

Taking the Same Things Seriously and Not Seriously: A Stoic Proposal on Value and the Good¹

If someone were to say that an archer does everything in his power not for the sake of hitting the target but for the sake of doing everything in his power, one would suppose him to be speaking in a riddling and fantastic way. So it is with these idiots...²

Matters of value – life, health, wealth, and so on – provide reasons for action, or so it is often assumed.³ Aiming to figure out what to do, the agent, it seems, must take these matters seriously. Does this translate into the claim that, when such things are attained or lost, the agent should be elated or distraught, respectively? According to widespread intuitions, one should be able to step back, realizing that it is possible to lead a good life if health is affected, money lost, and so on. That is, one should not take seriously the very things that, while deliberating, one was asked to take seriously. This is a puzzling demand, and yet it attaches to a wide range of situations in everyday life. Value theory,

¹ I am grateful to the organizers of the 2011 conference on *Epictetus and Stoicism* for inviting me. The conference looked at “continuing influences and contemporary relevance” of Stoic thought. Bringing Stoic ethics into conversation with contemporary thought – which is one intention of this paper – strikes me as a rewarding approach. Nandi Theunissen helped me get clearer about the inter-relationship between several sets of questions relevant to my concerns in this paper. Jens Haas advanced the paper significantly through raising any number of objections and providing critical input on several drafts.

² Plutarch, *On common conceptions* 1070F-1071E (selection) = LS 64C, tr. LS.

³ This assumption is in conflict with T.M. Scanlon’s influential proposal that reasons are primitive, a view that is alien to ancient thought and that I think the Stoics would be right to reject (*What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998)). There is no talk at all about ‘reasons’ of the sort that has become customary in contemporary ethics. Insofar as I speak of reasons, I use the term in a weak sense: matters of value provide considerations for deliberation, and in *this* sense, they provide ‘reasons.’

then, should ask whether the seemingly antithetical attitudes of taking the same things seriously and not seriously are rational modes of valuing. The Stoics are rather exceptional in putting these matters at the center of ethical theory. Indeed, they seem to be part of the motivation for a technical move the Stoics propose: a distinction between the good and the valuable.⁴

It will be helpful to first identify what precisely appears misguided or paradoxical about the Stoic proposal. Here is a list of what I consider the main objections. (1), (2), (3) and (4) figure in long-standing reservations about the Stoics. (5), I think, formulates a suspicion that readers today may bring to the Stoic proposals.

(1) Artificial Terminology Charge: The Stoic proposal rests on an artificial distinction between valuable and good.

(2) Nature of Value Charge: The Stoic proposal mischaracterizes the value of good deliberation vis-à-vis the value of those things deliberation takes into account as reasons for and against courses of action.

(3) Irrationality Charge: It is irrational to consider the same things as reason-giving and as indifferent to a well-going life.

(4) Substantive Falsity Charge: It is not true that it is possible to lead a good life whether or not things of value are attained and things of disvalue are avoided.

(5) Psychological Fraud Charge: The Stoics ask us to consider life, health, wealth, etc., as indifferent at the very moments when they are lost or impaired; this attitude is no more than a strategy for psychological survival; it is an invitation to self-delusion.

⁴ In agreement with long-standing trends in scholarship, John Cooper approaches this distinction from the opposite end: as antithetical to common attitudes (*Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 2012), 184-214). Though Cooper and others are right that agents tend to treat the valuable as good, I propose that the Stoics succeed in addressing an important phenomenon of everyday valuing that is under-appreciated in scholarship.

The Stoic distinction between value and the good, as I will argue in the following sections, survives the first four attacks.⁵ The Psychological Fraud Charge, however, leads into difficult territory. Some late Stoics, and in particular Epictetus, might be guilty as charged. If he is, this may or may not be held against him. It could turn out that deluding ourselves about matters of value has psychological advantages, so much so that it calls into question the very aim of getting clear about them. This is in tension with the basics of Stoic ethics, which is devoted to the Socratic project of a life guided by reason. My paper thus ends with a proposal and a question. I propose that the Stoic distinction between value and the good is worth taking seriously as a position in metaethics. And I ask whether the aim of psychological survival under adverse conditions is in tension with the aim of getting clear about value.

1. The Artificial Terminology Charge

In contemporary philosophy, “good” and “valuable” are both taken to be generic terms that can in principle refer to any kind of positive valence. How are these terms understood in ancient ethics? Just as today, the relevant locutions – to have value (*axia*) and to be good (*agathon*) – are ordinarily understood to be closely related. If one asks

⁵ On the question of how the good and the valuable figure in the wise person’s deliberation, cf. Rachel Barney, “A Puzzle in Stoic Ethics,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2003): 303-340; Katja Maria Vogt, “Die frühe stoische Theorie des Werts,” in Ch. Schröer and F.-J. Bormann (eds.), *Abwägende Vernunft*, (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2004), 61-77 and Vogt, *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City: Political Philosophy in the Early Stoa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter 4, “Law and Reason”; Cooper (2012).

how widely a given term is employed in philosophy, however, things come apart. Today, “value” is used widely, perhaps partly because there are easily available English cognates: a verb, “to value”; a noun, “value”; an adjective, “valuable”; and a further adjective, “evaluative.” Ancient ethicists, on the contrary, tend to employ *agathon* and its cognates. Though there is no verb that corresponds to “good,” there are any number of related terms: “good” as an adjective (*agathon*); “a good” as a noun and its plural “goods” (*agatha*); “best” as the superlative (*ariston*) of “good” and “best-ness”; *aretê*, as the term that gets translated as “virtue,” but really just means excellence or goodness-in-the-superlative. That is, while value-talk abounds today, good-talk abounds in ancient ethics. The Stoics, however, introduce a technical notion of value, to be distinguished from the notion “good,” thus adding to the vocabulary of their predecessors. Ancient ethical discussions used to get by with just one central term referring to positive valence, namely “good.” In Stoic ethics, there are both: goods-talk and value-talk, each devoted to its own set of issues.

