

The Early Stoics

Introduction Part 5 – The Big Themes & Ideas of the Early Stoics & Stoicism Stoic Ethics

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave's mission?** Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"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

The Classics Cave • www.theclassicscave.com

Thanks for supporting The Classics Cave.
Please visit and support our sponsors.

This introduction comes from the Cave's
The Best of the Early Stoics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Early Stoics.

Introduction Part 5

The Big Themes & Ideas of the Early Stoics & Stoicism Stoic Ethics

ETHICS. WE HAVE come now to the goal of Stoic philosophy, that for which everything else is studied—everything in the logical part and everything in the portion dealing with natural philosophy.

For the Stoics, the whole of philosophy aims at living well. As such, it is not a dry, academic affair, separated from our day to day life. Nor is it merely about satisfying our curiosity. On the contrary, it is, as Zeno encouragingly writes to the Macedonian king Antigonus, a matter of gaining some advantage: "I welcome your love of learning inasmuch as you hold to the truth that stretches out toward advantage"—that

is, the truth that aims at ethical benefit, excellence of life, virtue. Logic is pursued *for* natural philosophy and ethics. And natural philosophy is explored *for* logic and ethics. But ethics is studied and practiced for itself alone—though surely goodness leads to greater knowledge and wisdom.

We see what the Stoics require and what the Stoic goal is in Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*. The hymn acknowledges that people "neither see the universal law of God, nor do they hear it." If people did see and hear it, the hymn goes on, and "if they wisely obeyed it," then "they would have a noble life."

What, then, is required? First, we must learn to see and hear. Second, we must come to know the object of this seeing and hearing, the universal law of God, which is the mind and reason of God pervading the cosmos. Finally, we must obey this law. If we do so, we will have a noble life—or so the Stoics promise. This “noble life” is the goal of the whole philosophical endeavor from logic to physics to ethics.

But what more can be said about the Stoic understanding of the end or goal of life?

*The end or goal (telos) of life.*¹ Writing to Zeno of Citium, Antigonus of Macedonia acknowledged that Zeno had in his long life attained “perfect happiness.” Diogenes of Laertius concurred: “Zeno surpassed everyone . . . in bliss.” The Athenians recognized he was a remarkable man, “a good man,” they observed—so much so that they passed a decree memorializing his service to the city in terms of his devotion to philosophy, his teaching, and the pattern of life he offered others. He exhorted the Athenians “to virtue,” the decree announced, “directing them to what is most excellent.”

In these fragmentary appraisals of Zeno’s life, we detect the “noble life” the Stoics live for. In its essence, it has to do with being good, with living excellently or virtuously, and so with being happy, since happiness is, for the Stoics, the same as a good, virtuous life.

But let’s back up. The end or goal of life for the Stoics is a triune unity, we might say, one goal made up of three ongoing acts. Put simply, the one goal is happiness. Epictetus, a much later Stoic, expresses it this way: “God made all human beings to be happy.” If the one goal is happiness, the three ongoing acts are, one, to live in harmony with nature; two, to live in conformity with reason (to live a rational life); and, three, to live in accord with virtue.

It’s important to understand that these three—life in accord with nature, reason, and virtue—are not merely the means to the end of happiness as if happiness were a separate goal. Rather, to live in such a manner is simultaneously *to be* happy and to flourish as a human being. To live naturally, therefore, is to be happy. To live rationally is to be happy. To live

virtuously is to be happy.

Here’s how Diogenes Laertius expresses the goal in the *Lives*:

Our individual natures are portions of the whole of nature, which is to say the whole cosmos. This is why the goal of life is to live in conformity with nature—that is, with our own nature as well as with the nature of the whole cosmos. Accordingly, one holds back from every action forbidden by the law common to all things—that is to say, the right reason that pervades all things and is the same as Zeus, who leads the administration of every existing thing. This very thing is the virtue of the happy man and the good flow of life, when all actions promote the harmony of the divine power dwelling in each man with the will of the administrator of the whole cosmos.

*The addition and role of impulse (hormē).*² The Stoics maintain that nature provides for the preservation and thriving of each kind of being in the hierarchy of nature in distinct though not unrelated ways. At bottom, plants are given the powers of nourishment and growth. “Fixed by their roots in the earth,” we read, plants are “nourished by means of their own roots,” thereby growing and flourishing.³ Therefore, the “general rule of nature” for plants is to go along with the regulation of nature by gaining nourishment and growing.

