

The Good of Others: A Stoic Reading of Plato¹

[Draft. Comments welcome.]

In spite of the resurrection of virtue ethics in the past twenty years, many contemporary ethicists distrust ancient ethics. A number of long-standing complaints could be cited. Importantly, ancient ethics seems to make a case for ‘selfishness.’ Though this objection sounds as if raised by someone with little sympathy and knowledge of ancient philosophy, it is not easily dismissed. Bernard Williams formulates a more sophisticated version: the person who cares primarily about the state of her soul may appear self-indulgent.² When we look at Stoic ethics, it is indeed *not* easy to see whether and how virtuous agents are concerned with the good of others. Apparently, they are concerned with the perfection of their own reason. But this squares badly with the fact that the Stoics take a cosmopolitan stance. In order to do so in any plausible sense, their ethics has to be concerned with the good of others. As I shall argue, we look in vain for this side of Stoic ethics as long as we seek for discussion of interaction between unrelated persons. In a way that is indebted to Plato, the Stoics think we should see others as fellow-parts of a whole, whose concerns matter to us because they are the concerns of ‘relatives.’

¹ I am grateful to audiences at the University of Michigan, Columbia University, and University of Toronto for helpful discussion of an ancestor of this paper, and to Jens Haas for feedback on more recent versions of it. The paper builds on Vogt, *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City* (Oxford 2008), but addresses different questions. Earlier publications on the topic include: Gisela Striker, “Origins of the Concept of Natural Law,” *Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 2 (1987), 79-94, reprinted in *Papers in Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge 1996), 209-220; Malcolm Schofield, *The Stoic Idea of the City*, with a foreword by Martha Nussbaum (Chicago 1999); Martha Nussbaum’s introduction to Schofield’s book; Dirk Obbink, “The Stoic Sage in the Cosmic City,” in: Ierodiakonou (ed.), *Topics in Stoic Philosophy*, 178-195.

² Bernard Williams, “Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence,” in *Moral Luck*.

Stoic cosmopolitanism is based on a proposal on how we are to *see* ourselves and others: we ought to recognize that we are related to others. That is, the Stoics do not struggle with the question of why we should help unrelated persons at the other end of the world; there are no such persons. This position, we might think, has an advantage and a disadvantage. The question that troubles contemporary proponents of global justice, namely how they can prove to the unpersuaded that poverty and disease of distant others concern us, has a straightforward answer. From the Stoic point of view, it is obvious why we must help: because others are related to us. This is a fact about the world, one that is at once physical and normative. A disadvantage, however, might be that, for the Stoics – and this is a deep difference to religious, Kantian, and post-Kantian versions of cosmopolitanism – other human beings do not concern us because they have *worth*, *dignity*, *equal standing as reasoners*, or anything of that sort.³ Human beings are interrelated physiological parts of a complex physiological system; no special value is ascribed to them *qua* human beings.

In explaining the Stoic proposal, and its ancestry in Plato, I hope to dispel some of the

³ My account of Stoic cosmopolitanism differs in a number of ways from Martha Nussbaum's well-known account in "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," *Boston Review* 19 (1994), as well as her "Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 5 (1997): 1-25. Contrary to Nussbaum, I think the Stoic claim that the world is one physical entity with us as parts is not a metaphor, but an integral aspect of their theory. Importantly, this means that human beings are viewed as physical entities, and not as 'persons' with 'dignity' and 'worth' (terms Nussbaum uses in describing Stoic theory in (1997), 7). Further, I consider it important that the Stoics think emotions are *irrational*, which Nussbaum does not. Generally, I reconstruct Stoic theory in the hopes of emphasizing differences to Kantian and other modern conceptions in moral philosophy, thus pointing to the distinctiveness of the Stoic position.

mistrust that is bound to arise when we realize that the Stoics, just like other ancient ethicists, do not ascribe worth to human beings – a point that scholars of ancient ethics rarely point out or admit. Ultimately, I hope to show that the Stoic proposal is compelling, and fits surprisingly well with many aspects of a contemporary outlook.

A brief note on method. The Stoics disagree with Plato on fundamental philosophical issues. In almost all respects, it seems misguided to argue that the Stoics *accept* claims or arguments from Plato. The early Stoics are sophisticated readers of Plato, and interlocutors of other Hellenistic thinkers, many of whom are equally well-acquainted with Plato's dialogues. Early Stoic philosophy emerges in a debate in which Plato is rarely far from the minds of the discussants. Plato's influence is thus at once enormous and elusive. Stoic theories are theories that one might come up with while thinking very hard about one's agreements and disagreements with Plato. In my discussion of Plato, I shall focus for the most part on the *Republic*, though I shall also refer to passages from the *Meno* and the *Euthydemus*. Much could be added from other dialogues. But for the cluster of ideas relevant to our topic – the way in which the good person concerns herself with others – these three texts are particularly important.

