



On Stoic Ethics

Cicero

Stoic Views on the Chief Good

IX. “I am well aware, it is true, that varieties of opinion have existed among philosophers, I mean among those of them who have placed the Chief Good, the ultimate aim as I call it, in the mind. Some of those who adopted this view fell into error; but nevertheless I rank all those, of whatever type, who have placed the Chief Good in the mind and virtue, not merely above the three philosophers who dissociated the Chief Good from virtue altogether and identified it either with pleasure or freedom from pain or the primary impulses of nature, but also above the other three, who held that virtue would be incomplete without some enhancement, and therefore added to it one or other respectively of the three things I have enumerated.

But still those thinkers are quite beside the mark who pronounced the ultimate Good to be a life devoted to knowledge; and those who declared that all things are indifferent, and that the Wise Man will secure happiness by not preferring any one thing in the least degree to any other; and those again who said, as some members of the Academy are said to have maintained, that the final Good and the supreme duty of the Wise Man is to resist appearances and resolutely withhold his assent to the reality of sense-impressions. It is customary to take these doctrines severally and reply to them at length. But there is really no need to labour what is self-evident; and what could be more obvious than that, if we can exercise no choice as between things consonant with and things contrary to nature, the much-prized and be lauded virtue of Prudence is abolished altogether?

Eliminating therefore the views just enumerated and any others that resemble them, we are left with the conclusion that the Chief Good consists in applying to the conduct of life a knowledge of the working of natural causes, choosing what is in accordance with nature and rejecting what is contrary to it; in other words, the Chief Good is to live in agreement and in harmony with nature....

X. “Again, the term ‘Good,’ which has been employed so frequently in this discourse, is also explained by definition. The Stoic definitions do indeed differ from one another in a very minute degree, but they all point in the same direction. Personally I agree with Diogenes in defining the Good as that which is by nature perfect. He was led by this also to pronounce the ‘beneficial’ (for so let us render the Greek *ophelema*) to be a motion or state in accordance with that which is by nature perfect. Now notions of things are produced in the mind when something has become known either by experience or combination of ideas or analogy or logical inference. The fourth and last method in this list is the one that has given us the conception of the Good. The mind ascends by inference from the things in accordance with nature till finally it arrives at the notion of Good. At the same time Goodness is absolute, and is not a question of degree; the Good is recognized and pronounced to be good from its own inherent properties and not by comparison with other

things. Just as honey, through extremely sweet, is yet perceived to be sweet by its own peculiar kind of flavour and not by being compared with something else, so this Good which we are discussing is indeed superlatively valuable, yet its value depends on kind and not on quantity. Value, in Greek *axia*, is not counted as a Good nor yet as an Evil; so that however much you increase it in amount, it will still remain the same in kind. The value of Virtue is therefore peculiar and distinct; it depends on kind and not on degree.

The Passions as Diseases of the Soul

“Moreover the emotions of the mind, which harass and embitter the life of the foolish (the Greek term for these is *pathos*, and I might have rendered this literally and styled them ‘diseases,’ but the word ‘disease’ would not suit all instances; for example, no one speaks of pity, nor yet anger, as a disease, though the Greeks term these *pathos*. Let us then accept the term ‘emotion,’ the very sound of which seems to denote something vicious, and these emotions are not excited by any natural influence. The list of the emotions is divided into four classes, with numerous subdivisions, namely sorrow, fear, lust, and that mental emotion which the Stoics call by a name that also denotes a bodily feeling, *hedone* ‘pleasure,’ but which I prefer to style ‘delight,’ meaning the sensuous elation of the mind when in a state of exultation), these emotions, I say, are not excited by any influence of nature; they are all of them mere fancies and frivolous opinions. Therefore the Wise Man will always be free from them.

Virtue as Intrinsically Desirable

XI. “The view that all Moral Worth is intrinsically desirable is one that we hold in common with many other systems of philosophy. Excepting three schools that shut out Virtue from the Chief Good altogether, all the remaining philosophers are committed to this opinion, and most of all the Stoics, with whom we are now concerned, and who hold that nothing else but Moral Worth is to be counted as a good at all. But this position is one that is extremely simple and easy to defend. For who is there, or who ever was there, of avarice so consuming and appetites so unbridled, that, even though willing to commit any crime to achieve his end, and even though absolutely secure of impunity, yet would not a hundred times rather attain the same object by innocent than by guilty means?

