

Stoic Definitions Without Forms

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In Plato's early dialogues, Socrates asks "what is X?"-questions.¹ He is looking for the form that makes each X an X.² Presumably, there is one right answer to a "what is X?"-question, *one* definition for any one X. In middle and late dialogues, forms become Forms, separate and intelligible entities. In Aristotle, Forms become essences, understood as the "what it was for X to be an X."³

The Stoics reject forms, Forms, and essences for metaphysical reasons. For them, everything is what it is through the particular way in which the active principle individuates it as a part of the universe. The universe is a whole with parts. These parts are kinds of parts—palm trees, wolves, people—but not by having natures or essences or anything of that sort.⁴ Here, I don't want to ask whether a theory that distinguishes between kinds of things without ascribing natures to them can work. Rather, I want to stipulate that such a theory is the Stoics' ambition, and focus on the next step: how the Stoics conceive of definitions.

For the Stoics, I argue, a definition of X is a component of a theory of X that spells out some dimension of the concept X, to the effect that acquaintance with a definition improves one's ability to apply the concept to items in the world. Concepts enable us to identify items as what they are. The more refined our concepts are, the better we are at not mistaking, say, a wolf for a monster. The theory of definition thus addresses a fundamental way in which falsity enters our thinking: through the misapplication of concepts.⁵

The Stoics tend to offer a number of definitions of the same thing, and my proposal aims to account for this multiplicity. At times individual Stoics disagree with each other. But often, several Stoic definitions are not in competition with each other. This non-dissensual multiplicity comes in (at least) two guises. First, definitions disclose, articulate, refine, and enrich our

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² In the *Euthyphro*, Plato already uses the vocabulary that becomes central to his metaphysics in later dialogues. Socrates seeks the *eidōs* and the *mia idea* of X, and the *paradeigma* by which to recognize each X as X (5d, 6d, 6e).

³ For commentary on this phrase, cf. Frede and Patzig (1988).

⁴ On Stoic physics, cf. Bobzien (1998), Brunschwig (2003), de Harven (2015), Marmodoro (2017), Salles (2018), Vogt (2018) and (forthcoming).

⁵ This does *not* mean, as this is sometimes put, that the Stoics "replace" the Forms with concepts. Cf. Aetius 1.10.5 = LS 30B for the claim that according to the Stoics the "Ideas" are our own concepts. The Stoics are, as Caston (1999) puts this, eliminativists about the Forms.

conceptual repertoire, and this can be done at different levels of technicality. For example, multiple definitions of particular virtues such as courage and clemency, but also of technical notions in logic, for example, of predicates, display different degrees of technicality.⁶ Second, for any number of X's, X plays a role in the world that can and should be studied from the points of view of several disciplines or their subfields. For example, multiple definitions of virtue are formulated in Stoic psychology, epistemology, ethics, etc. These definitions are not competition. They are reflective of the way in which, for the Stoics, the philosophical disciplines interrelate.

Interpreters often approach the multitude of Stoic definitions by declaring one definition as canonical.⁷ This designation captures that, at times, one of several definitions appears to be the outcome of an effort of refinement and precisification. But it does not appreciate the philosophical underpinnings of the multiplicity of definitions. In Stoic philosophy, a multitude of definitions is a feature, not a bug. My reconstruction, I submit, has the great advantage of genuinely embracing that there are no forms, Forms, or essences in Stoic philosophy. On other ways of telling the story, it seems that the Stoics seek the one definition of what X is while denying that there is such a thing as what X is.⁸ That is an unattractive and unstable position, as if they were unhappy Platonists. The Stoics as I present them are fully aware of the implications of their own physics and ontology.⁹

A reconstruction of how the Stoics conceive of definitions must begin from their theory of preconceptions (section 1). Stoic definitions remind us of the truths that preconceptions supply and refine them (section 2). Stoic definitions are real definitions, neither concerned with universals nor with states of minds, but with how things are (section 3). They contribute to the discovery of the truth (section 4) and belong to a cluster of tools all of which are geared toward making us better at correctly applying concepts (section 5). In making this proposal, I argue, the Stoics develop ideas from Plato's *Meno* and *Theaetetus* (sections 6 and 7).

1. Preconceptions and Reason

The Stoic account of definition takes its starting point in the theory of how human beings acquire reason, namely by acquiring so-called preconceptions. When an infant encounters the world, her mind is receptive of sensory input:¹⁰

⁶ On courage, cf. Cicero, *Tusculan Disp.* 4.53 (= LS 32H); on clemency, cf. Seneca, *De Clementia* 2.3.1-2; on predicates, cf. DL 7.64.

⁷ Cf. the literature on kataleptic impressions, see n. 34 below. A notable exception is Striker (1996).

⁸ Crivelli (2010) briefly notes that an interpretation according to which Stoic definitions capture essences would be incompatible with their practice of offering several definitions of the same thing (p. 408).

⁹ My proposals are roughly in agreement with my (2008), close in spirit to Sedley (1985), and indebted to Gourinat (2000, 46-58), Bronowski (2007) and (2013), Crivelli (2010), Brittain (2005), and Caston (1999).

¹⁰ Cf. Bronowski (2007) and (2013). Dyson (2009) emphasizes the difference to Epicurean theory and traces connections to Platonic recollection.

