

The Early Stoics

Introduction Part 3 – The Big Themes & Ideas of the Early Stoics & Stoicism Stoic Logic or Knowing

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"No kind of philosophy is more profitable ... than the philosophy of the Stoics." —Thomas James

"Stoicism is the greatest system of organized thought which the mind of man had built up for itself in the Greco-Roman world. ... It represents a way of looking at the world and the practical problems of life which possesses still a permanent interest for humankind, and a permanent power of inspiration." —Gilbert Murray

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The Best of the Early Stoics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Early Stoics.

Introduction Part 3

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The Big Themes and Ideas of the Early Stoics & Stoicism

THE GOAL OF life. Like most Greeks, and in agreement with Socrates and those who followed him in one way or another, Zeno and the Stoics judge that happiness is the end or goal (*telos*) of life.¹ As such, it shapes the path that Stoics resolve to follow.

But to follow the path, the Stoics figure they not only have to know *where* they are going but also the nature of the path and how it fits in with the surrounding landscape. In other words, they wish to know *what we must do* to achieve happiness, and how

this *what* or path corresponds to the rest of human life and the whole of reality itself.

The three parts of Stoic philosophy. That question—What must we do to achieve happiness, the goal of life?—naturally involves Zeno and the Stoics in other questions and topics having to do with human knowledge, the nature of the world and the place of human beings within it, and, finally, the details of what had to be done in terms of a path to follow.

These questions and topics form the substance of

the three parts of Stoic philosophy—logic, natural philosophy or physics, and ethics—three divisions we will explore in detail as we go along.

For now, let's briefly look at one analogy the Stoics give to explain the three parts. They liken philosophy to "a fertile, all-productive field," where logic "is the fence that goes around the field, ethics is the crop, and physics is the soil or the fruit tree."² In the analogy, logic is the science of knowing; it is the barrier that keeps falsehood out and the truth within the field. The

field itself, with its soil and fruit trees, is natural philosophy, the part of philosophy that discovers "what is" in terms of the whole of reality and human life. Finally, ethics—the crop—is everything having to do with human flourishing, including the goal of life and the means by which we can attain the goal.

With that, let's turn to the Stoic system, exploring each of the three parts of philosophy. We'll begin with logic, move on to natural philosophy, and finish with ethics.

Stoic Logic or Knowing

The three parts the logical part of philosophy. Derived from *logos*, the Greek word *logikos*—as in the *logikos* part of philosophy—indicates not only that which is reason-based or intellectual but also that which is related to speaking or speech.³ Accordingly, the logical part of Stoic philosophy includes dialectic, definition, canons and criteria, and rhetoric.

*Dialectic.*⁴ The Stoics hold that dialectic (*dialektikos*) is "the science of correctly discussing subjects by means of question and answer." They define it as "the knowledge of truth and falsehood and that which is neither true nor false." More exactly, dialectic is the *scientific* knowledge—careful, subtle, and precise—of what is and what is not, having to do with, as Chrysippus put it, "things that signify" (things said or human utterance) and "things that are signified." Counted a virtue, dialectic and various allied virtues (earnestness, deliberateness, levelheadedness, irrefutability) strengthen the Stoic, providing a firm stance and steady habit in the form of knowledge.

Explaining why dialectic is a virtue, Cicero states that "it offers a method that guards us against giving assent to any falsehood or ever being tricked by deceptive probability. And it enables us to maintain and to defend the truths that we have learned about good and bad things." He further judges it "the art" that is able to remove "rashness and ignorance," as well as any kind of error, frivolity, or mere opinion. And this is important. According to Zeno of Citium, "the strongest point of the wise man is found in his avoiding being taken in and in his seeing that he is not deceived."

It is the earnest practice of dialectic that enables the philosopher to avoid such a fate.

We read that Zeno himself was "an extremely subtle dialectician and a very acute thinker." His "inclination was toward searching and inquiry." He was "precise in everything." As for Chrysippus, we are told that his practice of dialectic was nearly divine. He "became so well-known for dialectic that most people supposed that the gods would adopt his system if dialectic ever existed among them."

*Definition.*⁵ Part of the precision of dialectic has to do with definitions—another division, as we have noted, within logic. Cicero states that definition serves "to delimit [a] particular term"—an explanation that simply presents the literal meaning of the Greek word *horos* (limit, boundary, definition), a word observed in the English "horizon." In his book *On Definitions*, the Stoic Antipater explains that definition has to do with being precise, with breaking down a word into its constituent meanings, thus giving a careful and exact analysis. He writes that "a definition is an expressed statement in accord with a precise analysis or reduction." For Chrysippus, "a definition is an account of what is distinct." Taking these explanations together, a definition establishes the horizon or boundaries of a word, indicating what is within the limits of its meaning and, by implication, what is without. What is within is what is distinct about the word's meaning, its precisely analyzed meaning.

We may grasp the significance of definition for the Stoics by knowing the role definitions play in Stoic

thought. In short, they help us to identify the truth. They are “the means of recognizing the truth,” Diogenes Laertius states, “inasmuch as real things or objects are grasped by means of conceptions.” And “concepts,” relates Augustine of Hippo, are “those things which [the Stoics] expound by definition.”

*Canons and criteria.*⁶ We have observed so far that both dialectic and definition are used by the Stoics to get at truth. Another tool is what they termed “canons and criteria” (*s. kanōn* and *s. kritērion*). Like definitions, these are another “means of discovering the truth.” They serve as the standard or measure of truth, the means by which we can judge or test something to see whether it is true. Included in the canons and criteria are things such as mind, right reason, preconception, sensation (a “measuring rod” of knowledge), and what the Stoics call an “apprehending presentation”—all things we will learn about in a moment when we come to the Stoic parts of knowing.