I. The Good of Others in Plato

1. Virtue

The *Republic* begins with ordinary intuitions about virtue. A number of interlocutors say what, in their view, justice is. Doing so, they have an ordinary notion of justice in mind,

according to which the just (*dikaion*) person is the person who does the right thing (*dikein*), so that justice is virtually taken to be all of virtue.⁴ Cephalus proposes that the just person abstains from certain types of action that immediately affect others, actions such as not giving back what belongs to others. His position is common-sensical. Though it is presented as rather unrefined, it is obviously meant to capture widespread intuitions. Polemarchus invokes the poet Simonides, who famously said that justice is to give to everyone their due (331e-332a). He interprets Simonides along the lines of the warrior-code of Iliadic times: the just person helps her friends and harms her enemies. Given the role of poetry in Greek education, and the role of warfare in Greek history and politics, this is likely to be an extremely widespread view (332a-335e). Thrasymachus says that justice, understood as the law given by rulers, is what aids those who are in power (338c). Surely, this notion of politics is not new. Thrasymachus eventually reformulates his stance, saying that justice, now understood as the attitude of an agent, is the good of the other (343c). To be just is to one's disadvantage, but to the advantage of the rulers, or indeed, any others who take advantage of the just person. Thrasymachus' reformulated position is not presented as widespread. On the contrary, most people would not dare to say such things. But it is meant to capture a deep worry – that one might be badly off if one is virtuous – one that young people like Glaucon and Adeimantus are likely to ponder. For present purposes, one feature of the suggestions in Book I matters most. Each of the three speakers, as well as the influential poets who are invoked, views virtue as

⁴ Book I's background assumption that justice is virtue is made explicit during the exchange with Polemarchus. Socrates proposes: "Justice is human virtue?" (335c); he continues: "And the just is good" (335d). These premises are confirmed in the function argument 352e-354a; esp. 353e7-8.

immediately concerned with others. For all of them, it is obvious that virtue has something to do with interaction.⁵

In Book IV of the *Republic*, when Plato arrives at his official definitions of virtue, this perspective almost disappears. Wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice emerge as four *eidê* – four kinds of attitudes of the virtuous person. Notably, they are not referred to as four virtues. Virtue is *one*; the good state of the soul is one state. Plato's definitions in Book IV thus circumscribe a complex proposal: virtue is one; there are four main features or attitudes that the virtuous person has; justice is one of these attitudes, and at the same time there is a sense in which justice is all of virtue.⁶ Justice is harder to define than wisdom, courage, and moderation, for it is not located primarily in one part of the soul (wisdom/reason; courage/spirit; moderation/desires) and in its relationships to the other parts. Justice is virtue in the sense that its account explains the state of the virtuous soul as a whole. Consider the sequence of formulations in Book IV:

I. Justice is doing one's own work (433a-b).

II. Justice is the power that preserves and lets grow the other virtues (433b).

⁵ The various ideas about justice that come up in Book I play a role that in some respects can be compared to Aristotelian *endoxa*. Each view that is discussed contains ideas that the account of justice in Books IV and VIII-IX addresses.

⁶ In the *Meno*, Meno keeps confusing virtue and justice. Clearly, he thinks of the common-sensical idea that the just person is the person who acts in the right ways; *dikaïosunê* and *dikein* are linguistically and conceptually closely associated. Socrates keeps correcting him, saying that justice is a part of virtue, rather than all of virtue. However, it is unlikely that Plato would spend so much time exploring this issue if he did not think there was something to the ordinary intuition that Meno has in mind. The idea resurfaces in the *Republic*, with Book I making no relevant distinction between virtue and justice, and Book IV proposing that justice is part of virtue and, in a sense, all of virtue.

III. Justice is the having and doing of one's own (433e).

IV. Justice is when each part of a whole does its own work (441d).

Conventional Assumptions Argument: If every part of the soul in a person does its work (whether that is ruling or being ruled), this person would not do any of the things that conventionally count as unjust (stealing, betraying friends, adultery, breaking an oath, etc.) (442 e f.).

V. The just person produces a harmonious unity in her soul (443d).

VI. To produce justice is to produce a natural relation of control in the soul (444d).

VII. Just actions produce justice in the soul (444d). Beautiful actions lead to the possession of virtue, ugly actions to vice (444e).

The sequence ends with the claim that virtuous actions make the agent virtuous. That is, virtuous actions are not defined by how they affect others, or how the agent views others and interacts with them. What seems to matter most is the motivational state of the agent. Almost as an afterthought, Plato says that his account is not contrary to ordinary assumptions. The kind of person we are envisaging is unlikely to do any of the things that Cephalus was concerned with, things like betraying others or not giving back their property. But this observation appears to be a mere corollary of what really counts: namely that the virtuous person is in the best possible state. Thrasymachus' challenge is, even if only provisionally (the issue is re-opened in Book VIII), refuted: justice is not the good of others, but the good of the agent.

If the critic of ancient ethics wants to point to one particular passage that exemplifies his worry – the worry that virtue is apparently about one's own soul, rather than about the

ways in which others are treated – the claim that virtuous actions produce a just soul is a good choice. Apparently, Plato is more concerned with how action retro-actively acts on the soul, rather than with how action affects other agents. As it seems, what really matters is that one become a wise and virtuous person, thus doing well for oneself.

