The Stoics

Diogenes Laertius

Stoicism is often traced back to Zeno of Citium, around 300 BCE and took shape under Chrysippus around 250 BCE. (Zeno of Citium is not to be confused with Zeno of Elea who we read earlier on in the quarter.) It would go on to be the dominant philosophy in the later Roman period, being associated with figures like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. The Stoics made contributions to logic, metaphysics, and epistemology, but they are best known for their views on ethics. In this excerpt from Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, Diogenes reviews the Stoics’ teachings on nature, virtue, and the good life.

[84] The ethical branch of philosophy they divide as follows: (1) the topic of impulse; (2) the topic of things good and evil; (3) that of the passions; (4) that of virtue; (5) that of the end; (6) that of primary value and of actions; (7) that of duties or the befitting; and (8) of inducements to act or refrain from acting. The foregoing is the subdivision adopted by Chrysippus, Archedemus, Zeno of Tarsus, Apollodorus, Diogenes, Antipater, and Posidonius, and their disciples. Zeno of Citium and Cleanthes treated the subject somewhat less elaborately, as might be expected in an older generation. They, however, did subdivide Logic and Physics as well as Ethics.

[85] An animal’s first impulse, say the Stoics, is to self preservation, because nature from the outset endears it to itself, as Chrysippus affirms in the first book of his work On Ends: his words are, “The dearest thing to every animal is its own constitution and its consciousness thereof”; for it was not likely that nature should estrange the living thing from itself or that she should leave the creature she has made without either estrangement from or affection for its own constitution. We are forced then to conclude that nature in constituting the animal made it near and dear to itself; for so it comes to repel all that is injurious and give free access to all that is serviceable or akin to it.
[86] As for the assertion made by some people that pleasure is the object to which the first impulse of animals is directed, it is shown by the Stoics to be false. For pleasure, if it is really felt, they declare to be a by-product, which never comes until nature by itself has sought and found the means suitable to the animal's existence or constitution; it is an aftermath comparable to the condition of animals thriving and plants in full bloom. And nature, they say, made no difference originally between plants and animals, for she regulates the life of plants too, in their case without impulse and sensation, just as also certain processes go on of a vegetative kind in us. But when in the case of animals impulse has been superadded, whereby they are enabled to go in quest of their proper aliment, for them, say the Stoics, Nature's rule is to follow the direction of impulse. But when reason by way of a more perfect leadership has been bestowed on the beings we call rational, for them life according to reason rightly becomes the natural life. For reason supervenes to shape impulse scientifically.

[87] This is why Zeno was the first (in his treatise On the Nature of Man) to designate as the end “life in agreement with nature” (or living agreeably to nature), which is the same as a virtuous life, virtue being the goal towards which nature guides us. So too Cleanthes in his treatise On Pleasure, as also Posidonius, and Hecato in his work On Ends. Again, living virtuously is equivalent to living in accordance with experience of the actual course of nature, as Chrysippus says in the first book of his De finibus; for our individual natures are parts of the nature of the whole universe.

[88] And this is why the end may be defined as life in accordance with nature, or, in other words, in accordance with our own human nature as well as that of the universe, a life in which we refrain from every action forbidden by the law common to all things, that is to say, the right reason which pervades all things, and is identical with this Zeus, lord and ruler of all that is. And this very thing constitutes the virtue of the happy man and the smooth current of life, when all actions promote the harmony of the spirit dwelling in the individual man with the will of him who orders the universe. Diogenes then expressly declares the end to be to act with good reason in the selection of what is natural. Archedemus says the end is to live in the performance of all befitting actions.

[89] By the nature with which our life ought to be in accord, Chrysippus understands both universal nature and more particularly the nature of man, whereas Cleanthes takes the nature of the universe alone as that which should be followed,
without adding the nature of the individual. And virtue, he holds, is a harmonious
disposition, choice-worthy for its own sake and not from hope or fear or any exter-
nal motive. Moreover, it is in virtue that happiness consists; for virtue is the state
of mind, which tends to make the whole of life harmonious. When a rational being
is perverted, this is due to the deceptiveness of external pursuits or sometimes to
the influence of associates. For the starting-points of nature are never perverse.