To approach the Stoic proposal, consider how earlier ancient ethicists speak of goods, *agatha*. This expression bears some similarity to the way we speak of “values,” but it is decidedly not the same. Goods in the sense of *agatha* are good conditions, states, etc., while values, as we speak of them, may also be ideals that could turn out to be misguided. Today’s notion of values invites theorizing about the relation between valuer and value: one can speak of someone’s values and thereby refer to what she holds to be valuable. There is no ancient correlate to this. Though there is abundant discussion about

disagreement, this is not expressed in terms of “someone’s goods versus someone else’s goods.” This way of speaking would appear confused: the very notion of a good, an *agathon*, implies that one is talking about something that in some sense *is* good.

According to a well-known distinction, which goes back to any number of discussions among ancient ethicists other than the Stoics, there are three kinds of goods: goods of the soul, also called internal goods; goods of the body; and external goods. In this framework, classificatory questions can be raised. For example, one might ask whether bodily goods are a class of their own, or whether goods like beauty, health, and strength are to be subsumed under the category of external goods. Similarly, there might be goods that could either be viewed as external or internal. For example, friendship could be a resource, and thus resemble money. Insofar as it does, it could be an external good. Or it could count as an internal good. These questions, though in substance not relevant to current purposes, provide a sense of the way in which evaluative language is employed in ancient ethical discussions. Notably, all this can be expressed without ever using the term *axia*, value. Everything is put in terms of goods. The Stoics, however, introduce a notion of value according to which the valuable is different from the good. Consider three lists of what counts, for the Stoics, as good:

Goods-1: virtue, virtuous action, the virtuous person.⁶

⁶ SE M 11.22 (= 60G). Another item on the list is the friend of the virtuous person, who is, *pace* further Stoic premises, also a virtuous person.

Goods-2: the virtues and the affective attitudes of the virtuous person.⁷

Goods-3: virtue, wisdom, knowledge.⁸

Bad-1 to 3: the opposites of what is good.⁹

These lists are pulled from different texts, and they are not meant to compete with each other. Each of them is a way to spell out the more general claim that only virtue is good. Goods-1 and Goods-2 pick out several ways in which virtue can be effective in the world. Goods-3 provides important additional information. It offers three terms that, for the Stoics, describe a perfected state of mind: wisdom, virtue, and knowledge are three names for the very same state of mind.¹⁰ Since they tend to evoke different associations, it is not advisable to describe this state of mind simply by using one of these terms. Instead, I shall speak of WVK to refer to the perfected mind – or, in Stoic terminology, the perfected rational soul or reason – of the Stoic ideal agent. In short, what counts as good for the Stoics is perfect reasoning and its various manifestations in the world, in

⁷ Stobaeus 2.58,5-15 (= 60K). For example, moderation, courage, etc., and joy, cheerfulness, etc., which are the so-called *eupatheia*, rational feelings that take the place of emotions in the wise person. According to Stobaeus, the virtues are final and instrumental goods, while the virtuous person is an instrumental good and the rational feelings are final goods (2.71,15-72,6; = LS 60M). Such classifications are to be read with a grain of salt: Stobaeus likes to introduce Peripatetic distinctions which are alien to orthodox Stoic ethics. On this issue, cf. Katja Maria Vogt, “The Good is Benefit: On the Stoic Definition of the Good,” in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2008): 155-174 and David Sedley, “Comments on Professor Reesor’s Paper,” in W.W. Fortenbaugh (ed.), *On Stoic and Peripatetic Ethics: The Work of Arius Didymus* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1983), 85-6.

⁸ Via a number of Stoic premises, it is evident that virtue, knowledge, and wisdom are three ways to describe the condition of reason achieved by a perfect agent/cognizer.

⁹ The Stoics also say that the good benefits and the bad harms, where this is taken to mean that the good really does something good for one’s life, and the bad something bad; accordingly, value and disvalue do not count as benefitting and harming. Cf. Vogt (2008) and DL 7.101-3.

¹⁰ The Stoics’ most general distinction between different virtues is a list of three, namely mastery of knowledge in ethics, physics, and logic (Aetius 1, *prooem.* 2 = SVF 2.34 = LS 26A).

actions and attitudes, but also just in the presence of a wise person. Consider now the lists of valuable and disvaluable things.¹¹

Value: life, health, beauty, strength, wealth, good reputation, being born into a good family, having one's perceptual faculties intact.

Disvalue: death, illness, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, bad reputation, being born into a bad family, impediments to one's perceptual faculties.¹²

The reports on which I'm drawing each offer short lists, explicitly flagged as incomplete. That is, it is in the spirit of the Stoic proposal to add to the list of values whatever is in general conducive to human life. Moreover, more specific items could be considered as valuable, insofar as they relate to the items on the list. For example, clean drinking water might count as valuable in virtue of its relation to health, strength, and wealth. *Contra* the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, which conceives of such matters as external-*cum*-bodily goods, the Stoics decidedly do not call them goods of any kind.¹³

¹¹ The Stoics also describe these matters in terms of what is natural and against nature. It is a long-standing objection against them that they equivocate on the notion of "natural," using "natural" sometimes such that it refers to something that affects how an organism functions, and at other times in a more elevated sense, where it is associated with the good. Whether or not that is a damning objection, I think that talk about what is "natural" comes with far more difficulties than the distinction between "good" and "valuable." In his *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), Anthony A. Long says that the two most long-standing objections to the Stoic proposal are the Equivocation Charge (raised against versions that talk about nature) and what I call the Artificial Terminology Charge (183-4).

¹² DL 7.101-2 (= LS 58A) and Stobaeus LS 58C-E. I discuss the idea that pleasure is not of value though pain is of disvalue in Vogt, "Die frühe stoische Theorie der Emotionen," in Barbara Guckes (ed.), *Zur Ethik der älteren Stoa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 69-93.