“Again, what desire for profit or advantage underlies our curiosity to learn the secrets of nature, the mode and the causes of the movements of the heavenly bodies? Who lives in such a boorish state, or who has become so rigidly insensible to natural impulses, as to feel a repugnance for these lofty studies and eschew them as valueless apart from any pleasure or profit they may bring? Or who is there who feels no sense of pleasure when he hears of the wise words and brave deeds of our forefathers, of the Africani, or my great-grandfather whose name is always on our lips, and the other heroes of valour and of virtue?

On the other hand, what man of honourable family and good breeding and education is not shocked by moral baseness as such, even when it is not calculated to do him personally any harm? who can view without disgust a person whom he believes to be dissolute and an evil liver? who does not hate the mean, the empty, the frivolous, the worthless? Moreover, if we decide that baseness is not a thing to be avoided for its own sake, what arguments can be urged against men’s indulging in every sort of unseemliness in privacy and under cover of darkness, unless they are deterred by the essential and intrinsic ugliness of what is base? Endless reasons could be given in support of this view, but they are not necessary.

For nothing is less open to doubt than that what is morally good is to be desired for its own sake, and similarly what is morally bad is to be avoided for its own sake.

Again, the principle already discussed, that Moral Worth is the sole Good, involves the corollary that it is of more value than those neutral things which it procures. On the other hand when we say that folly, cowardice, injustice and intemperance are to be avoided because of the consequences they entail, this dictum must not be so construed as to appear inconsistent with the principle already laid down, that moral baseness alone is evil; for the reason that the consequence referred to are not a matter of bodily harm but of the base conduct to which vices give rise (the term 'vice' I prefer to 'badness' as a translation of the Greek *kakia*)."

XII. "Indeed, Cato," said I, "your language is lucidity itself; it conveys your meaning exactly. In fact I feel you are teaching philosophy to speak Latin, and naturalizing her as a Roman citizen. Hitherto she has seemed a foreigner at Rome, and shy of conversing in our language; and this is especially so with your Stoic system because of its precision and subtlety alike of thought and language. (There are some philosophers, I know, who could express their ideas in any language; for they ignore Division and Definition altogether, and themselves profess that they only seek to commend doctrines to which nature assents without argument. Hence, their ideas being so far from recondite, they spend small pains on logical exposition.) So I am following you attentively, and am committing to memory all the terms you use to denote the conceptions we are discussing; for very likely I shall soon have to employ the same terms myself.

Well, I think you are quite correct in calling the opposite of the virtues 'vices'. This is in conformity with the usage of our language. The word 'vice' denotes, I believe, that which is in its own nature 'vituperable'; or else 'vituperable' is derived from 'vice.' Whereas if you had rendered *kakia* by 'badness' ('malice'), Latin usage would point us to another meaning, that of a single particular vice. As it is, we make 'vice' the opposite term of 'virtue' in general."

The Stoics and the Peripatetics on the Status of Worldly Goods

"Well, then, " resumed Cato, "these principles established there follows a great dispute, which on the side of the Peripatetics was carried on with no great pertinacity (in fact their ignorance of logic renders their habitual style of discourse somewhat deficient in cogency); but your leader Carneades with his exceptional proficiency in logic and his consummate eloquence brought the controversy to a head. Carneades never ceased to contend that on the whole so-called 'problem of good and evil,' there was no disagreement as to facts between the Stoics and the Peripatetics, but only as to terms. For my part, however, nothing seems to me more manifest than that there is more of a real than a verbal difference of opinion between those philosophers on these points. I maintain that there is a far greater discrepancy between the Stoics and the Peripatetics as to facts than as to words. The Peripatetics say that all the things which under their system are called goods contribute to happiness; whereas our school does not believe that total happiness comprises everything that deserves to have a certain amount of value attached to it.