T1 When a man is born, the Stoics say, he has the commanding-part of his soul like a sheet of paper ready for writing upon. On this he inscribes each one of his conceptions. The first method of inscription is through the senses. For by perceiving something, e.g., white, they have a memory of it when it has departed. And when many memories of a similar kind have occurred, we then say we have experience. Some concepts arise naturally in the aforesaid ways and undesignedly, others through our own instruction and attention. The latter are called conceptions (*ennoia*) only, the former are called preconceptions (*prolêpseis*) as well. Reason, for which we are called rational, is said to be completed from our preconceptions during our first seven years. (Aetius 4.11.1-4 = LS 39E, tr. LS with changes)

Cumulatively, and with the help of memory and experience, sensory impacts supply the person with *prolêpseis*, traditionally translated as “preconceptions.”¹¹ Literally, a *prolêpsis* is the mind’s preparation for grasping. Proto-concepts, as we may also translate “*prolêpseis*,” are a kind of concept(ion). They prepare us for grasping, insofar as they enable us to refer, for example, to a dog as a dog. The acquisition of preconceptions is natural, and for that reason preconceptions are criteria of truth (DL 7.54). The process described in T1 guarantees truth in the following sense: the preconception DOG, for example, can be appealed to as a criterion by which to accept and reject views about dogs. If someone were to suggest, for example, that a dog is a plant, we can reject this suggestion based on the *prolêpsis* DOG. Insofar as preconceptions enable us to ask questions, and to reject or otherwise assess candidate replies, they pave the way to more sophisticated notions.

Just as *prolêpsis* can be rendered preconception or proto-concept, *ennoia* can be translated as “conception” or “concept.” In each case, the former translation is traditional, and for this reason I adhere to it.¹² “Conception” signals that there is cognitive activity by the individual cognizer: a conception is something one forms in one’s mind. This captures an important dimension of Stoic theory. A’s *ennoia* of X can differ from B’s *ennoia* of X, for example, because B is an expert in the relevant field. But the translation “conception” is also potentially misleading. A’s and B’s *ennoia* of X are not their own “takes” on X. Rather, the expert’s “thought”—the way she conceives of something and cognitively represents it—is a more refined, enriched, etc., version of the non-expert’s *ennoia*.¹³ Any *ennoia* of X, whether it is more or less sophisticated, develops the preconception of X.¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. Frede (1994).

¹² Some interpreters take it that “conceptions” are in the mind, while “concepts” aren’t (cf. Bronowski 2013, p. 280).

¹³ Cf. “expert thought” (*technikê noêsis*) in DL 7.51.

¹⁴ It is conceivable that the Stoics engage with Plato’s *Parmenides* 132a where the thought is entertained that each of the Forms simply is a *noêma*. The text leading up to 132a discusses two problems. (i) If a Form is like a canvas stretched out over particulars, each particular is covered only by part of the *eidos*. (ii) If we consider the Tall and all tall things, we need a further, higher *eidos* of tallness, thereby running into an iterative account. Socrates says that if an *eidos* was just a *noêma*, we could preserve its unity.

Some reports talk about both kinds of concept(ion)s conjointly, for example, explaining both *prolēpsis* and *ennoia* in terms of imprinting and storage:

T2 Conception is a kind of impression, and impression is a printing in the soul... They [the Stoics] define conceptions as a kind of stored thoughts, and memories as permanent and static printings. (Plutarch, *On common conceptions* 1084f-1085a = LS 39F)

This broad notion of concepts is employed in a list of modes by which we acquire concepts: confrontation with sensory objects, similarity, magnification, diminution, transposition, combination, oppositions, transition, and privation; and some notions, in particular value notions, are acquired naturally (DL 7.53 = LS 39D).¹⁵ These modes seem to be operative already in the acquisition of preconceptions; for example, the natural acquisition of evaluative preconceptions happens in early infancy.¹⁶ Acquiring reason involves, finally, that we come to employ concepts related to inference, such as “following” (SE M 8.275-6 = LS 53T).

2. Defining Definition

Preconceptions supply us with truths. But they are not pieces of knowledge. Before we have definitions, we are prone to make mistakes in how we apply concepts (Epictetus, *Diss.* 2.17, 5-9). To improve our ability to apply concepts correctly, we need to do two things: we need to become explicitly aware of what our preconceptions say, and we need to refine and enrich our preconceptions, working toward a more sophisticated conceptual repertoire. Definitions help us in both respects, *reminding* us of the core of our preconceptions and *refining* our conceptual tools. Here are two Stoic definitions of definition (*horos*):

T3 And a definition, as Antipater says in the first book of *On Definitions*, is an account formulated analytically and fittingly, or, as Chrysippus says in *On Definitions*, the rendering of a peculiarity. (7.60, tr. Crivelli 2010)¹⁷

Alexander of Aphrodisias elucidates Antipater’s proposal and says that those who hold it take it to amount to the same as Chrysippus’s proposal:

¹⁵ In discussing concepts, my focus is on their psychological and epistemic roles. Insofar as my discussion involves ontological assumptions, my views are indebted to Sedley (1983), Brunschwig (1988), Frede (1994), Caston (1999), Brittain (2005), and Cameron (2015). I take it that concepts are impressions of some sort and thereby corporeal states of the soul; as such, they exist.

¹⁶ This is captured in a key component of Stoic ethics, so-called *oikeiōsis* theory, according to which infants first of all “appropriate” their own hands and eyes and so on, perceiving them as their own, seeing them as valuable, and acquiring pro-attitudes toward benefit as well as attitudes of aversion against harm to them.

¹⁷ ὅρος δέ ἐστιν, ὡς φησιν Ἀντίπατρος ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ Περὶ ὄρων, λόγος κατ’ ἀνάλυσιν ἀπαρτιζόντως ἐκφερόμενος ἢ, ὡς Χρῦσιππος ἐν τῷ Περὶ ὄρων, ἰδίου ἀπόδοσις.

T4 But those who say that a definition is an account formulated analytically and fittingly, calling ‘analysis’ the unfolding of what is defined, namely of the heading, ‘fittingly’ the lack of excess and defect, would say that a definition does not differ in any way at all from the rendering of a peculiarity. (*in Top.* 42, 20–43, 8, tr. Crivelli 2010)¹⁸

We may call Antipater’s proposal the Articulation View. A definition is formulated analytically, the thought goes, if it “unfolds”—expands, develops—the definiendum. That it is “fitting” means that there is no excess or defect. If we have a definition, we won’t apply a concept to too many or to too few items.

