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## The Stoic Method of Happiness

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# *The Stoic Method of Happiness*

Ian Blecher

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Let a stoic arise who shall reveal the resources of man...

—Emerson

## 1

The Stoics — most of them, anyway<sup>1</sup> — held that:

- (1) Virtue is the sole good.
- (2) Outside the scope of virtue, some items are preferable to others.

Not, however, without discomfort. From (1), and from ancient platitudes connecting goodness with happiness, we may infer that virtue is not only necessary, but also sufficient for happiness; and that therefore happiness is always within reach, even on the rack (*de Fin* III 42; cf. *EN* 1000b22-1101a8). To be fair, the Stoics never claimed happiness must be always within *easy* reach; they were comfortable with the thought that only Socrates and Cato the Younger — if anyone at all — had the stuff for it.<sup>2</sup> But this will hardly ease the impression — widespread, unfortunately — that theirs is a severe and joyless doctrine — thus, for example, Hegel, in the *Phænomenology of Spirit*: ‘Stoicism is the freedom which

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1 Diogenes Laertius reports that Panaetius and Posidonius reject (1) (DL VII 103, 128).

2 For a discussion of the problems posed by this possibility, see Inwood 2005.

always comes directly out of bondage [viz.,] freedom in thought ... a truth lacking the fullness of life' (§§ 199-200).<sup>3</sup>

In reply it might be observed that the Stoics also expounded doctrine (2); that they demonstrated sufficient concern for 'the fullness of life', for 'the resources of man', just by ranking external goods. But — ranking them according to *what*? It is not that it is obviously incoherent to prefer health and wealth and renown<sup>4</sup> to say, having one's limbs torn from their sockets.<sup>5</sup> It is that the sense in which such things are supposed to be preferred is difficult to make out if they are not simply better than the alternatives — if, that is, they are irrelevant to happiness. If it is intelligible to prefer something, one would think, this can only be because having it is good (though perhaps in a sense different from the sense in which virtue is good) (*de Fin* IV 20-2, 41, 57-60). This, presumably, is what moves Aristotle to say that virtue *and* its material conditions are needed for a happy life.

But Aristotle's view is not without problems.<sup>6</sup> The crass conclusion that an increase of wealth or other so-called external good should always cause greater happiness cannot be easily avoided once some role in the happy life has been provided external goods. In particular, it cannot be avoided by attributing to Aristotle the view that only that a minimum standard of external goods is required, increase beyond which does not make for a better life.<sup>7</sup> For this is evidently to allow that decrease of external goods below that point makes for a worse life: and that Aristotle was unwilling to concede. '[T]he happy man can never become miserable,' says he (*EN* 1101a6). What is left is something of a hodgepodge: 'Success or failure in life does not depend on [external goods], but human life, as we said, needs these as well, while excellent activities or their opposites are what determine happiness or the reverse' (*EN* 1100b9-11).

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3 Cf. also *Diss* I 19.

4 For catalogs of external goods, see, e.g., *de Fin* IV 20, 49.

5 This is not, however, a unanimous opinion. For Pyrrho, Herillus of Carthage and Aristo of Chios, among others, external goods simply did not rate (*de Fin* II 35, 43; IV 42f.; V 23; DL VII 160, 165).

6 The position developed in this paragraph closely follows that of Julia Annas 1993, 364-84.

7 Cf. Annas 1993, 382.

This sounds something like the Stoic view, actually: but rather than follow it through to the logical (though *prima facie* unintuitive) conclusion that external goods are not, after all, good, Aristotle maintains that human life needs external goods if it is to attain to the evocative but obscure status of 'blessed' (μακάριος — *EN* 1100b25 *et passim*). And this is unhelpful. For either it is better to be blessed than to be happy, in which case we ought properly to have in view the one and not the other as our ultimate end (and the original problem with happiness now arises for blessedness), or it is not better to be blessed than to be happy, in which case it is unclear why one should want to be blessed. (Indeed it is unclear in precisely the sense that it is unclear why one should want external goods if having them does not make for a better life, which is of course the question in response to which the category of 'blessedness' was first introduced.)

I agree with Julia Annas that claims (1) and (2) ought to be regarded as an attempt to clarify and stabilize Aristotle's position<sup>8</sup> (though I think she is wrong about how the Stoics think it ought to be revised). Now it seems to me that any such attempt can succeed only if it does not simply cordon off virtue on the one hand and external goods on the other, and declare for each a separate sense of 'good' and a corresponding sense of 'happy'. For from this the problem of the relation of the two sorts of good inevitably arises. We would be left with a version of, and not an improvement upon, Aristotle's solution to the problem (indeed, the Stoics were often accused — unfairly, I think — of failing sufficiently to distinguish themselves from Aristotle in this respect [cf. e.g., *de Fin* IV 11-13, 43; *Comm not* 1071B-C]). The right approach will instead derive both claims (1) and (2) from a single account of actions — one which shows them to have both virtue and external goods in view, but in such a way that success with regard to the one is necessary for the success of a given action, while success with regard to the other is not.