*Rhetoric.*⁷ Finally, there is rhetoric, which is “the science of speaking well on matters set out in detailed narrative speeches or expository speeches.” If truth is the goal of Stoic logic, including dialectic, definition, and criteria and canons, then we may view rhetoric as the art by which the Stoics discourse with success about the truth. So it is that they identify various parts of rhetoric, as well as a range of virtues and vices of discourse, aspects of the Stoic presentation of truth that need not deter us.

The parts of knowing. Seeing that the Stoics are interested in knowing the truth of things in order to live accordingly, we next turn to what they understood to be the process of knowing. So as to have a comprehensive view of this process and the various methods involved, we will first spend some time with what may be called *the parts of knowing*, that is, everything involved in the process, from the human knower to things known. Doing so, we will briefly survey each of the following: the human parts or powers of knowing; real things; presentations; the senses and sensation; preconceptions and conceptions or concepts; and, finally, the distinction between knowledge, grasp, opinion, and ignorance. After, we’ll look at the parts of knowing together in order to view the Stoic

process of knowing in a comprehensive manner.

*The human parts or powers of knowing—the soul and its parts.*⁸ Generally speaking, it is the soul that knows. The soul is a “warm breath” or an “exhalation”—which is to say, it is that which we may feel with our own hands upon exhaling. The soul itself enables life and action. By it “we live and breathe, and by its influence we are set in motion.” Relative to the process of knowing, the soul is able to sense things. In terms of its natural function, it is “a nature capable of sensation.” As a sensing thing, the soul is that which is affected by real things external to it. In this way, it is impressed, altered, or modified by what the Stoics call impressions or presentations (on which, more in a moment).

The Stoics recognize eight parts of the soul. One is the generative or productive part by which the soul and body together reproduce itself. Five are the senses or sense faculties (sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch). These five are the soul’s “reporters” and “messengers” relative to the external world. Another is the vocal part by which the soul communicates itself. The eighth is the rational or intellectual part of the soul, the soul’s leading part or leader, which organizes and directs every other part of the soul. In Greek it is called the *hēgemonikon*.⁹ Situated in the highest part of the soul, it is identical with—or nearly so, anyway—the mind (*nous*) and the intellect (*dianoia*). As for its location relative to the body, some Stoics locate it in the head while others put it in the heart.

What does the *hēgemonikon* do? First, it serves as the source of motion in the soul, motion or activity that extends throughout the whole of human nature, body and soul. As such, it is the origin of the various powers exercised by the soul. “All the powers that are sent out into the parts of the whole are sent out from the leading part as from a fount or spring.” As the source of these and the director of the soul, the *hēgemonikon* plays the leading role in sensation, apprehension, and cognition. The Stoics identify knowledge itself as “a particular state or condition of the leading part” of the soul. Finally, the leading part is the place “from which rational speech comes,”—that is, the place from which we humans rationally

articulate what we have come to know.

Real things. Humans come to know real things, objects that exist, things that *are*. Real things are *what is* in the cosmos—from what is dark or smooth, for instance, to individual elements, to rocks, trees, and horses, to humans, stars, and gods.

Most significantly, real things impact other real things; they produce effects. Relative to the process of knowing, they enable sensation, apprehension, and cognition, and they give rise to utterance or rational articulation. In short, together with the human parts or powers of knowing, real things make possible the whole process of knowing, including presentations, sensations, conceptions, and knowledge itself.

*Presentations (phantasia).*¹⁰ Ancient sources tell us that a presentation is “an impression (*tupōsis*) on,” or “an alteration (*alloiōsis*) of,” or “a modification (*pathos*) that occurs in the soul.”¹¹ As for it being an “impression,” Diogenes Laertius relates that “the name is borrowed from the impress (*tupos*) made by the seal ring upon the wax.” More precisely, he defines presentation as “that which comes from an existing or real thing, agrees with it, and has been stamped and impressed and sealed on the soul in a way that would not be the case if it came from a non-existing or unreal thing.”

Said another way, real things give rise to presentations that correspond to the same real things in such a way that they provide accurate or matching information about the real things. Presentations, then, correspond to or agree with and thus reveal or *present* those real things that give rise to them.¹² In turn, this real-thing-corresponding information impacts the soul, impressing, altering, or modifying it in some manner.

The full explanation, however, is more complex. Some presentations, we learn, accurately present real things; others do not.

The Stoics call the first “apprehending presentations.”¹³ They arise from a real object, meaning that the apprehending presentation directly and actually apprehends or grasps something real. Conversely, it is the “existing thing itself” that impacts the soul through the apprehending presentation. As such, as

accurately *presenting* a real thing, presentations are trustworthy, having, as Zeno of Citium judges, “an exposition or disclosure proper to themselves of the things presented.” Zeno terms such trustworthy presentations “graspable,” that is, presentations that one can truly get a hold of, “resembling things that are grasped by the hand.” These are true presentations, distinct and clearly imprinted on the soul.

The second kind of presentation, a non-apprehending presentation, by contrast, “does not proceed from any existing thing or object—or, if it does, it fails to agree with the existing thing itself.” Consequently, in terms of its purported source, it either relays faulty or inaccurate information about something real, or it somehow originates in unreality (whatever, precisely, *that is*), arising from something that does not even exist. Non-apprehending presentations are “neither distinct nor clearly imprinted” on the soul.

