

The Progress Paradox:
An Attempt To Provide The How And Why Behind The Vicious Pursuit Of Virtue

By Emma Ritter

Stoicism purports to be a lived philosophy. It presents a set of doctrines to be used in everyday life as a guide in acting and thinking, and asserts that only these doctrines present the correct manner in which to live in order to achieve the ultimate good of humanity. For the Stoics, the ultimate good rests in living according to nature. To reach this state, the individual must live completely virtuously in perfection of the reason inherent within them. The individual who does so earns the title of Stoic Sage. Achieving this title is the goal of Stoic practitioners. As such, individuals must improve themselves morally to reach the ultimate good, and must have a source of motivation to better themselves. An individual requires motivation for moral improvement – even if this individual is a Stoic. Upon first consideration, this statement does not appear problematic for Stoicism. After all, Stoicism is a lived philosophy. It focuses on the practical aspects of ethics as well as the abstract. For a philosophy that stresses the importance of social *oikeiosis* and ethics, it seems odd, then, that we are also faced with comments like this one from Cicero's *de Finibus*:

‘Consistent with the theory which states that the highest good (what we call the “final” or “ultimate” good) is capable of increase is the view that one person may have more wisdom than another; and likewise that open person may act more wrongly or more rightly than another. We cannot say this, since we rule out any increase in the highest good. When submerged in water one can no more breathe if one is just below the surface and on the verge of getting out, than one can in the depths. A puppy that has almost reached the point of opening its eyes can no more see than one newly born. In the same way one who has made some progress towards the acquisition of virtue is just as unhappy as one who has made no progress at all.’¹

These comparisons paint a powerful picture of futility. If all of my attempts to rise above my vice to become virtuous make me no better than the person who commits incest and murder, why

¹ Cicero. *De Finibus*. ed. Julia Annas, trans. Raphael Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.48.

try at all? This is the problem of Stoic moral progress, and a very serious problem for a philosophy whose purported main purpose is to serve as a lived philosophy guiding one's actions.

The problem rests upon a series of quotes we have from the ancient Stoics, not only the above passage from the *de Finibus*, but also from other primary documents. These texts indicate that the ancient Stoics view morality in terms of absolutes. Plutarch comments that the Stoics held that as long as "the soul discards and purges itself of none of its stupidity," then no "entire progress, nor any perception of progress" should be assumed.² Unless every bad aspect of a man is done away with, he remains bad. A human being "deals in absolute badness right up to its acquisition of the absolute and perfect good."³ The Stoic model presents an all or nothing concept of virtue: an individual is either completely virtuous or completely vicious. Virtue admits of no increase. Diogenes Laertius provides further evidence of this view: he writes that according to Stoic doctrine, "nothing is in between virtue and vice... a man must be either just or unjust, and likewise with the other virtues."⁴ Only absolutes exist. The problem is not that this description provides a bad conception of the utterly virtuous person or the utterly vicious person; indeed, an evil person and a paragon of virtue are commonly conceived as having a yawning gulf between them morally speaking. Rather, the problem is that this theory provides an unsatisfying conception of the moral progressor: it leaves the idea of people like you and me up in the air. How do people who are not yet virtuous, but who are working toward the state of virtue, fit into the picture? These primary documents seem to suggest no place for the one striving to better himself morally. Like a stick, a man is either crooked or not. But how can one make a transition

² Plutarch, "On Moral Progress," in *The Hellenistic Philosophers Volume I*, ed. A.A.Long and D.N. Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 75C.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1997), II.7.127.

from badness to goodness? This is a question that must be answered in order for Stoicism to give a clear account of the transition between the two extremes. Otherwise, its applicability to life decreases.

In this essay, I intend to explain the apparent problem of motivation in Stoic moral progress and seek a solution within the Stoics' own theories. In order to fully understand this question and all of its component parts, it is necessary to understand how we, as humans, act. Then, given this theory of action, the reasoning behind the Stoic division of actions as either virtuous or vicious becomes more clear. This division in turn helps to elucidate wherein we can draw the fundamental distinction between the Sage and the non-Sage, thereby helping us understand what exactly the deficiency is within a non-sage that moral progress attempts to overcome. Following the explication of the problem, I will consider three different solutions to the quandary, presenting both a two-part, synthesized orthodox Stoic solution and a Later Stoic alternative, and will evaluate each in turn. Ultimately, I suggest that the Stoic answer provides a compelling argument for those who accept their holistic philosophical system, but that the philosophy of Epictetus provides an alternative more palatable to outsiders and new followers.

Every instance of human virtue arises from a human choice resulting in an action deemed virtuous. In order to understand how one becomes virtuous, we must understand how virtuous actions come about: in other words, how human beings act. This general overview of Stoic action theory will give insight into their moral psychology.

For the Stoics, human action depends on impulse, or *hormê*. As Stobaeus reports in his anthology, the Stoics held that impulse is “a movement of the soul towards something.”⁵ Our impulses drive us toward our actions. For example, in order to drink my coffee, I must have an

⁵ Stobaeus, “Anthology,” in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), II, 9.

impulse toward drinking a hot, caffeinated beverage produced from the seeds of a coffee tree. But, as Brad Inwood notes in *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, impulse “is not just an instinct or an underlying drive in an animal.”⁶ This definition would allow no room for virtue, because there exists no room for choice within this definition. Instead, an impulse has a fundamentally psychological element: “an impulse is that psychological event which determines or causes an action” in which the material soul actually moves or changes.⁷ If we accept Inwood’s concept of an impulse, we accept impulse as something our soul inclines us to do.

Impulses originate in the soul’s response to outside impressions. Diogenes Laertius reports that “the presentation is first and then the intellect, which is verbally expressive, puts into rational discourse what it experiences because of presentation.”⁸ I perceive an amalgam of sensory impressions (black, hot, half-full), and my intellect translates these into a coherent whole, my coffee. Only then can I begin the rational discourse of impression and assent. Lucullus recounts this theory to Cicero in *De Academica*, when he says, “We must first have an impression of what moves our impulse, and believe it.”⁹ Somehow the object toward which the impulse is directed must first enter our mind’s eye in order for our impulse toward it to arise in the first place. The way impressions do this, according to Zeno, is physical in nature. In *Academici Libri*, Cicero has Varro recount Zeno’s theory of sense-perception, one of Zeno’s innovative claims: “[Zeno] considered sense-perceptions to be compounds of a kind of externally induced ‘impact’—he called this a *phantasia*, but we can call it an ‘impression.’”¹⁰ When we see an object, our sense-perception is a direct result of tiny particles which hit our sense organs. It is

⁶ Inwood, Brad, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 45.

⁷ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 47.

⁸ Diogenes Laertius, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, II.3.49.