In addition to the powers of nourishment and growth, animals are given sensation, motion, and impulse or appetency. As for the latter, impulse (*hormē*) is that which sets an animal in motion, urging it on toward something. Without impulse, an animal would always rest inert like a stone rather than starting out for or beginning anything. Impulse is appetite, the eager desire an animal has for a thing. But toward what do animals naturally have an impulse? What is it that animals eagerly desire?

Epicureans judge that pleasure is the answer—that animals, including humans, naturally and first of all desire pleasure. In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus declares, “We recognize that pleasure is our first good, present at birth, and that it is the beginning point of every choice and avoidance.” As proof that pleasure is

what humans and other animals naturally desire, he points “to the fact that living things, as soon as they are born, are quite satisfied with pleasure, whereas they are naturally upset with pain—and this without rational reflection.”

The Stoics disagree. “The Stoics declare false the assertion—made by some—that the first urge or impulse of animals is directed toward pleasure.” Rather, for them pleasure is merely a “byproduct that never comes until nature by itself has sought and taken those things suitable to the animal’s constitution.” As we’ll see in a moment, the latter part—“things suitable to the animal’s constitution”—is a significant part of the Stoic understanding of impulse.

For the Stoics, the first impulse of every animal “is to self-preservation.” Generally speaking, this impulse causes an animal to seek what is beneficial and healthy and to reject what is harmful and unhealthy. This is so because “nature endears the animal to itself from the beginning,” making it “so that it is near and dear to itself.” In the words of Marcus Cato in Cicero’s *On Ends*,

a living being feels an attachment to itself from the very moment it is born. . . . From this moment on, it feels an impulse to preserve itself and to feel affection for its own constitution and for those things that tend to preserve that constitution. By contrast, it feels an aversion for destruction and for those things that appear to bring destruction.

Beyond the assertion, however, the Stoics offer proof in the form of babies or infants. Babies are not born immediately seeking out pleasure and dodging pain, they observe. Rather, as soon as they are born, they “desire healthy things and reject the opposite.” What are these things? As for mammalian infants, they desire nourishment in the form of milk, protection-ensuring affection in the form of touch, various forms of care (changing wet or dirty clothes, for instance), and ongoing restoration and growth in the form of sleep. Babies desire these, the Stoics say, even “before they have experienced pleasure or pain.”⁴

Epicureans, to be sure, counter that babies cry out

for food, touch, care, and sleep precisely because they want the pleasure of these and to avoid the pain of not having them. Not so, the Stoics reply. The substance of what a baby wants is not the pleasure that may happen to result from gaining nourishment and so on, but the nourishment itself and all the other things that contribute to the baby’s self-preservation. In fact, hunger is nature’s warning system given to alert the baby to its need for sustenance. When the baby notices hunger, it is in some manner aware that *something* must be done. Consequently, it whimpers or cries. This hunger and crying out is impulse in action on behalf of the baby’s integral being. The imperative desire is not, “Feed me! I want to avoid pain and experience pleasure,” but “Feed me! I’m aware my body needs something to sustain itself!” So it is that the mother draws near, and the baby “is led by nature without any instruction to seek the teats of its mother’s breasts in order to satisfy itself with their abundance.”

The Stoics note evidence for the impulse toward self-preservation in other ways. One example has to do with animals seeking out their natural environment. A duck, for instance, even though it has been hatched and reared by a hen, will “leave its hen mother” and settle in “water, its natural home” whenever it has the opportunity to do so. Why? Because “the instinctual guard of self-preservation that nature has planted into animals” is so powerful. In the case of the duck, the instinct drives it to live where it is naturally and best able to move and sustain itself.

Another example is the fact that animals, including human beings, wish to preserve their bodies healthy and whole, limbs and all. Marcus Cato states that “there is no one who, given the choice, would not prefer to have all the parts of his body sound and whole, rather than maimed or distorted although equally serviceable.”

Finally, there is the impulse toward self-preservation that is revealed in the fact that animals naturally yearn to “secure the perpetual preservation of their kind.” We are told that there is an “extraordinary longing, in both males and females, to join their bodies together” toward the end of procreation. Not only

that, but impulse continues beyond the act of procreation to the long-term love and care for offspring: “Observing the labor parents spend on bearing and rearing their young, we seem to be listening to the voice of nature itself. . . . It is apparent that we are driven by nature itself to love those whom we have begotten.”

