2021). But on their own, within Stoic ethics, they appear politically inert.

Later thinkers emphasize Stoicism's communitarian elements. Epictetus, for instance, combines Stoic cosmopolitanism with the Stoic doctrine of divine providence to argue that being a citizen of the world requires that we recognize our communitarian role(s) as parts of the cosmos as a whole:

> Consider who you are. First, a Man...On these terms you are a citizen of the universe and a part of it...What then is the calling of a Citizen? To have no personal interest, never to think about anything as though he were detached, but to be like the hand or the foot, which, if they had the power of reason and understood the order of nature, would direct every impulse and every process of the will by reference to the whole. (Epictetus 2004, II.10)

To be a good citizen of the universe, then, is to play one's assigned role. And since we cannot know the ultimate direction of nature, Epictetus concludes, "it is appropriate that we should hold fast to the things that are by nature more fit to be

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[1] Annas (1993, 311) ascribes to the early Stoics "a radically unpolitical, even depoliticized [outlook]."

chosen; for indeed we are born for this." (2004, II.10.) Epictetus' thought is, just as I cannot be a good man without also being a good son, so too I cannot be a good cosmopolitan without attending to my assigned role(s) in the cosmos.

According to Epictetus, communitarianism is required (not merely permitted) by Stoic cosmopolitanism. Stoic politics integrates the existing political structure of society into its conception of the cosmos. A Stoic lives in accordance with nature by selecting appropriate actions that derive from one's existing role(s) in society. While unlike Stoic cosmopolitanism, Stoic communitarianism undoubtedly has political content, it is difficult to see how it moves us beyond the status quo. Stoic ethics stresses the importance of justice as a character virtue. But as Julia Annas (1993, 311) observes, "the Stoics have no systematic answer to the question, how justice as a virtue of the individual agent relates to justice as a virtue of institutions." Hence, justice, according to Stoic communitarianism, seems to require only that I perform my role(s) within the existing institutions of society without questioning whether the institutions that define my role are *just*. Stoic communitarianism yields an equally unsatisfying account of Stoic politics.

Is there a middle way? According to what I call 'Stoic conservatism,' a Stoic approach to politics should prioritize neither cosmopolitanism nor communitarianism. A Stoic should strive for virtue within the socially embedded context of the role(s) defined by the existing institutions of society.[2] So, for instance, if I am a police officer, I should try to be a *just* police officer. If I am a father, I should try to be a *loving* father. If I am an American citizen, I should try to be a *good* American citizen. Stoic cosmopolitanism has no political content because it is intended as an ethical (not political) ideal, while Stoic communitarianism appears politically quietist only when detached from the Stoic ethical ideal. Stoic conservatism reconciles cosmopolitanism and communitarianism by insisting that ethical development toward virtue begin with the performance of actions associated with existing social roles. But Stoic conservatism also insists that the demands of social roles cannot be fulfilled unreflectively, since they must be integrated into the ethical ideal of virtue as a whole.

Conservative characterizations of Stoicism are not uncommon. Annas (1993, 309), for instance, in a discussion of the relationship between the Stoic ethical ideal and the tendency of Stoics to accept conventional political institutions like private property, writes regretfully that "in general Stoic discussions on this level seem to be basically conservative." If we expect Stoicism to produce a theory of justice that pronounces critically on the existing political organization of society, this must come as a disappointing realization. But though Stoicism is a very demanding moral theory, the Stoics never detach the ethical ideal of the virtuous life from the practical reality of the person striving to live such a life.

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[2] I am much indebted to Annas (2002, 2007), who defends this view as an interpretation of Stoic ethics, but notably does not explore its political implications.

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Cicero, for instance, reports that, according to Stoicism, "it is consistent with human nature for the wise person to want to take part in the business of government, and, in living by nature, to take a spouse and to wish to have children." (Cicero 2001, III.68) Epictetus, in contrast, invokes Socrates' refusal to commit unjust acts even when this conflicted with his conventional social roles (Epictetus 2004, II.1). But, according to Stoic conservatism, Cicero and Epictetus are both right. We should neither give up on conventional social roles, nor fulfill them unreflectively, isolated from the demands of virtue. "No one," Cicero reminds his son in *De Officiis*, "should be misled into thinking that because Socrates and Aristippus acted or spoke against the established custom of the city, we can do the same." (Cicero 2000, I.148) But equally so, "[m]ost foolish of all is the belief that everything decreed by the institutions or laws of a particular country is just." (Cicero 1998, *De Leg.* I.42)

How is this middle way to virtue achieved? Cicero, perhaps through the influence of the middle Stoic Panaetius, outlines four 'personae' or roles that characterize the virtuous agent.[3] The first two roles have to do with human nature, both collective and individual: "[1] The first is that which all of us share by virtue of our participation in that reason and superiority by which we rise above the brute beasts… [2] The other is that which is assigned uniquely to each individual," (Cicero 2000, I.107) i.e., a person's peculiar psychological and physical characteristics. The third and fourth roles have to do with chance circumstances and our choices: "[3] Regal powers, kingships, military commands, noble birth, magistracies, riches, resources – and the opposites of these – are a matter of chance, depending on circumstances." (Cicero 2000, I.115) Finally, "[4] the role which we should like to play is prompted by our own choice," (Cicero 2000, I.115) e.g., the choice of a vocation, spouse, or pastime.

Cicero urges that, in determining what virtue requires of us, "we must mentally grasp and reflect on all these aspects." (Cicero 2000, I.117) In other words, the virtuous person must harmonize all four roles, not reason in isolation from the demands of existing social roles, nor fulfill such roles unreflectively. For, our ability to reason alone is seldom sufficient to work out what must be done in particular circumstances; we need the constraints of existing institutions. Neither should chance opportunities be accepted unreflectively, since not everyone is fit to rule or make wise use of riches or resources. Likewise, the roles that we would like to play (e.g., a musician) are very often justly constrained by the roles of circumstance (e.g., the need to make a living), or a role we have already chosen (e.g., husband and father).

Cicero's theory of the four personae supports Stoic conservatism by including all four roles in working out what the virtues demand. Cicero maintains that from the first role "the honourable and fitting elements *wholly* derive, and

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[3] For the influence of Panaetius on Cicero's theory, see De Lacy (1977). For a recent treatment of role ethics in Epictetus and Cicero see Brian E. Johnson (2016, chap. 8).

from it too the way in which we assess our obligations." (2000, I.107, emphasis added) But because of the relative standing of the other three roles, this cannot be done by setting aside existing obligations and working out independently what is honorable and fitting. Rather, the leading role of rational human being must be played *through* the supporting roles of who you are, your existing relationships, and your choices.