2. *Only virtue is good*

Next, consider the idea that only virtue is good. Given Socratic background assumptions, this claim is virtually equivalent to two other claims: only wisdom is good; only knowledge is good. For present purposes, it does not matter which term we use. The core idea is that only the perfect condition of one's soul is genuinely good, and nothing else is. Plato does not argue for this claim in the *Republic*. However, in some dialogues, notably the *Euthydemus* and the *Meno*, he looks at lists of 'goods' (things that are thought to be good), and argues that only virtue (wisdom, knowledge) is unqualifiedly good.

Consider first a passage from the *Euthydemus* (278e3–281e). The exchange begins with the premises that all human beings want to be well (*eu prattein*), and that one is well through having many good things. A list of potentially good things is considered: being wealthy, being healthy, being born into a good family, having power, having a good reputation; being moderate, just, and courageous; wisdom; good fortune (*eutuchia*). However, it appears to the interlocutors that something is wrong with this list. The same comes up twice. Wisdom and good fortune appear to be the same. Why? The expert is 'most fortunate' in doing what he does well (for example, we would rather fight illness

with a wise doctor at our side than with one who lacks learning). Wisdom makes us fortunate in all things because, through wisdom, one acts by necessity correctly and ‘hits the mark.’ If there is wisdom, good fortune is no longer needed.

Conversation now returns to the starting-point: we are happy by having many goods.

However, we are only happy if the goods are beneficial (*ôpheloi*) to us. But they are only beneficial to us if we use them, and use them correctly. In fact, it is worse to use something incorrectly than to not have it in the first place (say, to use money incorrectly rather than have no money). For correct use (*chreia*), we need knowledge (*epistêmê*). No possession is of any benefit (*ophelos*) without wisdom (*sophia*). It follows that 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); if wisdom, they are good. In themselves (*kath’ hauta*), neither of them is of any value (*axia*).

The claim, then, is that the kinds of things we usually consider good, things like health or wealth, are by themselves of no value. They are good if used wisely and bad if used ignorantly. The claim also involves a close association of the notions of the good and of benefit. This is where we need to turn next.

3. The good benefits

Goods are really only goods-for-us if they benefit us, and for that to be the case, we need to use them wisely. The notion of correct or wise use receives a certain amount of

attention by scholars; it is part of the the pre-philosophical tradition about the good life as the measured life. However, the close conceptual tie between the notions of the good and of benefit is largely neglected. Presumably, it does not speak to modern sensibilities, according to which the useful (which is another way of translating the words that I rendered in terms of the beneficial) is associated with self-interest and mundane concerns, while the good is associated with loftier ideals. But Plato seems to me to be fully committed to the claim that the good is that which benefits. This is particularly clear when, in *Republic* II, he discusses the nature of the divine. Socrates states a theological axiom of greatest importance: God is good. He follows up by saying that “the good is benefit”; accordingly, if God is good, he must be someone who benefits (379b).

The claim that the good is benefit figures prominently in Book I. The good has a *function* (*ergon*), namely to benefit (335d3-8). For this reason, virtue, which is good, cannot be an expertise (*technê*). Like medicine can be used to heal and to poison, virtue, understood as an expertise, could be used to good and ill effect (332d-334b). However, it is the function of the good to benefit, and accordingly the good person benefits everyone (333e-335e).

Plato explores related issues in the *Meno*. Consider first (77b4-78b). Meno offers his second response to the question of what virtue is: “virtue is to desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them” (77b). Socrates reformulates the first phrase (to desire beautiful things) as ‘desiring good things’ (77b6-7). Does Meno think that some people desire good things, others bad things? Meno says ‘yes.’ Those who desire bad things, do

they believe the bad things to be good, or do they believe them to be bad? Meno thinks that both cases occur. But Socrates leads him to see that the second case is impossible. Consider an agent who wants bad things that he considers bad. Does he think that bad things benefit (*ôphelein*) him, or does he know that they harm (*blaptein*) him? Again, Meno thinks that both cases occur. But Socrates argues for a close conceptual tie between the bad and the harmful. So see something as bad is to see it as harmful, and to be harmed is to be miserable and unhappy. No one wants to be miserable and unhappy. Therefore no one wants what is bad (78a). It follows that the first clause in Meno's account of virtue (to desire good things) applies to everyone, not just to those who have virtue (78b). This exchange is one of the core passages on the so-called Socratic Paradox, that everyone desires the good. For present purposes, we shall leave this issue aside. Instead, we should note the close association of the bad and the harmful, as well as the good and the useful. Plato suggests that this is how ordinary agents *see* things: to think of something as good is to think of it as useful.

Discussion of relevant issues resumes a couple of pages later (87e-88a). Socrates and Meno apply a new method. They study virtue by setting up hypotheses and exploring their implications. In the course of this discussion, two claims relevant to our present purposes are – albeit hypothetically – set up as central: A good person is a useful person, and virtue is useful (87e1 and 4). These hypotheses lead the interlocutors to take a closer look at what kinds of things are useful (*ôphelein*). We get an initial brief list: health, strength, beauty, wealth. However, it is objected, these very things can also bring harm.