We may call Chrysippus’s proposal the Idion View. “*Idion*” is a technical term in Stoic physics. Every part of the world—every grain of sand, bird, tree, animal, human being—is individuated by its *idion*, its peculiarity. However, it is unlikely that Chrysippus uses the term in its technical sense here. Definitions are not of individuals; one does not define *this* grain of sand, for example.¹⁹ Moreover, if Chrysippus were to talk about the *idion* of an individual such as this grain of sand, he would have to talk about “the” peculiarity of something. Instead, however, he says that definitions name “a” peculiarity. Chrysippus’s proposal, I take it, says that a definition puts forward something that is special or distinctive—*idion*—of that which is defined.

According to T4, those who hold the Articulation View also hold the Idion View and claim that a definition in the former sense doesn’t differ from one in the latter sense. In other words, a brief definition picks out a distinctive feature, and longer definitions do more by way of developing this feature. For example, a brief definition that picks out the *idion* of the good may remind us of what our preconception already contains: “the good is benefit.” If we think further about this, we need a more precise version: “the good is benefit or not other than benefit.” This can be articulated further, for we can further specify how to think of benefit, and so on (M 11.21-24).²⁰

Definitions are, as I shall put this, reminders and refiners. Short definitions are especially good reminders:

T5 [according to the Stoics, a definition (ὄρος)] “is that which by a brief reminder brings us to a conception of the things underlying words” (Galen, *Medical definitions* 199.348,17-349,4 = LS 32D; cf. SE, PH 2.212).

Definitions make occurrent what is otherwise in the background of our minds. They thereby spell out for us what our conceptions say. This effect can be achieved by any number of definitions of

¹⁸ οἱ δὲ λέγοντες ὄρον εἶναι λόγον κατὰ ἀνάλυσιν ἀπαρτιζόντως ἐκφερόμενον ‘ἀνάλυσιν’ μὲν λέγοντες τὴν ἐξάπλωσιν τοῦ ὀριστοῦ καὶ κεφαλαιώδους, ‘ἀπαρτιζόντως’ δὲ τὸ μήτε ὑπερβάλλειν μήτε ἐνδεῖν οὐδὲν ἂν λέγοιεν τὸν ὄρον διαφέρειν τῆς τοῦ ἰδίου ἀποδόσεως.

¹⁹ Here I agree with Brittain (2005, 187) and Crivelli (2010). Crivelli argues that Chrysippus must use the term in an Aristotelian sense. On the view that the Stoics use their technical notion of *idion*, cf. LS (1987), Vol.1, 194.

²⁰ Cf. Gourinat (2000, pp. 48-9) on the language of articulation in Epictetus.

the same thing. For example, Cicero offers a list of Stoic definitions of courage, and rather than take issue with this multiplicity, praises it for the very reason that we need these kinds of prompts:

T6 “However much we attack this school, as Carneades used to, I’m afraid that they may be the only real philosophers. For which of those definitions [the Stoic definitions of courage] does not uncover the tangled conception of courage which lies buried in us all?” (*Tusculan Disp.* 4.53 = LS 32H).

A similar point is made in Seneca’s *De Clementia* 2.3.1-2. Seneca offers a list of definitions of clemency, without any implication to the effect that only one of them gets things right. On the contrary, the multiplicity of definitions seems to count as a compelling feature of Stoic theory.

3. What Definitions Define

On my reconstruction, Chrysippus’s *Idion* View does *not* invite the question of how something’s *idion* relates to what others call its form, Form, or essence. The thought isn’t that there is, after all, something like the form or Form or essence, but because the Stoics don’t want to call it that, they call it *idion*. There is a more ordinary use of *idion*, where we call something distinctive or characteristic of X, without thereby postulating that there is such a thing as “what X is.”

This dimension of Stoic philosophy—that the Stoics do not *rethink* forms, but *eliminate* them—is difficult to fully appreciate, given predominant traditions in ancient (and later) philosophy. It is well-established that the Stoics reject Platonic Forms. The extent to which the Stoics are acquainted with Aristotle’s philosophy is disputed. In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 2.219, Sextus Empiricus seems to assume that there are only two types of view on genera and species: either they are impressions (*phantasiai*) or they subsist on their own.²¹ Presumably, Sextus takes himself to refer to the Stoics’ and Plato’s positions. He assumes that, if he argues against both options, he exhausts the range of relevant proposals. It is conceivable, then, that the Stoics share this outlook. In this case, to say that they reject essences is an overstatement. Aristotle’s view—which I invoke by talk about essences—may not be part of the philosophical “map” as Hellenistic philosophers conceive of it.

The Stoics’ rejection of Platonic Forms, however, can count as a rejection of a *type* of view, the type of view that thinks about kinds of things by asking what it is that makes a given particular an instance of X—a wolf a wolf, say. This departure runs deep. For the Stoics, there are no final or formal causes which make a wolf a wolf.²² Rather, a wolf is a part of the universe, to be analyzed in a framework of part-whole relations, and an individual unified by a certain way in which the active principle pervades it.²³

²¹ I am grateful to Justin Vlasits for mentioning this feature of Sextus’s discussion to me.

²² Cf. Vogt (2018).

²³ Cf. Marmodoro (2017) on blending and part-whole relations in Stoic philosophy.