We may grasp the distinction between the two kinds of presentation if we look at the difference between dreams and waking reality. In the first, the visions we see do not immediately arise from anything real. Rather, they simply appear in our minds in a fleeting, phantom-like manner. Such visions the Stoics term “phantasms.” They are, Diogenes Laertius explains, “an apparition (*dokēsis*)”—or a seeming—“in the intellect, the kind that may occur in sleep.” By contrast, an apprehending presentation is an impact on the soul made by something real, something that is directly before us in some manner. Take a horse. If a black stallion is standing before us, there will be an apprehending presentation that imprints, alters, or modifies our souls. On the other hand, if later on in the day we think of the horse, this thinking is no longer an apprehending presentation but a “notion or thought-object” or a “phantasm in the intellect.” Of course, such a notion is in some way related to a presentation (the prior one of the black stallion). But since the horse is not directly before us, the information presented is merely apparent rather than real. Diogenes Laertius states it this way: “A notion or thought-object is a phantasm in the intellect that is neither something real nor any quality; rather, it is an apparent thing and an apparent quality. For example,

a mental image of a horse may come to be even though there is no horse present.”

As for the more subjective basis of the presentation, there are three ways to classify presentations. One has to do with whether the presentation is sense-based or not. If it is sense-based, then it is grasped or “received by means of one or more of the senses or sense organs.” If it is not sense-based, then the intellect is the means by which it is grasped. Another classification distinguishes the rational from the non-rational presentation. Rational presentations impact rational animals, whereas non-rational presentations impact non-rational animals. Finally, there are skill-based presentations and those that are not skill-based. In describing the difference, Diogenes Laertius explains that “a statue . . . is viewed differently by a trained and skilled craftsman in sculpting . . . than it is by one who is not trained and skilled.”

The final point we must explore regarding presentations is how they work on the soul. According to Cleanthes, they do so in the manner of a signet ring impressing a soft wax seal. “Cleanthes understood ‘impression’ (*tupōsis*) as a thing that is both pressed in and standing out, similar to the impression made in wax by signet rings.” Chrysippus, by contrast, judged that such impressions, one after another, would lead to muddled wax, which is to say a cluttered, confused, and incoherent soul or mind. This is why he suspected that Zeno of Citium used the term impression “in the sense of ‘alteration’.” If we think of “impression” in this way, he said, then “it is no longer absurd that, when many presentations coexist in us at one and the same time, the same body receives many alterations.”

Why, for Chrysippus, was this the case? He explains with an illustration, one that is key not only for understanding how presentations work but also for grasping how sensation works. “It is just like the air when many people simultaneously speak,” he says. When this occurs, the air “receives numerous and different blows and has many alterations. So will the leading part experience something analogous to this when it receives a variety of presentations.” The Stoics hold that we hear thanks to sound waves. “We hear when the air between the sonant body and the organ

of hearing suffers concussion, a vibration that spreads spherically and then forms waves and strikes upon the ears, just as the water in a reservoir forms wavy circles when a stone is thrown into it.”¹⁴ Presentations work upon the soul, then, as sound waves do in the air. Just as each sound or voice emits information in the form of waves impacting the air, so does each real thing emit, as it were, corresponding information that impacts the soul, altering it. Likewise—and significantly to the point—just as the information from each voice remains distinct, so too does each alteration of the soul remain distinct.

But how or in what way is the soul impacted or altered? The question brings us to the topic of sensation.

*Senses and sensation.*¹⁵ For the Stoics, the senses and sensation are central to the process of knowing. The early Christian theologian and philosopher Origen comments that the Stoics “hold that all that we apprehend is apprehended through the senses, and that all knowledge comes through the senses.”¹⁶ So it is that everything—grasping things and knowledge itself—depends on the process of sensation.

But what is sensation? According to Diogenes Laertius, the Stoics apply the term sensation to the following four phenomena. First, “sensation” is used for “the equipment of the sense organs.” These are the five bodily sense organs—the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin. Second, “the operation of the sense organs is itself . . . called sensation.” The operation is the proper activity of the sense organs, what they do according to their own function. Third, there is “the breath or current passing from the leading part of the soul to the senses.” It is this breath or *pneuma* that is responsible for sensation, the medium through which, we might say, sensation occurs. Accordingly, each sensation is a breath extending from the sense organ to the leading part of the soul (*hēgemonikon*), or, as both Aetius and Diogenes Laertius put it, each sensation is a breath extending from the leading part to the sense organs. To give a few examples: “Sight,” we learn, “is a breath extending from the leading part to the eyes.” Or, “smell is a breath extending from the leading part to the nose.”

Before we encounter the fourth way that the Stoics use the term sensation, let's note that sensation, as the Stoics understand it, involves both the body (in the form of the sense organs that are parts of the body) and the soul (in the form of the breath that extends from the sense organs to the leading part of the soul).

Finally, then, sensation is applied to "direct apprehension by means of the senses." Said another way, sensation is the moment when the soul directly apprehends a presentation, or, more exactly, an *apprehending* presentation. It is the moment when the soul has been impressed, altered, or modified by the presentation.

But there's more. The Stoics suggest there must be some kind of voluntary mental recognition of the apprehension, what they term "assent," for there truly to be sensation. As Cicero reports the matter, Zeno "proposed that sensation is a joining or combination of a kind of impulse or influence or impact presented from outside the individual sensing," —the impact of the presentation itself—"and to these presentations received by the senses, Zeno joined the assent of the rational soul, which he located within us and declared a voluntary act." Sensation, therefore, is a combination of external impact and internal voluntary assent—an important point, as we will see.

When we recognize a friend walking down the street, we not only receive an apprehending presentation of our friend by means of our eyes or perhaps our ears as he or she calls out to us, but we also voluntarily agree with or assent to the presentation, giving rise to full-on sensation. "Yes, that's our friend," we realize and confirm. The same is true when we spot a white flower or hold a chunk of rough volcanic rock in our hands. Various presentations impact our senses as we voluntarily assent to them—or not.

We observe, then, that sensation is a process generally involving four things—five if sensation does not involve direct contact with the thing sensed.¹⁷ The four are the external object, the sense organs, the soul or *pneuma* (breath or current), and the *hēgemonikon* or leading part of the soul. During the process of sensation, the external object gives off sense data or information in the form of an apprehending presentation.