Correct use (*chrêsis*) needs to rule over them if they are to be useful. If not used correctly, they bring harm. Discussion turns to another set of goods: temperance, justice, courage, being learned, memory, etc. With respect to these things, Socrates argues that, whatever in them is not knowledge, sometimes benefits and sometimes harms. For example, courage with wisdom benefits, courage without wisdom harms. Socrates continues his proposal (couched in hypothetical terms) as follows. If virtue is in the soul and is by necessity always useful, virtue must be wisdom. Everything else in the soul is only beneficial if it is used with wisdom; if used with foolishness, it is harmful. In itself, it is neither useful nor harmful. It follows that, if the hypotheses that were set up are correct, then wisdom (*phronêsis*) is the useful (*to ôphelimon*), and wisdom is virtue, either all of it or a part of it (89a).

The details of the arguments in the *Euthydemus* and *Meno* differ, and there is no reason to assume that the Plato of the *Republic* would accept either version in all its aspects.

However, the *Republic* confirms the claims that the good benefits and that the virtuous person benefits. Plato continues to think of virtue, knowledge, and wisdom as intricately related. Though Plato discusses these matters in different terms in the *Republic* (for example, in terms of which kind of person shall have which kinds of desires, Book VIII-IX), it is plausible to assume that he continues to think that only the virtuous person shall deal with money, health, and so on, in the right kinds of ways.

4. *Others as relatives*

Return now to the question I set out with, and that was particularly apparent in Book IV of the *Republic*. If virtue is a certain state of the soul, and virtuous actions are actions that sustain or produce this state, then other people seem to be shockingly absent in Plato's ethics. Are the brief remarks in Book IV, the remarks I referred to as Conventional Assumptions Argument, all there is? If we look for discussion of particular interactions with others, the answer is 'yes.' The conceptual tie between the good and the useful indicates where we should look for the relevant ideas. Clearly, Plato does not think of the virtuous person as a lover of her own, perfect soul; rather, the good person is someone who benefits. But we need to hear more.

A very general fact about the virtuous agent's relationship to others, as Plato conceives of it, derives from the set-up of the *Republic*. The good person is studied in the context of a larger study of the good city. In what is perhaps the most pervasive metaphor of the *Republic*, we think of an agent as located at a particular point in a community.

Plato explores what it would mean for everyone in a city to perform her function (*ergon*) (433e-434c). Each job that people in a city hold has something specific to do with the good of others: bakers and shipbuilders, soldiers, rulers, doctors and architects, politicians and educators do things that can be done well and badly. If they do them well, they benefit others. Otherwise they harm others.

Plato does not speak in terms of others, with whom one interacts, being well off through one's actions. Rather, he speaks in terms of the city being well off if everyone in it does

his or her job well. Throughout the *Republic*, Plato is concerned with the *unity* of the city. This is most prominent when the so-called community of women and children is introduced. Most literally, the idea here is that the members of the ruling group in Plato's city should regard everyone in the generation above them as if they were their parents, everyone in the same generation as siblings, and everyone in the next generation as their own offspring (450c). Thus the city is maximally unified—its rulers view each other as belonging together like family-members.⁷

II. The Good of Others in Stoic Cosmopolitanism

1. *Virtue*

Stoic ethics should be approached with these Platonic arguments in mind. Otherwise, the Stoics may appear to be silent on the concerns of others.⁸ The Stoics formulate a number of accounts of virtue. For our purposes, the core claim is that to be virtuous is to be a perfect reasoner with respect to preferred and dispreferred indifferents. Let me explain.

According to the Stoics, health, wealth, life, functioning cognitive faculties, and so on, are in agreement with nature. This means: a human life that is lived with one's cognitive

⁷ Schofield (1999) argues that Zeno wrote his *Republic* in close engagement with the particular institutions of Plato's *Republic*. As will be apparent from my approach throughout, I take the Stoics to engage with Plato's philosophical arguments more than with the letter of particular proposals.

⁸ Scholars have called this one of the "puzzles" in interpreting Stoic philosophy: Stoic ethics appears not to mention the concerns of others Rachel Barney describes how puzzling this is in "A Puzzle in Stoic Ethics," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2003), 303–340. Micheal Frede discusses this difficulty in "On the Stoic Conception of the Good," in: K. Ierodiakonou (ed.), *Topics in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford 2001), 71–94.

faculties intact, with one's body functioning well, a certain amount of wealth, and so on, is the kind of life that it is natural for human beings to lead. Therefore, reason prefers to have these things. Accordingly, the Stoics call them preferred things. They call them preferred *indifferents*, thereby indicating that these things are not *goods*. Rather than being good, these things have *value*. Their opposites—illness, impediments of one's cognitive faculties, death, poverty, and so on—are contrary to nature; they are dispreferred indifferents; they have disvalue.⁹

Indifferents are indifferent insofar as they do not contribute to happiness. I am not doomed to have a bad life when I am poor, or have a disease. But wealth, poverty, health, illness, and so on, have value and disvalue. It is reasonable to prefer, say, having a roof over my head and having access to doctors as compared to, say, sleeping out in the cold and not being able to care for my health. Importantly, virtue itself does not figure in deliberation as one of several considerations. The agent never weighs the value of wealth against the claims of virtue. The perfect agent comes to see that virtue—and that is, perfect reasoning—is the only thing that, for a human being, is really good. Everything else, i.e., the things that deliberation is immediately concerned with, has value and disvalue. Virtue thus figures in deliberation insofar as it is the agent's goal to deliberate