With the latter—the perpetuation of ourselves through others and the natural love and affection that occurs for our offspring—we should briefly note that the Stoic understanding of self-preservation very much stresses the tie between ourselves and others. This is particularly true for social animals, including human beings. For the Stoics, it is “important to understand that nature creates in parents a love and affection for their children. This love and affection is the source to which we trace the origin of the association of humankind in communities.” So parental affection is the foundation of other human associations. “We are by nature equipped to form marital unions, assemblies, and cities or states.” We read the same point in the later Stoic writer Hierocles the Stoic, who wrote the *Elements of Ethics* and *On Appropriate Acts* sometime prior to 150 AD. Therein, Hierocles writes about our natural duty in terms of ourselves, our relatives, our fellow citizens, and our fellow humans, that is, the “entire race of human beings.”⁵

To conclude, impulse is nature’s primary means of control or direction. By means of impulse, “nature has made the animal so that it is near and dear to itself. As such, it pushes away all that is harmful and pulls near all that is suitable and fitting.”

For most animals, this “pushes away all that is harmful” and “pulls near all that is suitable and fitting” happens naturally. Consequently, “nature’s rule for animals is to follow the direction of impulse.” But what about humans? Do we simply follow impulse as other animals do? The short answer is both yes *and* no—but mostly no. Though we humans survive by impulse alone, we do not (always) flourish. For that we need something more.

*The addition and role of reason.*⁶ The Stoics insist that humans are called to a life of reason. “For those beings we call rational”—in this case human

beings—“the rational life correctly became the natural life when reason was given to them by means of a more perfect rule.” What is the role of reason relative to that of impulse? “Reason was added to shape impulse as a skilled craftsman.”

The point is fundamental. According to the Stoics, we humans are different from other animals in that we are rational. Significantly, this means we not only have impulse to guide us in the life-long activity of self-preservation. Rather, we also have a powerful tool or capacity—reason—that can and should help to direct and thus benefit us.

But the capacity of reason raises an important point. If impulse can be skillfully crafted or directed by reason, then there are multiple directions humans can go in any activity or pursuit. Not so with non-rational animals. Take squirrels, for instance. Squirrels go about surviving—self-preserving—in very ordinary, squirrel-like ways. By impulse they live in and under the cover of trees to get away from predators such as hawks swooping down from the sky. By impulse they forage for nuts and other edibles. By contrast, and thanks to reason, humans have many options. And so we see the various human solutions for these same ends (safety and nutrition) expressed in distinct building techniques and architectural styles, defensive measures, food gathering and production methods, culinary arts, and the like.

What’s the significance? For the Stoics, as we’ll see, this means we humans can be both wise or foolish, good or bad, virtuous or vicious, depending on how we use reason to shape impulse.

For now, let’s repeat again that, for human beings, the rational life *is* the natural life. To say it another way, it is unnatural for humans to live by impulse alone. Impulse shouts, “Survive!” Reason calmly adds, “Wisely.” Impulse gnaws, “Eat!” Reason steps in to advise, “Just enough.” Impulse urges, “Copulate!” Reason counsels, “With your spouse alone for the sake of children.” Impulse worries, “Supply yourself with what it takes to live!” Reason adjoins, “With whatever is just.”

Notice how each impulse is necessary to get humans moving toward survival. But unlike other

animals that respond to impulse in an instinctive manner that naturally leads them to what is best for them in terms of survival or self-preservation (including preservation of the species), we humans have the voice and power of reason that can lead us to the healthiest or best way to follow impulse rather than any way whatsoever. This best or excellent way is called virtue.

*Virtue and vice.*⁷ We have already seen that, for the Stoics, the end or goal of life is to live in accord with virtue. This is because “happiness consists in virtue,” which is to say that happiness *is* virtue.

What is virtue? For the Stoics, “virtue is in one sense the perfection of anything in general, say a statue.” As such, it is excellence—the very best or height of that thing’s being. In the case of human beings, virtue is “the fulfillment or perfection of a rational being *as* a rational being following nature.” Accordingly, virtue is tied up with reason and nature in that living in accord with virtue is the same as living in accord with reason and in harmony with nature. Where one is (nature, reason, or virtue), there are the others. Therefore, if we want to know the virtuous thing to do, we must know the rational thing to do; and if we want to know that, we must know the natural thing to do—natural, that is, for a *rational* being rather than for any other animal living by impulse alone. In line with reason and nature, virtue is the ongoing and “harmonious disposition” of the soul “that tends to make the whole of life harmonious.” Finally, virtue is chosen “for its own sake” rather than “from fear or hope or any external motive” such as the fear of getting caught or the hope of pleasure or some other benefit.⁸