If there is no direct or immediate contact between the sense organ and the object sensed (as there is not with sight, hearing, and smell), the sense data travels through the medium of air (the fifth thing involved in sensation), presumably in some kind of wave-like manner.¹⁸ The presentation impacts the soul by means of the sense organs. The sense organs then convey the sense data or information to the leading part of the soul by means of the medium of the soul itself, the *pneuma*, which is the breath or current that connects the sense organs with the leading part of the soul, the *hēgemonikon* or intellect.¹⁹ Finally, the *hēgemonikon* voluntarily offers or withholds assent.

*Preconceptions and conceptions or concepts.*²⁰ Sensation is significant for the role it plays in concept formation. According to Augustine of Hippo, the Stoics held that "it was from the bodily senses that the mind conceives notions, called by them *ennoiai* or 'concepts'—that is, those things which they expound by definition."

How does the development of concept formation work? Aetius explains that it begins with the leading part of the soul, which is "like a sheet of paper that is easy to write on" when humans are born. It is upon the *hēgemonikon*—the easy-to-write-on sheet of paper—that each person "inscribes each one of his concepts." Here's where sensation enters the act. "The first manner of inscribing something on the *hēgemonikon* is by means of the senses." Sensing something leads to a memory of that thing. And multiple memories of similar things add up to an acquaintance with or experience of similar things. Aetius puts it this way: "When, for example, one senses something white, one has a memory of it after the thing departs. And when there occur many memories of a similar kind, then one is said to have 'an acquaintance with'—for 'an acquaintance with' is a multitude of memories of a similar kind."²¹

This experience of or acquaintance with many similar things is what the Stoics call a "preconception," which is a naturally occurring general conception of a thing, or, as Diogenes Laertius gives it, "a preconception is a *natural* conception of universals or general concepts." The "naturally occurring" aspect

of preconceptions sets them apart from conceptions or concepts, which occur by means of teaching. A young child forms a preconception of the general concepts of “mother” or “horse” by encountering his own and other mothers and seeing many horses, whereas something such as the concepts of “soul” or “rational” are developed by teaching. Aetius expounds:

Some of these concepts come into being naturally according to the aforementioned way [that is, by sensation and memory formation culminating in an acquaintance with or experience]—and this without the art of teaching. Others, however, come into being through our instruction and care. These latter ones are alone called ‘concepts’ or ‘conceptions,’ whereas the others are called ‘preconceptions.’

The Stoics judge that our minds or reason is “filled up with preconceptions in the first seven years” —that is, we naturally develop the stock of general notions (preconceptions) we will possess by our seventh birthday. From then on, and doubtlessly in some circumstances before, we learn new concepts by means of instruction.

How do we arrive at concepts—both natural (preconceptions) and learned (conceptions)? Aside from the general answer, “naturally . . . [and by means of] instruction and care,” as Aetius puts it, we do so in various ways. Diogenes Laertius lists nine: direct experience, resemblance, analogy, transposition, combination, opposition, transition, nature, and deprivation. As for the first, “sense objects,” he explains, “are thought about by means of direct experience.” This is the “acquaintance with” mentioned by Aetius, that which consists of many memories of single instances of sensation—the many instances of sensing white liquid leading to the naturally formed preconception of milk.²²

One final point. It is upon these preconceptions and conceptions that a whole system of philosophy may be built. Completing his explanation cited a moment ago, Augustine of Hippo states, “It is from this”—the various notions and concepts—that the

Stoics “develop the whole system of their learning and teaching, and all the connections therein.”

The use of reason versus sensation in concept formation. We sense or perceive various things by means of sensation and reason. Consequently, both are the means by which we form different kinds of concepts. “According to the Stoics, it is by sensation that we apprehend black and white, and rough and smooth, whereas it is by reason that we apprehend the conclusions of demonstrations—such as the existence of the gods, as well as their foreknowledge.”²³ If we see many white tunics, flowers, and clouds, and if we feel many smooth chins, jars, and walls, we will naturally form the concepts (preconceptions) of “white” and “smooth.” By contrast, since the gods or God usually cannot be sensed directly, we must know them, or various conceptions of them, indirectly through reason by means of various arguments or demonstrations.

*Knowledge, grasp, opinion, and ignorance.*²⁴ The Stoics commonly declare that a wise man will not hold “mere opinions.” Why? Because thoughtless people opine. By contrast, sages possess knowledge.

A thoughtless man, for example, may see a coiled *thing* in a shadowy corner of his house and opine, “Ah, a snake!”²⁵ Not so a wise man. Instead, before assenting to the presentation that the coiled thing is a snake,—that is, before making the judgment that it is a snake rather than something else,—he will shine an oil lamp on it to determine what its real nature is. In doing so, he will see that it is a coiled rope rather than a snake. Even so, he may withhold assent for a moment while he further edges toward the object to get a better look and even pick it up and touch it with his own hands. And finally, giving his assent to the rope’s presentation that has reached his mind by means of both sight and touch, such a man will have knowledge.

“Knowledge,” the Stoics state, “is either a firm and direct apprehension or a habit that is, in the reception of presentations, unchangeable by argument.” Cicero similarly defines knowledge as “a sensation that is grasped in such a way that it cannot be torn away by reason or an argument.” In the case of

the rope, no argument, no matter how subtle, will dislodge the conclusion, “This is a rope,” from the mind once the rope has been clearly seen by the eyes and held and touched by the hands. The case similarly holds for less tangible realities or knowledge—say the existence of God.

Whereas knowledge is strong and sure, opinion “is weak and false assent” based on ignorance (the absence of knowledge), its source of weakness. Opinion, we are told, “shares attributes with what is false and what is unexamined.” It is saying, “That’s a snake!” before taking a closer look.