⁹ DL 7.101-5; Stobaeus 2.79,18-80,13; 82,20-1; 2.83,10-84,2; 2.84,18-85,11; (= LS 58A-E).

perfectly.¹⁰ The things of value and disvalue are the *material* of deliberation. The perfect agent deliberates perfectly with respect *to them*. Perfect selection and deselection of indifferents—or, in other words, perfect deliberation—constitutes virtue.¹¹

As in the case of *Republic IV*, it is hard to see how the concerns of other people matter to the virtuous agent.¹² No early Stoic examples survive that would help clarify this question. The virtuous agent, it would appear from the sources, thinks about her *own* life. A hard case that the Stoics discuss, for example, is the virtuous person who, in dire circumstances, is ready to cut off her foot. The agent, apparently, deliberates with a view

¹⁰ Cicero, *De fin.* 3.50; cf. 3.22 on the claim that the valuable is that which is ‘selected.’ See also the *telos*-formulae of Antipater and Diogenes (both second-century Stoics): the end is reasoning well in the selection and deselection of the natural things (Stobaeus 2.75,11). In Vogt (2004), I discuss how Stoic theory is often misrepresented, as if, according to the Stoics, virtue ‘trumped’ other considerations. It is key to the Stoic theory that virtue is not one of several considerations. Virtue consists in deliberating perfectly with a view to indifferents.

¹¹ Tad Brennan discusses a number of issues related to the precise interpretation of ideal deliberation in *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate* (Oxford 2005). However, Brennan’s focus is not on how the concerns of others figure in the wise person’s reasoning. I do not have the space here to explain my disagreements with Brennan. With respect to the agents’s own concerns, my interpretation is close to John Cooper’s views in “Greek Philosophers on Euthanasia and Suicide,” in: Cooper, *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton 1999), 515-541.

¹² When it comes to describing justice in particular, the Stoics think of interaction: justice is about distribution. But the definitions of particular virtues play a rather limited role in Stoic ethics. The Stoics fully endorse what they see as a Socratic tenet: the unity of virtue. Plutarch, *On Stoic self-contradictions* 1034c-e (LS 61C) and Stobaeus 2.63,6-24 (LS 61D).

to her *own* health, physical strength and abilities, and life.¹³

2. *Only virtue is good*

The Stoic theory of indifferents is commonly seen as a heir to the accounts in Plato's *Euthydemus* and *Meno*.¹⁴ Though it clearly is, the Stoics disagree in several ways with Plato: (i) They do not adopt a notion of correct or wise use (*chrêsis*). (ii) They do not accept the idea that, if used wisely, things like health and wealth are good. These things have value, for the wise and the foolish alike. (iii) For the Stoics, preferred indifferents genuinely *have* value. The Stoics disagree with Plato's suggestion that, in themselves, neither of these things is of any value (*axia*).

As important as it is that we recognize Stoic engagement with Plato, and refer to Platonic texts when thinking through Stoic theories, we need to be careful. The Stoics tend not to adopt anything straightforwardly from Plato. They read the dialogues philosophically, and that is, they engage with the arguments, then moving on to the formulation of their

¹³ I discuss this example in Vogt (2008), chapters 1 and 4. On early Stoic examples, see Vogt "Die frühe stoische Theorie des Werts," *Abwägende Vernunft*, eds. Ch. Schröer and F.-J. Bormann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), 61-77. A brief word on terminology. The Stoics do not have a term for 'deliberation.' For them, agents accept and reject impressions. Such impressions might be of rather different kinds, for example, "today it is raining," "when it rains, one should take an umbrella," "not catching a cold is to be preferred," "I should take my umbrella." This last impression would count as an action-engendering impression. When we assent to this impression, assent generates the impulse for an action—taking the umbrella. Reasoning that is relevant to action thus involves reasoning about what is the case (such as, whether it is raining today), reasoning about what has value and disvalue (not catching or catching a cold), and reasoning about what it is appropriate to do (taking the umbrella).—For the sake of simplicity, I shall refer to this kind of reasoning as deliberation.

¹⁴ Cf. A.A. Long, "Stoic Eudaimonism," in Long, *Stoic Studies* (Cambridge, 1996), 179-202; first published 1989.

own views. It is surprising how many scholars still write as if the Stoics thought indifferent things had *no* value or disvalue – as if they simply said that virtue is good, but did not have a notion of value. This is a deep misunderstanding of Stoic theory.¹⁵ If the Stoics did not have a notion of value, then Stoic ethics would probably be highly unattractive to us (as indeed many think it is): if the Stoics just talked about an elusive wise person, who values wisdom and nothing else, it would be quite unclear why this position deserved any serious philosophical attention.