[90] Virtue, in the first place, is in one sense the perfection of anything in general,
say of a statue; again, it may be non-intellectual, like health, or intellectual, like
prudence. For Hecato says in his first book On the Virtues that some are scientific
and based upon theory, namely, those which have a structure of theoretical prin-
ciples, such as prudence and justice; others are non-intellectual, those that are re-
garded as co-extensive and parallel with the former, like health and strength. For
health is found to attend upon and be co-extensive with the intellectual virtue of
temperance, just as strength is a result of the building of an arch.

[91] These are called non-intellectual, because they do not require the mind's as-
sent; they supervene and they occur even in bad men: for instance, health, courage.
The proof, says Posidonius in the first book of his treatise on Ethics, that virtue
really exists is the fact that Socrates, Diogenes, and Antisthenes and their followers
made moral progress. And for the existence of vice as a fundamental fact the proof
is that it is the opposite of virtue. That it, virtue, can be taught is laid down by
Chrysippus in the first book of his work On the End, by Cleanthes, by Posidonius
in his Protreptica, and by Hecato; that it can be taught is clear from the case of
bad men becoming good.

[92] Panaetius, however, divides virtue into two kinds, theoretical and practical;
others make a threefold division of it into logical, physical, and ethical; while by
the school of Posidonius four types are recognized, and more than four by Clean-
thes, Chrysippus, Antipater, and their followers. Apollonius for his part counts
but one, namely, practical wisdom. Amongst the virtues some are primary, some
are subordinate to these. The following are the primary: wisdom, courage, justice,
temperance. Particular virtues are magnanimity, continence, endurance, presence
of mind, good counsel. And wisdom they define as the knowledge of things good
and evil and of what is neither good nor evil; courage as knowledge of what we
ought to choose, what we ought to beware of, and what is indifferent...
[93] [They define]... magnanimity as the knowledge or habit of mind which makes one superior to anything that happens, whether good or evil equally; continence as a disposition never overcome in that which concerns right reason, or a habit which no pleasures can get the better of; endurance as a knowledge or habit which suggests what we are to hold fast to, what not, and what is indifferent; presence of mind as a habit prompt to find out what is meet to be done at any moment; good counsel as knowledge by which we see what to do and how to do it if we would consult our own interests. Similarly, of vices some are primary, others subordinate: e.g. folly, cowardice, injustice, profligacy are accounted primary; but incontinence, stupidity, ill-advisedness subordinate. Further, they hold that the vices are forms of ignorance of those things whereof the corresponding virtues are the knowledge.

[94] Good in general is that from which some advantage comes, and more particularly what is either identical with or not distinct from benefit. Whence it follows that virtue itself and whatever partakes of virtue is called good in these three senses—viz. as being (1) the source from which benefit results; or (2) that in respect of which benefit results, e.g. the virtuous act; or (3) that by the agency of which benefit results, e.g. the good man who partakes in virtue. Another particular definition of good which they give is “the natural perfection of a rational being qua rational.” To this answers virtue and, as being partakers in virtue, virtuous acts and good men; as also its supervening accessories, joy and gladness and the like.

[95] So with evils: either they are vices, folly, cowardice, injustice, and the like; or things which partake of vice, including vicious acts and wicked persons as well as their accompaniments, despair, moroseness, and the like. Again, some goods are goods of the mind and others external, while some are neither mental nor external. The former include the virtues and virtuous acts; external goods are such as having a good country or a good friend, and the prosperity of such. Whereas to be good and happy oneself is of the class of goods neither mental nor external.

[96] Similarly of things evil some are mental evils, namely, vices and vicious actions; others are outward evils, as to have a foolish country or a foolish friend and the unhappiness of such; other evils again are neither mental nor outward, e.g. to be yourself bad and unhappy. Again, goods are either of the nature of ends or they are the means to these ends, or they are at the same time end and means. A friend and the advantages derived from him are means to good, whereas confidence, high-spirit, liberty, delight, gladness, freedom from pain, and every virtuous act are of the nature of ends.
The virtues (they say) are goods of the nature at once of ends and of means. On the one hand, in so far as they cause happiness they are means, and on the other hand, in so far as they make it complete, and so are themselves part of it, they are ends. Similarly of evils some are of the nature of ends and some of means, while others are at once both means and ends. Your enemy and the harm he does you are means; consternation, abasement, slavery, gloom, despair, excess of grief, and every vicious action are of the nature of ends. Vices are evils both as ends and as means, since in so far as they cause misery they are means, but in so far as they make it complete, so that they become part of it, they are ends.