Though the virtues are, according to the Stoics, the same for men and women, and though they are “inseparable from one another,”⁹ there are nevertheless various divisions among the virtues that are important to note. One division has to do with what each virtue is centered on. For instance, practical wisdom is concerned with “what is to be done,” whereas justice has to do with “the distribution of valuable things.” Another involves the distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual virtues. The latter virtues are simply the perfection or excellence of something not directly

related to the intellect, things such as health and strength. These virtues “do not require the mind’s assent.” By contrast, intellectual virtues are related to knowledge and so to the intellect. Take practical wisdom. It is the “knowledge of what one should do, and what one should not do, and neither” or the “knowledge of good things and bad things and of things that are neither.” Courage, moderation, and justice are other virtues that involve knowledge—knowledge, respectively, of what is fearful, of what is to be chosen and avoided, and of proper distribution. Finally, the most important division is that between primary and secondary or subordinate virtues, a division that was taken over from earlier Greek philosophers. Primary virtues include practical wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice. Subordinate virtues follow on primary virtues. For example, good counsel and understanding follow on practical wisdom, just as good order and propriety do on moderation.

Vice is the opposite of virtue. Whereas virtue is knowledge, vice is ignorance. “The vices are ignorance of those things of which the virtues are the knowledge.” So it is that vice is ignorance about what to do, what to choose, what to fear, the proper distribution, and so on. More, vice offers assent to something when no assent should be given. Primary vices are folly, cowardice, immoderation, and injustice. Secondary or subordinate vices include bad counsel, slow-mindedness, and a lack of self-control.

For the Stoics, there is no ground or space between vice and virtue in terms of happiness. Rather, those of us who are on the way to virtue are miserable until we are wholly virtuous.

For just as a drowning man who is so close to the surface of the water that at any moment he might come up into the air is no more able to breathe than if he were actually at the bottom already, . . . similarly a man that has made some progress toward the state of virtue is no less in misery than the one who has made no progress at all.

Further, there are no degrees of virtue or vice. “The Stoics declare that just as a stick must be either straight or crooked, so a man must be either just or

unjust. Neither are their degrees of justice and injustice. The same is the case for the other virtues.” If a man is moderate, then he is moderate; if a woman is wise, then she is wise. The same goes for immoderation and foolishness. Following this, we learn that “all failures or sins are equal.”

For if one truth is not more true than another truth, then neither is one falsehood more false than another falsehood. In the same way, one deception is not more deceptive than another deception, nor is one failure or sin more of a failure or more sinful than another failure or sin. For the man who is one hundred stadia from Canopus and the man who is only one stadium away are equally not in Canopus. In this way, the man who commits the greater and the one who commits the smaller sin are equally behaving incorrectly.

Even though we have either wholly arrived at virtue or not, the Stoics nevertheless hold that virtue can be taught. In his letter to the Macedonian king Antigonos, Zeno writes, “If any man with a nature such as yours receives a reasonable amount of training, in terms of ungrudging instruction, he will easily reach perfect virtue.” This is evident from the fact that base men really *do* become good. That virtue is possible is clear thanks to the examples of real men who were actually virtuous—men such as Socrates, the Cynics Antisthenes of Athens and Diogenes of Sinope, and Zeno of Citium himself, who lived in accord with virtue, treading “a path to the stars.”

Unfortunately, if virtue can be gained through teaching and training, then it can also be lost—or so thought Chrysippus, who observed that virtue “can be lost through drunkenness and melancholy.” Cleanthes, by contrast, held that virtue cannot be lost. Regardless, we must try to learn about virtue, train to be excellent, and make the attempt to maintain a virtuous life. It is our duty as rational humans following nature to do so.

*Duty or what is fitting.*¹⁰ The early Stoic Archedemus declared that the goal of life is “to live while carrying out every duty, that is, whatever is appropriate.” If we compare this to what else has been

said about the end or goal of life, then we see that doing our duty or whatever is appropriate is related to living in harmony with nature and in conformity with reason.

In fact, we are told that duty “is a fitting action or activity in relation to nature’s arrangements.” As for reason, duty is “that which, when done, may be supported by a reasonable account.” Reason is that which determines what is fitting or not and, accordingly, chooses to do such things.

Some things are duties in all circumstances, whereas others depend on the circumstances. Thus, we see that duty or what is fitting is not an absolute but something that involves deliberation or the use of reason.

*The good, the bad, and the indifferent.*¹¹ “Of existing things,” Diogenes Laertius reports, “the Stoics declare that some are good, some are bad, and some are neither.” The latter are “things indifferent.”