The claim of this paper is that what I have called 'the right approach' is, indeed, the Stoic approach. I shall try, in what follows, to give an account of it.

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8 I do not claim, nor does Annas, that the Stoics took themselves to be responding to Aristotle in particular. They may simply have had in mind a position similar to his; or they may have been thinking of a position developed by Aristotle's followers.

## 2

A popular sort of introduction to the Stoic conception of virtue takes the form of an analogy between virtue and some set of everyday doings. The following — drawn by several Stoics, beginning with Antipater in the third century BC<sup>9</sup> is perhaps the best-known example:

Just as a man whose task it is to shoot (*conliniare*) a spear or arrow at something has, as his ultimate end, to do everything in his power to shoot straight, so it is with what we call the ultimate end in life. In the case (of the archer), it is to shoot straight that he must do all he can; nonetheless, it is to do all he can to discharge the task (of shooting straight) that is (really) his ultimate end. So it is with what we call the supreme good in life. But to hit something is, as we say, to be “selected” not “sought”. (*de Fin* III 22; cf. Stob 5b3, 6a-c; *Comm not* 1071B-D.)

The manuscript has perhaps been corrupted somewhat,<sup>10</sup> and Cicero’s Latin is uncharacteristically dense here (perhaps in an attempt to ape the style of Stoic dialectic [cf. *de Fin* III 19]). The idea seems in any case to be this: first, the ultimate end for a given archer is not that a given target be hit; rather his ultimate end is that he do the things required of him by the task in the appropriate way. And second, someone trying to be virtuous is like our archer in this respect.

The analogy has never fared well outside the Stoa. Posidonius is said to have thought it contained ‘a manifest inconsistency and nothing honorable or productive of happiness’ (fr. 187; LS 1, 405). Alexander of Aphrodisias called it ‘absurd’ (*de An* II 164.6; LS 1, 401). And, of course, there is Plutarch’s canonical objection:

If someone were to say that 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 riddling and fantastic way. So it is with the idiots who insist that the end of aiming at things in accordance with nature is not the getting but the taking and selecting of them, and that being healthy is not each man’s end in his desire and

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9 Annas 1993, 402. Striker 1996, 310 gives another suggestion about its origin. Cf. also Alpers-Gözl 1976, 82.

10 But cf. LS 2, 398.

pursuit of health, but on the contrary being healthy has reference to the desire and pursuit of being healthy. For what is the difference between someone's saying that health has come into being for the sake of drugs, not drugs for the sake of health, and one who makes the selection of drugs and their composition and use more choiceworthy than health, or rather regards health as not choiceworthy at all, but locates the end in activity concerning the drugs, and declares desire to be the end of the getting, not the getting the end of the desire? (*Comm not 1071Fff.*)

Let us set aside, for the moment, his indecorous lack of sympathy for it, and observe how Plutarch brings the analogy into focus. The end of the archer — 'that the task be completed in the appropriate way' — is glossed here in terms of the practice of an art. And I think this is appropriate.<sup>11</sup> For the standards by which even a failed attempt at hitting the target could count as a kind of success could only have come from their satisfying the standards of a general practice of target-hitting (that, for example, one assumed the proper oblique stance, nocked the arrow at a right angle, took account of the wind, released smoothly... But imagine someone failing not only to hit the target, but also even to try to do any of these things. Under what circumstances would we say such a person nevertheless did his best to hit the target?).

So Plutarch has the analogy right; he only thinks it absurd that the ultimate end of archers is not that targets be hit, but rather that archery be practiced appropriately — as it would be absurd to suppose that the ultimate end of doctors is that medicine be practiced appropriately, and not that their patients' health improve.

Contemporary scholarship has largely followed Plutarch in this, though it has refined his complaints somewhat. It is nowadays said that Stoic dogma entails, disastrously, that archery is — and archers, therefore, ought to be — indifferent to hitting targets;<sup>12</sup> that the standards by which archers actually judge their own performances are not those by

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11 Cf. Alpers-Gözl: 'Here the meaning of "*conliniare*" is important: its significance does not reside merely in the straightforward aim of hitting the target, but rather in the "aiming accurately" — the surehandedness, that is, which signifies the mastery of the art...' (1976, 81; my [somewhat liberal] translation). The relevance of Alpers-Gözl's marvellous book to this paper was brought to my attention by an anonymous referee.