Of mental goods some are habits, others are dispositions, while others again are neither the one nor the other. The virtues are dispositions, while accomplishments or avocations are matters of habit, and activities as such or exercise of faculty neither the one nor the other. And in general there are some mixed goods: e.g. to be happy in one’s children or in one’s old age. But knowledge is a pure good. Again, some goods are permanent like the virtues, others transitory like joy and walking-exercise. All good (they say) is expedient, binding, profitable, useful, serviceable, beautiful, beneficial, desirable, and just or right.

It is expedient, because it brings about things of such a kind that by their occurrence we are benefited. It is binding, because it causes unity where unity is needed; profitable, because it defrays what is expended on it, so that the return yields a balance of benefit on the transaction. It is useful, because it secures the use of benefit; it is serviceable, because the utility it affords is worthy of all praise. It is beautiful, because the good is proportionate to the use made of it; beneficial, because by its inherent nature it benefits; choiceworthy, because it is such that to choose it is reasonable. It is also just or right, inasmuch as it is in harmony with law and tends to draw men together.

The reason why they characterize the perfect good as beautiful is that it has in full all the “factors” required by nature or has perfect proportion. Of the beautiful there are (say they) four species, namely, what is just, courageous, orderly and wise; for it is under these forms that fair deeds are accomplished. Similarly there are four species of the base or ugly, namely, what is unjust, cowardly, disorderly, and unwise. By the beautiful is meant properly and in an unique sense that good which renders its possessors praiseworthy, or briefly, good which is worthy of praise; though in another sense it signifies a good aptitude for one’s proper func-
tion; while in yet another sense the beautiful is that which lends new grace to any-
thing, as when we say of the wise man that he alone is good and beautiful.

[101] And they say that only the morally beautiful is good. So Hecato in his trea-
They hold, that is, that virtue and whatever partakes of virtue consists in this: 
which is equivalent to saying that all that is good is beautiful, or that the term 
“good” has equal force with the term “beautiful,” which comes to the same thing. 
“Since a thing is good, it is beautiful; now it is beautiful, therefore it is good.” They 
hold that all goods are equal and that all good is desirable in the highest degree 
and admits of no lowering or heightening of intensity. Of things that are, some, 
they say, are good, some are evil, and some neither good nor evil (that is, morally 
indifferent).

[102] Goods comprise the virtues of prudence, justice, courage, temperance, and the 
est; while the opposites of these are evils, namely, folly, injustice, and the rest. 
Neutral (neither good nor evil, that is) are all those things which neither benefit 
nor harm a man: such as life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, fair fame 
and noble birth, and their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, pov-
erty, ignominy, low birth, and the like. This Hecato affirms in his De fine, book vii., 
and also Apollodorus in his Ethics, and Chrysippus. For, say they, such things (as 
life, health, and pleasure) are not in themselves goods, but are morally indifferent, 
though falling under the species or subdivision “things preferred.”

[103] For as the property of hot is to warm, not to cool, so the property of good is 
to benefit, not to injure; but wealth and health do no more benefit than injury, 
therefore neither wealth nor health is good. Further, they say that that is not good 
of which both good and bad use can be made; but of wealth and health both good 
and bad use can be made; therefore wealth and health are not goods. On the other 
hand, Posidonius maintains that these things too are among goods. Hecato in the 
ninth book of his treatise On Goods, and Chrysippus in his work On Pleasure, de-
ny that pleasure is a good either; for some pleasures are disgraceful, and nothing 
disgraceful is good.

[104] To benefit is to set in motion or sustain in accordance with virtue; whereas to 
harm is to set in motion or sustain in accordance with vice.