Generally speaking, the good is that which is beneficial. The good both produces happiness and makes it complete insofar as it *is* happiness itself or a portion of it. The good is in step with nature and reason. More exactly, the good is virtue itself (the various virtues) and those things that participate in virtue, such as “excellent men” and virtue’s “accompanying by-products, joy and merriment and like things.” Virtue is good in that it is, as we have noted, “the fulfillment or perfection of a rational being *as* a rational being following nature.”¹² The good may be related to the soul or to external things (such as having an excellent friend) or neither. Otherwise, the good may either be an end or a means to an end. A virtuous friend who teaches and models virtue, helping us to be virtuous, serves as a good means (an example of virtue) to a good end (virtue). The good is both noble and beautiful—for a truly beautiful and noble thing *is* a good thing. Good things are all choiceworthy and equal. Lastly, as with virtue, the good does not admit of degrees. Either something is good or it is not.

Opposed to the good is the bad, which is harmful. The bad is vice or those things that participate in vice. Otherwise, we may extend the opposite of what we have said about the good to the bad.

The indifferent—things that are neither good nor bad—requires some discussion, though. Indifferent things may be categorized variously. First, something is indifferent if it excites neither desire or impulse nor aversion or disgust, things such as the number of blades of grass in a lawn. Second, something is indifferent if it contributes neither to happiness nor to unhappiness, things, according to the Stoics, such as reputation or bodily strength. This category includes everything but for the virtues or the vices since these alone contribute to happiness or unhappiness. Things that do no more benefit than harm are also indifferent. For the Stoics, money or wealth is such a thing. While money may benefit us in getting what we want, it may also be the cause of harm if someone robs or sues us because of it. Finally, there are those indifferent things that can be used well and badly. Again, money may be used to benefit or harm ourselves or others.

The Stoics further subdivide those indifferent things that neither contribute to happiness nor to unhappiness. Some, they teach, are chosen and some are not. “Regarding [these kind of] indifferent things, they say that some are preferred and some are not preferred—that is, they are rejected.” We know the difference between the two categories thanks to what the Stoics term “value.” “Those things that have value are preferred, while those that do not have value are rejected.” Valuable things are those that exist in accord with nature; they are able to contribute to a harmonious life. In other words, they are a means to an end (a contribution to) rather than the end itself such as the good is. And yet even these means to an end may be further divided into those that are preferred for their own sake (such as natural ability or intelligence), those that are preferred for the sake of something else (such as money or a noble birth), and those that are preferred both for their own sake and for the sake of something else (such as strength or good eyesight).

*The turning or perversion of the rational soul.*¹³ We have already learned that the Stoics hold that the cosmos is arranged in the best possible manner. In line with this “best,” they hold that the initial impulses or “the

starting-points offered by nature are incapable of turning aside or perversion.” Said another way, nature leads well.

It follows, then, that we should expect to find actual human beings that are all virtuous as they rationally shape impulse and so live in accord with nature, reason, and virtue. But this is not what we find. Rather, we find that many, if not most, humans are far from virtuous. Wise or virtuous people are very few—if they exist at all. So what’s going on? What has gone wrong? What’s wrong with us humans?

Before looking for an answer from the human perspective, we need to rise up to a cosmic perspective. There we see that in some manner perfection includes imperfection. As the *Hymn to Zeus* declares, Zeus has “joined together all noble things with things ignoble, so that there is one everlasting principle in all things.” And for Zeus, “what is unpleasant is pleasant.”

In a similar though somewhat different way, the second-century Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, who practiced Stoicism, notes in his journal of meditations, *To Himself*, how certain (apparent) imperfections in natural things are attractive and give rise to pleasure:

We should observe that even the things that follow from the things that are produced according to nature contain something pleasing and attractive. For instance, when bread is baked, some parts are split at the surface, and these parts that are open in this way and have a certain appearance contrary to the purpose of the baker’s art, are beautiful in a way, and in a certain way excite a desire to eat. And again, figs, when they are quite ripe, gape open. And in ripe olives the very circumstances of their being near to rottenness adds a peculiar beauty to the fruit. And the ears of wheat bending down, and the lion’s eyebrows, and the foam that flows from the mouth of wild boars, and many other things—though they are far from being beautiful, if a man should examine them individually, still, because they follow things that are formed by nature, they help to adorn them and please the mind.

With this in mind, we turn to certain apparent imperfections in the (natural) cosmos. For one,

there is the eventual exhaustion of fuel that will lead to the ultimate destruction of the cosmos in the great conflagration. The very perishability of the cosmos implies a certain imperfection.¹⁴ Otherwise, we are told that there is a “tendency toward certain maladies in the body, such as the buildup of mucus and diarrhea.” Similarly, we learn that just as there are the aforementioned tendencies in the body, “so with the soul there is a tendency to” various maladies such as “enviousness, pitifulness, and quarrelsomeness.” And so, explaining the Stoic view, Diogenes Laertius states, “Just as we say that there are certain bodily illnesses or infirmities, for example, gout and arthritic disorders, so also are there soul illnesses, such as love of reputation and love of pleasure, and similar things.”