12 See, for example Annas 1993, 402.

which they ought to be judged,<sup>13</sup> that archery must have been invented for the sake of shooting arrows.<sup>14</sup>

It is sometimes added, as if in their defense, that the Stoics were aware of, and happy to accept, these consequences, and many more besides; that, in their view, the skeptic needs to revise his intuitions about such matters — indeed would revise them, if only he realized the significance of virtue.<sup>15</sup>

Such considerations seem to me confused. The analogy with archery was supposed to help us realize the significance and scope of virtue in the first place — so it isn't much good to require us already to have realized them in order to grasp the analogy. Nor will a further analogy help (sports and acting, among others, having been suggested<sup>16</sup>). For the criteria according to which it would be a successful analogy could only have been supplied by a correct conception of virtue; but that conception was supposed to have been supplied (in part, at least) by the analogy with archery.<sup>17</sup>

If the analogy is worth bothering about — and this paper is addressed to those who think it is — this can only be because it can supply non-Stoics with a correct conception of virtue. This will be possible under two conditions: first, it must not presuppose any prior philosophical commitments to Stoic doctrines. Any interpretation of the analogy must therefore grant the default view, that archery was designed in order to hit targets. It is not as if this is some unexamined prejudice: the goal of target-hitting is pretty obviously the source of the systematic unity of the art (cf. SVF I 73). How else should such diverse activities as checking the direction of the wind and tightening a bow-string and carrying around a quiver come to be essential parts of the same set of doings?

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13 See, for example Cooper 1999, 438.

14 See, for example Striker 1996, 243, 307, 309.

15 See Annas 1993, 399, 410.

16 By Striker 1996, 245, 310 (but cf. Annas 402n., for a reply to this) and Cooper 1999, 348 respectively.

17 Of course the Stoics did draw an analogy between acting and virtue (see *de Fin* III 24f.). But that analogy was not, it seems to me, intended to explain how claims (1) and (2) may be held simultaneously. I consider what it was intended to explain in §4 below.

And second, it must be made clear why the analogy we are to consider is with archery, and not just any art — geometry or sculpture, say. We should take ourselves to have missed something if we conclude, with Annas, among others (1993, 400-2; cf. White 1990, n.36), that the analogy is meant only to alert us to a similarity between virtue and the other arts: so much is already clear from the Stoic definition of virtue as the *τέχνη περὶ τὸν βίον* that is, the art of living (AM XI 170, 181, 184). Virtue must therefore come to resemble archery in a way which sets both of them apart from other arts.

In the following section, I shall examine how an unprejudiced conception of archery might nevertheless conform to Stoic thought about action. In §4 I shall suggest what a conception of virtue analogous to this might look like. With this in place, it should be easier to see how claims (1) and (2) might be held simultaneously. I shall conclude by considering, in §5, an objection to the use I think the Stoics wish to make of the analogy with archery.

### 3

Take the claim that someone, given the task of hitting something with an arrow, would not try to hit the target, but rather to practice a certain art appropriately. Gisela Striker has suggested that we may suppose there are people so motivated, inasmuch as practically any motivation for doing anything will have its hour with someone ('I am voting Republican because Christ desires it of me...'). But, she says, for this very reason the bare existence of someone so motivated tells us nothing about the proper attitude toward the good. What we want to know is whether it is right to try and practice archery properly given the task of hitting something with an arrow, not whether there exists someone who would so try. The point of the analogy, she concludes, must actually have been to generalize about the end of archery as such.<sup>18</sup> The claim the Stoics want us to consider would then be:

(A) The end of archery is that archery be practiced appropriately.

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18 Striker 1996, 243, 306; a similar view can be found in Annas 1993, 400ff.



And, Striker concludes, this is more or less fatuous. For it was widely agreed among ancient philosophers that arts must differ from the objects for which they are practiced (the claim seems to have originated with Carneades; see *de Fin* V 16ff.; cf. Striker 1996, 311ff.). Even if this is not, strictly speaking true, archery does seem to be one of the class of arts so conceived (cf. Striker 1996, 245, 311ff.). Whereas, presumably, virtue is not: substituting 'virtue' for 'archery' in (A) yields a claim we can take seriously. But it is not as thought the analogy with archery helped us to see this: it seemed rather to get in the way.