3. Stoic Conservatism in Cicero's Natural Law Theory

Stoic conservatism finds its best expression in Cicero's adoption of Stoic natural law theory. Although it has antecedents in both Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics are usually credited with innovating natural law theory. Whereas prior philosophers had set nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*) in opposition, the Stoics locate true law (*nomos*) in nature herself. Cicero's contribution was to bring natural law down from heaven, as it were, and introduce it into cities as a way of doing the political philosophy neglected by the early Stoics.[4]

Cicero's *De Republica* is concerned with the question of the best regime and the possibility that philosophy and statesmanship might coincide to realize such a regime. In the words of Cicero's character Scipio, "a republic is the property of the public…brought together by legal consent and community of interest." (Cicero 1998, I.39) Given Cicero's rejection of legal conventionalism (see *De Leg.* I.42), and his observation that with regard to justice "a thousand changes have taken place within a single city," (*Rep.* III.17) a *good* republic must have just laws. To this end, Cicero avails himself of the Stoic concept of natural law as a normative standard to evaluate political regimes. Accordingly, Cicero pronounces that "[t]here will not be one such law in Rome and another in Athens, one now and another in the future, but all peoples at all times will be embraced by a single and eternal and unchangeable law." (*Rep.*, III.33)

A more detailed account of Stoic natural law theory can be found in Cicero's *De Legibus*. Echoing Chrysippus, Cicero identifies law with "the highest reason, inherent in nature, which enjoins what ought to be done and forbids the opposite." (Cicero 1998, *De Leg.* I.18) We act virtuously when we act in accordance with reason, which is equivalent, for the Stoics, to nature, since law governs both impersonal nature and human affairs. This is a conception of law far removed from positive or written law; indeed, natural law precedes written law and enjoins legislation that enables human beings to attain the virtues. Cicero argues that the purpose of law, then, must be "to ensure the safety of citizens, the security of states, and the peaceful happy life of human beings." (Cicero 1998, *De Leg.* II.11) Laws that do this well are good imitations of natural law, by which we judge positive laws to be just or unjust.

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[4] In this sense, Cicero did for Stoicism what he says Socrates did for philosophy generally. See Cicero (2012, V.10).

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What makes Cicero's natural law theory *conservative* is his acknowledgment that, given the imperfections in human nature, the content of natural law is not fully accessible to human reason, nor can human beings be relied upon to steadily observe the natural law without the constraining role of institutions (Cicero 2000, *De Off.* III.69). This means that, while, in theory, a monarchy administered by a perfectly wise person is the best regime, in practice, given the tendency of the pure simple regimes (i.e., monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy) to degenerate into cycles of stasis, Cicero favors "a carefully proportioned mixture of the first three [simple regimes]" to maintain the civic bond, thus forestalling civic strife.[5] (Cicero 1998, *Rep.* I.45)

What makes Cicero's defense of the mixed constitution conservative is his argument that the mixed constitution of the Roman Republic was the best living embodiment of natural law. Scipio finds the best regime in "the one which our fathers received from their forebears and have handed down to us," that is, the Roman Republic of the recent past (Cicero 1998, *Rep.* 1.70; see also I.34). After a tour through Roman history, illustrating Rome's gradual incorporation of monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic institutions, Scipio justifies using Rome as a normative model on the grounds of "illustrating, from the actual experience of the greatest state, what was being described in my theoretical exposition." (Cicero 1998, *Rep.* II.66) Whereas Plato had attempted to construct the just city 'in speech,' Cicero looks to the past as a living embodiment and approximation of the universal natural law. In this way, Cicero embraces what conservatives call 'the wisdom of tradition,' in recognizing that the Roman constitution "had been established not by one man's ability but by that of many, not in the course of one man's life but over several ages and generations." (1998, *Rep.* II.2)

There are two distinctive features of Cicero's treatment of natural law in its relation to the best regime.[6] First, unlike Plato and Aristotle, who construct their political theories on the model of the Greek polis, Cicero's invocation of Stoic natural law includes the entire human community, and as such, in principle, applies to all human societies at all times. Second, Cicero avoids the depoliticized outlook of early Stoic cosmopolitanism by locating the best approximation of natural law in the institutions of the Roman Republic. In this sense, natural law retains its universality, yet finds its best realization in the particular laws of the Roman Republic.

Annas (2017, 180-186) identifies a problem here. How can the particular laws of Republican Rome have universal application? In his account of natural law, Cicero describes a system of law that is universal, derived from nature, not custom or convention. But when the details of what natural law requires of the best regime, Cicero falls back on a slightly modified version of the Roman Republic.

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[5] A mixed constitution was also considered the best form of government by the Stoics, though the report from Diogenes Laertius is unmotivated and lacks context (Inwood and Gerson 1997, D.L. 7.131).
[6] I follow here Annas (2017, 179-180).

Could Cicero really be claiming that the Roman Republic of the recent past is the best regime everywhere, so that it ought to be implemented in every society? And could the Roman Republic – with all of its haphazard advances and setbacks – really have perfected the content of natural law that exists in the moral fabric of the universe?

To resolve this problem, we must first understand that natural law, for Cicero, following the Stoics, is not a set of specific laws, but rather the directive sense of virtue.[7] Natural law has the universal function of promoting human happiness through the virtues. But given the limits of human nature, as well as the vagaries of chance and circumstance, the good statesman must take into account the particulars when applying the natural law to an existing society. As we have seen, for Cicero, this requires a blend of the simple regimes into a mixed constitution, whose particular laws best *imitate* the universal natural law. From his own (admittedly biased) experience, Cicero held that the Roman Republic was the best existing imitation of natural law, and as such, was the best possible (since existing) regime. And who could blame him? But this does not mean that the Roman Republic is the best possible regime *everywhere*, for that would ignore the important differences among societies, and neither does it mean that the content of the universal natural law is *identical* to the particular laws of the Roman Republic, since Rome is only the best existing imitation of natural law, not a facsimile.

Cicero's conception of natural law as conforming to the demands of virtue follows early Stoic cosmopolitanism. But Cicero, in his philosophical eclecticism, also develops natural law in a genuinely political direction that goes beyond early Stoicism. In doing so, Cicero reconciles Stoic cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. Cicero embraces Stoic conservatism. The good statesman looks to the best regime, not as a utopian blueprint for existing states, but rather as an ideal of natural law (and so virtue) *through which* the reform of an existing society is possible.

4. Stoic Conservatism and the 'Disturbing Theses' of Early Stoicism

Stoic conservatism, as I have described it, fits well with middle and later Stoicism, particularly the Roman Stoics, who were much more conscious of and interested in politics.[8] But what about the early Greek Stoics? Since none of the primary texts have survived intact, we have to rely on testimony and doxography, much of which appears to be flatly incompatible with conservatism of any kind. These are what Katja Maria Vogt (2008) calls the 'disturbing theses' of early Stoicism. The most

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[7] Again, I follow Annas (2017, 180-186), though she does not identify this resolution of the problem as 'conservative.'
[8] The development of Stoic political thought related to the question of the best regime is discussed in Devine (1970).

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famous of these come from the work by Zeno of Citium known as the *Republic*.[9] Our best source is Diogenes Laertius, who reports its contents from criticisms made by Cassius the Sceptic:

> Some people, including the circle of Cassius the Sceptic, criticize Zeno extensively: [1] first, for declaring at the beginning of his *Republic* that the educational curriculum is useless; [2] and secondly, for his statement that all who are not virtuous are foes, enemies, slaves and estranged from one another, including parents and children, brothers and brothers, relations and relations. [3] They criticize him again for presenting only virtuous people in the *Republic* as citizens, friends, relations and free…and [4] for his doctrine set out there concerning community of wives, and [5] his prohibition at line 200 against the building of temples, lawcourts and gymnasia in cities. [6] They also take exception to his statement on currency: 'The provision of currency should not be thought necessary either for exchange or for travel,' and [7] for his instruction that men and women should wear the same clothes and keep no part of the body completely covered. (Long and Sedley 1987, D.L. 7.32-3)

Some of these reported claims are more anti-conservative than others. Claims (1), (4), (5), (6), and (7) are thoroughly subversive of longstanding social institutions and customs traditionally supported by conservatives, while arguably claims (2) and (3) are mere dramatic statements of the demandingness of Stoic ethical theory. But taken at face value, it is difficult to reconcile any of these claims with Stoic conservatism as I have described it.