3. *The good benefits*

The Stoics forcefully endorse Plato's claim that only virtue benefits. They go so far as to define the good as benefit or 'that which is of use'.¹⁶ As in the case of Plato (and quite likely for similar reasons, namely, that this idea does not resonate with high-minded modern conceptions of morality), this part of Stoic ethics is greatly under-appreciated.¹⁷

[...] Well then, the Stoics, holding on to 'common conceptions' (so to speak), define the good in this way: "Good is benefit (*ôpheleia*) or not other than benefit," by 'benefit' referring to virtue and virtuous action, and by 'not other than benefit'

¹⁵ For a recent example of this conception of Stoic philosophy, cf. Shadi Bartsch, "Senecan metaphor and Stoic self-instruction," in S. Bartsch and D. Wray (eds.), *Seneca and the Self* (Cambridge 2009), 188-220. Bartsch writes as if the Stoics suggested we should look down upon, for example, food. This is seriously misleading. Having healthy food to eat is, for the Stoics, something that reason prefers. It is of value.

¹⁶ SE, *M* 11.21-24.

¹⁷ Cf. Vogt, "The Good is Benefit. On the Stoic Definition of the Good," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* (2008). Cicero is already cautious, in ways that anticipate a widespread modern distaste for the useful. He is well aware of the Stoic thesis that the good is useful. But he still thinks that, in deliberation, it is one thing to think in terms of the honorable, and another to think in terms of the useful, thus contrasting the virtuous and the useful in a way that is inconceivable within Stoic ethics. Cicero associates the perspective of the useful with selfish reasoning and one's own advantage, rather than insisting, as the Stoics would, that only what is good is genuinely useful (*On Duty* 1.9-10).

the virtuous human being and the friend. For virtue, which is a disposition of the commanding-faculty, and virtuous action, which is an activity in accordance with virtue, are, precisely, benefit; while the virtuous human being and the friend, also being themselves among the good things, could not be said to be either benefit or other than benefit, for the following reason. Parts, the sons of the Stoics say, are neither the same as wholes nor are they different from wholes; for example, the hand is not the same as the whole human being (for the hand is not a whole human being), nor is it other than the whole (for it is together with the hand that the whole human being is conceived as a human being). Since, then, virtue is a part of the virtuous man and of the friend, and parts are neither the same as wholes nor other than wholes, the virtuous human being and the friend have been called ‘not other than benefit.’ So that every good is encompassed by the definition, whether it is benefit or not other than benefit. (M11.21-24).¹⁸

The good is benefit: virtue, thus, is the only thing that benefits; the virtuous person is not entirely of benefit – only her rational soul, which is in the state of virtue, benefits.

Clearly, then, the Stoics agree with Plato in thinking that the virtuous agent must be someone who benefits. This position leads them toward claims that strike readers as paradoxical. First, *only* the virtuous person can benefit someone else; that is, if an average person were to give you some medication that you need, she would not benefit you.

Second, *only* the virtuous person can be benefitted; the kinds of things that the rest of us exchange – money, medications, etc. – are not of benefit; two sages, however, who encounter each others’ virtuous actions, are benefitting each other.¹⁹ That is, the association of the good and benefit is fully endorsed: whatever is not good, but merely has value (such as health or wealth), is not a benefit. Do the Stoics really claim that, say,

¹⁸ Tr. based on Bett, LS, and Bury, with changes; cf. the shorter version in PH 3.169-171.

¹⁹ Cf. Plutarch, *On common conceptions* 1076A (LS 61J) and *De Stoicorum Repugnantiis* chapter 12.

providing a medication, is not of benefit to those who need it?

How are we to resolve the appearance of paradox in the Stoic position? With respect to Seneca's treatise *De Beneficiis*, scholars have contemplated the idea that, what actually benefits the addressee of virtuous action is the *intention*, not the receipt of the help itself.²⁰ Thus, virtue as the state of mind of an agent would benefit the addressee, not the actual delivery of, say, a medication. Whether or not this is an adequate interpretation of Seneca's position, the early Stoics do not seem to me to have the relevant kind of notion of intention. How, then, can we explain their stance? The proposal, I think, is as follows. Only the good benefits. Valuable things do not benefit. However, the virtuous person is virtuous insofar as she deliberates perfectly with respect to valuable things. Accordingly, the way the concerns of others shall be taken care of is that she deliberates perfectly with respect to valuable things, as they pertain to *her and others*.

Epictetus explores this point. If one looks at oneself as an independent entity rather than as a part of some whole, then, apparently, it is according to nature to live to old age, to be wealthy, and to be healthy.²¹ That is, as long as one has a *mistaken* view of what one is, namely the view according to which one is a separate entity, unrelated with others, then it would seem that only one's own health, wealth, life, etc., matter. But on a correct view of

²⁰ See Brad Inwood's "Seneca's *De Beneficiis*," in *Reading Seneca*, OUP 2005, 65-94. Seneca's discussion is hard to assess, for it goes back and forth between concerning itself with the Roman institution of 'giving favors' on the one hand, and analysis of paradoxical Stoic claims about the good and benefit on the other.

²¹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.5.25-26.

oneself and others, valuable and disvaluable things as they pertain to oneself and to others are the material of deliberation. This leads to the fundamental claim of Stoic cosmopolitanism: that we must see everyone as related to us.