⁹ Cicero, “De Academica” in *On Academic Skepticism*, trans. and ed. Charles Brittain (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 2.25.

¹⁰ Cicero, “Academici Libri,” in *On Academic Skepticism*, trans. and ed. Charles Brittain (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 1.40.

for this reason that Diogenes Laertius reports that “a presentation is an impression in a soul” and can be thought of in the way a signet ring makes an impress in wax.¹¹ From this impact arises our impressions; the intellect reacts to impressions because they reshape the very material of the soul.

The soul reacts to impressions by assenting or withholding assent. Charles Brittain, the editor of *On Academic Skepticism*, defines assent as “our rational acceptance or rejection of externally induced impressions.”¹² Translated from the Greek *sunkatathesis*, assent is the agreeing or committing oneself to the truth of a proposition. This assent is up to us and gives us causal power; Zeno holds assents as “voluntary” and having their source in us.¹³ This up-to-us quality sets assent apart from impressions. As stated above, impressions are not in our power to control. Chrysippus confirms the uncontrollable onslaught of impressions, but repeats that assent is up to us: he admits that “assenting could not occur unless aroused by a sense-impression” but rejects the claim that this causes all assent to be determined.¹⁴ Instead, the relationship between impression and assent should be compared to a cylinder rolling down a hill. While something must push the cylinder for it to begin rolling, it is the cylinder’s own nature that perpetuates the motion. In the same way, assent is in our power: “it is pushed from outside [by sense-impressions] but for the rest moves by its own force and nature.”¹⁵ We can choose the path of our assents. This power of choice carries import for Stoic action and moral psychology due to the close connection between assent and impulse.

Impulse, or *hormê*, is a type of assent, albeit an active one. Recounts Stobaeus:

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, II.3.45.

¹² Brittain, Charles, ed. *On Academic Skepticism*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006). 1.40.fn51.

¹³ Cicero, “Academici Libri,” 1.40.

¹⁴ Cicero, “De Fato,” in *Cicero: On Fate & Boethius: The Consolations of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. R.W. Sharples (Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 1992), XVIII.42.

¹⁵ Cicero, “De Fato,” XIX.43.

All impulses are [acts of] assent; <there are other kinds of assent>, but the practical ones also include the power to set [the agent] in motion. Now, [acts of] assent are directed at one thing and impulses at another; and [acts of] assent are directed at certain propositions, while impulses are directed at predicates which are, in a way, included in the propositions to which assent is given.^{16, 17}

The difference between assents in general and impulses is the object toward which each is directed: assents are directed toward propositions, while impulses are directed toward predicates.

Tad Brennan provides an accessible delineation between propositions and predicates. A proposition, Brennan writes, is simply an impression as a whole; it is this to which we assent.¹⁸

When I receive the impression, for example, ‘it would be good for me to drink this coffee right now,’ I assent to it insofar as I accept it as a true impression. Now, for me to have an actual impulse, I must assent to the predicate within the proposition: ‘to drink this coffee right now.’

My assent to this proposition – or, my impulse – propels me to act. Again, as long as no external force interferes, an impulse will result in its accompanying action.

To summarize, the following is the account of Stoic action which I have outlined: an individual receives impressions from the external world, to which he can either choose to assent, or withhold assent; if this proposition to which he assents contains a predicate, he may then be moved by an impulse to act in the manner presented. Impulse and assent cause our actions. In addition, they lie within our sphere of choice: we have control over them. Thus, Inwood argues that the impulse “isolates the ethically significant aspect of an action” due to its causal force;¹⁹ and since assent is “apparently an unfailing cause of impulses,” man is responsible because of assent.²⁰ Herein lies our moral responsibility. As human beings, we are endowed with reason.

This sets us apart from non-rational animals. Unlike non-rational animals, humans are not

¹⁶ Stobaeus, “Anthology,” II.95.9b.

¹⁷ Inwood denies this definition of impulse, arguing that, strictly speaking, an impulse cannot be an act of assent precisely because it is directed at a predicate and not in impulse. He instead supplies a definition he attributes to Chrysippus: “impulse as man’s reason commanding him to act.” In *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 61.

¹⁸ Brennan, Tad, *The Stoic Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 87.

¹⁹ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 53.

²⁰ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 54.

limited to instinctive reactions to outside stimuli. It is not that non-rational animals do not have impulses; rather, they do not have a power to assent. They yield automatically to presentations. In contrast, human action is “always controlled by the mechanism of rational assent to the hermetic propositions occasioned by our presentations.”²¹ We are able to use our reason to pass judgments on our impressions and upon which impressions to act. As human impulses “are the result of assent, strictly speaking,” and more importantly, of rational assent, only these rational impulses are subject to moral evaluation.²² Since all actions a rational agent undertakes are necessarily the result of an assent or impulse, a rational agent is held accountable for every action he makes.

If our actions are ultimately up to us, which actions are those deemed appropriate? For the Stoics, appropriate actions consist in assenting to the right impressions and acting in the right way. The definition used here is very important. Long explains appropriate actions, or *kathêkonta*, as those whose starting-point “is not mere impulse or instinct but reason.”²³ Furthermore, appropriate actions are according to nature and admit of a reasonable defense.²⁴ Appropriate actions are necessarily the result of rational impulses. But there are different types of impulses, and not all of them are rational. At times, our impulses are excessive. This happens when *pathos*, or passion, ascribes erroneous value judgments to external indifferents. These passions, although irrational and unnatural, are still movements of the soul. They are still impulses, even though they are morally wrong. The Stoics divide passions into four types, which Brennan outlines:

Desire is the opinion that some future thing is a good of such a sort that we should reach out for it.
Fear is the opinion that some future thing is an evil of such a sort that we should avoid it.

²¹ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 67.

²² Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 129.

²³ A.A. Long, “Stoicism: Stoic Ethics” in *Hellenistic Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 2010), 190.

²⁴ Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *The Hellenistic Philosophers Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 196.

Pleasure is the opinion that some present thing is a good of such a sort that we should be elated about it.
Pain is the opinion that some present thing is an evil of such a sort that we should be depressed about it.²⁵

These four categories can be divided into those that deal with opinions of the future (desire and fear) and those that deal with opinions of the present (pleasure and pain). Further, they can be divided between opinions about evils (fear and pain) and goods (desire and pleasure). These categories allow for easier comprehension of the opinions contained within the various types of passions.