And yet, commentators who analyze the Stoic account of definition often speak of “essences,” albeit at times in scare quotes.²⁴ Relatedly, commentators speak of universals, again, as if our vocabulary otherwise fails us in reconstructing Stoic theory. They may signal that this is not quite on target by writing, for example, “universals or generic features of reality,” proceeding, then, as if it made no difference whether we speak of the former or the latter.²⁵ Alas, it does make a difference.²⁶

The preconception DOG comes about by repeatedly seeing dogs, hearing people talk about dogs, and so on. It contains generalities, such as that dogs have four legs, live alongside humans, and so on. But none of this adds up to a universal.²⁷ Indeed, the Stoics think that so-called generics, general claims about X, are not grammatically well-formed sentences. The impression that dogs have four legs is neither true nor false, because no *axioma* corresponds to it.²⁸ For the impression to have a truth-apt linguistic-conceptual correlate (a complete *lekton*, called *axioma*), it would need to be made more precise, say, “most dogs have four legs.”²⁹

We may take it, mistakenly, that our concept DOG has a well-defined intentional object. But such intentional objects, which the Stoics call *ennoēmata*, are figments of the mind; they are mere quasi-somethings.³⁰ By way of contrasting this with Aristotelian views, Simplicius says that for the Stoics universals are “not-somethings” (*outi*).³¹ For the Stoics, corporeals and incorporeals are something (*ti*). To say that universals are not-somethings is to say that they are *not even* the kind of something that incorporeals are. For example, the universal “wolf” does not have the ontological status of the void, which is incorporeal and nevertheless “something.” It also doesn’t even have the ontological status that a monster has, as something we refer to in stories. The

²⁴ Brittain (2005) speaks throughout of ‘essence’, once qualified as follows: “‘essence’ (or at least necessary properties)” (p. 191).

²⁵ Bronowski (2013), p. 255.

²⁶ Bailey (2014) too speaks of universals; however, his approach as a whole is not entirely clear, since he conflates what, for the Stoics, is corporeal and what is material.

²⁷ A passage that tends to be cited as if the Stoics talked about universals does no such thing. It belongs to a report about components of speech: “A common noun (*prosēgoria*), according to Diogenes, is a part of speech that signifies a common quality, like “man,” “horse.” A proper name is a part of speech that indicates a quality particular to an individual, like “Diogenes,” “Socrates.” A verb...” (DL 7.58)

²⁸ This is also the most likely way in which the Stoics resolve a paradox that may seem to involve the universal “man”: If someone is in Athens, he is not in Megara. Now man is in Athens. Hence, man is not in Megara. For the Stoics, the second premise (“man is in Athens”) is neither true nor false. That is, it is not truth-apt in the way it would have to be for the conclusion to follow. Cf. Bobzien (2002).

²⁹ SE 7.246.

³⁰ Stobaeus 1.136,21-137,6 = LS 30A. Cf. DL 7.60-1. Bronowski (2013, p. 280) takes it that *ennoēmata* are the contents of *ennoia*. She calls the former concepts, and the latter conceptions.

³¹ Simplicius, *On Aristotle’s Categories* 105,8-16 = LS 30E.

universal “wolf” isn’t a proper object of thought. When it comes to definitions of species, the Stoics refrain from formulations that sound as if they stated what a universal is, say “man is...” Instead we should say “if something is a man, it is a rational animal” (SE M 8.8-11). This kind of conditional is compatible with there being a number of additional claims of the same form (“if something is a man, it is...”).

What, then, is it that definitions define? On the reading I propose, they don’t define the “what it is”—the Socratic form, Platonic Form, Aristotelian essence, or universals. At the same time, definitions do not merely articulate how we think of things. The Stoic turn to concepts is not a turn to conceptualism. As we saw, concept acquisition begins with the storing of perception and proprioception. Hence the “unfolding” of our concepts is the unearthing of *how the world told us that it is*. Definitions are real definitions, even though they are concerned with articulating our concepts.

4. The Epistemic Role of Definitions

Stoic definitions do not promise knowledge of the definiendum. They help discover the truth insofar as they help us avoid mistakes in the application of concepts. They do so by being components of theorizing about all “somethings,” about everything we can refer to, corporeals and incorporeals.

The Stoics offer multiple divisions of their disciplines—logic, ethics, physics—into subfields. One such division of logic distinguishes between the study of definitions and the study of criteria (DL 7.412).³² Criteria of truth and definitions do complementary work:

T7 They adopt the part concerning yardsticks and criteria for the sake of discovering truth: for here they adjust the differences between impressions. Similarly, they adopt also the definitional part for the sake of the discernment of truth: for things are grasped through concepts. (DL 7.41-2, tr. Crivelli with changes KMV)³³

Criteria, according to this report, are concerned with the differences between impressions. “Differences between impressions” is a catchphrase, indicating that the report addresses the best-known Stoic criterion of truth, the kataleptic impression. According to the Stoics, there is a kind of impression that reveals to the cognizer that *this* is how things are. These impressions are

³² There is also evidence that the study of definitions belongs to ethics (DL 7.199-200). As Crivelli (2010, 368) points out, this grouping was probably not done by Chrysippus. If anything, it seems reflective of the topics of some of Chrysippus’s works on definition, such as *Definitions of the Good*, *Definitions of the Bad*, and *Definitions of the Intermediate*.

³³ τὸ περὶ κανόνων καὶ κριτηρίων παραλαμβάνουσι πρὸς τὸ τὴν ἀλήθειαν εὐρεῖν· ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ τὰς τῶν φαντασιῶν διαφορὰς ἀπευθύνουσι. καὶ τὸ ὁρικὸν δὲ ὁμοίως πρὸς ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς ἀληθείας· διὰ γὰρ τῶν ἐννοιῶν τὰ πράγματα λαμβάνεται

“kataleptic”—firmly grasping—and thereby criteria of truth.³⁴ The skeptics dispute that there are kataleptic impressions. They raise the challenge that for *any* impression, there could be one that is highly similar and yet false. In effect, this controversy focuses on the question of whether we can discern similar impressions. This is one contribution that kataleptic impressions make to the discovery of the truth: they enable us to keep similar things apart.