Now it is perhaps peculiar that a reading which makes the analogy fatuous should have recommended itself to Striker over one which makes it look merely trivial. But let us consider whether these really are the only alternatives. Now certainly the issue cannot be whether some particular person might try to practice archery, given a bow and arrows and something to hit. But why suppose we are speaking here of a particular person, the details of whose biography have simply been elided for convenience's sake? Isn't the idea rather that we want to know what a human being would do here? It is as if we had asked: what would a cat do given a saucer of milk? It would reflect a misunderstanding to reply: 'My Tibbles detests *anything* in a saucer'. In this example, we want to know about the nature of cats — not about Tibbles. In the case of the archer we want, analogously, to know whether

(A') A given (good example of a) man, asked to hit something with a bow and arrows, would try to practice archery.

accurately characterizes human nature, and not just whether it accurately characterizes the disposition of any actual persons.

Now it surely isn't fatuous to say a man would practice archery in a given situation; nor is it trivial to describe him as trying to do so (as it may be to describe someone walking down the street as 'trying to walk down the street'). For he may well fail to practice archery in the right way even if he is good at it: it is understood this is not an easy thing to do (perhaps only Socrates and Cato the Younger were up to it ...). We seem to have a claim which we can take seriously, even if it turns out to be false.

The claim can also be put this way: to practice archery is an end for our man because of what he is, and because of what archery is, and because of what his task is, and not because he just wants to (he is not selecting a brand of detergent). It is therefore a claim about the *explanation* of human actions of the relevant sort. If we want to know why a man acts as he does upon receiving some task, we cannot always, and because

not always, cannot ultimately advert to a supposed desire that the task be accomplished. We must cite a practice.

Why should this be? Let us imagine someone whose actions *vis-à-vis* a given target all reflect the end that it be hit and nothing more. For such a person, practicing archery here is but the means to that end. Perhaps this sounds like a truism about arts: cobbling, we may say, is the means of producing shoes, gunsmithing the means of producing guns, geometry the means of bisecting angles... But here we must note a peculiarity of archery (and the so-called 'stochastic' arts<sup>19</sup>). So long as all he wants is that a pair of shoes be made, a cobbler has no reason to try and achieve his end by any method other than cobbling. If he cobbles correctly, he will succeed. Success with archery is, however, a matter of probability. In certain cases, archers will stand a better chance of landing their arrow with a method other than archery. It may be preferable, for example, to throw the arrow at the target rather than to shoot it, or to walk up to the target and shove it into the bull's eye. Or, we may imagine the target is being guarded in such a way that there is only the slimmest chance of hitting it by means of archery; but that there is an extremely good chance of hitting it if one bribes the guard to shove an arrow into it. Here, we should say, the end that the target be hit demands that the guard be bribed.

Now practicing archery is not the answer to every problem involving arrows ('I want you to fashion a duck decoy from this'). But I think we shall say our archer has misunderstood his task if he decides on bribery — that he has behaved unsportingly, perhaps; or that he has, by permitting himself this short-cut, merely *rid* himself of the task without actually *accomplishing* it. But why do we feel this way? Our archer will, after all, have brought it about that, by means of a bow and arrow, the target is hit. Why shouldn't this count as success?

The problem comes into focus, I think, if we arrange for our archer's financial straits to be such that the money required for the bribe could only be raised by the sale of his bow. Now, as long as the end of our archer (as such) is simply that this target be hit, there will be no reason for him not to go ahead with the bribe. For the rationality of taking the means to an end is unaffected by considerations about one's ability to

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19 Arts, that is, whose successful performance is compatible with the failure to produce the end. Medicine and navigation are the standard examples.

realize like ends in the sequel unless those ends are already in view. And, by hypothesis, they are not — our archer has as his end nothing but the hitting of this target. ‘You’ll need your bow if you want to hit targets ever again’ is, to him, inert.

From this we should conclude that we do not think our archer’s ultimate end hitting a particular target. But what is his end if not this? The Stoics say — plausibly, in my view — it is that the target be hit ‘in the right way [*certo genere quodam*, possibly rendering the Stoic term of art, *καθηκόντως*] — not however one likes [*quolibet*]’ (*de Fin* III 23–4). Here we are told ‘in the right way’ means ‘consistently’ (translating the Latin *convenientia*, itself translating the Greek ‘ομολογία [*de Fin* III 22]). This is, obviously, a peculiar gloss. But I think the claim is an intuitive one. To be concerned not just for the target’s being hit but also for the way this is done is to be concerned for the ‘consistent’ — that is to say general — method of target-hitting being deployed in particular cases. Of course, given the vicissitudes archers face (wind, fleet-footed quarry, hostile guards...), no method for hitting targets could guarantee success in every instance. This is what it means that archery is a stochastic art. Nevertheless, we can devise a method to maximize the number of successes overall — viz., by organizing the body of practical knowledge about target-hitting with this in view (cf. SVF II 93–97; *de Fin* III 50; Allen 1993, 89).