Regardless of these categorizations, the opinions within each passion make a fundamental error: they mistakenly claim that things outside our sphere of choice can be goods or evils, when in fact all externals are, by definition, indifferents. When we perceive things as goods “of such a sort that we should reach out for it,” we deem them as appropriate to act toward; we are impelled to action by the way in which the value judgment relates to our individual well-being. In doing so, argues Inwood, it is not that reason is led astray; rather, reason is disregarded. Here, the reason being referenced is Right Reason, or *orthos logos*. This term not only indicates the “correct use of reason in matching up means and ends” in ethics, it is one of the Stoic descriptions of god.²⁶ It represents a divine and natural moral law that pervades the universe. The closer we align our reason to Right Reason, the closer we come to the perfection of our reason: virtue. In the case of the passions, Right Reason is ignored. Had Right Reason been followed, a correct judgment would have been made regarding the value of the objects and events concerned.²⁷ It is in this way that passions are *akrateis*, or out of control: without the regulation of Right Reason, “the agent’s impulses and actions are beyond the limits set by Reason and

²⁵ Brennan, *The Stoic Life*, 93.

²⁶ Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, “Right Reason” in *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 405.

²⁷ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 171.

therefore not alterable in accordance with its dictates.”²⁸ The passions cause human impulses to deviate from any rational boundary of action. When we choose to follow our irrational passions, we relinquish our Zeus-given rationality.

It is important to emphasize that passions are still within our control, as Inwood reminds us. All actions are the result of impulses, and more importantly, assent. We choose what we do. In fact, the Stoic view of this is so strict that “the nature of the theory makes it automatically true that if someone acted he also assented”;²⁹ for, as long as no obstacle was in the way, an intention is always followed by an action.³⁰ Under Stoicism, one is held accountable for agreeing to each action one performs. Today, passions are often thought of as something outside our control: our emotions, we say, get the better of us. Indeed, there is evidence that this opinion held during the Hellenistic period as well, as seen in Epictetus’ discussion of inconsistency in the *Discourses*. Speaking about why people admit to some faults and not others, Epictetus argues that it is because in the case of love, or fear, or pity, the masses “fancy there is something involuntary about them.”³¹ Shirking responsibility for one’s passions is tempting. However, this evasion is not a real possibility in the Stoic model. Because the passions are excessive impulses, they have the same characteristics as other impulses. Specifically, Chrysippus identifies passions as judgments, or *doxa*, an instance of weak or incorrect assent.³² Assents, even those involving the passions, are assents nonetheless. The result is that the agent “is responsible for his passions,” which may be said to be “totally in the agent’s control.”³³ The agent chooses to assent to

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 83.

³⁰ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 96.

³¹ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” in *The Discourses of Epictetus, the Handbook, and Fragments*, ed. Christopher Gill, trans. Robin Hard (London: Orion Publishing Group, 1995), II.21.6.

³² Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, fn72.

³³ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 144.

passions. Thus, impulses of the passions are just as within our sphere of choice as every other impulse.

Because the passions are irrational, the Sage's life would not include any passions. Inwood states that "passions never occur in men who have a firm grasp of what is truly good."³⁴ The Sage acts from impulses other than passions, which leaves the question of the other types of impulses available to him. According to Brennan, there are two other classes of impulses. One of these classes still involves the labeling of things as good and bad, as do the passions, but these judgments are not mistaken: "it does not attribute genuine goodness to something that is actually indifferent."³⁵ Instead, these judgments are true, knowledgeable attributions of goodness and badness to things that are actually good and bad. Known as *eupatheiai*, this class of impulses includes three particular strands: volition, caution, and joy. Diogenes Laertius records the following definition:

There are also three good states [of the soul], joy, caution, and wish. And joy is opposite to pleasure, being a reasonable elation; and caution to fear, being a reasonable avoidance. For the wise man will not be afraid in any way, but will be cautious. They say that wish is opposite to desire, being a reasonable striving.³⁶

Rationality is emphasized in each form of *eupatheiai*. The Sage is not making any mistaken value judgments; instead, free of passions and any disposition toward them, the Sage can make correct value judgments toward those things that are worthy of the epithets good and bad without ascribing these titles to indifferents.

Indifferents remain a part of every day human experience, however, so the Sage must have some way of dealing with externals. The way in which the Sage does so is by employing the third kind of impulse: that to do with indifferents, or selection. Brennan notes that unlike emotions or *eupatheiai*, selections "do not involve our attributing goodness or badness to the

³⁴ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 171.

³⁵ Brennan, *The Stoic Life*, 97.

³⁶ Diogenes Laertius, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, II.94.116.

object or actions in question.”³⁷ Instead, they involve recognizing indifferents as things that would be in accordance with nature and further our pursuit of virtue, or in other words, deciding which indifferents are preferred. These impulses are defined by Brennan in the following manner:

Selection is the belief [or, in the case of the sage, the knowledge] that some future thing is an indifferent of such a sort that we should reach out for it.
Disselection is the belief [or, in the case of the sage, the knowledge] that some future thing is an indifferent of such a sort that we should avoid it.³⁸

This third type of impulse acknowledges the practical nature of life. The Sage will not believe that food is the good, and rightly so; however, he would recognize that it is a preferred indifferent. In reasonable quantities, food nourishes his body and allows him to maintain health. Thus, he will select this option if nothing impedes his decision.

The non-sage, too, will select between indifferents; unlike the Sage, however, the non-sage’s selections will be inherently vicious, even if the non-sage does not wrongly assign value judgments to the indifferents. This harkens back to the original problem discussed: due to the absolute nature of virtue and vice, all of the Sage’s actions are virtuous, while all of the non-sage’s actions are vicious. The Stoic view, as Stobaeus records it, is just this: “the wise man does everything well.”³⁹ This is a result of the fact that virtue governs all of his actions; he performs every action “in accordance with right reason and in accordance with virtue.”⁴⁰ Meanwhile, for the non-sage, all actions are equal, and equally wrong. Again, the account from Stobaeus stresses that, “by analogy, the inferior man does everything that he does badly and in accordance with all the vices.”⁴¹ So, simply due to the moral state of the individual, actions are divided between good and bad. However, this explanation is a fairly surface-level analysis of the difference

³⁷ Brennan, *The Stoic Life*, 99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Stobaeus, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2.66.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

between Sage and non-sage. There are two other ways in which the Sage and the non-sage differ in terms of action: first, they differ in terms of the impressions to which they assent and which provide the impulse for action; second, they differ in the extent to which Right Reason aligns with their appropriate actions. Both of these factors contribute to the difference between Sage and non-sage, but they point to the fact that the final, ultimate distinction between the two is a mental disposition, not necessarily the individual's actions in and of themselves.