Given that Stoicism developed over many hundreds of years, and the context for these controversial claims is unclear and presented by critics hostile to Stoicism, it would not be entirely unreasonable to set them aside. "However," as Vogt (2008, 20-21) argues, "the testimony on these theses – which I call the disturbing theses – plays such a central role in what we know about early Stoic political philosophy that one must either neglect this field or engage with them." Clearly, then, if Stoic conservatism is plausible as a coherent Stoic approach to politics, we must engage with the disturbing theses, even if, given scant sources, we do so speculatively.

Malcolm Schofield (1991, 22-25) distinguishes three possible interpretations from Diogenes Laertius' report of Zeno's *Republic*. First, according to *antinomianism*, "No positive political ideal emerges or is intended to emerge. The spirit of Zeno's recommendations is altogether critical and antinomian." (Schofield 1991, 22) Second, according to *revisionism*, "Zeno does indicate a positive ideal: a community of sages. But it represents a radically revised conception of community." (Schofield 1991, 22) Third, according to *communism*, "The ideal is a community as ordinarily conceived…[but] What makes Zeno's community ideal is the degree of concord achieved in it through the political virtue

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[9] Though similar issues are raised by a work of the same name by Zeno's successor, Chrysippus, for reasons of space, I do not discuss the claims associated with Chrysippus' work.

of its citizens, which is in turn fostered by communist political institutions." (Schofield 1991, 22)

Schofield's catalog of interpretations breaks down along two axes. First, are the proposals of Zeno's *Republic* intended as political proposals? Second, are the proposals intended positively, i.e., should be put into practice, or are they merely critical, i.e., of conventional social arrangements? According to antinomianism, Zeno's proposals in the *Republic* are neither political, nor to be taken seriously as positive proposals, as they are merely intended to ridicule and critique the conventional status of existing social arrangements. The antinomian interpretation is supported by early Stoicism's association with Cynicism through Zeno's teacher Crates.[10] This interpretation is perhaps least compatible with Stoic conservatism, and indeed, with later Stoicism as it eventually distanced itself from Cynicism.[11]

Schofield's second interpretation, revisionism, shares the non-political stance of antinomianism, but offers a positive moral ideal in place of antinomianism's critical stance toward conventional social arrangements. This interpretation fits well with Stoic cosmopolitanism in its emphasis on the cosmic city of sages. According to Vogt (2008, 56-64), Zeno's provocative anti-institutional claims are intended to stress the conventional status of institutions like courthouses, whose parochial activities should not be confused with the universal demands of the cosmic city. So, for instance, in the city of sages, in which everyone is virtuous, understood as perfectly following natural law, courthouses are otiose. If confined to Stoic ethics, the revisionist reading is compatible with Stoic conservatism. But because it deliberately abstracts from institutions like courthouses, gymnasia, schools, and so on, it tells us little about the Stoic approach to politics and is therefore unhelpful for our purposes.

Schofield himself endorses the communist reading, according to which Zeno's proposals are both political and positively intended.[12] Schofield (1991, 25) argues that "as with Plato, so in Zeno the objective is conceived not in terms of the ethics of the individual, but constitutes a specifically *political* ideal." (emphasis added) Indeed, Zeno's *Republic* shares with Plato's *Republic* several specific political proposals including the community of women. There is also a report from Plutarch that Zeno "wrote in reply to Plato's *Republic.*" (quoted in Schofield 1991, 25) Plainly, the communist reading of Zeno's *Republic* is incompatible with Stoic conservatism, since it offers a utopian vision of the just society in place of cautious reform from within an existing society.

Is there a conservative alternative to the antinomian, revisionist, and communist interpretations of Zeno's *Republic*? One intriguing possibility is to

[10] Schofield locates this interpretation in Finley (1975, 188).
[11] Cicero (2000, I.128, I.148) is particularly harsh on the Cynics for their lack of shame and social propriety, which, for Cicero, goes against human nature and is anyhow incompatible with public life.
[12] Schofield credits "the best statement of this interpretation" to Baldry (1959).

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follow Schofield in adopting the political reading, but deny that Zeno's proposals are positively intended. According to this reading, the political proposals of Zeno's *Republic* are intended *critically*, that is, they illustrate the impossibility (and folly) of trying to practically realize communism in an actual society. Although it is controversial, some have defended this reading of Plato's *Republic* (Strauss 1964, chap. II; Bloom 1968, 389-411; see also Ferrari 1997). So we need not give up on Schofield's plausible premise that Zeno follows Plato's *Republic*. But, as Brad Inwood (1992, 5) notes, "[i]n so far as Schofield relies on the argument that Zeno wrote the *Republic* with Plato's dialogue in view … he has succeeded only in pushing the problem back one step further. For we must then puzzle out, rather than assume, the correct reading of Plato's *Republic*."

This is not the place to settle the correct reading of Plato's *Republic*. Indeed, given its complexity, no reading is without controversy. But a common reading of the dialogue is that it uses the political proposals of the just city as an ethical model for showing the superiority of the virtuous life, even in unjust circumstances like those vividly demonstrated by Socrates' own life (see e.g., Annas 1981). Thus, at the end of Book IX, Socrates says that the just person will "look to the constitution within him and guard against disturbing anything in it," and "won't be willing to take part in politics," except "in his own kind of city. But he may not be willing to do so in his fatherland, unless some divine good luck chances to be his." (Plato 1997, 592a) This sounds very much like Zeno's claim that only the virtuous are truly citizens. The ethical reading of Plato's *Republic* corresponds to the revisionist reading of Zeno's *Republic* discussed above. But, in fact, revisionism is compatible with the conservative reading I propose. For, if the cosmic city is an ethical ideal against which actual human beings inevitably fall short, then it is highly imprudent to treat the characteristics of the cosmic city as a politically realizable goal. Rather, the ethical ideal of the cosmic city is a prescriptive ideal against which ethical progress may be measured. As Marcus reminds himself, "don't go expecting Plato's Republic; be satisfied with even the smallest progress…The task of philosophy is modest and straightforward. Don't tempt me to presumption." (Aurelius 2002, IX.29)

Further support for the conservative reading of Zeno's *Republic* vis-à-vis Plato's *Republic* comes from Cicero, who in a stray comment from his own *Republic*, notes that "[Plato] constructed a state which was desirable rather than feasible. It was the smallest he could contrive, and, though not actually possible, it enabled the reader to see how politics worked." (Cicero 1998, II.52) How does the impossibility of Plato's state show the reader how politics works? Cicero does not elaborate. But presumably, Cicero is referring to the reasons why Plato's just city was not possible, after all, because it conflicts with our natural desires for, and attachments to religion, nation, family, property, tradition, and custom. This conservative argument against political utopianism plausibly casts into doubt Socrates' radical political proposals in the *Republic*, which Aristotle (1998, II.1-5) notably critiques, as inconsistent with human nature, as well as Socrates'

deliberatively provocative claim that the just city's feasibility is premised on the philosopher-kings coming to rule. More fundamentally for our purposes, the political reading of Plato's *Republic* ignores the lesson of Stoic conservatism, a lesson that Cicero, as we have seen, evidently embraces: political philosophy begins in the society in which we find ourselves, and proceeds by the maintenance and reform of existing institutions according to the ideals of natural law and virtue, subject to the constraints of prudence.

Stoic conservatism also fits with Cicero's understanding of the early Stoics, who, according to Cicero, did not engage in practical political philosophy. In a discussion from *De Legibus* on the practical issue of magistrates, Cicero (1998, III.13) alludes to "points examined first by Theophrastus and then, in greater detail, by Diogenes [of Babylon] the Stoic."[13] His friend Atticus then responds with surprise: "Really? Such matters were also handled by the Stoics?" (Cicero 1998, III.13) Cicero goes on to clarify that he is referring to more recent Stoics like Diogenes and Panaetius, whereas "[t]he older Stoics supplied perceptive *theoretical* discussions of the state, but did not offer, as I [Cicero] am doing, a *practical* guide for communities of citizens." (1998, *De Leg.* III.14, emphasis added) According to Cicero, then, the older Stoics like Zeno *were* following in the footsteps of Plato's *Republic*, as Schofield suggests. However, they did so not in the manner of putting forth serious political proposals, but rather by exploring the nature of politics theoretically in relation to the ethical ideal of virtue.