Once the method of archery is in place, then even where bribing the guard is the surest way to hit a given target, and where trying to do things properly would make success terrifically unlikely, there is still reason to make a go of archery — then, indeed, for one in the position of our archer, bribing someone to shove an arrow into the target could not count as success at all. For now a particular attempt at target-hitting is to be judged by how the method employed would fare at hitting targets generally. And this is just to say that it is to be judged by the standards of archery.<sup>20</sup>

This does not mean that our archer is not trying to hit the particular target, or that he should not be glad of hitting it, if he does (so long as

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20 I am not claiming archery (along with the other stochastic arts) is to be distinguished from non-stochastic arts in this respect; only that the general aim of arts as such is brought out most clearly in the case of the stochastic arts, since for non-stochastic artists there is never a conflict between the end in a particular case and the end in general.

'glad' does not stand for any emotional response. But a meaningful discussion of the Stoic theory of emotions here would be out of place here). Obviously he *is* trying to hit his target — trying to hit it by means of archery; and to this extent he may be glad of a particular success. But what our archer does in order to hit a particular target cannot be explained in terms of the end of success in that particular case. If we want to understand what he is doing, we will have to understand his actions in terms of the general practice of target-hitting — in terms, that is, of the art of archery.

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I have not characterized the Stoic account of the archer in a way which distinguishes it from other ancient conceptions of art (cf. Allen 1993, 89; he cites, in this connection, *Phædr* 269d-e, 272a-b; *Rhet* 1355b10-11; *Top* 101b5-10). And this was precisely the aim: to approach the analogy without prior commitment to a theory of virtue, so that it might be understood as an appeal to the uninitiated. Now we have to see what the appeal is.

It can be put straightforwardly: virtue, as the Stoics understand it, is an art structurally similar to archery.

Let us therefore say: given a particular task (of a sort I am about to specify), a (good example of a) man has reason to try to be virtuous, and not to try to accomplish the task. Assuming the analogy holds, it may well turn out in a lot of cases that trying to be virtuous will result in the task's being accomplished; but, in certain cases, a choice will have to be made in favor of practicing virtue and against a method much more likely to accomplish the task.

Now the sort of task the Stoics must have in mind here is that which is given to a man in virtue of his being human: the task of attaining the so-called primary things according to nature (*prima naturae* — *de Fin* III 16ff.; *προηγμένα κατὰ φύσιν* — *Stob* II 6a; *DL* VII 105 *et passim*) — of attaining, in other words, those goods which satisfy his animal needs and desires. Though it is perhaps surprising given claim (1) above, the Stoics never claimed that it is pointless or wicked to pursue such things, as though they were a distraction from the real work of cultivating virtue; on the contrary, they regarded pursuit of them as a necessary part of what it is to live as a human being (cf. *de Fin* III 39).

'Every animal, as soon as it is born,' Cicero's Cato says,

is concerned with itself, and takes care to preserve itself. It favors its constitution and whatever preserves its constitution, whereas it recoils from its destruction and whatever appears to promote its destruction. In support of this thesis, the Stoics point out that infants seek what is good for them and avoid the opposite before they ever feel pleasure or pain. This would not happen unless they valued their own constitution and feared destruction. But neither could it happen that they would seek anything at all unless they had self-awareness and thereby self-love. So one must realize that it is self-love that provides the primary motivation. (*de Fin* III 16; cf. *Ep* 121, DL VII 85)

Now the claim of the analogy can be put this way: with a particular opportunity of promoting the maintenance of one's constitution in view — that is to say, given the opportunity to act — one always has reason to practice virtue, and not to seize the opportunity by whatever means happen to be most convenient. And indeed, this is what children who are brought up properly learn, the Stoics say.

Hence Cicero's Cato:

The initial "appropriate action" (by which I translate "καθῆκον") is to preserve oneself in one's natural constitution. The next is to take what is in accordance with nature and reject its opposite. Once this method of selection (and likewise rejection) has been discovered, selection then goes hand in hand with appropriate action. Then such selection becomes continuous, and, finally, stable and in agreement with nature. At this point that which can truly be said to be good first appears and is recognized for what it is. (*de Fin* III 20)

The import of this passage will come clear when we see why we ought not to ask, 'if man's first concern for rationality is a form of concern for himself, why should he come to completely neglect his animal nature?' (Striker 1996, 288, see also 289; Engberg-Pedersen 1986, 145ff.). It is not simply that the prospects for a satisfying answer to this question are bleak — though they are (see Striker 1996, 292). The question is simply confused.