4. Others as relatives

The Stoics share Plato's intuition that, in order to act to the benefit of others, we need to see them as belonging to us. The Stoics think that the universe is a large living being.²² Human beings are its parts. What the ideal agent understands about herself and everyone else is that they belong together as parts of a whole.²³ This is a core claim of Stoic physics, which conceives of the universe as a thinking animal that moves by its perfect reason. To us, this idea may sound suspect, because it appears to reduce human beings to mere parts, and also because it may involve a rather arcane kind of physical theory.²⁴ But both of these reactions are unfounded. First, other human beings are fellow-parts of a whole, so that their concerns are our concerns, without thereby losing their standing as individuals: human beings are individuated by their rational souls. The claim that they are fellow-parts of the world means that they are to be viewed as physical, biological, and ensouled beings, interrelated with each other because the world is a complex physical and biological system, one that contains many rational beings. Second, the claim that the

²² Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2.21-22; 2.32; 2.37; 2.39.

²³ According to Epictetus, to be a citizen of the world is to be a *part* of it. *Discourses* 2.10.5-12.

²⁴ Stoic ethics has often been reconstructed in more Kantian terms, according to which the Stoics envisage human beings as reasoners who, qua reasoners, have equal standing. Cf. Gisela Striker, "The Role of *oikeiôsis* in Stoic Ethics," in her *Papers in Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge 1996), 281-297; more recently, Nussbaum defends an extreme version of this view (1997).

world is a large living being loses some of its strangeness if we rephrase it in terms that the Stoics, too, use: the world is a *complex system* with us as parts.²⁵ This picture of the world might not be alien, and it might not be morally suspect.

Stoic insistence on seeing human beings as physiological entities in a physiological world, then, has major implications for ethics. The modern idea that, absent treaties or a common history of interaction, we are unrelated with people at far ends of the world, never comes up. Other human beings are to be viewed as fellow-parts of the universe. This is what the sources describe as Zeno's dream: we should view all others as our fellow-citizens and our relatives.²⁶ The concerns of others matter to an agent's deliberation because they are, in a sense, *her* concerns.

Stoic cosmopolitanism is closely related to the Stoic theory of affiliation. The Greek term that I translate here as 'affiliation' is often rendered untranslated: *oikeiôsis*.²⁷ It describes a process of familiarizing ourselves with others *because* they belong to us—of coming to

²⁵ Clem. *Strom.* 4.26 (= SVF 3.237): the world is a city in the proper sense, because it is a system (*sustêma*) or group of men administered by law that exhibits refinement.

²⁶ "The much-admired *Republic* of Zeno . . . is aimed at this one main point, that we should not dwell in cities or peoples, each one marked out by its own notions of what is just [*idiois dikaiois*], but we should regard all human beings as our fellow members of the populace and fellow-citizens, and there should be one way of life and order, like that of a herd grazing together and nurtured by a common law. Zeno wrote this, picturing as it were a dream or image of a philosopher's well-regulated regime." (Plutarch, *De virt. Alex.* 329A–B = SVF 1.262 part = LS 67A) Cf. Vogt, "Plutarch über Zenons Traum" in Marcel v. Ackeren and Jörn Müller (eds.), *Understanding Ancient Philosophy*, (Darmstadt: WBG, 2006), 196-217; and Vogt (2008), chapter 2.

²⁷ I discuss these questions in detail in *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City*, esp. 99-110 and 130-135.

have the affective disposition towards related things which we tend to have only for what is in fact related to us, and which we do not have toward the related as long as we do not recognize *that* it is related.²⁸ The theory of *oikeiôsis* is concerned with our *affective disposition* towards others. The Stoics argue that we should come to see a relatedness between all human beings, and they characterize this relatedness as kinship. Coming to recognize this kinship is not, as it were, a purely intellectual matter; it consists in coming to assume a certain affective, relational disposition.

In order to relate correctly toward all, we have to ‘love’ all. The idea is not to ‘love’ others in a sense in which love is an emotion—that is, for the Stoics, an irrational movement of the mind, accompanied by irrational actions. The ideal agent has no emotions. The Stoics do not ask us to envisage a perfect being without any type of affective disposition toward others. The wise person has ‘rational feelings,’ and among these is a friendly disposition toward others, involving kindness, generosity, warmth and affection (DL 7.116). It is this kind of ‘love’ which ideally we would feel for everyone. Thus, while we may think of paternal affection as the kind of emotion that will involve

²⁸ The Stoic Hierocles describes this task. In his account, the process of viewing others as belonging to us begins from concentric circles of relative closeness around each person’s soul. The agent is at the center; next come family members, more and more distant relatives, local residents, fellow-citizens, people from neighboring towns, fellow-countrymen, and finally the whole human race. (Stobaeus 4.671,7-673,11 = LS 57G; tr. Long and Sedley, with some changes). The following is ascribed to Zeno: “All who are not virtuous are personal and public enemies, slaves, and alienated from one another, including parents from children, brothers from brothers, relatives from relatives. They criticize him again for presenting [...] only virtuous people the *Republic* as citizens, friends, relatives, and free.” (DL 7.32–33; tr. LS with changes) Scholars have described Stoic cosmopolitanism as calling for impartiality. Cf., e.g., Julia Annas, *Morality of Happiness* (Oxford 1995), 265. However, what Stoic *oikeiôsis* calls for is quite different from the modern idea that morality demands an impartial perspective.