Thus there are two ways in which things can go wrong: between impressions, if one is taken for the other, and between concepts and somethings, if the wrong concept is applied to something. Definitions are concerned with the way in which truth figures in the latter relation. They are tools for grasping things as they are. As such, they are vital for theorizing and teaching.³⁵

In characterizing preconceptions, I avoided a formulation that may seem natural, namely that by possessing a preconception we *know* such-and-such.³⁶ For example, it is tempting to say that by having the preconception WOLF, we know that a wolf is a predator, that wolves look a certain way, live in packs, and so on. The Stoics, however, do not actually speak of knowledge; talk about what we “know” by having preconceptions sets us on the wrong path. It implies that, by virtue of having acquired reason, we already have knowledge. On this picture, the task of definitions and theorizing would be to resurrect antecedent knowledge.³⁷

Admittedly, the “reminder” function of definitions has a resurrectorial dimension. According to the Stoics, typical human cognitive development involves the corruption of reason by living in cultures that get things wrong. Thus the truths that we gain by acquiring preconceptions can become muddled and non-occurrent, overshadowed by misleading thoughts. This is possible, however, precisely because these truths are not “possessed” as pieces of knowledge; if they were, they would be firm. Accordingly, correcting goes hand in hand with reminding and with refining the truths provided by preconceptions.³⁸

5. Definitions, Sketches, Divisions

Some Stoic divisions of the subfields of logic place definition in the study of vocal sound, between music and the study of divisions (DL 7.44) or between the studies of poetry and that of

³⁴ I refrain from flagging the various controversial dimensions of the Stoic theory of kataleptic impressions. Cf. Striker (1974), M. Frede (1983) and (1999), Annas (1990), Sedley (2002), Reed (2002), Perin (2005), Nawar (2014) and (2017), Shogry (2018), Vasiliou (forthcoming), Schwab (MS), Vogt (MS).

³⁵ Cf. Gourinat (2000). Sextus reports that according to the dogmatists, definitions are necessary either for comprehension or for instruction [ἢ γὰρ ὡς πρὸς κατάληψιν ἢ ὡς πρὸς διδασκαλίαν]. (PH 2. 205–6)

³⁶ Brittain says “That preconceptions amount to or immediately yield knowledge is clear from their criterial status” (2005): 179, n. 58. He takes it that corruption is *subtraction* from the *knowledge* that preconceptions supply.

³⁷ Cf. Brittain (2005): 181; cf. the fragments listed in SVF 3.228–36.

³⁸ Cf. Vogt (2008).

ambiguity (7.55-62).³⁹ Definitions, the thought seems to be, precisify the significations (*sêmainomena*) of linguistic signifiers (*sêmainonta*). DL 7.60-62 (= H 621) treats the following as an interrelated set of topics: definition, sketch (*hupographê*), kind (*genos*), concept(ion) (*ennoêma*), species (*eidos*), division (*dihairesis*), counter-division (*antidihairesis*), sub-division (*hupodihairesis*), classificatory division (*merismos*), and ambiguity (*amphibolia*).

The reported gloss on “sketch” is especially pertinent for present purposes. A “sketch” introduces some matter in an outline-like fashion. It is a definition broadly conceived, but one that performs its task in a simpler manner (7.60). As we saw, the two-fold task of a definition is to remind us of core premises that come with preconceptions, and to sharpen and advance our concepts. This progression—from preconception to, eventually, the concept an expert might have—is a gradual one. Accordingly, progressively fine-tuned and technical definitions have their place.

The set of interrelated notions in DL 7.60-62 suggests that definitions belong to a cluster of tools. Kind, species, division, counter-division, sub-division, and classificatory division all seem to figure in an effort at conceptual clarification and enrichment. A division, according to DL and following his examples, dissects a kind into its species. For example, “of living beings, some have reason and some don’t.” A counter-division invokes contradictories, for example, “Of that which is, some is good and some is not good.” A sub-division continues an earlier division, for example, “... and of what is not good, some is bad, and the other indifferent.” A classificatory division divides by appeal to topics, say, “of goods, some concern the soul and some the body.” We can see how definition and divisions of various kinds *work together*.

In Plato, the method of collection and division, including its appeal to genus and species, aims for a definition as its outcome. It is via division that we arrive at something’s definition. That method presupposes (or at least stipulates) that there is a what-it-is, a Form, or essence that a definition can capture.⁴⁰ But if there is no such thing, as the Stoics hold, then division and definition can cooperate, both doing similar things. In its own way, each illuminates and precisifies our grasp of what something is.

Now we see why, in Stoic philosophy, the pervasive presence of multiple definitions is a feature, not a bug. For definitions to do their job, they are aided by companion definitions. The work of “unfolding”—of precisifying and enriching—can be pushed further and further. This can be done within the same subfield. Earlier I mentioned multiple definitions of virtues such as courage and clemency, as well as Stoic definitions of predicates that display progressive technicality.⁴¹ Within

³⁹ Cf. Crivelli (2010) 368-370. Crivelli entertains the thought that Stoic stipulative definitions legislate how people should speak. But Chrysippus says that his revisionist definitions are not intended to make people change how they speak. People can continue to speak as they do, as long as they are conceptually clear about the subject matter. Cf. Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1048A (= LS 58H).

⁴⁰ Cf. Crivelli (2012).

⁴¹ See n. 6. According to DL 7.64, the Stoics define a predicate as “what is asserted of something, or a state of affairs attachable to something or some things, as Apollodorus says, or an incomplete sayable attachable to a nominative case for generating a proposition.” (tr. LS, 33G). I am grateful to Simon Shogry for discussion of this passage.

ethics, Stoic definitions of the end supply another example. Zeno defines the end as “living consistently”; according to Stobaeus, later Stoics offer further definitions, but not by way of disagreeing with Zeno. Rather, they are “articulating further” (προσδιαρθροῦντες) what the end is.⁴²

Another example from Stoic logic is almost as famous as the multiple Stoic *telos*-formulae: the definitions of the *axioma*, standardly translated as assertible. According to one definition, an assertible is “a complete state of affairs which, so far as itself is concerned, can be asserted” (DL 7.65; cf. SE PH 2.104).⁴³ According to another definition, an assertible is that by saying which we make a statement (DL 7.66), and according to yet another definition, an assertible is that which is true or false (DL 7. 65). Each of these definitions is a cornerstone of Stoic logic.⁴⁴

Accordingly, my account of Stoic definitions supports a line of interpretation that others have explicitly or tentatively defended in specific cases. It goes beyond these analyses by addressing non-dissensual multiplicity of definitions in general, rather than in particular instances. For the Stoics, non-dissensual multiplicity of definitions is a frequent feature of theorizing, reflective of the kind of tool that definitions are.