First, let us examine the impressions that provide the impulses to which the individual can choose to assent in order to perform an action. For the Sage, this impression will only be a *kataleptic* impression. *Kataleptic* impressions are a special class of impressions that contain more truth value than those of regular impressions. According to Brennan, a *kataleptic* impression is one that “(1) comes from what is, and (2) is stamped and sealed and molded in accordance with what is, and (3) is of such a sort that it could not come from what is not.”⁴² These requirements severely restrict what can be a *kataleptic* impression, making the title a strong one: *kataleptic* impressions provide the criterion of truth and establish facts with certainty.⁴³ Zeno describes these as a firm grasp of an impression; indeed, the original Greek term *katalepton* is literally graspable.⁴⁴ Just as we can clench our hands into fists into a firm grasp, we can use our mind to receive a firm grasp of a *kataleptic* impression. Only from these *kataleptic* impressions can knowledge arise. Because of this, the Sage will only assent to *kataleptic* impressions; if he did otherwise, he would not be a true Sage. *Kataleptic* impressions form the basis for all Sage assent and impulse. Unless the Sage is met with a *kataleptic*

⁴² Brennan, *The Stoic Life*, 67.

⁴³ Long, “Stoicism,” 128.

⁴⁴ Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, “Grasp” in *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 402.

impression, he will withhold assent and thereby any action from a false impression. His judgments are infallible.

On the other hand, the impressions to which the non-sage assents lead only into fallibility and error. Ordinary people act from their beliefs. These beliefs are formed from impressions in two ways, namely, by assenting to an altogether non-*kataleptic* impression, or by assenting weakly to a *kataleptic* impression. In the first case, the non-sage assents to false impressions. These non-*kataleptic* impressions are patently false, and so all actions that result from them are necessarily against Right Reason and are not appropriate. The second case is more complicated. Sages are not the only ones who receive *kataleptic* impressions; non-sages may be presented with a *kataleptic* impression as well. However, the non-sage would not assent firmly enough to receive any true knowledge thereby. Just like virtue and vice, the Stoics interpret knowledge in absolute terms: Diogenes Laertius states that “if [grasping] occurs in a wise man, it is knowledge, and if in a base man, it is opinion, and there is nothing else left besides these two.”⁴⁵ The discrepancy occurs because of the manner in which the two men assent: the Sage assents firmly, the base man weakly. The Sage’s disposition allows him to convert these cognitive impressions into knowledge through the “acceptance of impressions which cannot be shaken by argument.”⁴⁶ With a weak assent, this unshakeable knowledge does not come about. To use Zeno’s imagery, only the Sage is able to wrap his other hand around his fist, gaining firm knowledge. The non-sage is unable to do so. Unable to firmly wrap his mind around the *kataleptic* impression, he is left without a firm grasp of the truth. His weak assent still leaves him in a state of ignorance. No matter whether the non-sage assents to *kataleptic* impressions weakly

⁴⁵ Diogenes Laertius, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 7.153.

⁴⁶ Long, “Stoicism,” 129.

or non-*kataleptic* impressions, the result is the same: the impressions to which they assent provide predicates for their actions that are inherently flawed.

This difference in assent leads to difference in action. When these assents contain predicates that result in an impulse, the individual acts. Just as the assents of Sages and non-Sages differ, the actions of Sages and non-sages differ. The Sage's actions are not only always appropriate, they are always perfectly appropriate.⁴⁷ They come from the Sage's entirely virtuous being and disposition, and thus are completely in accordance with Right Reason at all times. In contrast, the non-sage may act inappropriately or appropriately. In the case of the former, they act upon impulses of the passions, ascribing false value judgments to objects and events. These actions are not befitting. The non-sage may also perform appropriate actions. These appropriate actions have a reasonable justification and result from rational impulses. However, the non-sage's appropriate actions are not perfectly appropriate for they are not done in line with Right Reason. Instead, as the actions come from someone who is still wholly vicious and ignorant, the appropriate action remains as much an error as those actions resulting from the passions.⁴⁸ The division between Sage and non-sage remains, even in the quality of their actions.

Hence, the primary difference between Stoic Sage and any other individual is in mental disposition, not in actions performed. Julia Annas provides a helpful way of looking at the issue: she states that the key difference is that the Stoic Sage completely grasps the moral; he has reached the state of an ethical being.⁴⁹ We cannot discern Sage from non-sage merely by observing their actions, as both are capable of performing appropriate actions. In fact, practically, the Sage and non-sage may resemble each other in every way. This is especially true

⁴⁷ Brennan, *The Stoic Life*, 170-171.

⁴⁸ Brennan, *The Stoic Life*, 171.

⁴⁹ Julia Annas, "Theophrastus and the Stoics: Forcing the Issue," in *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 406.

if the non-sage is a moral progressor trying to grow closer to the Stoic ideal by performing appropriate actions. Actions cannot inform our classification of an individual as a Sage or non-sage. Only mental disposition is telling. What a person assents to and the impulses she acts upon convey her status as a Sage or non-sage. This view provides the foundation for statements such as this from A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley in their discussion of humanity's proper function:

The virtues do not describe the particular or type of thing done in a 'perfect proper function'. They describe and evaluate the moral character of the agent, which is transferred adverbially to the action itself: thus, 'walking about prudently' is a 'right action' and therefore a 'perfect proper function', its 'perfection' resulting from the virtue of prudence.⁵⁰

Mental disposition is of the utmost importance. Annas' statement is confirmed by primary documents from the Early Stoics as well: Stobaeus reports that all wrong actions are equal and all fools equally foolish because "they have one and the same character."⁵¹ Character, not actions, affords the final sign of sagehood. Unless this character is changed to the ethical one of the Sage, all of a person's actions will remain vicious. As Plutarch says, only when the soul completely "discards and purges itself" of its stupidity can one transition from absolute badness to absolute goodness. Hence, we come to reach sagehood by edifying our desires and assents.

This finally brings us back to our original problem presented at the outset of our discussion of action theory: how does one, practically speaking, travel down the path of moral virtue? While being virtuous seems an enviable position, the discrepancy between my current state and the elevated state of perfect ethicalness is abysmal. Indeed, even if I am trying to be virtuous, every action I perform on my journey to moral improvement is still just as evil as genocide. Not only do my actions fail to take me any closer to my goal, but each time I act

⁵⁰ A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, "Proper Function" in *The Hellenistic Philosophers Volume 1: Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 59.

⁵¹ Stobaeus, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2.113.

toward my goal I am actually viciously performing harmful acts. The problem remains. As one Stoic critic puts it,

If virtue and vice alone, in their [the Stoics'] opinion, are good and bad respectively, and no other creatures are capable of receiving either of them; (2) and if the majority of men are bad, or rather, if there have been just one or two good men, as their fables maintain, like some absurd and unnatural creature rarer than the Ethiopians' phoenix; (3) and if all bad men are as bad as each other, without any differentiation, and all who are not wise are all alike mad, (4) how could man not be the most miserable of all creatures in having vice and madness ingrown in him and allotted?⁵²

Our lot in life seems maddeningly unfair and our *telos* unattainable. We very much need to find the Stoic motivation behind moral progress if we wish to keep Stoicism as a tenable guide to living life. Within orthodox Early Stoic thought, there are two different strategies to approach a solution, although the strongest comes from their synthesis.