But what about that moment when the man first receives the presentation of the coiled thing before he has ascertained with full knowledge that it is a rope rather than a snake (or the other way around)? At that point he may grasp *a coiled thing*, realizing that it would be credible to judge it either a snake or a rope. Zeno counts such a “grasp” neither “correct nor incorrect but declares it to be only ‘credible’ or ‘believable.’”

Including all states of mind relative to real things, then, we have four. There is *opinion* founded on ignorance (“It’s a snake!”); there is a *grasp* (“It’s a coiled thing that may be a snake or rope or something else.”); there is *knowledge* (After verifying by means of sight and touch what it is, “It’s a rope.”); and, lastly, there is *ignorance*, which is simply the opposite of knowledge (for which one may say, “I don’t know what it is”—an entirely appropriate response in many cases).

The Stoic process of knowing. Now that we have thoroughly explored the human parts and powers of knowing, we are in a position to briefly summarize what the Stoics held about the process of knowing. So here goes.

The process begins at birth. Within the first seven years, and thanks to the scribal powers of sensation as well as memory, the easy-to-write-on paper sheet of the soul (more specifically, the leading part of the soul—the *hēgemonikon*) gets filled up with preconceptions, which are natural concepts that arise from seeing and otherwise sensing similar things again and again. Doubtlessly—though we are not told in the source material we have—these similar things

are labeled for the growing child: “Mommy,” “ball,” “white,” “rope,” “horse,” and so on. By seven or eight, then, the developing child knows many real things by means of these naturally occurring preconceptions—what a ball, horse, and mother are, the color white, the feel of something smooth, what something “coiled” is, and the difference between a rope and a snake.

About this time, the child goes off to school.²⁶ This—and even before, perhaps—is the beginning of a life-long instruction in and concern with concepts (those learned). Building on naturally formed preconceptions, the child is taught all manner of new concepts until the intellect matures around the age of fourteen.²⁷

At this point, the youth has all the tools necessary to know with wisdom and truth. He is ready to apply both preconceptions and conceptions, and all the methods he has learned regarding how one can know, to learning more about the world and living life well.

One night he is outside reclining beneath the stars. Sitting there, he considers many of the preconceptions he has learned over time. One is that of “star.” When he looked up into the night sky as a young boy, he saw countless similar objects night after night. At some point, even though he already had a preconception of them, they were all labeled “star” by his father. So it was also with “dark,” a preconception covering not only the night sky between the stars but the water deep in a well when he went to collect it or the rumbling clouds he observed during a succession of stormy days. So too with “light,” which was applied to the stars at night and the sun during the day, as well as the fire his mother would light for cooking and the oil lamps they would light just as the sun was setting. And so on, preconception after preconception. Sensation worked in conjunction with memory to form the acquaintance with or experience of a thing. The process resulted in these various naturally occurring preconceptions.

Sitting there in the dark, he also thinks of his schooling and all the concepts he has learned, things built upon the foundation of preconceptions. He

remembers Euclid's geometry and all its postulates and proofs. He recalls learning that the earth is round, as well as the whole cosmos. And peering into the sky, that the stars are fire. In fact, now that he is studying with the Stoics, he realizes that the stars are gods. And though he can hardly see the movement of the stars revolving in an orderly manner across the sky right at *this* moment, he knows they do, guided by the providential hand, as it were, of the gods—or God. He assents to the concept of providence thanks to various Stoic arguments, most moving from what is better known to something less clearly known, and finally from the ordered cosmos to the one or ones who order and go on ordering.

Whatever he knows, he knows thanks to real things external to himself. These real things give rise to presentations that reveal or *present* the real thing itself to the knower himself—the boy. The presentations impact his sense organs. His senses, in turn, performing their proper action or operation or function, communicate the information regarding the real thing to the leading part of his soul through or by means of his soul's substance, the breath or *pneuma* (even as air carries a vision of something seen or the sound of something heard to the viewer or hearer). It is at this point that he must either assent or withhold assent to the presentation's information that has entered his soul via sensation. Assuming assent, his leading part or intellect then converts the information into thoughts and things said or sayables. These, then, are communicated by means of the vocal organs (sent from his intellect or *hēgemonikon* to his vocal organs by the conduit of his soul's breath).

We see, then, that the process of knowing involves five things: the external object, the presentation, the senses and sensation, the breath or *pneuma*, and the leading part of the soul or the intellect.

Zeno, Cicero tells us, demonstrated what knowing or knowledge is like with a gesture:

Before another man, he would show his hand with the fingers outstretched and say, "A presentation is like this." Next, he would draw in his fingers a little and say, "An assent is like this." Then, he would press his fingers

closely together and make a fist, and say, "A grasp or comprehension is like this." And by this analogy, he introduced the name *katalēpsis* (grasp or comprehension), which was not used before. But then he would move his left hand to that fist in order to squeeze it tightly and with might. And he would say, "Such is knowledge," and that no one but a wise man was the master of knowledge.²⁸

Methods of knowing. Now that we've explored the general process of knowing, let's turn to look at a few of the methods the Stoics used to gain knowledge.