¹³ The addition of having one's perceptual faculties intact is likely to be Stoic. A precursor might occur in Plato's *Meno*, where memory is listed among goods that are standardly regarded as external/bodily (87-89).

From the point of view of Peripatetic critics of the Stoics, the Stoic distinction between the good and the valuable does nothing but advance artificial terminology – this is the Artificial Terminology Charge. But clearly, the proposal is meant to do something other than revise ordinary usage of the language: it is meant to capture the difference between good deliberation on the one hand and the material of deliberation (what deliberation is concerned with) on the other hand. Perfect deliberating is good; the things that perfect deliberating is concerned with have value or disvalue.¹⁴ This is an eminently plausible distinction. Moreover, the proposal is self-consciously technical. Even Chrysippus, the Stoic philosopher most notoriously devoted to re-defining terms, doesn't mind if we continue to talk in more ordinary ways. As he puts it, if someone were to *refer* correctly – that is, think of one category of things when saying “good” in some contexts, and think of another category of things when saying “good” in other contexts – then all would still be well. The usage of the person who speaks this way “must be accepted on the grounds that he is not wrong in what he refers to (ἐν μὲν τοῖς σημαινομένοις) and in other respects he is aiming at the normal use of terms (τῆς κατὰ τὰς ὀνομασίας συνηθείας).”¹⁵

¹⁴ I shall elaborate on this interpretation of the distinction throughout the rest of the paper. Cooper (2012) offers the most recent discussion of the Stoic proposal. His analysis is compatible with my characterization, though he mainly explores the ways in which an agent ought to relate to Zeus's actions. “The only correct guide to good living, and to our own happiness, given that we are by our nature rational agents, is to live in agreement with Zeus's plan” (191). I agree with the upshot of his discussion (cf. Vogt (2008), chapter 3, “Wisdom: Sages and Gods”), but my focus in this paper is elsewhere.

¹⁵ Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1048A (= LS 58H, tr. LS with changes). The title of Plutarch's treatise – “On Stoic Self-Contradictions” – provides a sense of how uncharitable other philosophers were in their responses to Stoic distinctions.

My defense of the Stoic proposal adopts this spirit. It is true that people do not speak about the good and the valuable according to the Stoic distinction, but the same applies to any number of philosophical distinctions. As long as technical terminology expresses a philosophical point, and one of some significance, it should be admitted into discussion. This does not yet mean that it ought to be accepted. But it merits consideration.

Accordingly, I suggest that the Artificial Terminology Charge be set aside, and that we use “good” and “valuable” as the Stoics do, namely simply by using these terms. Scholars often add qualifiers, speaking, say, of what “merely” has “some” value or characterizing the good as “objectively” valuable.¹⁶ These qualifiers, however, do not appear philosophically innocent to me. If the Artificial Terminology Charge is recognized as misguided, then we might as well use “good” and “valuable” as the technical terms they are. Moreover, rejecting the charge that Stoic terminology is artificial should not go as far as to obscure the fact that it is technical. Indeed, it seems to me that this makes the Stoic proposal particularly interesting: it opens up the question of how an analysis of the property good relates to an account of valuing – and this is a worthwhile question to have clearly set out.

2. The Nature of Value Charge

Consider now the substance of the Stoic proposal: a distinction between perfect deliberation – the good – and the material of deliberation – the valuable and disvaluable.

¹⁶ Cf. Cooper (2012), 184-214, esp. 184 and 188.

This is a far-reaching proposal. It means that virtue is nothing other than good deliberation, and that the kinds of things deliberators are concerned with have value and disvalue. The Nature of Value Charge objects on both counts.

Suppose a WVK-person is involved in foreign aid. In aiming to help others, she will think about their lives with respect to health (access to health care, medications, clean drinking water, disease prevention, etc.), wealth (shelter, adequate clothing, training, job opportunities, a functional economic system, etc.), and so on. Trying to assess these matters adequately, she will come up with a plan of action. She is WVK, in Stoic terms, insofar as her “selection” (*eklogê*) and “disselection” (*apeklogê*) of things like life, health, wealth, and so on is perfect.¹⁷ That is, WVK *consists* in being a perfect reasoner about things of value and disvalue. The upshot of this proposal is that virtue is not in and of itself a value that competes with other values: virtue *is* the ability to deliberate well.

Compare this to a Platonic line of thought, according to which things like health, wealth, and so on *depend on wisdom* if they are to play a positive role in one’s life. In order to remain agnostic on whether this proposal should be ascribed to Plato, I will call it E, because it is formulated in the *Euthydemus*.

E: The things we called good are not good in their nature (*kath’ hauta pephuken*). If ignorance controls them, they are bad (worse than their opposites);

¹⁷ Deciding on a course of action consists in selection and deselection of indifferents (Stobaeus 2.76,9-10).

if wisdom, they are good. In themselves (*kath' hauta*), neither of them is of any value (*axia*). (280d-281e)¹⁸

Scholars have long thought that the Stoics react to this passage, and this seems plausible. Notably, however, the Stoics do not endorse it. They pick up the term *axia*, and proceed to say something that rejects E's account both of the good and of the valuable. Consider E a bit more closely. What does E say when it says that wisdom, virtue, and so on are good by their natures? Wisdom is good because, given that it is wisdom, it cannot but be used wisely: there is no foolish use of wisdom. "In its nature" refers to the nature of wisdom: it *is* wisdom. Similarly, virtue does not admit of badness, simply because virtue – *aretê* – literally *is* goodness or 'best-ness'. So far, so good. But E says more, namely that WVK is a good-maker for anything it deals with. And this the Stoics reject. For example, wealth does not become good if used wisely. It is valuable, but not good. The Stoic resistance goes both ways: wealth does not become good if used wisely, and it doesn't become bad if used foolishly; it has value.