However, before moving into potential answers, I must address this caveat: it is crucially important to ensure that there is nothing fallacious in our conceptualization of the problem itself. What must be avoided is the idea that becoming a Sage is altogether impossible. This is not the case. In Inwood's chapter on "Moral Evolution," he notes that Zeno believed every Sage was first a fool. "Even the Sage," Zeno remarks, "carries with him the scars of his former passions...no one develops morality without first falling into folly."⁵³ Moral transformation *can* happen. Diogenes Laertius' record confirms this claim. Within his text, he reports that "virtue is teachable," and that this is evident precisely from the fact that inferior men become good.⁵⁴ Thus, it is important to take heed of the warning several scholars emphasize: we must not conflate the idea of virtue without degrees with the idea of virtue without improvement. Instead, the problem truly is how the well-intentioned vicious man is motivated to pursue progress given that all of his

⁵² Alexander, "On Fate," in *The Hellenistic Philosophers Volume I*, ed. and trans. Long and Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 199.14-22.

⁵³ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 182.

⁵⁴ Diogenes Laertius, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 7.91.

well-intentioned acts are each completely vicious, and his state remains technically static. This is the problem for which we will examine the possibility of solving in the following paragraphs.

The first proposed solution is to reject what Brennan argues is the mistaken assumption that when agents act, they act for some good. A common way of interpreting Stoic action theory is to interpret human action as directed toward the good and the ethical. This top-down reading of Stoic ethics supposes that all human action is motivated by the agent's conception of the good, as confused or faulty as this conception may be: "whatever agents pursue, they pursue *sub specie boni*."⁵⁵ Brennan charitably attributes this interpretation as guided by the influence of Socrates and Plato on the Stoics, as both of these philosophers express views like *sub specie boni*.⁵⁶ On this interpretation, the technical impetus of action for Stoics begins in our conception of the good and the process of working toward that good.

However, this model is inadequate. The trouble this interpretation encounters is in trying to explain the motivation of the non-virtuous moral progressor. The actions of virtuous and vicious men are both easy to understand: the virtuous man is motivated by a correct conception of the good through *eupatheiai*, and the vicious man is motivated by an incorrect conception of the good through *pathē*. The man between these two extremes, though, is more difficult to comprehend. Here, Brennan introduces a thought experiment to help the reader more fully appreciate this problem. Consider how a moral progressor could be motivated to eat dinner under this model. As a student of virtue actively trying to better herself, the progressor has learned that externals are indifferents. She has begun to grasp that the dinner in itself is not good; therefore, she cannot pursue eating dinner as a good from this point of view. She has eradicated any inclination to think of the food as a good thing. Neither can she act from the place of the Sage,

⁵⁵ Brennan, "Stoic Moral Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 284.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

though. As a non-sage, she is aware that her eating dinner cannot be a good thing, as every action she performs as a non-sage is vicious. Thus, says Brennan, “neither of the two options canvassed...is open to the student making progress.”⁵⁷ She can neither enjoy the true belief that her eating is an action performed virtuously nor the false belief that eating food is inherently good. Motivation *sub specie boni* leaves the progressor in paralysis.

Instead, action is motivated by *kathêkon*, or what is appropriate. Brennan argues that the core content of an impulsive impression is a predicate involving some action the agent perceives as appropriate: “the core content of an impulsive impression – the thing about it that produces an action, instead of a mere belief, when you assent to it – is that you envisage an action you could undertake, and entertain the thought that it is *kathêkon*.”⁵⁸ It is our viewing something as appropriate for us to do that triggers our action. Brennan’s interpretation saves the moral progressor from her paralysis. She cannot eat dinner if she is motivated by the good, but she can if she is motivated by what is appropriate for her. Brennan argues that the progressor “can be motivated by the thought that eating is the thing to do.”⁵⁹ It is appropriate that she eat in order to survive, and so she can act on her impulse to eat insofar as it is an appropriate action, not insofar as she believes eating is good. Selection of appropriate actions instead guides her impulses. This view has the additional benefit of keeping in line with Early Stoic thought. It holds with Zeno’s configuration of the *telos*, “living in agreement with nature,” as it is acting appropriately with the nature of oneself and of the cosmos as a whole.⁶⁰ Brennan argues that reattributing the source of motivation provides a way to explain how the moral progressor acts.

⁵⁷ Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology,” 285-6.

⁵⁸ Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology,” 284.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Diogenes Laertius, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 7.87-9.

Of course, one may easily object that selecting preferred indifferents is really nothing more than a delayed pursuit of the good. Cicero does this very thing in Book IV of *de Academica*, where he argues that if we pursue preferred indifferents because they aid us in achieving the good or benefit us in some way, then they are not truly indifferent entities to us. We consider them valuable and act toward the good by choosing them. Indeed, he argues that “the words get altered but the ideas are left intact” from the ideas of the ancients.⁶¹ We are not motivated by the appropriateness of an action, but because pursuing it helps us reach the good. The objector of this position argues that when agents pursue indifferents, it is in light of their planning value and their instrumentality in producing a genuine good.⁶² On this view, Brennan’s argument collapses into motivation *sub specie boni*.

However, Brennan argues that this objection misinterprets the meaning of selecting indifferents in the first place. Within the definition of preferred indifferents (“objects of such a sort as to arouse impulse, and it is in virtue of this that we select them”), nowhere is the good mentioned.⁶³ What Cicero and his fellow objectors fail to acknowledge is that the goodness is not ascribed to the selected indifferent that causes an action. Cato states in his defense of Stoicism that his opponents’ error lies in thinking that ultimate good exists in the selected indifferent. Consider someone trying to shoot an arrow at a target: the ultimate aim is to do everything within your power to shoot the arrow straight to the best of your abilities. So it is with our aim toward our ultimate good. Hitting the target is “selected but not sought” – it is a preferred indifferent.⁶⁴ As such, we will still succeed even if we do not hit the target but have managed to shoot the arrow in a perfect manner. The target is merely an external object outside of our

⁶¹ Cicero, “de Academica,” IV.21.

⁶² Brennan, “Stoic Moral Psychology,” 289.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Cicero, *de Finibus*, III.22.

control. While we are pleased if our arrow hits the target, the fact that it does so does not determine our happiness. The arrow could be redirected midflight by a rogue gust of wind, missing the target completely, but this does not affect us. Hitting the target is not our ultimate good. Rather, shooting the arrow correctly and perfectly is our concern. In the same way, we do not see our selections as reaching toward our good. We see them as appropriate to undertake given our human natures, and so we act upon them. Whether or not we succeed in obtaining the preferred indifferent is irrelevant to our supreme good, virtue. We are indifferent to indifferents.