The suggestion is not at all that an adult's interest in virtue supplants childhood concerns with external goods (as we may say an interest in *The New Yorker* and *Penthouse* supplants a childhood interest in *Boy's Life* and *Mad*). The suggestion is rather that over time a method for the selection and rejection of external goods takes shape. Prior to this, selection and rejection still happened — only not methodically. That is

to say, it happened without a view to what is good for a human being throughout a life. But it is only the haphazardness which has to be abandoned — not the ‘animal nature’.

Part of the upbringing of a child will therefore involve explanations of the sort, ‘Because if you gobble up all the raisins now you won’t have any when you want them later,’ and ‘Because I wouldn’t trust someone who lies,’ and ‘Because it is impolite and unsanitary to pick one’s nose, that’s why.’ And this is because, though children do not, according to the Stoic way of thinking, need to learn to desire particular external goods, they do need to learn how their particular actions bear on their prospects for securing those goods in the long term. This is surely not to learn that securing those goods is not important at all. On the contrary: it is to learn that the greatest possible number of such goods can be secured throughout a lifetime only by means of a general method. And, of course, it is to learn that the piecemeal means children (and Cyrenaics) use will make this harder — will lead, in the most extreme case, to their being unable to secure any goods at all. Consider the response of Xenophon’s Socrates to Aristippus’ view that one ought always and only to do what brings immediate pleasure. Such a person, Socrates says, would not long be able to gratify himself in this way. He would soon find himself a slave to those who became strong by delaying gratification (*Mem* II 1 10-15; cf. Annas 1993, 227).

And this general method is called ‘virtue’. Now the Stoic claim is that, after learning the method of virtue, one will concern oneself more with its employment than with getting the particular items to be selected. Perhaps this sounds implausible — the method is, after all, a means of securing precisely those items (or so we may suppose, anyway). But it is by now, I hope, sounding a little more familiar. We have to hear the appropriate concern as a general one, to be contrasted with a concern for getting some particular external good. That is what the analogy with archery was supposed to teach us.

This does not mean, of course, that if I stop myself stealing this pear from the market, I shall someday have many more pears. Perhaps, after not stealing the pear, I shall be stabbed to death on the bus home. (Does a great lode of pears count always as a good? We mustn’t, in any case, equate success at securing external goods with mere accumulation of wealth — perhaps too many pears would impede my securing health, or good friends, or...) The point is, however, a point about how to justify what I am doing: in light of my ultimate end — viz., that I lead a happy life — my actions would be at best arbitrary if they were not directed at securing the greatest share of external goods throughout a life as such

(though perhaps, it may turn out, not my life in particular, if I am after all stabbed). The securing of no (even very high) number of particular goods could attain to the sort of generality which this end has in view. This incommensurability of the particular with respect to the general is, I think, what justifies the Stoic claim that 'the particular value of virtue is distinct: a matter of kind, not degree' (*de Fin* III 34; see also III 39): the point is not that the number of goods obtained be absolutely high, but that it be *as high as possible*, whether or not what is possible is actually very much.

And, conversely, if we are to understand the actions of someone virtuous — his abstaining from food and drink now and then, his giving away his money to the poor, his wearing the occasional beard of bees — we must understand them as directed at the ultimate aim of securing external goods throughout a life (as such) and not of securing, say, this pear, for him, now.

Here let us revisit claims (1) and (2). To say that virtue is the sole good is, as I said, to say that virtue and nothing else makes for a happy life. But why think this a severe and joyless doctrine? It cannot be a contingent fact about virtue that it is a means of deciding which external goods to pursue, as if its 'intrinsic value' were some separate matter, to be explained by its possession of wondrous abstracta. On the contrary: virtue would have nothing to recommend it — would be no more than Hegel's contentless 'freedom in thought' — if it were second-best as a practical method; if there were some other less pretty but more efficient alternative method in the application of which children might be tutored. The practical (by which I mean both extrinsic and intrinsic) benefits of the virtuous life (as conceived by the Stoics, anyway), are inseparable from it. If they were not, it would be hard to see how virtue alone could make a person happy.