What, then, should we make of the proposals of Zeno's *Republic*? The proposals with parallels in Plato's *Republic* can be read as bringing Plato's proposals to their logical conclusion. So, in the truly just city, *everyone* must be fully virtuous, not just the rulers, since any injustice in the soul has the potential to generate social conflict that could undermine the city's unity. But if everyone is *already* virtuous in the just city, then the extensive educational program of Plato's *Republic* really is 'useless.' Similarly, if the just city represents an ideal of friendship, then whoever is not fully virtuous must be an enemy to such a city. What about the proposals to abolish established institutions like marriage, temples, lawcourts, and gymnasia? These institutions regulate love, piety, justice, and physical health respectively. But none of these institutions would be necessary in the cosmic city. Zeno's point, therefore, might be simply that *this* is what a society of truly virtuous people would look like. In other words, it would not look like a human society in any recognizable sense. As such, it is certainly not to be taken as a serious political proposal.

Schofield (1991, 148) himself considers a version of our hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, Zeno intended his *Republic* as an impossible utopia. So, according to Philodemus, "[Zeno's] legislation consisted of impossible hypotheses for people who don't exist – disregarding those who do." (quoted in

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[13] This is the same Diogenes who Cicero (2000, III.50-57, 91-92) reports had a disagreement with fellow Stoic Antipater of Tarsus about whether one must disclose defects in a house put up for sale. See Annas (1989). See also Obbink and Vander Waerdt (1991).

Schofield 1991, 147) And once we remind ourselves of the well-known Stoic claim that the wise person is as rare as the Ethiopian phoenix, it becomes clear that the political proposals of Zeno's *Republic* were not intended seriously. Schofield rejects this hypothesis on the basis of Zeno's apparent intention to make good on the practical impossibility of Plato's *Republic*: "Zeno is saying: the community described in *my Republic*, unlike the one in Plato's, is achievable *both* here *and* in the present."[14] (Schofield 1991, 148, emphasis original)

Schofield's claim is plausible if understood as part of the revisionist (or ethical) reading of Zeno's *Republic*. After all, Philodemus also reports that Zeno offered "something applicable to the places in which he found himself and the times in which he lived." (quoted in Schofield 1991, 148) And as Schofield stresses, ethically speaking, "[a]ll that is necessary for the realization of Zeno's vision is that people begin to exercise their capacity for virtue." (1991, 149) But given that virtue cannot be summoned by abstracting from the social contexts in which it develops, is it true that this would be sufficient to practically realize the *political* proposals of Zeno's vision? Schofield casts Zeno's *Republic* as *anti*-utopian in the sense that, unlike Plato, "his [Zeno's] book gave his readers something much more directly applicable to their lives." (1991, 50-1). But it is hard to see how instructing not-yet-virtuous people to abolish the central institutions of their society is a way of making the ethical ideal of virtue 'directly applicable to their lives.' Indeed, this only makes sense on the utopian assumption that everyone could become fully virtuous. Instead, as I've argued, it is more plausible to interpret Zeno's *Republic* as an anti-utopian warning *against* this very misconception. The alternative, following Stoic conservatism, is to work toward the ideal of virtue within the socially embedded contexts of your own life, including the political structure of your society.

5. Conclusion

I began by observing that the recent popularity of Stoic ethics has not produced a coherent Stoic approach to politics. For, the Stoics either seem to recommend a radically depoliticized cosmopolitanism, or the political quietism of communitarianism. Neither responds to the contemporary interest in social justice as a normative vision of what a just society would be like that would, in turn, offer practical guidance for political change. Stoic conservatism, inasmuch as it recommends that we refocus our attention on the ideal of virtue rather than the ideal society, shares this feature of Stoic cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. But Stoic conservatism, like Stoic ethics, does offer practical guidance for working toward political reforms that better enable citizens to develop the virtues. We can improve in virtue *and* better society, through the existing institutions of society, not by discarding them in vain pursuit of utopia.

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[14] Schofield also argues that the Stoic claim about the rarity of the sage is a later development in response to a similar claim by Epicureans.

Tristan J. Rogers

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The Promises and Problems
of Two Stoic Big Tents

Alyssa Lowery

Abstract: Stoicism's tremendous recent popularity provides an opportunity to update the tradition for a contemporary audience. In this paper, I review one such update: Stoicism's conception as a 'big tent,' first as depicted by two prominent figures in contemporary Stoicism – Ryan Holiday and Massimo Pigliucci – then how it fares in light of two challenges, Stoic Resignation and Stoic Reductionism. I conclude by arguing for a self-determination that emphasizes Stoic ethical commitments and attends to its social features, even at the cost of such a big tent.

Keywords: contemporary Stoicism, demarcation, reductionism, resignation.

Introduction

Stoicism has become enormously popular in recent years. This growth has entailed new developments in Stoic practice and ideas, including the rise of conflicting accounts of who can *really* call themselves a Stoic and who's peddling philosophy-lite for their own gain. In this paper, I'm interested to explore this phenomenon of contemporary Stoicism in its divergent forms by focusing specifically on the phenomenon of 'big tent' Stoicism as found in the work of Ryan Holiday and Massimo Pigliucci.

The paper has 3 parts. In Part 1, I provide a taxonomy of contemporary Stoicism as represented primarily by Ryan Holiday and in a lesser sense by Massimo Pigliucci (who I treat as a representative, albeit a limited one, of Modern Stoicism). I focus in particular on their characterization of Stoicism as a 'big tent,' what I consider one of the primary developments of the Stoic tradition. In Part 2 I examine two strands of criticism of Stoicism and consider how these may be updated or amplified in light of Stoicism's modern formulation. In Part 3 I consider possible responses to these challenges and how they fare, including how they inform the future of Stoicism. I conclude by elaborating briefly on how this challenge can enable us to make helpful distinctions concerning Stoicism and philosophy going forward.

1. Contemporary Stoicism as a 'Big Tent'

The central feature of modern Stoicism with which I'm concerned in this paper is its conceptualization as a 'big tent.' This term is frequently used in contemporary Stoic circles, and its multiple meanings should be distinguished. The first is that everyone is welcome to be a student of Stoicism, as when Whiting and

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Konstantakos write that Stoicism "caters to all walks of life," but distinguish those pursuing Epicurean ends from properly Stoic ones (2021, 22). The second refers to the inclusion of atheistic or agnostic individuals as considered properly 'Stoics.' Third and finally is the understanding of Stoicism wherein many kinds of things can qualify as Stoicism itself, a Stoic view, or a Stoic practitioner, even without self-identification as such. Here, Stoicism's big tent entails that a surprising array of things in the world are Stoic already. I'm interested in these second and third forms, as I think there is some overlap and both represent recent developments in Stoicism.

1.1 The Big Tent Stoicism of Ryan Holiday

The third view is represented by Ryan Holiday, who doesn't use the term 'big tent' explicitly, but whose treatment of Stoicism demonstrates such an approach. Specifically, his descriptions of Stoicism and the justifications he offers for it – most notably his Great Person and Common Sense justifications – reveal him to understand Stoicism as a markedly expansive tradition.