Logical inference. One such method was dialectic itself, which, recall, is the means by which a wise person methodically asks questions and gives answers. Part of this questioning and answering is the more technical form of logic consisting of various kinds of arguments presented in the form of syllogisms. These lines of reasoning proceed by inference from "what is better grasped" to "something less clearly grasped."²⁹

An example of an inferential argument is the Stoic argument demonstrating that the "cosmos is destructible or perishable, inasmuch as it is generated." Diogenes Laertius explains that the argument's conclusion "is based on the analogy of those things that are understood by the senses"—that is, things around us that are "better grasped." Given our ordinary experience of things, we observe that those things that are made up of perishable parts are perishable as a whole. Tree leaves fall brown to the ground; tree limbs dry up and snap in the wind; eaten by insects, trees as a whole eventually die. Taking this observation of ordinary things, we may conclude that "the cosmos [itself] is perishable" since its parts are perishable in that they "transform into one another."³⁰

Cicero offers another example of "logical inference." It is by means of logical inference, he says, that we arrive at the concept or "the notion of good." Again, we move from things we know well or directly to things we know less well or indirectly. "The mind ascends by inference," Cicero says, "from those things in accord with nature until finally it arrives at the notion of good."³¹ What are "those things in accord with

nature”? They are things such as strength, health, and beauty, as well as all the virtues. From these, we are able to form an idea or notion of good.³²

Truth from truth. With this movement toward truth by inference, we see that, as the Stoics put it, “a truth follows from a truth.” The truth of the perishing of something on a large scale follows from the truth of the perishing of something on a smaller scale. Or the truth of the general nature of the good follows from the truth of the good of something in accord with nature. Or, to offer the example given by Diogenes Laertius, “‘It is light’ follows from ‘It is day.’”³³

The power of concepts. Each of these simple statements involves conceptions or preconceptions that convey meaning. “It is light” brings to mind certain concepts—most notably the preconception of “light”—as does “It is day.” These concepts are significant for the Stoics methodologically because it is by them that real things are grasped. “Real things are grasped by means of conceptions.”³⁴

The sun with its light truly rolls across the sky in twelve hours, let’s say (though, of course, we know it is the earth that is actually revolving). This occurs again and again, the occurrence which is termed “day.” The term or concept “day,” then, conveys and so enables us to grasp this regular appearance of the sun with its light. The term or concept “night,” by contrast, signifies the absence of the sun and so the absence of light. Consequently, if it is light outside, then we can infer that it is day. Or if it is dark, night.

*The benefit of training in the logical part of philosophy, and the imperative to study.*³⁵ In writing to Antigonos, the king of Macedonia, Zeno of Citium acknowledges that learning is advantageous. “I welcome your love of learning,” he writes, “inasmuch as you hold to the truth that stretches out toward advantage and not to that popular kind of instruction that tends only to the corruption of morals.” The implication is that learning—studying, training—should be both intellectually and morally beneficial.

This intellectual and moral benefit, in short, is what Stoic training in the logical part is all about. It is not merely about becoming clever at argumentation, even though that occurs and is significant. Rather, it is

training oriented toward truth about the reality of things in order to live a good life (the opposite of “the corruption of morals”)—the advantage or benefit accruing to instruction.

Chrysippus, we learn, held that “we should no more use the power of reason or argumentation than we should the power of weapons for things that are not fitting.” How should the power of reason or argumentation,—which is to say, logic,—be used? It “should be employed in the discovery of truths,” he urged, “and for relating [truths] together—not for the contrary, though many do it.”

The goal in training, then, is truth for the sake of moral advantage. This advantage is the overall Stoic goal in pursuing philosophy, and particularly logic.

But how exactly does training in logic benefit those of us who train? The first advantage is that we will not be thrown in life. “Without the study of dialectic,” we’re told, “the wise man cannot guard himself in argument so that, as in a wrestling match, he will never be thrown.”³⁶ The wise man in the midst of argumentation—or let’s say those of us who wish to be wise—is here compared to a wrestler in a wrestling match. If a wrestler’s training with weights and so on helps him not to be thrown in a match, then study or training in dialectic or logic furnishes the wise man with the ability not to be thrown in argumentation, and surely in the whole of life as well, since all of life is related to thinking well. How is it that the wise man is not thrown? Diogenes Laertius explains: “The study of dialectic enables him to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and to judge well between what is plausible and what is ambiguously expressed, . . . [and to] methodically ask [well thought-out] questions and give [truthful] answers.”³⁷ In the context of argumentation and life, falsehood, ambiguity, and a lack of method in asking and answering questions are liable to defeat us. So it is that in wrestling with reality, the study of dialectic or logic helps us not to be outmaneuvered and thrown.

Cicero makes a similar case for the Stoic position regarding training in dialectic. According to the Stoics, this study

offers a method that guards us against giving assent to any falsehood or ever being tricked by deceptive probability. And it enables us to maintain and to defend the truths that we have learned about good and bad things. They hold that without the art of dialectic any man may be tricked and led away from what is true or actual toward what is false or deceptive.

In Cicero's *Academica*, Lucullus argues that ethical practice and the wisdom it is based on demands "our ability to perceive and grasp many things."

Significantly, the Stoics believe in the need to train relative to the reception of presentations. The reason for this training is straightforward: the way we receive and make judgments based on presentations—really the whole process of knowing—has a *real* or *actual* impact on what happens in our lives and consequently in the lives of those around us. Here's how Diogenes Laertius puts it: "Overhastiness in judgment affects the actual course of events, so that those who are untrained in presentations fall into disorder and a lack of purpose." To state it positively, the man who is trained in the reception of presentations will not draw false conclusions or make hasty judgments or decisions. Accordingly, his life will be ordered and have purpose since he knows what he is about and what he is doing. Such a man, the Stoics believe, is able both to argue and converse well, discussing subjects proposed by others and readily answering questions. "There is no other way," they judge, "that a wise man may show himself to be sharp, ready-witted, and generally skillful in argumentation."

Lastly, and more related to the modern conception of logic, the Stoics hold that "the study of syllogisms is very useful." With such a study, we come to know "what is demonstrative or what offers proof" relative to any question or inquiry. This in turn "contributes a good deal to the correction of judgments or opinions." When we know what may or may not be demonstrated, we know what we may or may not assent to. For instance, is it possible to demonstrate that a "coiled thing" in a shadowy corner of a room is a snake? If not, is it necessary to assent to fear? Put another way, is it necessary to allow fear to take the lead in making the

following kind of argument or demonstration?—"There's a coiled thing in the corner; it must be a snake!" (The answer, of course, is no, it isn't necessary.) Finally, the "arrangement and retention in memory" of various syllogistic forms will "give a scientific character to our comprehension of things."