One may also object that when we act, we look toward the Stoic Sage to see how they act, and pursue that as our good. We only select appropriate actions because it directs us toward our good of achieving the state that the Stoic Sage has attained; we act as the Stoic Sage acts. This directs our impulses in place of the good. This solution also avoids motivation *sub specie boni*, but does not entail acting based on what we see as appropriate to our nature. However, this objection also fails, as it does not provide a tenable theory of motivation. When we observe the Stoic in order to carefully copy his actions, we do not do so because it is directly good for us to copy him. Indeed, as ordinary individuals, acting in the way in which the Sage does will result in evil, not good, due to our status as absolutely vicious beings. Instead, the Sage is worth observing because he performs perfectly appropriate actions. Insofar as these actions are appropriate, a moral progressor could replicate the correct process to select an appropriate action. This action would not be perfectly appropriate. As such, it would remain vicious. This illustrates that the impetus toward the action being copied is not that the action is good, nor do we replicate the actions simply because they are done by the Sage. Instead, the impetus toward the action simply originates from our understanding that the actions the Sage takes are appropriate, so by

performing the same actions we may habituate ourselves toward actions that befit us as human beings.

Brennan's construction of motivation based on appropriate acts, therefore, provides a concept of action that frees the moral progressor from the fetters of inaction. However, this solution, I argue, does not completely answer the problem of motivation in the Stoic model. While this explanation provides the *how* of moral progress, it does not address the *why*: why we choose to pursue action given that, in making progress toward virtue, we remain "as utterly miserable as before."⁶⁵ This is a large component of the problem of Stoic moral progress, and it requires attention within our proposed solution. For a more complete answer to this question, we must turn to a Roman Stoic of the 2nd century: Hierocles.

Hierocles' writings on *oikeiosis* can shed light on why we choose to progress toward morality once it has been established as possible. *Oikeiosis* is the objective relationship between an animal and things that are congenial to it.⁶⁶ In other words, animals are appropriated toward that which befits them naturally. Long provides a summary helpful in understanding *oikeiosis* as presented in Hierocles and other Stoic writers. He summarizes the term as "determin[ing] an animal's relationship to its environment" and through which it is "primarily well-disposed to itself."⁶⁷ An animal intuitively understands itself and its nature, and how it should relate to the world around it. Put simply, *oikeiosis* is self-awareness in conversation with its surroundings. This relationship is an affective one, and it manifests itself in every assent and impulse a creature undertakes. Thus, Long states that "the direction of an animal's impulses is determined both by

⁶⁵ Cicero, *de Finibus*, IV.64.

⁶⁶ Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, "Oikeiosis" in *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 400.

⁶⁷ Long, "Stoicism," 172.

what it senses and by its innate capacity to recognize things which belong to itself.”⁶⁸ *Oikeiosis* guides motivation and action in animals.

In his best-known work, *The Elements of Ethics*, Hierocles focuses on the Stoic doctrine of self-appropriation to build a picture of animal and human action. According to Hierocles, what differentiates animals from non-animals is in perception and impulse.⁶⁹ Perception here is key. Perception allows animals to contribute to a knowledge of the “first thing that is one’s own and familiar.”⁷⁰ This perception occurs immediately upon birth. The animal perceives its body with the understanding of what each part is and what it is intended to do, and it understands where its weaknesses and strengths lie in its particular body. Hierocles provides evidence of this by pointing to examples from the animal kingdom. He believes animals show awareness of their limbs and those limbs’ strengths: for example, a bull is aware of the strength of its horns and will position itself in a defense situation with those horns facing its attacker.⁷¹ The bull is aware of itself, and has been since birth. Upon this very first perception of itself, the animal “immediately becomes its own and familiar to itself and to its constitution.”⁷² This awareness promotes informed self-preservation. By knowing its strengths and weaknesses, the animal can better contribute to its own preservation. Self-preservation manifests the animal’s self-love: an animal is, quite simply, well-disposed toward itself.⁷³ This is the basic doctrine of *oikeiosis*. Animals exhibit self-love by acting toward that which nature has appropriated them.

Hierocles’ statements echo those of other Stoic thinkers. Appropriation toward oneself is mentioned in Diogenes Laertius, where records show the Stoics believed “an animal’s first [or

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ramelli, Ilari, ed. “Elements of Ethics,” in *Hierocles the Stoic: Elements of Ethics, Fragments, and Excerpts*, trans. David Konstan (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), I.35.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ramelli, Ilari, ed. “Elements of Ethics,” II.19.

⁷² Ramelli, Ilari, ed. “Elements of Ethics,” VI.50.

⁷³ Ramelli, Ilari, ed. “Elements of Ethics,” VIII.1b.

primary] impulse is to preserve itself, because nature made it congenial to itself from the beginning.”⁷⁴ Clear tenets of *oikeiosis* can be seen in this statement, such as the impulse of self-preservation and self-appropriation. It is Cicero, however, who provides an extensive description of self-appropriation and its development simultaneous with the animal’s own maturation. Self-love is ubiquitous and immediate: “every living creature loves itself, and as soon as it is born strives to preserve itself.”⁷⁵ Cicero gives a nod to the fact that the Stoics look to infants as demonstrators of this doctrine: he recounts that the Stoics argue that “babies seek what is good for them and avoid the opposite before they ever feel pleasure or pain.”⁷⁶ This observed behavior reinforces the Stoic claim that we pursue what is appropriate, not what is pleasurable, in our actions. An infant does not nurse because it finds the experience pleasurable, but because it recognizes the act as necessary for the continuation of its being. We pursue what is appropriate to us out of an inborn love for ourselves and our preservation. Because of this, a creature’s desire “is to be found in what is adapted to its nature.”⁷⁷ This has a direct impact on a creature’s *telos*: “the highest good [is] to live in accordance with nature in the best and most suitable natural condition possible.”⁷⁸ Each creature has a different nature, and thus a different highest good toward which they are appropriated and act toward in self-love. Even plants exhibit self-appropriation. Like more developed animals, plants undertake activities by their own power to contribute to their life and growth. For instance, a plant in an over-forested area will redirect its growth toward a light source in order to promote its own well-being. It is appropriated toward its own natural good like every other creature. Understanding an animal’s *oikeiosis*, then, leads to an understanding of its nature and its ultimate good.

⁷⁴ Diogenes Laertius, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 7.85.

⁷⁵ Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.24.

⁷⁶ Cicero, *de Finibus*, III.16.