Stoicism as a big tent is most apparent in Holiday's claim that anyone who has ever conquered a challenge in their life is a Stoic. Following a list of notable figures (who are not self-identified Stoics), Holiday tells us that: "Knowingly or not, each individual was a part of an ancient tradition, employing it to navigate the timeless terrain of opportunities and difficulties, trial and triumph." (2014, xv-xvi) Even if they had never read a Stoic text or done a Stoic practice, they were Stoics, inasmuch as they embodied Marcus Aurelius' maxim: the obstacle is the way: "There were people who flipped their obstacles upside down... lived the words of Marcus Aurelius and followed a group which Cicero called the only 'real philosophers' – the ancient Stoics – even if they'd never read them." (Holiday 2014, 4) Furthermore, any of us who would take up the same effort at overcoming obstacles are "the rightful heirs of this tradition. It's our birthright." (Holiday, 2014, xvi) For anyone who finishes reading *The Obstacle is the Way*, Holiday lets them know that now "the thread of Stoicism runs through [their] life just as it did through [other successful figures] – just as it has for all of history, sometimes explicitly, sometimes not." (Holiday 2014, 138) In this sense, Holiday seems to be suggesting that all wisdom related to perseverance has been a testament to Stoicism, or an instantiation of it. Such an approach is echoed when the response to exposure to Holiday's work is the shared sentiment and frequent refrain that "I was a Stoic and didn't even know it!" (Arcis 2017, Ginsburg 2015) Stoics and Stoicism are everywhere, even if the affiliation isn't drawn out or named explicitly. This is unsurprising once one sees that for Holiday, Stoicism is "about the mental game... not a set of ethics or principles. It's a collection of spiritual exercises designed to help people through the difficulty of life." (Holiday, quoted in Bishop 2017)

This view is further clarified by a brief look at Holiday's justifications: why ought one become a Stoic? The Great Person argument is inescapable: the first

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thing one notices when reading Holiday's books is their ubiquitous references to notable figures. Some of the figures Holiday references were explicit about encountering or approving of Stoicism themselves, including: "George Washington, Walt Whitman, Frederick the Great, Eugène Delacroix, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Jefferson, Matthew Arnold, Ambrose Bierce, Theodore Roosevelt, William Alexander Percy, Ralph Waldo Emerson," as well as contemporary notables, including Tim Ferriss and Jonathan Newhouse (Holiday 2016). In the promotional material for one of his courses is the following: "There's a reason everyone from George Washington to Tom Brady to Anna Kendrick to John Steinbeck have read, studied, quoted, and admired the Stoics." (Stoicism 101) Great people are here, Holiday makes it clear, and have been Stoics. You, who also wants to be a great person, should therefore take up Stoicism as well. This dovetails with Holiday's Common Sense justification: that you should be a Stoic because Stoicism is obviously true, thanks to its consistency with 'ancient wisdom' found in multiple religions and multiple heroic lives. See Holiday's remark that the four Stoic virtues: courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom are "to millions… known as the cardinal virtues, four near-universal ideals adopted by Christianity and most of Western philosophy, but equally valued in Buddhism, Hinduism, and just about every other philosophy you can imagine." (2021, 12) And the ubiquity of the wisdom he's discovered doesn't just extend from tradition to tradition, but includes contemporary 'wisdom,' as Holiday seamlessly blends Seneca with selections from *The 48 Laws of Power* and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (2016).

1.2 The Big Tent Stoicism of Massimo Pigliucci

In contrast to Holiday's gesturing at big tent Stoicism, Pigliucci is explicit, representing our second understanding. Stoicism is "an ecumenical big tent for people of different religious inclinations (from Buddhists to Christians to atheists) and political persuasions to come together and explore whether the life of virtue really is the good life." (Pigliucci 2016b) "Stoics," he writes, "can build a very large tent indeed," and this is "simply the realization that what is important in life is to live it well, and that such an objective… depends very little on whether there is a God or not, and if there is one, on what it's specific attributes may or may not be." (Pigliucci 2017, 64) A variety of people can self-identify as Stoics even if they don't share a variety of formerly common Stoic beliefs. There are limits to Pigliucci's Big Tent, however. Most importantly, Pigliucci claims that there is a core which *has* to remain for Stoicism to be Stoicism: that "if you don't think that virtue – meaning prosocial behavior guided by reason – is fundamental in life, then you are veering pretty far from Stoicism." (Pigliucci 2021) Pigliucci also criticizes those who use Stoicism as purely a means for material success, in the process making a distinction between those who 'merely use Stoic techniques to achieve whatever goal' from 'Stoic philosophy' itself (2017b).

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I'm now interested to consider how this view fairs in philosophic terms: does Stoicism's characterization as a big tent enable it to respond better to the challenges Stoicism has historically faced? Does it invite new challenges? And does this more expansive understanding entail the failure of Stoicism to provide a meaningful definition of itself?

Section 2: Challenges to Contemporary Stoicism

Stoicism has faced its fair share of criticism, and in this section I'll present the two critiques which I think have the most salience for contemporary Stoicism: Stoic Resignation and Stoic Reductionism.

2.1 Stoic Resignation

The first of these, Stoic Resignation, is an instantiation of a long-standing challenge to Stoicism. This owes to Stoic cosmological and metaphysical commitments concerning the constitution of the universe and the subsequent ethical theses which follow. There is of course tremendous debate over the exact relationship of Stoic cosmology to Stoic ethics,[1] but all that matters to initiate the critique of Stoic Resignation are the theses that Nature is rationally and providentially ordered, and that virtue is the only good – necessary and sufficient for happiness – while all other seeming goods are indifferents. [2] These theses rely on the Stoic commitment to the idea that, "the current state of the cosmos, as well as its creation… are fully rational in the sense of being intelligently organized," due to "god's all-pervading reason, which physically penetrates the cosmos through and through." (Salles 2009, 1) As such the world is not an irrational place but has the qualities of being rational and good, such that whatever takes place is not unfair or unwarranted, but has some justification – even if we aren't privy to it. There are both morally neutral and a morally weighty versions of this critique, but the primary challenge concerns the morally objectionable form of this criticism. This is the threat that the Stoics discourage or even disallow someone from taking notable moral action, such as the kind required to remedy significant social ills.

In the world of contemporary Stoicism, this view is presented tongue-in-cheek by Mary Beard and seriously by Sandy Grant. As Beard puts it, it's 'mystifying' that people are so interested in Stoicism, given that it was 'nasty, fatalistic, bordering on fascist,' arguing that the confidence in Stoicism comes from its 'rubber stamp of great antiquity,' despite the fact that Marcus Aurelius was "an emperor who was about as brutal in massacring the enemy as Julius Caesar." (Beard, 2021) Grant's arguments are harder to summarize in a single quotation, but as she memorably put in Quartz magazine, drawing on critiques of Stoicism

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[1] See Salles, *God and Cosmos in Stoicism*.
[2] Not to mention concerns about determinism or fatalism and their implications for our ability to choose our actions. See Frede (2003), who concludes that "Stoic determinism, therefore, does not lead to resignation." (205)

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from Nietzsche and Sartre: "the problem with this attitude is that it can lead us to accept things that we shouldn't. As we confront the global rise of authoritarianism, we should not respond by attempting to gain control over our emotions." (Grant, 2017)

Despite the fact that these challenges aim to go directly at the heart of Stoicism, they're rebuffed quickly by committed Stoics. Beard was criticized as 'abysmally ignorant about Stoicism' by Pigliucci, and Holiday tweeted that Grant was 'silly' and wrote that she 'should know better.' (Holiday, 2017) As such, there's a sense in which this debate has already happened, and it seems many contemporary Stoics see the problem as solved. But how do our two forms of the Stoic big tent look in light of this challenge?