Indeed, things like health and wealth *really have value* for the Stoics. This might appear to be a rather simple point, but it is not. Contemporary philosophers operate, I think, with conflicting intuitions about this matter. In discussions, say, of poverty, it is often taken for granted that having clean drinking water and access to medications is valuable. This assumption appears to be based on the premise that health is valuable. Indeed, in these

¹⁸ A similar idea is discussed in the *Meno* (87e-89a). Contrary to the goods of the soul (the virtues, etc.), things like health, wealth, beauty, and strength can benefit or harm, depending on whether they are used wisely or not.

contexts it would appear cynical to most of us to doubt whether this is so. However, philosophers sometimes feel the need to ground this in something loftier. Clean drinking water or access to medications then appear to be valuable because of some relation they bear to autonomy, or other values that seem to be closely related to morality. Contrary to any such constructions, the Stoics are – and this is a notable thing to say, since they are often represented otherwise – rather commonsensical. For them, health and wealth have value. Health and wealth, and so on, are the very things that we consider when we try to act well.¹⁹

Imagine a view that denies this, saying that things like health and wealth are ‘indifferent’ in the sense of not providing any value-considerations. This proposal was formulated by Aristo, a dissenting Stoic. Other Stoics, in my view correctly, rejected it on the grounds that it collapses the whole enterprise of virtue.

Next comes an explanation of the difference between things, by the denial of which all life would be made completely indiscriminated, as it is by Aristo, and no function or task for wisdom could be found, since there would be no difference at all between the things that concern the living of life, and no choice between them would have to be made. (Cicero, *De fin.* 3.50, tr. LS)

Deliberation that views virtue as the only good, and as the only relevant consideration, is an impossible enterprise. In the foreign aid example, the virtuous person helps those who

¹⁹ The much-debated Stoic formulae describe the end, a virtuous life, as “reasoning well in the selection and dissection” of things like health and wealth. I am refraining here from discussing the full quotes. For present purposes, we can translate “what is in accordance with nature” into talk about what is valuable. Stobaeus 2.76,9-15 (= LS 58K).

are in need. In doing so, she is taking seriously whether people have access to medications, clean drinking water, shelter, personal safety, a chance to preserve what the ancients call ‘reputation’ and what we might reformulate in terms of self-respect and social standing, and so on. If she did not consider any of these things important – say, claiming that only virtue matters – then she would have nothing to do. Virtuous actions respond to features of the world that involve life and death, health and illness, perceptual faculties, wealth and poverty, social standing, and so on. The idea that only virtue counts is utterly empty: if it were true, there would be nothing for the virtuous person to do, and thus there would be no virtue. For example, if illness and poverty were not disvaluable, it would be unclear why helping others who suffer is at all good.²⁰

Consider some objections to the Stoic proposal. Suppose the foreign aid worker does not take herself to be addressing living conditions, but injustice or lack of freedom. Does this provide a case that the Stoics cannot account for? No: this case involves again deliberation about matters of value. If the inhabitants of a country suffer from injustice, they suffer from a government or legal system that does not adequately assign value to *their* lives, health, wealth, perceptual faculties, reputations, and so on.²¹ That is, in aiming

²⁰ A similar line of thought is explored in late antiquity. The virtues respond to features of the world that one might prefer to be different. For example, courage is a virtue that soldiers need, but it would be perverse to wish for war so that this virtue can be displayed. Doctors are virtuous in caring to the best of their knowledge for their patients, but it would be preferable if there were no sickness in the world. Cf. Michael Frede, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought. Sather Classical Lectures*, ed. by A.A. Long, foreword by David Sedley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 140.

²¹ More would have to be said here about the status of all human beings as fellow-valuers, a status that is violated by injustice, oppression, etc. But again, the story would involve reference to value and disvalue.

to address injustice and oppression, the foreign aid worker is still concerned with matters of value.

But there is likely to be a further element: tyrannical rulers misunderstand value *and* the good. They fail to ascribe value to the lives, wealth, health, etc., of others, and they fail to recognize the goodness of good lives. That is, neither do they themselves strive for knowledge – the virtues achieved by studying physics, logic, and ethics – nor do they recognize that this striving is utterly important for the people over whom they rule. According to the Stoic proposal, good lives can only be lived by those who are in a position to deliberate well, that is, by those who have attained knowledge. Oppression may well include policies that prevent people from becoming the kind of deliberators they need to be in order to live good lives. In aiming to reduce injustice, the foreign aid worker would thus also be concerned with the good: she would find herself arguing for the ideal of lives guided by reason, and aiming for institutions such as schools that are conducive to this goal. But notably, virtue does not enter the picture as a substantive value. It continues to be understood as perfect deliberation.²²

3. The Irrationality Charge

²² Of course, virtue in the sense of perfect deliberation can itself figure in deliberation. One can think “I hope I’m getting this right” while one tries to figure out which action to perform in a given situation, and one might quite generally make it one’s aim to become a good deliberator. Such thoughts, however, play a different role from particular value considerations. They frame deliberation, rather than providing reasons of the kind that are provided by value and disvalue.

The apparently paradoxical attitudes of taking the same things seriously and not seriously are attitudes toward the material of deliberation: health, illness, wealth, poverty, perceptual faculties, social standing, and so on. The Irrationality Charge says that it is irrational to aim as well as you can without caring whether you hit the target. Why should one be able to say “whatever” if one fails an exam, does not get that promotion, loses one’s money, and so on? If these things are sufficiently relevant to motivate the norm that one should ‘aim well’, then it would appear to be justified that one is upset when one misses the target, and things do not go as one hoped.