XIII "Again, can anything be more certain than that on the theory of the school that counts pain as an evil, the Wise Man cannot be happy when he is being tortured on the rack? Whereas the system that considers pain no evil clearly proves that the Wise Man

retains his happiness amidst the worst torments. The mere fact that men endure the same pain more easily when they voluntarily undergo it for the sake of their country than when they suffer it for some lesser cause, shows that the intensity of the pain depends on the state of mind of the sufferer, not on its own intrinsic nature.

Further, on the Peripatetic theory that there are three kinds of goods, the more abundantly supplied a man is with bodily or external goods, the happier he is; but it does not follow that we Stoics can accept the same position, and say that the more a man has of those bodily things that are highly valued, the happier he is. For the Peripatetics hold that the sum of happiness includes bodily advantages, but we deny this altogether. We hold that the multiplication even of those goods that in our view are truly so called does not render life happier or more desirable or of higher value; even less therefore is happiness affected by the accumulation of bodily advantages. Clearly if wisdom and health be both desirable, a combination of the two would be more desirable than wisdom alone; but it is not the case that if both be deserving of value, wisdom *plus* wealth is worth more than wisdom by itself separately. We deem health to be deserving of a certain value, but we do not reckon it a good; at the same time we rate no value so highly as to place it above virtue. This is not the view of the Peripatetics, who are bound to say that an action which is both morally good and not attended by pain is more desirable than the same action if accompanied by pain. We think otherwise—whether rightly or wrongly, I will consider later; but how could there be a wider or more real difference of opinion?

Happiness and Virtue are Not Matters of Degree

XIV. “The light of a lamp is eclipsed and overpowered by the rays of the sun; a drop of honey is lost in the vastness of the Aegean sea; an additional sixpence is nothing amid the wealth of Croesus, or a single step in the journey from here to India. Similarly if the Stoic definition of the End of Goods be accepted, it follows that all the value you set on bodily advantages mustn’t be absolutely eclipsed and annihilated by the brilliance and the majesty of virtue. And just as opportune ness (for so let us translate *eukairia*) is not increased by prolongation of time (since things we call opportune have attained their proper measure), so right conduct (for thus I translate *katorthosis*, since *katorthoma* is a single right action), right conduct, I say, and also propriety, and lastly Good itself, which consists in harmony with nature, are not capable of increase or addition. For these things that I speak of, like opportune ness before mentioned, are not made greater by prolongation.

And on this ground the Stoics do not deem happiness to be any more attractive or desirable if it be lasting than if it be brief; and they use this illustration: Just as, supposing the merit of a shoe were to fit the foot, many shoes would not be superior to few shoes nor bigger shoes to smaller ones, so, in the case of things the good of which consists solely and entirely in propriety and opportune ness, a larger number of the things would not be rated higher than a smaller number nor those lasting longer to those of shorter duration. Nor is there much point in the argument that, if good health is more valuable when lasting than when brief, therefore the exercise of wisdom also is worth most when it continues longest. This ignores the fact that, whereas the value of health is estimated by duration, that of virtue is measured by opportune ness; so that those who use the argument in question might equally be expected to say that an easy death or an easy child-birth would be better if protracted than if speedy. They fail to see that some things are rendered more valuable by

brevity as others by prolongation.

So it would be consistent with the principles already stated that on the theory of those who deem the End of Goods, that which we term the extreme or ultimate Good, to be capable of degree, they should also hold that one man can be wiser than another, and similarly that one can commit a more sinful or more righteous action than another; which is not open to us to say, who do not think the End of Goods can vary in degree. For just as a drowning man is no more able to breathe if he be not far from the surface of the water, so that he might at any moment emerge, than if he were actually at the bottom already, and just as puppy on the point of opening its eyes is no less blind than one just born, similarly a man that has made some progress towards the state of virtue is none the less in misery than he that has made no progress at all.