Concerning Holiday's form of big tent Stoicism, I think we can raise a more precise form of the problem. The more damaging form of the Stoic Resignation critique is that, even if we accept some solution to the initial problem of Stoic moral resignation – say, a particular emphasis on oikeiōsis or Stoic 'cosmopolitanism,' as Holiday does – it's not clear that his variety of contemporary Stoicism actually takes its adherents there. Instead, it looks like being a Stoic by Holiday's lights is to live a life remarkably similar to most non-Stoics. This thought is perhaps most helpfully framed through a brief discussion of a key element of virtue ethics: the moral role model. These are the figures who add much-needed color to the outlined virtues of the Hellenistic traditions. Consider that Aristotle, unlike Plato, doesn't take the time to justify the value of being virtuous, instead he knows his audience of young, well-off, educated men will already have a roughly accurate sense of what virtuous individuals look like, as well as why it's worthwhile (Kraut, 2018). Similarly, the Stoic model of sagehood is unpopulated; as Brouwer argues, the only person who the Stoics (perhaps) understood as having reached sagehood is Socrates (2014). Additionally, given the openness of Stoic ethics – particularly when boiled down to the minimum, as in Holiday's presentation – the person you identify as embodying these qualities plays a significant role in concretizing your understanding of how Stoic ethics look in practice.

So who does Holiday offer as objects of emulation? Looking at the 'Stoics' Holiday discusses, one finds a list of highly accomplished, famous, and frequently wealthy people. There are only 'remarkable historical figures' in Holiday's books, which Zuckerberg calls 'subtly elitist,' in that he recounts their many successes without regard for "the structures of privilege and oppression that make success more easily accessible to some than to others." (2018, 69) For example, the celebrated figure which opens *The Obstacle is the Way* is oil baron John D. Rockefeller. As Holiday puts it, Rockefeller's genius – and more importantly – his *Stoicism* – was in recognizing that "the market was inherently unpredictable and often vicious – only the rational and disciplined mind could hope to profit from it." (Holiday 2014, 14) Common non-Stoic heroes are easily identified as Stoic ones viewed with the right lens. This suggests that to be a Stoic is to finally have the

tools I need to accomplish all of the desires I acquired in a world that celebrates wealth and fame – just with less suffering or anxiety. This is the heart of the oft-stated charge that Holiday presents Stoicism as 'life-hacking,' as merely a productivity tool for entrepreneurs (Rosenberg, 2020). If I can be a Stoic like Holiday – and yet continue seamlessly seeking after the goals I had before I became a Stoic – does Stoicism have much of an ethic at all?

This theme is intensified by the ongoing rise in contemporary awareness of the way in which our social situations affect our achievements. What is and is not under our control varies dramatically from person to person, but Holiday insists on treating all forms of what isn't under our control as equivalent. As Zuckerberg writes: "Holiday puts racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and a host of other prejudices into a box, labels it 'disadvantage,' and then makes it vanish by proclaiming disadvantage universal to the human condition." (2018, 65) This neglect of social context amplifies the scrutiny one ought to pay to Holiday's celebrated 'Stoics.' Are the figures which ubiquitously populate his texts 'Stoics' in a meaningful sense of the word, or is Holiday committing a kind of mass survivorship bias fallacy: anyone who has succeeded is a Stoic?

The final consideration here is to note how those who inhabit Stoicism's other big tent – the Modern Stoics who allow for differences – fare under the Stoic Resignation line. Many modern Stoics seem unbothered to slough off the more cosmological elements of Stoicism which are often the driving elements of Stoic Resignation. For those who are atheists or agnostics, they seem primed to maneuver all the more deftly around this challenge. They don't need to justify any current injustice as providential, and the full-throated pivot to a primarily ethical Stoicism enables a robust turn to an activist Stoic ethic – even one that acknowledges where Stoicism has previously fallen short (Gill 2016, Pigliucci 2021). This is to be commended, but it remains to be seen how the Modern Stoics will respond to the next challenge: Stoic Reductionism.

2.2 Stoic Reductionism

Stoic Reductionism is concerned with the way in which contemporary Stoicism distorts Stoicism's aims *as a philosophy*. It argues that Stoicism in its contemporary form and flourishing is an inadequate or even false picture of Stoicism, criticizing both the method and criteria of contemporary Stoicism and its content. Julian Baggini argues that as it's practiced and popularized today, popular Stoicism reduces the vibrancy and richness of Stoicism to merely its therapeutic aims (Baggini 2012, 2013). It's 'perfectly legitimate' that the developers of therapeutic systems cherry-picked certain features of Stoicism, but what he objects to "is praising the joys of scrumping as though it were on a par with the care, dedication and understanding of growing an orchard." (Baggini 2012) Merely stealing fruit from an orchard (adopting elements of Stoicism) is fine, but treating that practice as *proper philosophizing* is where one goes awry. He writes on the difference between one who uses Stoic tools to achieve a certain

therapeutic end, and a Stoic: "adapt[ing] and borrow[ing] any particular Stoic methods that work… no more makes you a Stoic than practising meditation makes you a Buddhist." (Macaro and Baggini 2013)

What's the alternative to cherry-picking? Baggini says that "to become a stoic is to endorse the truthfulness of its world view and accept its prescription for how you ought to live, not just to like how it makes you feel." (2012) And herein lies the real critique. Baggini wants to preserve Stoicism as a *philosophy*, as the kind of thing that ought to be judged solely by its *arguments*: "Like any philosophical position, Stoicism itself stands or falls… on the soundness of its arguments, not its effect on our psychological wellbeing. Philosophy is first and foremost the pursuit of truth, albeit without a capital T." (Macaro and Baggini 2013) Doing philosophy requires a certain openness to revision; to philosophize is not to "simply adopt a fully formed world view in its entirety," but to "follow up and through, and not simply after." (Macaro and Baggini 2013)

This lies in contrast to the way I've framed Holiday's Stoicism, where one can realize has been a Stoic all along, that one can become a Stoic and retain one's previous heroes, or that one can call oneself a Stoic without undergoing any serious ethical revision. It's also at odds with Pigliucci's framing of the decision to become a Stoic. In earlier work Pigliucci stressed a distinction between the adoption of a philosophy of life and a religion, writing (in a way that seems quite consistent with Baggini) that "ultimately religious belief must be a matter of faith. One simply accepts scriptures as the word of God… [whereas] the contrast should be stark with philosophy: by its very nature, philosophy not only can but has to be questioned." (2015) But in the more recent *How to Live a Good Life*, co-edited with Skye Cleary and Daniel Kaufman, this distinction between religion and a philosophy of life is rejected; they argue instead that such a distinction would be 'fuzzy' at best, and 'pointless' when choosing a life philosophy (2020, 8). The choice to become a Stoic isn't the naïve acceptance of faith, nor a reasoned agreement with truth, but a personal selection from many equally good 'philosophies of life,' made if it's 'really one that makes sense for [you].' (Pigliucci, Cleary, and Kaufman 2020b) To illustrate, see Pigliucci's account of his own choice to become a Stoic, made because the "two major [paths] on offer for those seeking a meaningful secular existence – are unsatisfactory." (Pigliucci 2017, 10) These 'two paths' are secular Buddhism and secular humanism; the former is 'a bit too mystical' and the latter "comes across as cold and not the sort of thing you want to bring your kids to on a Sunday morning." (Pigliucci 2017, 10-11)

The overall charge from Baggini holds up if we are committed to treating Stoicism as exclusively a philosophical position that ought to be adopted on precisely the same grounds one adopts an epistemological or metaphysical view. But the tide of contemporary Stoicism is solidly against this idea; the therapeutic value is understood as core to Stoicism's appeal and value, and can be easily traced

back to Stoicism's origins.[3] As such, Baggini's critique is an external one, easily rebuffed by Stoicism's contemporary committed adherents. This isn't to say the Stoic Reductionist challenge is over, instead there's an internal form: the challenge that removing certain features of Stoicism, most specifically its cosmological commitments, entails a break with the tradition which is so egregious as to no longer be a continuation of it. In other words, how much revision can the tradition handle? While Modern Stoicism provides an opportunity to correct for the morally weighty criticisms of the tradition, they now risk producing a vacuous form of Stoicism.