To defend the Stoics against the Irrationality Charge, consider some of the details of how, according to the Stoics, one should relate to value and disvalue. Most fundamentally, an agent must seek knowledge: she needs to study everything that pertains to human life, such as to be able to think correctly about value and disvalue. Studying natural science, logic, and ethics, the agent understands how, say, sense-perception helps a human being lead her life. But she also understands that a good human life is possible even with quite a few impediments to the ordinary functioning of a human organism. Based on these insights, it is reasonable to prefer health over sickness, life over death, and so on.

Accordingly, in deciding what to do, one should ‘go for’ – technically speaking “select” – life, health, wealth, having one’s perceptual faculties intact, etc. Preferring and dispreferring (selecting and disselecting) are reasonable preferences based on recognized

value and disvalue. They do not involve *pathê* – passions or emotions – as the Stoics understand them.²³

Rational valuing, on this proposal, has two dimensions, relating to two questions each of which is sometimes considered the starting point of ethics: *what to do*, and *how to live*. The Stoics suggest that when asking what to do the agent must consider value and disvalue as reason-giving, and when asking how to live a good life, she must step back and understand that it is possible to have a good life when things of value are not attained or things of disvalue come to be present in one's life.

To see that this is not a paradoxical proposal (and also not a cynical one), consider an example. Suppose you are waiting for a train and your eyes fall on an advertisement for a gym. The slogan says “without health, nothing is worth anything.” It reminds you that you are badly neglecting your health. You really should exercise, because health is valuable and it is unreasonable to live an unhealthy life. Then your eyes fall on the person next to you waiting on the platform, a man in a wheelchair. The advertisement, it turns out, is offensive. More than that, it does not state what you initially took it to say, namely that health is valuable and that you have reason to preserve your health. It states that one cannot have a good life without being healthy, and this claim is arguably false.

²³ Stoic theory of the emotions is widely discussed. For present purposes, it suffices to recall the points that the wise person has no emotions and that emotions often involve seeing something that is merely of value as good, or something that is merely of disvalue as bad. On the question of how the good is to be related to, cf. M. Frede, “On the Stoic Conception of the Good,” in: Katerina Ierodiakonou (ed.), *Topics in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 71-94.

The Stoic proposal can be saved from the Irrationality Charge because the difference between these two statements – that health is valuable and that one cannot lead a good life without health – is relevant to valuing. Valuing comprises two dimensions: one that is engaged in coming up with plans of action, and one that asks whether and how one can lead a good life, given the very conditions one happens to find oneself in.²⁴ Moreover, the seemingly antithetical attitudes of taking seriously and not taking seriously are unified insofar as they involve the same affective attitudes to value and disvalue. The ability to ‘switch’ between taking seriously and not taking seriously involves the ability to keep apart different questions; it does not involve an attitudinal shift, as if one were to initially strive with fervor after value, and then switch to emotional indifference. Suppose you take up a new position as an employee and you are asked to make decisions about your retirement investments. The affective side of preferring captures the difference between trying to make an informed choice on the one hand, and getting absorbed with desire for money on the other hand. The former is what one should do, the latter what one shouldn’t do. That is, the agent’s affective involvement must consistently reflect her grasp of the

²⁴ Note that, even where one aims to build a life given worsened health, one is not thereby rationally committed to considering health non-valuable. On the contrary, people with a chronic illness can rationally build a good life, and at the same time try to learn about potential new treatment methods. In Chapter 4 of *Law, Reason and the Cosmic City*, I argue against a long-standing interpretive option, namely that the Stoics claimed that, if in a given situation an agent reasonably decides against, say, having all her limbs intact, this involves that she thinks of having all her limbs as non-valuable. I used the example of a hiker who cuts off his arm because it becomes stuck under a rock in an accident – otherwise he could not climb down the mountain. In this kind of situation, it is reasonable to cut off one’s arm, though this doesn’t make having one’s arm (one’s health, etc.) non-valuable. Surely, once back in the plains, the hiker would go to the hospital and reasonably do all he can to restore his health as much as possible. But he can also build his new life around having just one arm, and be back in the mountains soon enough, as presumably the real hiker from whose story I derive my example did.

fact that the matters she deals with are valuable, but not good, where this means that it is possible to have a good life if things go different than planned.

In describing the two dimensions of rational valuing, there is a temptation to put matters in temporal terms. For example, one might describe the investment example as if one should care about maximizing one's retirement income when one makes a selection, and not care about losses once the market drops in an economic crisis. The two dimensions would then appear to be an *ex ante* and an *ex post* perspective. However, this move should be resisted. Though it may often be the case that choosing takes place while one does not yet know outcomes, and asking "can I have a good life without X?" takes place when one does, this is not essential to the distinction. In principle, both perspectives can be inhabited contemporaneously. While I make a selection, I can step back and realize that, one way or another – whether, say, the markets rise or fall – I shall have to try to lead a good life, and that thought, the Stoics say, should be based on the premise that this is indeed possible.

The Stoic claim that it is possible to lead a good life if something of value is lacking can be pushed further. It can be rational to be committed to the life one has even though one recognizes that, if one were not already engaged in leading this very life and if faced with a choice, one would reasonably prefer the value to be present. For example, people who

have grown up deaf often say that they would not want to change that condition.²⁵ Stoic theory can account for such assessments. Having one's perceptual faculties intact is to be preferred. If, say, one had to choose whether to be born deaf or not, one would reasonably choose not to be born deaf. But if one is deaf, one can build a good life, and then this life is one's life. In saying "I would want to change the condition I'm in" one would essentially say "I reject the good life I have built for myself" – and there is no reason to do so, assuming that indeed one is leading a good life.