To be quite clear, my term “non-dissensual” picks out the absence of substantive disagreement. A philosopher who phrases a definition plausibly aims to articulate things well, better perhaps than one’s predecessors or better than one did in an earlier treatise (witness Chrysippus’ *many* writings). Non-dissensual multiplicity of definitions permits the mild disagreement of working toward fine-tuned formulations.

Non-dissensual multiplicity of definitions also permits working toward articulations that are suitable to particular contexts of theorizing. That is, the work of “unfolding” can also be done within several subfields. For example, virtue is defined as utility.⁴⁵ This proposal is explored in the subfield of ethics that today we call metaethics, where the Stoics defend their notion of goodness, and in the theory of concept acquisition.⁴⁶ Virtue is also defined as a consistent character, choiceworthy for its own sake and not from fear or hope or anything external; and as a

⁴² Ecl. 2.7, 6 a (76, 1-2 W). Crivelli (2010, 395) mentions this passage in his discussion of “articulating”: “... this presupposes that for the Stoics the process of articulation could lead from one definition to a further definition, more accurate or otherwise superior.” On my reading, definitions that are more fine-grained are not more accurate; they are more precise and richer, and thereby suitable for someone who is further along on the path from preconceptions to scientific concepts. A classic contribution on the Stoic *telos*-formulae is Striker (1996).

⁴³ Tr. LS 34A. Both Bobzien (2003) and Ierodiakonou (2006) treat this definition tentatively as primary, without however taking it to be in tension with other definitions.

⁴⁴ Cf. Bobzien (2003) and Vogt (2012, ch. 7).

⁴⁵ Aetius 1, Preface 2 (= LS 26A).

⁴⁶ Frede (2001), Inwood (2005), Vogt (2008).

soul which has been fashioned to achieve consistency in the whole of life.⁴⁷ These latter definitions are explored in the subfield of ethics that explores life in agreement with nature and its psychology. These and other definitions of virtue are complementary. By looking at virtue from the points of view of several subfields of ethics, psychology, epistemology, etc., the Stoics develop a rich and complex theory. Several definitions are integral to this project.

So far we noted two points of departure from Plato. First, for the Stoics definitions do not aim to capture forms, Forms, or essences. Second, for the Stoics division and definition are collaborative tools, rather than relating qua method and its aim. With respect to non-dissensual multiplicity, however, matters are more complicated. The Stoics may take it that Plato's dialogues provide a nuanced picture.⁴⁸

For example, scholars have long been puzzled by the *Sophist's* multiple accounts of sophistry. Indeed, the *Sophist* may count as the *locus classicus* for the observation that, if we end up with several accounts of X, then these accounts cannot all be definitions (though they, or several of them, might be true predications).⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the Stoics might argue that at times even Plato offers multiple definitions that are not in competition. Consider *Republic IV*, where Plato defines justice. Here are some of Socrates's proposals—whether these are, strictly speaking, definitions, can remain open here. Justice is doing one's own work (433a-b). Justice is the power that preserves and lets grow the other virtues (433b). Justice is the having and doing of one's own (433e). Justice is unity of the soul (443d). Justice is a natural relation of control in the soul (444d).

In between these proposals, Socrates says that if every part of the soul does its work, a person would not do any of the things which conventionally count as unjust, such as stealing, betraying friends, adultery, breaking an oath, and so on (442e-443b). From the point of view of Stoic method, Socrates makes an interesting move. He captures the intuition that Cephalus formulated at the very beginning of the *Republic*: a just person doesn't perform certain actions, like cheating, deceiving, and so on (331a-b). The Stoics might say that it is part of our preconception of justice that the just person does not do any of these things. Whatever theory of justice we put forward, it should capture this. Along these lines, they might argue that the proposals in 433a-444d jointly work to remind us of our preconception and to refine it—to build a theory that, while in many ways revisionist, develops our preconception of justice.

6. Stoic Resources in Plato's *Meno*

In spite of these resonances with *Republic IV*, the account of Stoic definition that I laid out so far is unfamiliar. Even scholars of Hellenistic philosophy tend to have grown up reading texts that, in one way or another, invoke essences and universals. To get clear about proposals that genuinely depart from this tradition requires not just that we turn to different texts. It requires some kind of

⁴⁷ DL 7.89 = LS 61A.

⁴⁸ I am grateful to David Bronstein for discussion of this question.

⁴⁹ Cf. Justin Vlasits (MS), Crivelli (2012).

antidote for the sense of unfamiliarity—some way of appropriating, as the Stoics would say, what at first seems alien. Along the lines of my reference to *Republic IV*, Plato can help provide this antidote.

In rejecting the idea that definitions capture Forms, the Stoics depart from Plato. But if my reading is compelling, the Stoics are also greatly indebted to Plato.⁵⁰ Zeno, the founder of Stoic philosophy, spent more than 20 years in the Academy. We have good evidence for the fact that he and his Academic contemporaries engage closely with a number of dialogues, including the *Meno* and *Theaetetus*. By retracing some of this engagement, we get the chance to explore Stoic proposals further.

With respect to definition, the most obvious dialogue to turn to is the *Meno*. Contrary to scholarly convention, which views Stoic theory as a response to the Eristic Challenge, I suggest that the Stoics engage more broadly with the *Meno*. Accordingly, we need a sketch of how this dialogue might read for them.