3. Responses and Revisions to Contemporary Stoicism

While there are Traditional Stoics who (according to their website traditionalstoicism.com) insist that to be a Stoic is to retain Stoicism's 'religious' character and their 'fundamental assumptions about the nature of humankind and the nature of the cosmos,' the Modern Stoics (on their website, modernstoicism.com) have firmly committed to an 'inclusive' big tent which 'encompass[es] different interpretations and applications of Stoicism' ('About Us'). Resolving that debate is beyond the scope of the paper, but it's clear that the tradition is coming to solidify on the side of inclusivity. The concern from some Traditional Stoics is that to allow this adjustment is to open the door to a Stoicism that rejects even its ethical dimensions (Drew 2022). And this concern isn't unreasonable; in order to be meaningful designators, definitions have to exclude some instances from their scope.

The response to this has been that like other traditions, Stoicism can and should be *updated*. As Pigliucci writes, Stoicism is "an open philosophical system, meaning a framework based on some general ideas and insights advanced by the ancient Greco-Romans, updated to the 21st century, in light of intervening advancements in both science and philosophy." (2015) The fluctuations in Stoicism are a predictable part of the ebb and flow of any tradition; even Christianity has 'mainstream' forms and its "corruptions, like the abomination known as 'prosperity gospel.'" (Pigliucci 2018) As long as the constitutive core of Stoicism is preserved – for Pigliucci, that virtue keeps its central place – and the updates are "organic and sufficiently respectful of the original version of Stoicism that the modern one can reasonably be considered to have a family resemblance," such updates are appropriate (Pigliucci 2015). Most anyone who self-identifies as a Stoic counts as one; this is the promise of the big tent.

My overall agreement on this topic lies with this openness to a revisionary tradition. Consider the question of Stoic feminism. While commenters are quick to point out that the Stoics understood women as capable of philosophizing, and that it's important to correct this misconception, it's also true that Stoics have an 'uneven track record' on feminism, such that the misconception may not be so

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[3] On this tradition, see Nussbaum (1994) and Hadot (1995).

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inaccurate (Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014).[4] But for whose sake is anyone interested in preserving one version of Stoicism or the other as the truest? In whose interest is it to make sure that Stoicism in the contemporary eye remains free from misconceptions or misunderstandings? Stoics have no god who would be offended, nor any saints with reputations to protect. The only people invested in Stoicism are contemporary Stoics themselves, which means they have the power to determine the shape of the tradition, including ensuring it has explicit feminist commitments or not. An explicit commitment to a revisionary Stoicism seems the best available response to concerns about Stoic Resignation.

I am, however, sympathetic to the concern over the future of Stoicism, to the urge to tighten the tent, for two reasons. The first can be drawn out through a comparison: Buddhism has faced a similar line of critique and correction as Stoicism in recent years.[5] The most famous example is Ronald Purser's *McMindfulness*, a criticism of the way Buddhist spiritual practices have been co-opted for capitalist ends (2019). Despite these criticisms, it seems mindfulness has fully entered the Western arena and is here to stay. And yet, most people who practice mindfulness in an offhand way are often happy to refrain from calling themselves practicing Buddhists; there are even mindfulness exercises in public schools. In contrast, people who adopt Stoicism, even explicitly as a life-hack, still seem very comfortable calling themselves practicing Stoics. Even further, these same people proclaim themselves the *truest Stoics*.

Secondly, while mindfulness was co-opted (according to Purser) for capitalistic ends not native to it, Stoicism has been adopted for even more nefarious purposes. As Zuckerberg details, the alt-right and men's rights movements frequently draw on Stoic sources to support their views, arguing that they are the tradition's *proper inheritors* (2018, 59). And while Zuckerberg rightly notes that Holiday 'is not quite a member of the Red Pill community,' I want to point out how clearly his characterization of Stoicism and philosophy plays to their narrative of superiority and disenfranchisement (2017, 62). This is evident in the disdain Holiday regularly displays towards academic philosophers. In his introduction to *The Daily Stoic*, Holiday writes that, "while academics often see stoicism as an antiquated methodology of minor interest, it has been the doers of the world who found that it provides much needed strength and stamina for their challenging lives." (2016, 12) There's a contrast, it seems, between the stodgy academic engagement with Stoicism, and the *real living* of the thing. Stoicism 'seems to have been particularly well designed' 'for the field of battle,' and it's those Stoics on the battlefield who 'weren't professors but practitioners.' (Holiday 2016, 13) Those laboring to produce analysis on Stoicism are in fact not 'doers' after all; or if they are, it is in spite of their philosophizing, not because of it. And this inhibits their ability to even understand Stoic texts appropriately: in a

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YouTube video discussing the *Meditations* and the importance of understanding it a journal, not a treatise, Holiday explains that "one of the criticisms of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* by academics who don't get this is that it's repetitive." (2021) Repeatedly Holiday explains that Stoicism is wasted on professional philosophers, and worse, that it was hoarded by them: Stoicism is a 'wisdom' that was "taken from us, co-opted and deliberately obscured by selfish, sheltered academics." (Holiday 2014, 184) Philosophers too caught up in the nuances of Stoicism are failing at other more critically important, yet unnamed, tasks. In contrast, anyone who has read Holiday's book *The Obstacle is the Way* and become 'a person of action,' is now, 'by every definition that counts,' a philosopher (2014, 183). Holiday, in contrast, has decided to not 'play by the rules,' and therefore discovered the truth of Stoicism and shared it with the people who deserve it.[6] That sense of righteous entitlement, specifically against the academic elite who want to keep him down, sounds familiar.

It's also ultimately this line of thinking which is Holiday's response to the twin challenges of Stoic Resignation and Stoic Reductionism. Criticisms like those are made by academics who simply don't understand or appreciate Stoicism rightly (Holiday 2017b).

Conclusion

To close, I'm not telling Holiday what he's doing *isn't* philosophy. I may want to say he does a poor job philosophizing, but I don't need to police the boundaries. That Holiday does, and that he does so voraciously is the interesting phenomenon. He's drawing the borders of the philosophical tent tightly, seemingly to undermine academia and intellectual expertise, purportedly to make philosophy more accessible – even as he limits it to others like him. Now, what does this move have to do with Pigliucci's Modern Stoicism?

Today's Stoics have their own tent borders to mark off, and it seems the pendulum is swinging towards the biggest tent possible, as in Pigliucci's claim that Stoicism is a philosophy of life that 'Buddhists to Christians to atheists' can adopt (2016b). The appeal of this kind of view is clear. At the time of the greatest political polarization America has ever faced, that such division may be more illusion than reality, that it could be corrected by a return to a commonsense ethical and moral perspective, sounds like a welcome relief. But why does that perspective need to be Stoicism? The big tent has moved beyond inclusivity of varying metaphysical commitments, to inclusivity of even distinct accounts of the good (unless we

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[6] This can be seen most clearly when Holiday writes about his initial feelings of jealousy at Massimo Pigliucci's being asked to write for the *New York Times* about Stoicism. What's telling is a commentator who writes: "Ryan, your feelings of jealousy were displaced simply because you decided a long time ago that you wouldn't play by the 'rules,' dropping out of the college. Are you surprised that the NYT, which revers academia, would go with a scholar over you on this one." Holiday's response: "Of course not. But we all want to have our cake and eat it too." See Holiday (2015).