⁷⁷ Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.24.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

In the case of the human animal, that to which nature has appropriated our species is nothing less than virtue. *Oikeiosis* applies to humans as much as the next animal; writes Cicero, “the principle [of human action] is derived from self-love.”⁷⁹ The structure of the human being complicates human self-love, however. Human beings consist of both body and mind. Because we love ourselves, we “must also love each of their parts” and “want every aspect of mind and body to be perfect.”⁸⁰ But, these parts are not created equal. Notes Cicero, “our most desirable components are those that possess the highest worth” – in the case of humans, the mind.⁸¹ Our mind separates us from our animal brethren in terms of final ends. A bodily supreme good is only available for those creatures who lack fully developed minds. This subgroup does not include humans, for we possess reason. Reason is “the source of virtue” which is defined as the perfection of reason; this is our supreme good.⁸² Our nature is appropriated toward virtue, impelling us to pursue it.

Consciously realizing virtue as the true human end constitutes its own process. According to Cicero, it is something into which we grow. Nature creates and shapes the human body and mind so that it is well-equipped to follow its nature. Individuals do not receive virtue in this manner.⁸³ Although nature gave us “an intellect that has the capacity to acquire every virtue,” it did not perfect it: “nature only began to develop it, nothing more.”⁸⁴ As such, we have to grow into our virtue and work toward our moral progress ourselves. This process can be lengthy. We are born without fully-developed reason. At this stage in human development, pursuing virtue lies beyond the individual. It cannot be attained without rationality. Self-preservation is therefore

⁷⁹ Cicero, *de Finibus*, III.16.

⁸⁰ Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.37.

⁸¹ Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.38.

⁸² Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.38-40.

⁸³ Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.59.

⁸⁴ Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.58.

our only first concern: “our earliest desires have no other aim than to keep us safe and sound.”⁸⁵ Our awareness of virtue increases as our level of self-awareness and rationality increases. We begin to comprehend that the goal of morality is greater than that of bodily improvement; “the wondrous perfection of the intellect so surpasses these goods that the gulf between them is scarcely imaginable.”⁸⁶ The realization of true human nature⁸⁶ comes from interacting with the surrounding environment through *oikeiosis*. Looking at the environment around us, we “become aware of what we are and how we differ from other animals. Only at this point do we start to pursue the real objectives for which we were born.”⁸⁷ Our rational maturation increases our self-awareness and comprehension of virtue as the highest good. Thus, moral progress depends heavily on our natural appropriation through *oikeiosis*.

Hierocles’ account of *oikeiosis* harbors interesting implications for its role in self-assessment and improvement. According to Hierocles, our interactions with our environment inform our picture of ourselves. Whenever an animal perceives something, it also perceives itself in dialogue with that object. Writes Hierocles, “the apprehension of some external thing is not realized without perception of oneself.”⁸⁸ When I perceive something sweet (say, a bag of brown sugar), I also perceive myself “sweetened,” as Hierocles says. In other words, I perceive an altered version of myself according to how that object would affect me (in this case, by causing me to become sick). This self-awareness serves as a reference point in assent. By bringing the creature’s nature to the forefront of every interaction with an external object, it calls the relational aspect of a decision to mind. This allows an animal to reflect upon the juxtaposition of their current position in relation to the object with their ideal natural state. The animal may by

⁸⁵ Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.41.

⁸⁶ Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.60.

⁸⁷ Cicero, *de Finibus*, V.41.

⁸⁸ Ramelli, Ilari, ed. “Elements of Ethics,” VI.1-4.

pleased, displeased, or indifferent to the representation of itself it perceives.⁸⁹ Is eating an entire bag of brown sugar appropriate to my nature? By no means. My apprehension of the bag allows me to perceive this through the perception of how it relates to my nature. Displeased by the relationship between myself and the object that this perception presents, I can choose not to assent to the impulse contained in the impression. This perceived reflection helps in self-preservation and appropriate action. It gives an evaluation of available actions as well as a measure of the creature's place in its moral progress. *Oikeiosis* provides a built-in assessment tool crucial in directing the moral progressor.

Brad Inwood's theory of moral evolution corroborates this account. Like Hierocles and Cicero, Inwood also emphasizes the role *oikeiosis* plays in how both humans and their primary impulse mature. He translates *oikeiosis* as 'orientation' and describes it as "the basic state of affairs which grounds all human and animal action,"⁹⁰ noting that 'orientation' brings out "the important relational meanings of the word."⁹¹ *Oikeiosis* orients animals toward that to which they naturally relate in order to push the individual toward its final good. Man begins his journey toward his highest end like all other animals. He is oriented toward himself with a primary impulse toward self-preservation. Inwood argues this foundation provides a starting-point for the Stoic story told "about the development of man's specifically human commitment to the good, i.e. virtue."⁹² Man begins like all other animals, but man possesses one thing animals lack: reason. Before a human develops his reason, "his action and the life which is natural to him are basically similar to those of irrational animals."⁹³ These two things change with the maturation of man's intellect. When a human being's reason becomes fully formed, it supervenes and

⁸⁹ Ramelli, Ilari, ed. "Elements of Ethics," VI.27-31.

⁹⁰ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 184.

⁹¹ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 185.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 187.

changes his goal: “for a rational animal the natural life...is a life according to reason.”⁹⁴ No longer does man reach toward what can only preserve his being. Instead, when a human being attains rationality, he becomes capable of the good; he reaches toward virtue. This account shows that the good is “natural to man as a fully rational man in a way which is analogous to the way in which the merely natural things are natural to non-rational animals.”⁹⁵ Man’s transformation into a rational being changes his impulses and actions. He no longer acts from irrational impulses but can rationally select the impressions to which he assents. The transformation also entails a new awareness of one’s true relation to the world, a sort of enhanced *oikeiosis*:

...[the presence of reason] makes possible an awareness of the good, which comes from analogical reflection on things which are advantageous or natural in the lower sense. Once we are aware of the good it changes, or ought to change, the way we act—our human nature. For we see, or ought to see, that the good is truly advantageous; we see that it is natural to us or *oikeion* in a way different from that in which merely natural things are natural to us.⁹⁶

Humans attain peak *oikeiosis* upon maturation, recognizing virtue as the true supreme good. Like Hierocles, Inwood reaches this conclusion as a result of studying the way in which *oikeiosis* affects an individual. Existing in a community and seeing one’s place in relation to nature, other animals, and other humans, a man comes to realize his true nature as a rational being and act accordingly. Moral evolution necessitates renewed awareness in one’s natural *oikeiosis*.

In addition, Inwood’s account also addresses some of the gaps in Stoic moral psychology. First, he acknowledges the lack of primary source material detailing moral development from birth, through childhood, and to maturity. As he notes, Chrysippus “neglects any serious study of the gradual growth of the human from birth to maturity.”⁹⁷ He is interested only in the absolute distinction between rational and irrational animal, not the intermediate stages between the two.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 206.