I think we can say, therefore, that claim (1) is designed to encompass all those parts of life which Aristotle counted valuable — both virtues and their earthly rewards — but in such a way that no question about their relation need ever arise. The cases of conflict which have sometimes been emphasized here (shall I save the orphanage or buy a quite nice pen?)<sup>21</sup> must come to be regarded as conflicts not between distinct ends or impulses, but between methods of satisfying the selfsame end. This

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21 See for example Inwood 1985, 210ff. He cites, in this connection, *Ep* 76.18.

evidently requires us not — as Aristotle does — to begin by explaining what the virtues are, and then considering what other sorts of goods there might be; or — as Aristotle also does — to distinguish a number of goods, and then try to uncover their relative import to the happy life. Virtue must rather be conceived, from the beginning of the account, as inseparable from all questions about the good, which includes questions about the value of external goods. And this is a consequence of the conception which I think the Stoic *Bildungstheorie* invites us to have. For according to it, virtue just is the art of selection among external goods.

But if claim (1) already gives a full accounting of the relation between virtue and external goods, what is the purpose of claim (2), the claim that securing some mere things is preferable? Here, I think, we should recall the analogy with archery. Our archer's commitment is to practicing his art, not to hitting his target; but that does not mean, as I said, that he is not in some sense trying to hit the target — or that he would not be at all glad of succeeding in a particular instance. Similarly, a particular human action is, in some sense, an attempt to secure a particular external good; and it is hard to see why the virtuous agent should not be glad of this just because he has prudently deployed a method of acting designed for general, and not for particular, success.

Given the way things go, the method will of course sometimes require us to choose courses of action less likely to secure any external good at all than, say, simply stealing the pear; but failure in this regard is merely trivial if the overall share of goods is increased more by the employment of a method which in this case fails to secure the relevant good. The point of claim (2) is therefore not to give us a way to think about the relation of virtue to external goods, but rather to give us a way to think about the relation of particular actions (and their particular ends) to our general method of living (and its ultimate end). And the claim is: the success of the former must be judged by the lights of the latter — by whether it manifests a consistent method, and not whether it secures some particular external good. For in the case of virtue, as with stochastic arts generally, these criteria will sometimes come apart.



The claim of analogy between virtue and archery was, I think, meant to be controversial. In Aristotle's view someone who approached practical matters the way an artist approaches his art would miss what is distinctive about virtuous actions: that there is no item which they aim to secure (*EN* 1140a1-23; 1140b20-30). Their end is simply that they be done.

This is, in other words, to take seriously the *disanalogy* between archery and virtue I adumbrated in §2 above: we resist

(A) The end of archery is that archery be practiced appropriately.

in a way we do not resist

(V) The end of virtue is that virtue be practiced appropriately.

Now if (V) is the last word on the subject — a possibility I shall consider in a moment — it is clear that our original problem, the problem about the relation of virtue to external goods, inevitably arises. For if virtuous actions do not aim at anything beyond their own performance, a full account of them can be given without mentioning wealth and health and renown. The value of items of the latter sort — if indeed they are valuable — will then have to be made out separately. And here is where things get sticky: are external goods valuable in themselves? If so, they are a kind of good distinct from virtue; but how is the relation between this sort of good and virtue to be made out? Or: are external goods valuable as the material condition for virtuous actions? Suppose, however, we should fail to secure them. Would virtuous action — and therefore happiness — then be impossible? Certainly no one among the ancients was willing to say this. Or: are external goods not valuable at all? But surely some such things are preferable to others!

One might suppose the analogy with archery is meant to resist this line of thought, and to embrace instead one which makes concise the relation of virtue to external goods as the relation of a method of securing something to the items secured.

The trouble is, though, the Stoics did not resist (V). On the contrary, they shared to some extent Aristotle's intuition that virtuous action is valuable intrinsically: 'Nor do we think wisdom is like navigation or medicine, but rather more like acting or dancing... [For] the desired end

is located within the [virtuous] act,' Cicero's Cato says, just two paragraphs after presenting the analogy with archery (*de Fin* III 24, 32<sup>22</sup>).<sup>23</sup>

What might we make of this? It seems to me there are two questions here. There is a question about what to make of Cato's assertion that wisdom is not like navigation or medicine — or presumably any stochastic art — given the text which precedes it. And there is a question about what to make of the assertion that wisdom is like dancing. Let us take them in turn.