We learned before that health is a non-intellectual virtue, one that does not require assent. By analogy, we can say that disease or unhealth is a non-intellectual vice. Disease is a naturally occurring imperfection that ultimately leads to the decline and destruction of the human body. Similarly, vices (unhealth of the soul) occur naturally. But why? The short answer, we may lament, is that the Stoics never quite get around to answering the question—at least in the sources we have. Still, we can tease out an answer having to do with reason.

“The wise man does everything well,” we read, “in the same way that we say Ismenias plays everything well on the flute.” The question: how is it that Ismenias plays everything so well? Was he born playing well? On the contrary, we must presume that Ismenias was taught how to play the flute. And that he trained hard, putting in hours and hours of practice before he was able to play everything well. Similarly, the wise man was not born wise. Instead, thanks to the gifts of nature, he was born with the components or faculties necessary to be wise and do everything well. But these—most importantly, the capacity of reason—had to be formed, educated, and exercised.

Consider that reason was given to humans to shape impulse well. What this means is that impulse in some sense actually requires shaping. This

apparently is not the case with animals. Lions naturally eat antelopes. They copulate according to nature, at certain times and under certain conditions. And they rest beneath the shade of a tree. Humans are similar in that we have similar natural impulses to eat, reproduce, find shelter, and so on. But in contrast with animals such as lions, our impulses require shaping whereas theirs do not.

The first point, then, is that human impulses—however natural and non-turning-aside they are—require shaping. The second point has to do with reason itself. When we humans are born, reason itself requires formation or training. Recall: we become virtuous by means of teaching and training. Therefore, without such teaching and training—without such formation, education, and exercise—we will not be virtuous, which is to say, we will not live in accord with reason and thus naturally. Consequently, we will live in accord with something less than reason or knowledge—something the Stoics term opinion (*doxa*). Hence, rather than rationally and skillfully shaping impulse, we will muddle along under the influence of opinion, which is little better than blindness.

This is the source of the problem for us human beings—the source of the “turning” or “perversion” of the rational soul. “From falsehood or error,” we read, “there arises a distortion or perversion, which extends throughout the intellect.” And, “when a rational being is turned aside or perverted, this is due to the persuasiveness of external pursuits or sometimes to the influence of acquaintances.” The *Hymn to Zeus* similarly comments that nothing on earth takes place apart from Zeus, nothing “but what is done by bad men in their own folly” — “folly” being the same as the turning, distortion, or perversion in the intellect.

So natural impulse is not the problem. The problem is a lack of teaching and formation, as well as too little training of the intellect and reason, which results in folly. Things go well when we humans form and educate one another; things go poorly when we don’t. “And from this distortion”—the perversion arising from falsehood or error—“grow

many passions or emotions, which are responsible for much confusion and instability.”¹⁵

*The passions (bad and good).*¹⁶ A passion, according to the Stoics, is a judgment or decision. A bad passion is unnatural and irrational in the sense that it is “disobedient to reason.” (Bad passions include grief or pain of mind, fear, desire, and pleasure, with subordinate bad passions related to these.) Paradoxically, even though a bad passion is “disobedient to reason,” it is in fact reason itself in the act of judging or deciding. As we have noted, the problem is found in the fact that reason judges based on opinion rather than knowledge. Thanks to this opinion-based judgment, a bad passion is “a motion or excessive impulse of the soul that is contrary to reason or nature.” Where impulse requires the skillful shaping of reason for it to serve as a beneficial guide to action, reason fails to deliver. By contrast, a good passion is a sensible or reasonable elation of the soul. Put another way, a good passion is an impulse that has been skillfully shaped by reason. As such, it is a knowledge-based judgment. (Good passions include joy, caution, and willing, with subordinate good passions related to these.)