Worldly Goods as Morally Indifferent

XV. “ I am aware that all this seems paradoxical; but as our previous conclusions are undoubtedly true and well established, and as these are the logical inferences from them, the truth of these inferences also cannot be called in question. Yet although the Stoics deny that either virtues or vices can be increased in degree, they nevertheless believe that each of them can be in a sense expanded and widened in scope. Wealth again, in the opinion of Diogenes, though so important for pleasure and health as to be not merely conducive but actually essential to them, yet has not the same effect in relation to virtue, nor yet in the case of the arts; for money may be a guide to these, but cannot form an essential factor in them; therefore although if pleasure or if good health be a good, wealth also must be counted a good, yet if wisdom is a good, it does not follow that we must also pronounce wealth to be a good. Nor can anything which is not a good be essential to a thing that is a good; and hence, because acts of cognition and of comprehension, which form the raw material of the arts, excite desire, since wealth is not a good, wealth cannot be essential to any art. But even if we allowed wealth to be essential to the arts, the same argument nevertheless could be applied to virtue, because virtue (as Diogenes argues) requires a great amount of thought and practice, which is not the case to the same extent with the arts, and because virtue involves a life-long steadfastness, strength and consistency, whereas these qualities are not equally manifested in the arts.

“Next follows an exposition of the difference between things; for if we maintained that all things were absolutely indifferent, the whole of life would be thrown in confusion, as it is by Aristo, and no function or task could be found for wisdom, since there would be absolutely no distinction between the things that pertain to the conduct of life, and no choice need be exercised among them. Accordingly after conclusively proving that morality alone is good and baseness alone is evil, the Stoics went on to affirm that among those things which were of no importance for happiness or misery, there was nevertheless an element of difference, making some of them of positive and others of negative value, and others neutral. Again among things valuable-e.g.health, unimpaired senses, freedom from pain, fame, wealth and the like- they said that some afford us adequate grounds for preferring them to other things, while others are not of this nature; and similarly among those things which are of negative value some afford adequate grounds for our rejecting them, such as pain, disease, loss of the senses, poverty, disgrace, and the like; others not so. Hence arose the distinction, in Zeno’s terminology, between *proegmena* and

the opposite, *approegmena*- for Zeno using the copious Greek language still employed novel words coined for the occasion, a license not allowed to us with the poor vocabulary of Latin; though you are fond of saying that Latin is actually more copious than Greek. However, to make it easier to understand the meaning of this term it will be out of place to explain the method which Zeno pursued in coining it.

The Perfection of the Stoic Ethical System

XXII.”However I begin to perceive that I have let myself be carried beyond the requirements of the plan that I set before me. The fact is that I have been led on by the marvelous structure of the Stoic system and the miraculous sequence of its topics; pray tell me seriously, does it not fill you with admiration? Nothing is more finished, more nicely ordered, than nature; but what has nature, what have the products of handicraft to show that is so well constructed, so firmly jointed and welded into one? Where do you find a conclusion inconsistent with its premise, or a discrepancy between an earlier and a later statement? Where is lacking such close interconnection of the parts that, if you alter a single letter, you shake the whole structure? Though indeed there is nothing that it would be impossible to alter.

“Then, how dignified, how lofty, how consistent is the character of the Wise Man as they depict it! since reason has proved that moral worth is the sole good, it follows that he must always be happy, and that all those titles which the ignorant are so fond of deriding do in very truth belong to him. For he will have a better claim to the title of King than Tarquin, who could not rule either himself or his subjects; a better right to the name of ‘Master of the People’ (for that is what a dictator is) than Sulla, who was a master of three pestilential vices, licentiousness, avarice and cruelty; a better right to be called rich than Crassus, who had he lacked nothing could never have been induced to cross the Euphrates with no pretext for war. Rightly will he be said to own all things, who alone knows how to use all things; rightly also will he be styled beautiful, for those features of the soul are fairer than those of the body; rightly the one and only free man, as subject to no man’s authority, and slave of no appetite; rightly unconquerable, for though his body be thrown into fetters, no bondage can enchain his soul. Nor need he wait for any period of time, that the decision whether he has been happy or not may finally pronounced only when he has rounded off his life’s last day in death,-the famous warning so unwisely given to Croesus by old Solon, one of the seven Wise Men; for had Croesus ever been happy, he would have carried his happiness uninterrupted to the pyre raised for him by Cyrus. If then it be true that all the good and none but the good are happy, what possession is more precious than philosophy, what more divine than virtue?”

Cicero. **De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum**. Book 3. Trans. H. Rackham. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914.

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