4. The Substantive Falsity Charge

The Stoic view, however, hangs on a substantive claim: that things of value and disvalue are indifferent to whether it is possible to have a good life. Why assume that life, health, wealth, and so on, are indifferent to whether it is possible to have a good life? The gym-advertisement and the retirement case are 'friendly' examples – we tend to be committed to the view that one can lead a good life even if one is, in some respects (and even some rather significant respects), not healthy or disabled, or if one has less rather than more money. But some Stoic examples seem rather chilling to even the most sympathetic readers. When Epictetus, a late Stoic who arguably develops a perspective that in some respects differs from the 'orthodox' Stoic perspective I have been sketching up to now,

²⁵ Elizabeth Harman discusses this example in "'I'll Be Glad I Did It': Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23/Ethics (2009): 177-199. The Stoics would embrace this case, though their analysis would differ in any number of ways from Harman's. For example, Harman assumes, perhaps for the sake of simplicity, that in general deaf people *are* happy. The Stoics make a modal claim: they *can* be happy and build a good life for themselves. This makes a decisive difference: just as one can build a good life for oneself if deaf, one can also build a good life for oneself if not deaf. Thus the fact that a deaf person finds herself leading a good life does not provide a reason for others (if given the choice) to prefer to be deaf, or to decide against surgery that would allow their children to hear.

says that one shouldn't grieve over the death of one's child, Stoicism might appear to be at its worst. As Epictetus puts it, the death of one's child is not bad, but the grief is. The death is not up to us, and thus it doesn't fall into the domain of the good and the bad.²⁶ But grieving is up to us. Since it involves the mistake of considering death a bad thing, it is itself bad.²⁷

Epictetus' instructions make Stoicism seem rather stark. It is one thing not to despair if I need glasses; it is another thing not to despair if my child dies. Are there cases of loss of value where it is reasonable to give up? Notably, my point here is not that it may be a relatable human weakness to grieve and despair. The point is that it may be rational. If someone dies who is central to the life I am leading, and if my life is no longer recognizable as the life I have built for myself, then it might appear Stoically-appropriate to think that this is it: I don't want to go on.

Infant mortality, much more present in people's lives in antiquity than in many parts of the world today, serves as a central example in Stoic theorizing. What can be said on behalf of Stoic theory with a view to such examples? One point we can make, I think, is

²⁶ Epictetus discusses the distinction between what is up to us and what is not up to us in any number of contexts; it is one of the best-known aspects of his thought. To be able to make this distinction is one of the prime goals of education (*Discourses* I.22-9-10). What, then, is up to us? How we assent, what we accept as true, how we decide, what we intend – these may serve as preliminary glosses for the Greek term *prohairesis* as Epictetus uses it. Not even Zeus, says Epictetus, can conquer one's *prohairesis* (I.1.21-3).

²⁷ Cf. for example “‘So-and-so's son is dead.’ Answer, ‘That lies outside of the sphere of *prohairesis*; it is not a bad thing.’ [...] He was grieved at all this. ‘That lies within the sphere of *prohairesis*; it is a bad thing.’” (III.8.2-4)

that whatever else is to be said about infant mortality, we are strongly in favor of the scientific progress and health care improvements that lead to lowering its rate. In making this point, I am siding with early Stoic theory and against Epictetus. Epictetus' distinction between what is "up to us" – virtue/right decision-making – and what isn't "up to us" – everything else – has a different flavor from the good-value-distinction I defend. It suggests that life and health and wealth are outside of the domains in which we should be invested: we should see these things as not in our power, and focus elsewhere. This is contrary to the early Stoic proposal that one should do one's very best to aim well with respect to precisely such things as life and health and wealth. One should try to understand how the human organism works, what kinds of parts of nature humans are, and so on. This spirit leads toward science, and thus, among other things, toward aiming to figure out how children can be kept alive. Accordingly, it is rather different from the attitudes Epictetus advocates. The early Stoic answer to "what should one do in the face of infant mortality?" might indeed be this: one should aim to improve living conditions, medicine, access to health care, and so on, such as to reduce infant mortality rates as much as one can. In my view, this is a rather good response. It recognizes the value of life and health.

But arguably this does not yet explain why a given parent should not find herself unable to overcome the loss of her child. To see more clearly whether and how the Stoic proposal can be defended, consider a clause that I have been using throughout, but that merits careful analysis – the clause that "it is possible to have a good life" without

attaining or securing things of value. The clause comes from a report of Stoic theory that distinguishes two ways of using the term “indifferent”:

‘Indifferent’ is used in two senses: unconditionally, of things which contribute neither to happiness nor unhappiness, as is the case with wealth, reputation, health, strength, and the like. For it is possible to be happy without these, though the manner of using them is constitutive of happiness or unhappiness. In another sense those things are called indifferent which activate neither impulse nor repulsion, as is the case with having an odd or even number of hairs on one’s head, or stretching or contracting one’s finger. But the previous indifferents are not spoken of in this sense. For they are capable of activating impulse and repulsion. Hence some of them are selected and others disselected, but the second type is entirely equal with respect to choice and avoidance. (DL 7.104-5, tr. LS)

Διχῶς δὲ λέγεσθαι ἀδιάφορα· ἅπαξ μὲν τὰ μήτε πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν μήτε πρὸς κακοδαιμονίαν συνεργοῦντα, ὡς ἔχει πλοῦτος, δόξα, ὑγίεια, ἰσχὺς καὶ τὰ ὅμοια· ἐνδέχεται γὰρ καὶ χωρὶς τούτων (5) εὐδαιμονεῖν, τῆς ποιᾶς αὐτῶν χρήσεως εὐδαιμονικῆς οὔσης ἢ κακοδαιμονικῆς. ἄλλως δὲ λέγεται ἀδιάφορα τὰ μήθ’ ὀρμῆς μήτ’ ἀφορμῆς κινητικά, ὡς ἔχει τὸ ἀρτίας ἔχειν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς τρίχας ἢ περιττᾶς, ἢ ἐκτείνει τὸν δάκτυλον ἢ συστειλαί, τῶν προτέρων ἀδιαφόρων οὐκέθ’ οὕτω λεγομένων· ὀρμῆς γάρ ἐστιν (10) (105.) ἐκεῖνα καὶ ἀφορμῆς κινητικά. διὸ τὰ μὲν αὐτῶν ἐκλέγεται, ἢ τὰ δὲ ἀπεκλέγεται, τῶν [δ’] ἐτέρων ἐπίσης ἐχόντων πρὸς αἴρεσιν καὶ φυγῆν.