For all these reasons, the Stoics preach the imperative to study. The early Stoics themselves were paragons of this study. Reports have it that Zeno was "very energetic in his approach to philosophy." His "inclination was toward searching and inquiry." Similarly, after Cleanthes approached Zeno, he "intensely studied philosophy" with him. Finally, we're told that "when someone reproached" Chrysippus "for not going with the multitude to hear" a popular speaker, his reply was, "If I had followed the multitude, I would not have studied philosophy."

As for how we should study, the simple answer is by listening and with humility and deliberate choice. Diogenes Laertius reports a conversation Zeno had with a young man who was "talking nonsense"—that is, he was making false conclusions and judgments. "The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth," Zeno quipped, "is so that we may listen more and talk less." To the Cynic philosopher Crates, his former teacher, Zeno remonstrated, "The right way to seize a philosopher is by the ears." Zeno went so far as to alter Hesiod's poetry to read, "Best of all is that man who is won over by good advice," rather than as it originally went, "Best of all is that man who thinks about everything himself."³⁸ As for humility, Zeno judged that "there is nothing as fatal as supposition or self-conceit if we want to master the sciences." Lastly, deliberate choice. In his letter to King Antigonus, Zeno acknowledges that the very act of turning toward philosophy and "away from well-known pleasure" indicates not only one's nature but one's "deliberate choice." The implication is that all of us must make the well-considered choice to study philosophy and pursue the good life, studying "the truth that stretches out toward advantage."

Zeus the deliverer. Positively speaking, Stoic logic or knowing is aimed at the benefit that knowledge renders us. Negatively put, we wish to escape

ignorance, that which is the opposite of knowledge, that which proves harmful time and again. Fortunately, we have Zeus (or God) to turn to in our endeavor—or so hold the Stoics.

According to the Stoics, we should turn to him—to God, the great actor in the cosmos—for deliverance from our own ignorance.³⁹ If indeed we are ignorant, we may admit that we “neither see the universal law of God, nor do [we] hear it.” And with other humans, we may pray, “Zeus, giver of all, shrouded in dark clouds, ruler of the thunderbolt, deliver [us] human

beings from mournful ignorance, scatter it from [our] souls.”⁴⁰

If we docilely approach Zeus (or God) in this way—Zeus who is, according to the Stoics, the reason or *logos* within the cosmos, the divine mind (capital M), as we will see—then we will learn to reason well, and we will come to know the nature of the cosmos and our relation to it and so how best to live.

So now, having made the prayer for the enlightenment of reason, we move on to the nature of things, to natural philosophy.

So ends this item. See you in **another reading or item** from the Cave.

NOTES

¹ For more on happiness being the end or goal of life, see the Cave’s forthcoming *Happiness: What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Happiness*.

² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.40.

³ The Greek word *logos* is a rich word that signifies anything from “word,” “speech,” and “story,” on the one hand, to “reason,” “account,” and “inward thought,” on the other.

⁴ For “*Dialectic*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.15, 42, 62, 180; Cicero, *On Ends* 3.72, and Cicero *Academica* 1.35, 42, and 2.66. Compare the definition of dialectic given by Sextus Empiricus: “The Stoics declare that dialectic is the knowledge of things true and things false and things neither” (*Against the Ethicists* 1.187).

⁵ For “*Definition*,” see Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.147; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.42, 60–62; Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* 8.7.

⁶ For “*Canons and criteria*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.42.

⁷ For “*Rhetoric*,” see *ibid.*, 7.42.

⁸ For “*The human parts or powers of knowing—the soul and its parts*,” see *ibid.*, 7.156, 157, 159. Eusebius of Caesarea similarly tells us that Zeno labeled the soul “an exhalation with sensation” (*Preparation for the Gospel* 15.18). In his *Meditations* (5.33), the late Stoic Marcus Aurelius says the soul is “an exhalation from blood.” Contrary to other Greek philosophers who hold that the soul is an incorporeal reality, the Stoics judge that both the soul and body are corporeal. See also Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.102 and *Against the Logicians* 1.39.

⁹ *Hēgemonikon* (a form of *hēgemonikos*) is related to the Greek *hēgemōn*, “one who leads; a leader, commander, chief, sovereign; a guide,” the source of the English “hegemony” and “hegemonic.”

¹⁰ For “*Presentations*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.45–46, 50–51, 61, 158. Cicero reports that “a ‘presentation’ . . . was, as Zeno defined it, an appearance impressed and formed from the thing from which it originated, with a constitution or nature that it could not have if it originated from a thing that was not the one it actually did originate from” (Cicero, *Academica* 2.18). See also Cicero, *Academica* 1.41, 2.77; Aetius 4.12; Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* 1.228, 230–231.

As for the translation “presentation” of the term *phantasia*, the classics scholar R.D. Hicks noted nearly a century ago (1925) that “the [Greek] word *phantasia* . . . is a technical term in Stoic logic for which no one English equivalent is as yet unanimously adopted.” After parenthetically observing the word’s basic significance as “appearance” or “appearing,” Hicks went on to suggest that *phantasia* “denotes the immediate datum of consciousness or experience, whether presented to sense or in certain cases the mind. Hence,” he concluded, “‘presentation’ is nearer than ‘perception’ or ‘impression.’” It seems today that the matter of what term or “English equivalent” to adopt for *phantasia* is still not settled among scholars since some give “impression” rather than “presentation,” or occasionally they use both interchangeably. Along with R.D. Hicks and others, the Cave will use “presentation” so that the reader will be clear what is behind the word when it is encountered.

¹¹ For each term, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.45, 50; Sextus Empiricus, *Against Logicians* 1.228, 230; and Aetius 4.12.