Let’s look at an example, that of the good passion of “willing,” defined as “reasonable appetite,” versus the bad passion of “desire,” which is “an appetite that is contrary to reason.” Imagine we are at a feast. If, while eating from the plenty that is available, we shape the impulse of hunger (that moves us toward nourishment and thus survival) with the help of reason (the knowledge, for instance, that “moderation in all things” is best), we’ll eat just enough to satisfy the requirements of nourishment and perhaps a little more since the meal is, after all, a feast or celebration. In such a case, we’ll be moderate relative to the situation. Such a response to hunger illustrates the good passion of willing (again, “reasonable appetite”). By contrast, if we do not skillfully shape the impulse of hunger in the presence of platters full of food, we’ll likely give in to impulse and eat immoderately, falsely judging according to opinion (the view that more is better, that excess food is more satisfying in terms of

pleasure, which we mistakenly judge as something good; or the view that more or the most pleasure is better than some or a little pleasure). This illustrates the bad passion of “desire” (again, “an appetite that is contrary to reason”).

*The right judgment imperative.*¹⁷ From this one example, we see that it is absolutely imperative for humans to judge well when faced with various impulses. Again, it is not that these impulses are bad in themselves. Hunger is good insofar as it urges us on to eat in order to gain nourishment to survive and thrive. The impulse toward sex is also good for the reproduction of ourselves and the species, and for the intimacy and relationship building it entails. And so on with every other impulse.¹⁸ But each of these natural impulses must be directed by reason informed with knowledge rather than reason perverted by opinion. Therefore, it is imperative that human beings are formed and educated from an early age, that human reason is trained and exercised to judge well. If we humans are able to reason well, and so, presumably, to judge well, then we will have the power to live well. And so we will, as it were, be able to play the flute well like Ismenias.

This is why the Stoics put so much stock in philosophy. It is philosophy, beginning with logic, that trains the intellect to reason well. As said at the beginning, this training and exercise of the intellect is ultimately oriented to ethics, toward living well, toward living wisely (rationally with knowledge) and being happy.

Let’s finish this topic, then, with the Stoic observation that “wise men are genuinely earnest for and attentive to their own improvement.” And with that, let’s move with the Stoics toward the goal of life.

*Stoic happiness.*¹⁹ We have already noted that the one goal of Stoic philosophy is happiness—though, keep in mind that the one goal is expressed in three ongoing acts (acts in accord with nature, reason, and, most importantly, virtue). As the late Stoic Epictetus expressed the goal, “God made all human beings to be happy.”

What makes for happiness? According to both Zeno and Chrysippus, “virtue is sufficient in itself

for happiness” —that is, virtue does not require anything in addition to itself for happiness. Again, “happiness consists in virtue, which is the state of the soul that tends to make the whole of life harmonious.”

Zeno, we are told, lived accordingly, making “it his practice to place all the constituents of the happy life in virtue alone.” From this point alone we know that Zeno made it his practice to live in conformity with reason and so in harmony with nature. In this he was wise and, we may assume, a happy man.²⁰

The wise man. The Stoics usually did not make a practice of identifying wise human beings—those such as Socrates or Zeno of Citium.²¹ Rather, as

though portraying an ideal, they settled for detailing the nature of those who would be wise *if* such a wise man truly existed.

What are the wise like? What do they do? Most importantly, the wise live by reason so that natural impulse is skillfully shaped in all they do. Consequently, “the wise man is without passion.”²² So it is that the wise are truly free rather than slaves. Most importantly, the wise are happy: “Inasmuch . . . as the final good is to live in agreement and harmony with nature, it necessarily follows that all wise men at all times enjoy a happy, perfect, and fortunate life, free from all hindrance, interference, or want.”²³

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

NOTES

¹ For “*The end or goal (telos) of life*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.7, 10-11, 28, 88; Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.2.

² For “*The addition and role of impulse (hormē)*,” see Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.82-83, 128; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.85-86, 129, 137; Cicero, *On Ends* 3.16, 17, 62-63.

³ Some Stoics held that a plant’s or tree’s *hēgemonikon* or leading part was located in the roots. See Cicero: “As for trees and plants that spring up from the earth, people suspect that the leading part is in their roots” (*On the Nature of the Gods* 2.29).

⁴ Though the four examples do not literally appear in the text, they, or something very much like them, are clearly what the Stoics have in mind. We know this given the parameters of the first desires “for healthy things” that appear “immediately upon birth.” They are the desires that any baby has.

⁵ See Hierocles the Stoic: “*Elements of Ethics*,” *Fragments, and Excerpts*, trans. David Konstan, 91.

⁶ For “*The addition and role of reason*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.86. Although the Stoics counted the gods and other divine beings rational, the section refers to humans alone. Other animals—giraffes, apes, mice, and dogs, for instance—were not judged rational (contrary to what many believe today).