The claim that matters like health and wealth are indifferent to happiness or misery is here explained as the claim that it is *possible* to be happy – or, to have a good life – without them. This proposal is more modest than Stoic theory is often taken to be, and it should not be conflated with a number of stronger claims. (i) The claim is not that, say, a person could not feel happy after she inherited so much money that, in her new home high above Lago di Lugano, she barely recalls how she used to slave away as a

philosophy professor in the big city. This notion of happiness as a subjective feeling is not the notion of happiness that figures in ancient ethics. The ancient notion of happiness is one that takes a third person perspective and looks, roughly speaking, at someone's life as a whole. From this kind of perspective, one could say that someone's life is going well or is not going well. Indeed, one could say about the person who is elated about her newly acquired riches that her life is not going well. For example, she might have adopted a mode of life devoted entirely, say, to expensive wines and sustaining a perfect suntan, that is, a mode of life without any projects guided by value and the aim of attaining WVK.

(ii) Nor do the Stoics claim that things like health and wealth cannot be significant components of a given well-going life. For example, a parent devoted to raising her children well might count as leading a good life, and it might be impossible for the parent to do what she does if she loses her health, her job, and so on. If one were to describe her life – how hard she works to provide for the children and give them a good education, how untiring she is in playing with them, taking them outdoors for exercise, and so on – it would appear that the facts that she is healthy and has an income are quite relevant. The Stoics do not deny this. They propose, instead, that if the parent were to lose her job and to become sick, she would still be able to lead a good life. It would be a different life, and not the one she hoped for. Perhaps her children would have to move in with relatives. But the parent's life could still be a good life, and there would still be ways in which she could play a good role in her children's lives.

(iii) The Stoic proposal also does not mean that any kind of adversity should be suffered as if it did not affect one's life. On the contrary, the Stoics are the only ancient philosophers – and among the very few thinkers until today – who defend suicide as a potentially reasonable option. If one's life becomes such that one cannot do anything – not talk with one's children, not perform any good actions, and so on – then the Stoics do not see what should be wrong with ending it. They are, however, cautious in how they advertise this view. As is well-known from other contexts, the Stoics share with the skeptics a certain epistemic pessimism, and they assume that we tend to be rather bad at assessing such matters. Accordingly, they think that only the wise person is in a position to make this decision.²⁸ With respect to everyone else, they share our conventional view, namely that someone in danger of committing suicide is to be engaged with more like a patient suffering from a self-destructive pathological condition than like an agent who is deciding what to do. Still, their general line of thought on suicide is relevant to our current discussion. It indicates that the Stoics ascribe real significance to matters of value and disvalue.

Against the Substantive Falsity Charge, it is thus relevant that the Stoic claim is weaker than it is sometimes taken to be. The claim is not that things like life, health, wealth, and so on, cannot evoke a sense of happiness, or cannot figure in how a life that is good goes.

²⁸ Cf. John Cooper, "Greek Philosophers on Euthanasia and Suicide," in his *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 515-41.

The claim is more modest: when such things are lost, it is in general still possible to come up with a way of life that is good. This can involve anything from small adjustments to re-imagining one's life and starting from scratch. In some limiting cases, no such plan can be found: no life can be imagined and taken up that would plausibly count as going well. If one were wise, one could assess these matters correctly, and one might arrive at the conclusion that it is best to end one's life. This decision would reflect the basic premise that only the good life is desirable. But given that we tend not to be wise – and are thus prone to think in emotionally clouded ways, such that we may not recognize ways in which our life could be a good life – this can only be the rarest of exceptions, and certainly not practical advice for moments of despair.

5. The Psychological Fraud Charge

What, then, remains of the suspicion that the Stoics invite us to commit psychological fraud, talking ourselves into the view that life or health or wealth really don't matter the very moment they are lost, but otherwise encourage us to pursue these kinds of things? This charge has already been refuted: based on the arguments offered in response to other objections, the Psychological Fraud Charge can be recognized as misguided. It only arises if one rejects two substantive proposals: first, that valuing has two dimensions (deliberation about what to do, and thinking about whether, under given conditions, one can lead a good life), and second, that a good life is possible when things of value are lost or impeded.

One reason why the Psychological Fraud Charge might still resonate with readers of Stoic texts is that late Stoic texts are more accessible than early Stoic philosophy, which I have been drawing on. Recent scholarship has interpreted Epictetus, Seneca, and other late Stoic authors as offering therapeutic advice. In their writings, philosophy and therapy seem to merge, and it is hard to say where this leads with respect to the Psychological Fraud Charge. It might be argued that Roman Stoic philosophers put forward a model of philosophy that moves away from arguments and toward practices that help one deal with adversity in life.²⁹ This raises the question of whether these practices are meant to be delusional, or whether they are meant to capture the truth of the matter.³⁰ If a philosophy invites attitudes on the grounds that they are psychologically effective, whether or not they are rational, then this should give anyone pause.

I am not making a move here that recent scholars have dismissed, namely to look down upon later Stoic writings as less aptly considered ‘philosophy’ than early Stoic thought

²⁹ These matters are controversial and every late Stoic philosopher would have to be discussed in his own right. Prominent contributions on these questions include Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Long (2002); John Cooper, “Moral Theory and Moral Improvement: Seneca,” in Cooper, *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 309-334; Brad Inwood, *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Gareth Williams, *The Cosmic Viewpoint: A Study of Seneca’s Natural Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Cooper (2012).