despair and deep grief if the child dies, this is not the kind of affective disposition that is called for toward everyone. According to the Stoics, one should not respond in this way to the death of one's own child, and thus, being disposed toward everyone as 'belonging to oneself,' one should not respond in this way to a distant child's death.²⁹

While it might seem impossible, for instance, to fall into deep grief about a distant child's death, it seems quite possible to extend 'rational feelings' to all human beings. An ancient critic points out that it is impossible to relate to the most distant Mysian in the way in which we relate to ourselves and to those closest to us.³⁰ The Stoics would reply that, first of all, we have to change how we relate to those close to us. It is integral to wisdom that we rid ourselves of the violent emotions that tend to go along with close relationships. Once we relate to those closest to us in the way we should, namely with *rational* affections, it is perhaps quite possible to extend this attitude to all others.³¹

Return for a moment to the comparison with Plato. As Aristotle sees it, Plato is overly concerned with unity. With a view to the community of women and children (which

²⁹ Note that the typical affections toward relatives are not always positive—there is not only love for one's children, but also very often envy and jealousy among siblings, resentment toward parents, etc. To relate to everyone as one relates to one's relatives, the Stoics would think, would be a disaster. Plato's conception of viewing everyone as belonging to us can only be a desirable state if the relevant affective dispositions are *rational* affective dispositions.

³⁰ Anonymous commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus*, 5.18-6.31.

³¹ Keimpe Algra suggests that the Stoics are concerned with *universalized partiality*, rather than with impartiality. "The Mechanism of Social Appropriation and Its Role in Hellenistic Ethics," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 25 (2003): 265–296. But even this proposal seems to neglect Stoic thought on the emotions.

Aristotle seems to see as a proposal for the city as a whole, rather than just for the rulers), Aristotle complains that Plato considers unity as an overriding value without offering any real argument (*Politics* II.1-4 and IV.1). Plato introduces deceitful institutions that will, as he hopes, make people love *everyone*. Aristotle thinks that Plato's conception is deeply misguided. If one does not know which child in one's child's generation is in fact one's child (which is the result of Plato's community of women and children), this will not make one consider a whole generation as one's offspring. Rather, it sadly will make one view *no* child from that generation in this light. The attempt to consider everyone as belonging to us makes us view no one as belonging to us (*Politics* II.4).³²

The Stoics adopt a Platonic idea: in order to be motivated to care about others, one needs to recognize them as relatives. But they disagree with Plato in a number of ways. First, by envisaging a world-wide (rather than state-wide) community, they need not concern themselves with the creation of unity. The world is one, independently from the actions of its inhabitants. The arguably dubious focus in Plato's *Republic* on enhancing unity falls out of the picture. Second, and relatedly, the Stoics are not concerned with the 'good of the whole.' Plato thinks that, if everyone does his or her job, the city is happy. Again, this may strike us as dubious. Why care whether the city, rather than its inhabitants, are

³² Aristotle seems to share the idea that it is good to view others as belonging to us. However, on his conception, we should view them as belonging to us according to the various communities which structure human life. Each of these communities has its own, characteristic kind of friendship, and it would be misguided to want to assimilate all these forms of relatedness into one kind. Some relationships will have to be more distant than others, and the sense of belonging in each community will differ (*Politics* I.1-2, NE VIII.7-12). See for example: "All the different kinds of community, then, are evidently parts of the political one; and along with community of each sort will go friendship of the same sort" (NE VIII.9, 1160a29-31, tr. Broadie/Rowe).

happy? The Stoics do not have a notion of a happy universe. Rather, they propose that, in seeing oneself as a part of the world, one sees oneself as a fellow-inhabitant of one ‘city’ with every other human beings. From this cosmopolitan perspective, then, one concerns oneself with the good of others, not with the good of the world.

III. Conclusion

Stoic cosmopolitanism is grounded in how we ought to see ourselves and others. The Stoic take a thoroughly ‘naturalistic’ view: they look at us as interrelated parts of the world. As such, we stand in all kinds of relationships. The most comprehensive relationship is that of being a fellow-member of the world. Other relationships are more particular: we are someone’s neighbor, sister, fellow Athenian, and so on. Epictetus says that, in trying to figure out what one should be doing, one must consider the various roles one has. In the first place, one is a human being; second, one is a citizen of the world and a part of it; third, one is someone’s son and someone’s sibling; fourth, one holds a specific job at a given place, is of a certain age, is or is not someone’s father, and so on (*Discourses* 2.10.1-12).³³ All these roles – familial, professional, societal, political – matter to what we should be doing. The relevant relationships are between human beings, and that is, between rational beings who are interrelated parts of a whole. Neither Plato nor the Stoics conceive of human beings as having worth or indeed, as being any kind of

³³ This is a late Stoic contribution, and it is hard to assess whether the early Stoics share it in every aspect. However, as I try to make clear, it fits fully into their perspective on human beings as interrelated parts. A version (albeit not entirely Stoic) of such roles and their ethical significance is offered by Cicero in *On Duties* I.16.50 f.

bearers of value. Things like wealth or health have value *for* human beings. Human beings are *valuers*, not valuable. The reason we ought to concern ourselves with the health, lives, wealth, etc., of others is that precisely this: for them, like for us, things have value and disvalue.