After three failed attempts to define virtue (71b-79e), Meno and Socrates raise the Eristic Problem (80d-e). It seems that we can investigate neither what we know nor what we don't know. In the case of the former, there is no need to investigate. In the case of the latter, we do not know what to look for and we would not recognize it if we found it. The rest of the dialogue puts forward four potential solutions.

Recollection Story (81a-d): Priests and priestesses tell a story, according to which the soul is immortal and has seen all things in this life and prior to it; this knowledge is now latent but can be accessed via recollection.

Lazy Argument (81d-e): We would become lazy if we accepted the upshot of the Eristic Problem. This is the only solution Socrates endorses.

Geometrical Example (81e-86c): In question-and-answer with Socrates, a slave boy is able to come up with beliefs, first false ones and then true ones; the latter can be stabilized via repetitions. This starts out as a demonstration of the Recollection Story, but notably it is not. The slave boy does not unearth latent knowledge. He forms beliefs. The distinction between knowledge and belief is a key upshot of the Geometrical Example.

Hypothetical Method: When Socrates and Meno turn to their inquiry of Meno's preferred question, "is virtue teachable?", they employ a method that permits inquiry without knowledge, namely, by examining hypotheses (86c-96c).

According to ancient sources, the Stoics respond to the Eristic Challenge along the lines of a further solution:⁵¹

Conceptual Solution: The preconception of X enables us to inquire into X.

⁵⁰ Cf. Alesse, Long,

⁵¹ Plu. fr. 215 apud Olymp. in Phd. 156, 1-11 Norvin.

The *Meno*, however, enables us to say more. First, we can say more about the Stoic solution to the Eristic Challenge. The Conceptual Solution is only hinted at in one brief sentence. Before turning to the slave boy to ask him to double a square, Socrates asks Meno whether the boy speaks Greek. Meno replies that the boy speaks very good Greek; he was born and raised in Meno's household (82b4). Only because he speaks Greek can he be asked to double a square. He understands the words "square," "double," etc., and has the concepts SQUARE, DOUBLE, etc.

Learning Greek by being immersed in a Greek-speaking environment, the boy acquired both the vocabulary and the concepts needed for the geometrical exercise. If the Stoics develop their theory of preconceptions as their reply to the Eristic Challenge, they are likely to reflect on this. This has a noteworthy upshot: standard reconstructions ascribe a somewhat implausible view to the Stoics. Surely, no one acquires the concepts SQUARE (or any other concept) without being immersed into a linguistic community. The acquisition of concepts, as the Stoics think of them, involves a linguistic component. It involves thinking of squares as squares *and calling* them squares. But the texts standardly cited with respect to Stoic preconceptions don't mention this.

Of course, the acquisition of the concept SQUARE is not the same as the learning of the word "square." A child who grows up bilingual might acquire the concept SQUARE in an environment where people refer to squares as "squares" and as "Vierecke." And it is possible to acquire concepts for which there aren't words. If the slave boy only had the concept SQUARE, without knowing the word, a square could be identified deictically and the inquiry could analyze the kind of thing that is thus picked out. That is, one can inquire into squares without using the word "square" or "Viereck," etc. But arguably, one cannot inquire into squares without using any relevant words. Say, one might talk about this kind of "shape" or "lines arranged a certain way."

Once this lacuna in scholarly reconstructions shows up for us, we know where to turn for help: to fragments on Stoic philosophy of language. Here we find a wealth of evidence precisely on the bit that is missing from standard interpretations, the relation of reasoning and speech. Reason, *logos*, according to the Stoics, has a dual nature, comprising inner and externally uttered thought (Porphyry, *De abstinentia* III 2, p. 187,10-24 N. = H 529A). In having reason, humans differ from animals neither by having representations nor by uttering vocal sound; both are shared with animals. Rather, it is the dual nature of human reason, which merges inner and outer speech, that makes for the difference to animals (SE M 8.275-6 = H 529).⁵²

Second, from the point of view of the Stoics, the Hypothetical Method gains salience. The Hypothetical Method is employed because Meno insists on asking "Is virtue teachable?" Rather than ask a "what is X?"-question, he asks an "is X Y?"-question. Here are two of Socrates's hypotheses: "virtue is something in the soul" (87b) and "virtue is something good" (87d). It would seem that, whatever we think about virtue, these are premises we hold simply on account of having the concept VIRTUE. The Stoics, I submit, consider these kinds of premises dimensions of our preconception of virtue. Given that preconceptions are criteria of truth, we can rely on these premises as being true: virtue is a good thing, it is something in the soul, etc. Nevertheless, there is a point to treating these claims as hypotheses. As long as we don't have a full theory in

⁵² Cf. Shogry (2019, p. 32).

ethics, combined with a physical theory of the soul and a logical theory about its reasoning abilities, the Stoics hold that we don't strictly speaking *know anything* about virtue.

The conversation between Socrates and Meno continues in ways that resonate with how the Stoics conceive of their cluster of interrelated tools, where definition cooperates with various kinds of divisions. Socrates asks, assuming virtue is a good thing, whether all good things or only some of them are related to knowledge (87d); he says that all good things are useful (87d-e); he asks what the types of useful things are (87e); etc. A full analysis of this stretch of text, which is greatly under-researched, goes beyond present purposes. I want to suggest, however, that the *Meno's* Hypothetical Method provides inspiration for anyone who wants to combine several investigative tools.⁵³

7. Stoic Resources in the *Theaetetus*

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato suggests that falsity is puzzling.⁵⁴ To us, this may be surprising. After all, what is more familiar than falsity? Myles Burnyeat famously argued that ancient and modern philosophy comes apart in this respect.⁵⁵ For the moderns, there is a “gap” between mind and world. Assuming there is such a gap, it is puzzling how the mind can reach out to the world at all. It is conceivable that everything is “in the head,” that we do not have epistemic access to the world. Given that we take ourselves to refer to the world and make judgments about objects in it, this would render all our beliefs false. The opposite applies to Plato, as well as some other ancient philosophers. We, including our minds, are evidently part of the world. The world causally affects us, in sense perception and otherwise. There is no puzzle about how we attain cognitive access to the world. There is a puzzle, on the contrary, about how we can miss it. Falsity is mysterious.