As regards the first question: John Cooper has said the passage was 'very likely' intended to report both sides of an intestine debate (cf. 1999, 438n). Now, it is possible such a debate took place. But, first, there is no evidence to suggest Cicero was aware of one. And second, even if he was, it would hardly explain the straightforward inconsistency in what purports to be a single account of the nature of virtue — especially given Cicero's care to distinguish explicitly the views of different sects within the schools whose views he considers (cf. *de Fin* III 33). Perhaps it would be better to say something like this: Cato is claiming simply that virtue is in some respect different from the stochastic arts, though of course there are the similarities mentioned at III 22. This not what Cato actually says, unfortunately; then again, what he actually says is intolerable, and I am not sure how else to get around it.<sup>24</sup> Suppose, then, that it is what he meant.

If it is, we can say, as regards the second question, that the comparison with dance is intended to complement, not to undermine, the account of virtue I reproduced in §3 above. What was missing from that account was evidently an explanation of the intrinsic worth of virtuous actions: for it seems the value of the art of archery is derived from the value of

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- 22 III 32 is bracketed by the Oxford Classical Text edition as irrelevant to its context. Annas helpfully suggests it would fit well with III 24, and with this in mind, I have run the two passages together.
- 23 Strictly speaking, of course, Cato does not back down from the claim that virtue is an art here (or elsewhere). But he may as well have: it is no longer clear why it matters that we are regarding virtue as an art, and not as a *sui generis* property of actions which nevertheless shares something with dancing.
- 24 It is always open to us to speculate about the corruption of the manuscript, of course; but such speculation, based on nothing but philosophical bewilderment, seems to me unnecessarily desperate here.

hitting the greatest possible number of targets; but we should not like to say that the value of the art of living is derived from the value of securing external goods — even the value of securing the greatest possible number of them — or, really, that it is derived from anything to which it would then be a means. In this respect, I take Cato to be claiming, virtue is like dancing (and unlike archery): the value of the action which manifests the proper method of selection is wholly contained in its performance.

Perhaps this sounds like a repudiation of the analogy with archery. But I do not think it is. The point of that analogy was to alert us to some structural peculiarities which virtue, understood as the method of selection of external goods, shares with stochastic arts (e.g., its demand that securing an external good in a particular case be sacrificed in favor of success overall). But this was a point about the relation of virtue to the choice of particular actions, not a point about the relation of a particular virtuous action to the virtuous life as a whole.<sup>25</sup> This latter relation is quite different from the former. For no choice ever need be made between being virtuous *hic et nunc* and being virtuous throughout life. The one is just a part of the other. But precisely because a particular virtuous action is a part of the virtuous life, we do not say the one is a means to the other (as we do not normally say that the *pas de deux* at the end of Act I is a means to the performance of *Le Corsaire*).

The *intrinsic* value of the virtuous life apparently consists in its being — not a means to, but identical with — the happy life, where happiness is understood as absolutely valuable (cf. EN 1097a35-b7). So, we can say, the intrinsic value of a particular virtuous action consists in its being — not a means to, but identical with — a part of the happy life.

But this is perfectly compatible with the account of §3 above; there is no reason particular virtuous actions could not bear the relation to the virtuous life as a whole which the analogy with dance suggests and still be the best method of selection among external goods. All this would mean is that to practice that method is to lead a happy life (and the converse). There is no reason why the value of virtue should not be compatible with the relation it bears to the accretion of external goods

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25 Hence Inwood rightly speaks of the ‘limited aims of the author of this analogy’, 1985, 213.

— so long, that is, as we do not infer from this that the value is derived from that relation. But this — I have argued — is precisely what we shall have understood when we have understood how (1) is compatible with (2).<sup>26</sup>

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### Primary Sources and Abbreviations

Alexander of Aphrodisias, *de Anima* (=de An).

Aristotle, *Ethika Nicomachea* (=EN). I have used J.O. Urmson's revision of W.D. Ross' translation (Princeton University Press 1984).

\_\_\_\_\_, *Techne Rhetorike* (=Rhet).

\_\_\_\_\_, *Topika* (=Top).

Arius Didymus, excerpted in Stobaeus' *Eklogai apophthegmata hupothekai* (=Stob). I have modified A. Pomeroy's translation (Society of Biblical Literature 1999).

Cicero, *de Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (=de Fin). I have modified R. Woolf's translation (Cambridge University Press 2001).

Diogenes Laertius (=DL).

Epictetus, *Dissertationes* (=Diss).

Plato, *Phædrus* (=Phædr).

Plutarch, *De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos* (=Comm not). I have used the translation which appears in Long and Sedley 1987.

Posidonius, fragments (=fr.). I have used the translation which appears in Long and Sedley 1987.

Seneca, *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales* (=Ep).

Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* (=AM).

*Stoicorum vetera fragmenta* (=SVF). I have used the translation which appears in Long and Sedley 1987.

Xenophon, *Memorabilia* (=Mem).

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