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simultaneously deflate religious commitments like Christianity or Buddhism to merely their metaphysical claims).

Instead, I want to advocate that contemporary Stoicism draw the tent a little tighter. This is not to say the goal is more rigorous policing of who gets to call themselves a Stoic. Rather, if contemporary Stoics want a Stoicism which can be more socially or politically active, one that emphasizes the serious ethical claims Stoics put forward of cosmopolitanism and universality,[7] then they have to risk a smaller tent. Without one, the line between who's a Stoic and who isn't comes down to a general notion of who's a roughly reasonable person and who isn't.[8] But rough reasonability, or an assumed similarity of ethical commitments, isn't stable ground. If it were, if Stoicism were genuinely as pervasive as Holiday seems to think, or as reducible to such a common set of ethical commitments as Pigliucci seems to, then the question asserts itself all the more strongly: why doesn't the world (and even the Stoic movement itself) already embody the kind of cosmopolitanism they both say it celebrates? The supposed pervasiveness of Stoic values would entail that becoming a Stoic is more *recognizing* one's own values in the tradition, rather than being *transformed* by it.

One objection to calls for a narrower demarcation is that philosophy at any cost is worthwhile. Holiday and others like him get people to reflect on their lives, and that ought to be enough (Whiting and Konstantakos 2018). But I think this is a mistake. People are interested in things they believe will benefit them; it seems purely incidental to me that at this point on the culture carousel, it's philosophy on center stage. As Holiday clarifies repeatedly, he isn't interested in what populates philosophy departments: if it's not making people's lives immediately better, he doesn't want it. But this is utterly reductive of philosophy, even as therapeutic philosophy is very important. What we learn from Holiday is not how to make philosophy popular, but how thoughtfully and carefully we should take the act of demarcating a tradition. Doing so for a tradition you feel you deserve ownership of, as a way to establish your authority – what Holiday is doing with philosophy – is risky, as is doing the same alongside an assertion to be the rightful inheritor of its truest form, what Holiday is doing with Stoicism.

So as contemporary Stoics try to draw the borders of their tent, the question to ask is: for what reasons are the borders drawn? What commitments are essential, and what justifications will they respect? If the borders are drawn for the sake of merely protecting Stoicism as a coherent tradition – that's questionable.

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[7] As I think many do: see Gill (2016), Pigliucci (2021).

[8] This is evident in Pigliucci's claim that "if we are talking about mainstream religionists, as opposed to fundamentalists, our opinions on most crucial matters of ethics and politics are rarely that different." (2017, 63-64) But what constitutes a 'mainstream religionist' and a 'fundamentalist?' In other words, it may be easy to recognize such a distinction in religious terms (though I'm skeptical of this as well), but what about someone who's an advocate of Critical Race Theory? Are they a fundamentalist? Are they mainstream? These terms are poor ones to use as a framework.

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But drawing borders to preserve Stoicism's robust commitment to a specific ethical future strikes me as the right avenue. Finally, I wonder if conceptual analysis is the right tool here; I'm inclined to say a quite relevant feature of the debate is the social role Stoicism is playing in an enormous amount of people's (and often enough to note, white men's) lives. When those who want to set up the Stoic tent ask themselves what it is about Stoicism they're interested in protecting or preserving, they would do well to consider the social features it includes – not merely its conceptual elements.

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Information about Authors

Scott Aikin is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University. He specializes in epistemology and ancient philosophy. He is the author of *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* (2011), *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* (2014), *Political Argument in a Polarized Age* (2020, with Robert Talisse), and *Straw Man Arguments* (2022, with John Casey). He is currently working on a commentary on Epictetus's *Encheiridion* with William O. Stephens. Contact: scott.f.aikin@Vanderbilt.Edu.

Chuck Chakrapani is a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Toronto Metropolitan University and President of Leger Analytics. Chuck is the author of *Unshakable Freedom: Ancient Stoic Secrets Applied to Modern Life* and *How to Be a Stoic When You Don't Know How*. He is also the founder of the website *TheStoicGym.com* and the editor of THE STOIC (digital) magazine. For several years he was the Editor-in-Chief of the *Canadian Journal of Marketing Research* and has published nearly 50 books and 500 articles on a wide variety of subjects. Contact: chuck.chakrapani@gmail.com.

Aldo Dinucci is Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the Federal University of Sergipe in Brazil, and Honorary Research fellow of the University of Kent (UK). He is also the Editor in Chief of *Prometheus Journal of Philosophy*, and has published, among other books, translations from Greek to Portuguese of the Manual of Epictetus and Epictetus' *Discourses*, Book 1. Contact: aldodinucci@yahoo.com.br.

Christopher Gill is Emeritus Professor of Ancient Thought at the University of Exeter. His research focuses on ancient psychology and ethics, sometimes considered in relation to modern thought. His books on Stoicism include *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (2006), a translation of Marcus Aurelius 'Meditations' Books 1-6 with introduction and commentary (2013) and a forthcoming study of Stoic ethics and its modern significance, all published by Oxford University Press. Contact: C.J.Gill@exeter.ac.uk.

Leonidas Konstantakos is a political theorist and researcher in the International Relations department at Florida International University. Contact: lkons001@fiu.edu.

Alyssa Lowery, PhD is a Lecturer in Philosophy at Vanderbilt University. Her research interests include the way religion is conceptualized in political philosophy, contemporary virtue ethics, and what constitutes equality for same-sex couples. When she's not convincing her students to read Plato, Alyssa is

catching a movie at the Belcourt Theatre or trail running. Contact: alyssa.r.lowery@vanderbilt.edu.

Emily McGill is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Coastal Carolina University. She earned her Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University and her M.A. from Washington University in St. Louis. Her research interests include feminist philosophy, social/political philosophy, and ethics, with a particular focus on relational autonomy and feminist liberalism. Contact: emcgill@coastal.edu.

Tristan J. Rogers is Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy in the Benson Center for the Study of Western Civilization at the University of Colorado Boulder. He is the author of *The Authority of Virtue: Institutions and Character in the Good Society* (Routledge, 2020). His next book is tentatively titled *Conservatism Past and Present: A Philosophical Introduction* (Routledge, under contract). Contact: tristanjrogers1@gmail.com.

Edward Simpson's research interests and recent publications in the last 5 years include a broad range of issues covering Higher Education, procurement in the context of MoD projects, Stoicism and its alignment with environmental issues, and sustainability. Recent publications include the following indicative issues: innovation and failure in mechatronics design education, corporate environmental sustainability, how Stoics can have a diet that aligns with environmental facts, and what we can learn from Stoic philosophy and Freirean environmental pedagogies. Contact: e.simpson@abertay.ac.uk.

William O. Stephens is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Creighton University. His books include a revised edition of his English translation of A. F. Bonhöffer, *The Ethics of the Stoic Epictetus* (Peter Lang, 2021), *Marcus Aurelius: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury, 2012), *Stoic Ethics: Epictetus and Happiness as Freedom* (Bloomsbury, 2007), and *The Person: Readings in Human Nature* (Prentice Hall, 2006). Stephens is currently working on a commentary on Epictetus' *Encheiridion* (Bloomsbury) with Scott Aikin. Contact: stphns@creighton.edu.

Kai Whiting is a researcher and lecturer in sustainability and Stoicism based at UCLouvain, Belgium. Contact: whitingke@yahoo.co.uk.

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