³⁰ For example, Cicero has a Stoic ask how someone who accepts the distinction between external, internal, and bodily goods could be happy. The implication is that one should reject the idea that strength and health and so on are goods for the very reason that otherwise one cannot be happy. “For if a man is confident in the goods that he has, what does he lack for living happily? Yet a man who adopts the threefold division of goods inevitably lacks confidence. For how will he be able to be confident of bodily strength or secure fortune? Yet no one can be happy without a good which is secure, stable, and lasting... The man who would fear losing any of these things cannot be happy.” (*Tusculan disputations* 5.40-1 = LS 63L, tr. LS).

because they involve a therapeutic or exercise-oriented element. For present purposes, I shall assume that there are different ways of doing philosophy. The question I am asking is about *kinds* of therapy. It invokes a distinction between (i) therapy that aims at correcting the agent's views of the world such that they are more truthful, and (ii) therapy that aims at modifying the agent's views such as to help her navigate the manifold challenges of life. The relevant distinction is today sometimes discussed in the context of so-called depressive realism. Contrary to the long-standing assumption that depressed people see the world more negatively than it is, such that therapy could aim to instill more realistic evaluations, some studies suggest that depressed people see the world more realistically than the non-depressed – and this means therapy would have to move us away from the truth. These studies and their interpretations are controversial.³¹ For current purposes the question of how they are to be assessed need not be settled. It suffices that the phenomenon they point to is conceivable: that in order to get through life, one would have to delude oneself, and that therapy could contribute to creating the relevant delusions.

³¹ The initial study was published by L.B. Alloy and L.Y. Abramson, "Judgment of contingency in depressed and nondepressed students: sadder but wiser?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 108(4) (1979): 441-485. For critical discussion, cf. K. Dobson and R.L. Franche, "A conceptual and empirical review of the depressive realism hypothesis," *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, 21 (1989): 419-433; R. Ackermann and R.J. DeRubeis, "Is depressive realism real?" *Clinical Psychology Review*, 11 (1991): 565-584; L.G. Allan, S. Siegel and S. Hannah, "The sad truth about depressive realism," *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 60(3) (2007): 482-495; T.S. Fu, W. Koutstaal, L. Poon and A.J. Cleare, "Confidence judgment in depression and dysphoria: The depressive realism vs. negativity hypotheses," *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 43 (2012): 699-704.

This is the charge I have in mind with respect to late Stoicism. Some of the proposed practices might aim to make one see things differently than they are, based on the assumption that these acquired views and attitudes would be psychologically helpful, though they are not true. My suspicion is, for example, that to think of health as straightforwardly not “up to us” is to adopt a *false* view. If one were to aim as best as one could for health, one would start to think about health care and hygiene, one might study medicine or support that others study medicine, and so on. At the same time, no matter how far health care advances, there are likely to be cases where people die of illnesses.³² It seems, however, that the dichotomy of what is up to us and not up to us is unsuitable to deal adequately with matters of value. Health is the kind of thing that one can try one’s very best to achieve. It makes a difference how much study, thought, and care one puts into it, even though one may in the end still get sick. This perspective, which proceeds in early Stoic terms, aims to describe things as they are, not – presumably – as they are best thought of by those who want psychological relief. And indeed, the early Stoic claim would be that ultimately the truth is *most* therapeutic: that one will lead a better life by aiming to see things as they are, and that includes by seeing health as something that is reasonably aimed for as best as one can. The early Stoics are committed to the Socratic ideal of leading a life guided by reason. According to this conception of philosophy, practices count as psychological fraud if they do not aim to reflect how things are.

³² I shall not enter here into discussions of where to draw the line between dying of symptoms typical to old age on the one hand and disease on the other. The important point is that even the greatest advances in medicine are unlikely to create a world entirely devoid of disease.

6. Conclusion

Stoic ethics is the only major ethical theory that focuses on what I take to be a pervasive task in ordinary life: taking the same things seriously and not seriously. Other ethicists often have something to say about some related ideas, such as questions of ‘moral luck’ – how outcomes that were a matter of luck affect our attitudes to actions. The Stoics, however, address the challenge of taking the same things seriously and not seriously in a fundamental component of their ethical theorizing. As I see it, it is a virtue of a philosophical theory to acknowledge how widely this challenge figures in ordinary life, and to try to account for the rationality of the relevant attitudes.

Though ethicists tend to neglect these matters, religion traditionally addresses them. For example, it is part of the point of some religious holidays (in several religious traditions) that they allow the believer to take a step back, as it were distancing herself from the concerns of her daily life. A child who is asked every day in the week to take her homework seriously and pay close attention in school so that she will do well on her exams and eventually ‘do well in life’ is allowed to realize that, from another point of view, such matters as grades and entry exams for college are really rather irrelevant. What matters, she is told, is that she become a good person. Religious holidays that institutionalize these ideas respond to a serious task: it is not easy to acquire the complex set of attitudes that it takes in order to study enthusiastically for your exams and at the same time recognize that you can lead a good life whether or not you pass the exams.

Late Stoic therapeutic practices may be thought to bear similarities to religion, aiming to help people attain seemingly antithetical attitudes through practices.

The early Stoics, by contrast, put their stock in arguments, trying to get clear on why the seemingly antithetical attitudes of taking the same things seriously and not seriously are not just effective, but indeed rational. Though the distinction between the valuable and the good might be one of the most famous components of Stoic ethics, I think it has been one of its least well-understood. The Stoic proposal is not only relevant to ordinary life – which should suffice to recommend it – but also relevant to contemporary philosophy. It ties discussions about value to discussions about complex attitudes of valuing: attitudes involved in deliberation on the one hand, and in wanting one’s life as a whole to go well on the other. Not least, it raises the question of whether the good and the valuable are indeed well conceived as distinct properties: whether the valuable is plausibly thought of as what today we might call ‘the reason-giving’, while the good as primary motivational end might be the good life.

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