The *Theaetetus* develops several models of the mind. Scholars have observed that there are resonances between the Wax Tablet Model and Stoic philosophy of mind.⁵⁶ The Stoics seem to pick up Plato's language of “imprints” and “storage” in the mind. If my analysis of Stoic theory of definition is along the right lines, these resonances are more extensive. They don't begin with the Wax Tablet Model, and they don't stop there.

Rather, they begin when Socrates lays out a problem that the Wax Tablet Model is intended to solve. Early on in the dialogue's discussion of the second definitional proposal, that knowledge is true belief (*doxa*), Socrates says he cannot pin down what false *doxa* is (187d). He employs a premise that is reminiscent of the Meno Problem: with respect to everything, we either know it or we don't know it (188a). Given the premise that knowledge is true *doxa*, the relevant stretch of text makes dimensions of *doxa* that we otherwise ascribe to Plato—that *doxa* is mere “seeming” and “opinion”—disappear. Accordingly, translators and scholars render the text in a more neutral

⁵³ On Carneades's engagement with the hypothetical method, cf. Striker (1996, ch. 4).

⁵⁴ This is a larger theme of several late dialogues, including also the *Sophist*.

⁵⁵ Burnyeat (1982); on early steps toward a “mind-world gap” in Augustine, cf. Vogt (2015).

⁵⁶ Shogry (forthcoming).

fashion, as a discussion of false judgment. Judging, it seems, involves two items, one of which is attached to the other. Socrates presents four options that seem exhaustive:

Option 1: Item 1 is known, item 2 unknown. Someone who knows Socrates, but doesn't know Theaetetus won't say "Socrates is Theaetetus."

Option 2: Both items are known. Someone who knows Socrates and knows Theaetetus won't say "Socrates is Theaetetus."

Option 3: Both items are unknown. Someone who doesn't know Socrates and doesn't know Theaetetus won't say "Socrates is Theaetetus."

Option 4: Item 1 is unknown, item 2 is known. Someone who doesn't know Socrates, but knows Theaetetus won't say "Socrates is Theaetetus."

In effect, there doesn't seem to be false judgment, but in everyday life, we take it to be evident that there is false judgment. The Wax Tablet Model is intended as a solution. False judgment, on this model, is the mis-application of an imprint stored in the mind to an external prompting (193b-d). Rather than assume that the Stoics exploit the Wax Tablet Model primarily for their metaphors of "printing," I suggest they take seriously the model of thinking that it employs. This is how the Stoics seem to think of concept-application: a stored imprint is applied to some object.

Alas, the Wax Tablet's account of false judgment works only for instances where a stored item is attached to a *perceptual* item. But we also judge falsely in non-perceptual thinking (195c-196e). This prompts a more complex model, the Aviary. Surely, we won't ascribe the view to the Stoics that falsity occurs only in perceptual judgments. That is, they are likely to read on, seeing whether the Aviary Model can explain falsity in more general terms.

In the *Theaetetus*, the problem of false judgment remains unresolved. But the Stoic account of thinking resonates with the Aviary Model. Chrysippus aims to improve on the earlier Stoic view that impressions are imprints by saying that they are alterations (DL 7.50 = LS 39A).⁵⁷ The thought is, it seems, that we need to make room for more than the few imprints in the mind. We need a three-dimensional metaphor, with backrooms and ante-rooms, standing in for latent and occurrent thoughts. In the terms of the Aviary Model, the mind is inhabited by flocks of different kinds of birds. Translated into Stoic theory, this represents that what we hold to be true are not just unrelated judgments; we hold sets of judgments, for example, in different subfields of study. As long as we are not wise, the "flocks" in our mind tend to be insufficiently related. More often than not, they are flying around, as a flock or individually. Add to this that, as Theaetetus observes with Socrates's approval, the mind stores not only thoughts that are true; it also stores falsehoods (199e).

When we attach a concept to something there are multiple ways to go wrong. We can pick a concept that doesn't match what we perceive, say, by taking a dog to be a wolf. We can pick a

⁵⁷ Chrysippus does not reject the metaphor of imprinting and its theoretical upshots (cf. Shogry forthcoming). He improves upon a formulation because this metaphor, if taken too literally, can make it seem as if only very few thoughts fit into our mind. But of course, Zeno was not suggesting that our minds are "full" once we had a small number of thoughts. That is, Chrysippus' improvement is a further articulation, not a substantive disagreement.

concept that is inherently false, say, by taking it that werewolves exist outside of stories. We can pick a concept that is elusive, for example, if we get into view what real goodness is but easily lose our grip on it once we think of chocolate or whatever to us has a way of looking really good.

For the Stoics, all *doxa* is like birds. As long as we don't have scientific concepts, any application of a concept is like a hunt for something flitting. The search for definitions is the progressive articulation of each concept—the taming of each bird, so to speak—so that they come to stand in the right logical relations to each other. Definitions contribute to the discovery of truth in the best kind of way, namely, by contributing to the pursuit of knowledge.

7. Conclusion

If my reconstruction is compelling, the Stoic take on definitions differs fundamentally from better known approaches in antiquity and beyond. It rejects not only Forms and essences as being that with which definitions are concerned. More radically, it rejects that for any X, there is *one* definition that gets things right. For the Stoics, definitions serve an epistemic purpose, namely the precisification and enrichment of our conceptual repertoire. The more refined our concepts are, the better we are at applying them in our judgments. To this end, several definitions of any one X are better than one.

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