⁷ For “*Virtue and vice*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 8, 29, 89-91, 94, 120, 126-127; Cicero, *On Ends* 3.34, 48; Johannes Stobaeus, *Anthology* 2.5. For a list of primary and secondary or subordinate virtues and vices, see “The Virtues & Vices” in “Other Matters of Interest Related to the Early Stoics.” To learn more about what the ancient Greeks thought and said about *aretē*, see the Cave’s *Aretē: Excellence or Virtue*.

⁸ This in contrast to Epicurus who declares, “We choose the virtues for the sake of pleasure and not on their own account, even as we take medicine for the sake of health” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.138), or “While it is hard enough for a wrongdoer [the man who commits vice] to avoid getting caught, it is impossible for him to maintain confidence that he will remain uncaught” (*Vatican Sayings* 7). To understand Epicurus’ position in greater detail, read the Cave’s *The Best of Epicurus: The Life, Writings & Teachings of Epicurus the Greek Philosopher*.

⁹ Cleanthes wrote a book, now lost, *On the Notion That Virtue Is the Same for Men and Women* (see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.125). Much later, the Stoic Musonius Rufus also explored the sameness of the virtues for men and women. In his lectures, he declares that “a desire for virtue and an affinity for it belong by nature not only to men but also to women.” Further, he observes that “it is obvious that there is not one type of virtue for a man and another for a woman.” He goes on to suggest that “daughters should get the same education as sons.” See *Musonius Rufus: Lectures and Sayings*, trans. Cynthia King, ed. William B. Irvine (CreateSpace, 2011), 28, 31. For the mutual involvement of the virtues, see Johannes Stobaeus, *Anthology* 2.5 and Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.125-126. Finally, in the *Lives* we learn that Chrysippus and other Stoics taught that “the man who has one virtue has them all inasmuch as the virtues have common principles” (7.125).

¹⁰ For “*Duty or what is fitting*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.88, 107-108.

¹¹ For “*The good, the bad, and the indifferent*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.94, 102. For a chart of the good, the bad, and the

indifferent, see “The Good, the Bad & the Indifferent” in “Other Matters Related to the Early Stoics.”

¹² The Stoic Diogenes defines the good as “that which is by nature perfect.” See Cicero, *On Ends* 3.33.

¹³ For “*The turning or perversion of the rational soul*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.89, 110, 115, 125; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* or *To Himself* 3.2.

¹⁴ Of course the point may be debated. What looks like an imperfection in the form of perishability or destruction, may simply reveal sustainability, in that a new cosmos always comes from the old.

¹⁵ Such a teaching, of course, flies in the face of what many of our contemporaries believe. For them, the natural equals whatever we happen to desire. Thus, to follow our desires or passions is natural—or, to put it into Stoic terms, to follow our impulses is natural. In response to the question why we contemporaries behave as we do, we respond, “It’s just my nature or it’s just my character.” The Stoics would respond (echoing a much later Spaniard), “No, it’s your lack of character”—which is to say, we lack a proper formation in virtue.

¹⁶ For “*The passions (bad and good)*,” see Johannes Stobaeus, *Anthology* 2.10; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.110-111. For more on the passions, see “The Passions” in “Other Matters of Interest Related to the Early Stoics.”

¹⁷ For “*The right judgment imperative*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.118.

¹⁸ Such as the natural impulse toward self-defense (which may lead to irrational anger or wrath) or the acquisition of property (which may lead to irrational envy or jealousy).

¹⁹ For “*Stoic happiness*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.89, 127; Cicero, *Academica* 1.35. For more on Stoic and other ancient Greek views on happiness, see the Cave’s forthcoming *Happiness: What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Happiness*.

²⁰ For wise men being happy, see Cicero, *On Ends* 3.26. “We may assume” only because, as pointed out in the next section, “The Stoics usually did not make a practice of identifying wise human beings.” See also Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.133.

²¹ Recognizing the wisdom of Socrates and Zeno, the late Stoic teacher Epictetus advises, “Whenever you are about to meet with someone, particularly if he is one of those who are judged ‘outstanding,’ ask yourself, ‘What would Socrates or Zeno do in this situation?’ In doing so, rather than being at a loss, you’ll know the best thing to do with whatever happens” (*Handbook* 33.12). To benefit more from the *Handbook* of Epictetus, pick up the Cave’s forthcoming *The Handbook of Epictetus: Pocket Edition*.

²² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.117. That is, he is without the “bad” passions rather than the “good.”

²³ Cicero, *On Ends* 3.26.

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You’ll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave’s mission?** Let’s talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

“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

The Classics Cave ▪ www.theclassicscave.com



THE CLASSICS CAVE
The earliest light for a brighter life
www.theclassicscave.com