¹² Zeno of Citium says that a presentation is impressed “from a real thing—just as the thing is” (Cicero, *Academica* 2.77). Aetius

clarifies that a presentation “makes plain what made it” (4.12). More exactly, it is the presentation-caused “modification that occurs in the soul” that “makes plain” real things.

¹³ Scholars oftentimes call these “cataleptic impressions” or “cataleptic presentations,” the word “cataleptic” derived from the Greek *katalēptikos*, which refers to the “direct apprehension” or “grasping” or “comprehension” of an object.

¹⁴ Cicero identifies air as “our partner” in sensation, that is, the medium through which sights, sounds, and smells pass. See note 87 below.

¹⁵ For “Senses and sensation,” see Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.37; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.52; Aetius 4.21; Cicero, *Academica* 1.40. For the five sense organs, see Aetius 4.21; for the eyes and ears, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.157-158.

¹⁶ Origen’s point seems, however, to contradict the observation (above) that presentations may be directly grasped by the intellect. For more on the intellect, see “*The use of reason versus sensation in concept formation*” below.

¹⁷ The fifth is air, which carries the presentation from the real thing or object to the person sensing the real thing.

¹⁸ Keep in mind that, according to the Stoics, “We hear when the air between the sonant body and the organ of hearing suffers concussion, a vibration that spreads spherically and then forms waves and strikes upon the ears, just as the water in a reservoir forms wavy circles when a stone is thrown into it” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.158). Elsewhere we learn that “air itself sees with us and hears with us and speaks with us—for none of these functions can be performed without air” (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.83).

¹⁹ Recall, the soul itself, the soul’s substance, is a “warm breath” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.157); it “is a nature capable of sensation” (ibid., 7.1.156). Notice the parallel between the air that exists between the sense object and the senses and the breath-current or *pneuma* that exists between the senses and the *hēgemonikon*. Interestingly, the Stoic understanding of *pneuma* seems to parallel the ancient Indian or Hindu understanding of *prana*. See, for instance, the discussion of *prana* in Swami Vivekananda, *Raja-Yoga* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1982).

²⁰ For “Preconceptions and conceptions or concepts,” see Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* 8.7; Aetius 4.11; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.54.

²¹ The Greek term (*empeiria* or *empeiros*) means that one is experienced with a thing and thus comes to be acquainted with it. For example, in sensing milk and summer clouds and cotton, one comes to be acquainted with white things. Note the empirical (from experience, *empeiria*, or experienced or experience-based, *empeiros*) basis and thus nature of concepts.

²² Regarding the other ways we arrive at concepts, Diogenes Laertius explains: “We think about things related to those things near at hand by means of resemblance—as when we think of Socrates from a statue of Socrates. We think about things by means of analogy in terms of increasing the size of the thing, as with the giant Tityus and the Cyclops, and in terms of decreasing its size, as with the pygmy. In this way, the center of the earth is thought about analogously in terms of smaller spheres. An example of transposition is when we think about a man having eyes on his chest. We think about things such as a centaur, a half-man and half-horse creature, by means of combination. And things such as death by means of opposition. Moreover, by means of a kind of transition, we think about some things such as place and the meaning of words. Some conceptions such as justice and goodness come by means of nature. And some by means of deprivation, such as the man without hands” (*Lives* 7.52-53).

²³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.52.

²⁴ For “Knowledge, grasp, opinion, and ignorance,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.47, and Cicero, *Academica* 1.41, 42. Sextus Empiricus defines knowledge in similar terms: “Knowledge is a firm and certain direct apprehension unalterable by argument” (*Against Logicians* 1.151).

²⁵ Though the example of the rope and the snake hails from Indian Advaita Vedanta (non-dual philosophy), it works perfectly well here. And it is apropos given the likely mutual influence of Greek and Indian philosophy. See Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002).

²⁶ Incidentally, the Stoics judge that “the ordinary or general Greek education is useful” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.129). For more on Greek education, see Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁷ This, of course, does not mean that Stoics believe a fourteen year-old knows everything or will no longer develop. It seems only to mean that the intellect has come into its final state of development.

²⁸ Cicero, *Academica* 2.145.

²⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.45.

³⁰ For the argument, see ibid., 7.141. At the most basic level, this is true of the four elements (fire, air, water, earth) from which everything else arises in the cosmos and to which everything returns. These elements are constantly undergoing transformation,

one into another and back again. For more, see the next section, “Stoic Natural Philosophy or Physics.”

³¹ For the argument, see Cicero, *On Ends* 3.33.

³² Strictly speaking, according to the Stoics, the virtues are the only true goods in the list. That said, strength and the rest are counted as things that are in accord with nature, and so they are in some sense, however imperfect, goods. For an extended discussion, see “Virtue and vice” and “The good, the bad, and the indifferent” in “Stoic Ethics.”

³³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.81.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.42.

³⁵ For “The benefit of training in the logical part of philosophy, and the imperative to study,” see Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1037b; Cicero, *On Ends* 3.72 and *Academica* 2.23; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.3, 8, 15, 23-25, 45, 48, 168, 182.

³⁶ The “wrestling match” is not literally mentioned; however, it is strongly implied by the Greek *aptōtos*, which, in reference to a wrestler, means “never thrown.”

³⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.47.

³⁸ See Hesiod, *Works and Days* 293-295. To read Hesiod’s epic poems, see the Cave’s *The Best of Hesiod’s Theogony & Works and Days*.

³⁹ The Greek “Zeus” is related to the Proto-Indo-European *deiwos* or **dewos* (sky), the source of the Latin *deus*, meaning “god” or “God.” Consequently, in a sense, to turn to Zeus is to turn to god or God, just as to turn to Allah (which comes from the Arabic meaning “the god” or “the God”) is to turn to god or God. The Greek *theos* (god or God), by contrast, does not hail from the same source. See Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 189.

⁴⁰ Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus* 24, 31-33.

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