⁹⁶ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 209.

⁹⁷ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 187.

Inwood admits there are stages in childhood which blend into another, and that absolutes are not feasible things of which to speak in this context. The absence of any explanation of this growth does detract from the Stoic account of adolescent growth. However, as Chrysippus did not address this, to formulate theories of childhood moral development would be mere speculation. Furthermore, focusing on this concern provides no insight into Stoic moral theory, nor does it contribute to a solution to the problem at hand.

Inwood also discusses the relationship between humanity's pre- and post-rationality *oikeiosis*. The transformative shift in human impulse and guidance upon the achievement of complete rationality splits human life into two seemingly irreconcilable fragments: how can man's irrational childhood and rational adulthood be part of one cohesive life with only one supreme good? Furthermore, "how can an infant have an orientation to the rational constitution which is characteristic of human beings when his own constitution is not yet rational?"⁹⁸ According to Inwood, the answer lies in a relational analogy. Each stage has its own constitution toward which it is solely directed during its respective period. As orientation is a relation, it allows the Stoics to circumvent the problematic transition between specific orientations in the following manner: Inwood argues that *oikeiosis* can remain the same "because the structure of the relationship is constant although one of the terms changes in character," giving "an analogical continuity in one's life despite the radical changes it undergoes."⁹⁹ While the immediate orientation will pass into the next orientation in the next stage, each stage is always directed toward the final end of virtue in some manner. The highest good is always the ultimate good in each stage.

⁹⁸ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 195.

⁹⁹ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 195-6.

This relation also allows for a distinction between that which is preferred and that which is actually good. In the beginning stages of human life, that which is natural and preferred is pursued exclusively, as reason has not yet developed. Reason redirects this pursuit toward morality and the final good. However, an adult continues to pursue preferred things; this is part of living in a world populated by external objects. The way in which this is done, however, places that which is preferred below the good itself. While an adult may pursue preferred indifferents, he does so “in a way that in a case of a conflict with his pursuit of the good the impulse to the good will override his selection of the preferred thing.”¹⁰⁰ The good surpasses indifferents for the rational being. This hierarchy reflects the oft-repeated Stoic maxim that “virtue alone is to be chose for its own sake, and that the good has a kind of value different in kind from that of natural things.”¹⁰¹ The acknowledgement that items to which one was in the past oriented are still pursued allows continuity between stages. While doing so, it also acknowledges the superiority of stages later in moral development, always placing that which is higher to the good qua rational at the head. Human development need not result in a fractured, segmented life; instead, *oikeiosis* fluidly guides men toward rationality and virtue.

Hierocean *oikeiosis* as explained by Inwood provides a compelling account of motivation when synthesized with motivation through what is *kathêkon*. We are compelled by our own nature to work toward virtue, and we instinctively know what will benefit us and what will harm us. We see ourselves reflected as moral beings in each interaction with an outside substance and can act appropriately, not toward something *sub specie boni*, but as something which is appropriate for us to act toward. This combined theory fits nicely into Stoic doctrine, tying in with action theory, natural philosophy, and ethics. It provides both the how of human

¹⁰⁰ Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, 210.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

moral progress as well as the why. The synthesis of these two solutions creates a close approximation of the answer orthodox Early Stoics would have given.

However, the solution depends on a complete acceptance of Stoic philosophy in all of its components. Because the solution relies on both moral psychology and natural psychology, the theory requires belief in each component. No one part can be discarded or the theory will collapse. For example, if one does not agree with the Stoic definition of human nature, then both *oikeiosis* and motivation by appropriateness are not as convincing. While this solution may be satisfactory for an orthodox Stoic, an alternative must be provided for the new Stoic disciple not yet inculcated with Stoic philosophy.

To do so, we must turn to later Stoicism, and in particular, Epictetus. Writing in the first and second century CE, Epictetus was one of three Stoics whose writings have survived from this time period, the others being Marcus Aurelius and Seneca. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* observes that Epictetus and the other Roman Stoics focus on “the psychological and moral category of the self,” with particular interest in “the problems that confront the person who is still making progress toward wisdom.”¹⁰² As such, they prove invaluable guides in navigating the Stoic relationship to the moral progressor. While Seneca and Marcus Aurelius could also provide insight into the improvement of the self, I limit myself to an investigation of Epictetus’ approach to moral progress for the purpose of this essay. Epictetus provides a picture of progress that departs from the stark absolutes of Early Stoic doctrine.

Epictetus views morality as of utmost import in human life, but sees a lack of it in average human life; instead, the majority of people slave away under external masters. Many people believe themselves to be free. Few, however, truly merit the title. Instead, they are the

¹⁰² Baltzly, Dirk, “Stoicism,” In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Article published Apr. 15, 1996, Revised Dec. 6, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/>.

chattel of their possessions and acquaintances. As humans, we are searching for fulfillment. We acquire more and more external things, hoping that these will grant us a sense of stability, tranquility, and control. We choose “to encumber ourselves with many; body, property, brother, friend, child and slave,” desperate to find a source of fulfillment.¹⁰³ Humans devote themselves to these externals outside our sphere of control that masquerade as goods. But while common maxims place health, wealth, family, and friends at the forefront of securing a happy life, Epictetus disagrees. He argues that this can only result in anxiety and slavery: “being thus bound to a multiplicity of things we are burdened by them and dragged down.”¹⁰⁴ Viewing people and material goods as the highest good is an egregious error. Rather than providing security, it induces constant fear. These external goods may be taken away at any point without consent; they lie outside one’s sphere of choice. Man becomes these objects’ slave. Fear of loss permeates his interactions with loved ones, while economic volatility produces constant anxiety about the precarious state of his financial affairs. Even his own body becomes a prison. Upon threat of torture, he will submit to his assailants rather than lose his limbs, falsely believing them as necessary to his being. These people are not, in fact, free. This affection for external objects cannot exemplify freedom, for nobody who lives in fear, pain, or distress is free; one must be delivered from all of these to escape slavery.¹⁰⁵ We need to look elsewhere for freedom: our minds.

Epictetus views freedom and virtue as closely related. Freedom consists in living righteously without constraint or hindrance from outside forces; the free man desires and avoids those things as is appropriate to his nature and achieves this desire or avoidance in alignment with Nature. Epictetus argues that we only have control of one thing alone: the faculty “of

¹⁰³ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” I.1.14.

¹⁰⁴ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” I.1.15.

¹⁰⁵ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” II.1.23-24.

exerting the impulse to act and not to act, and desire and aversion.”¹⁰⁶ Humans have power over their impressions. In practice, we overlook this definition, and this is the cause of our bondage. The human power to assent separates us from animals: to be human is to be rational. The “rational element in our nature,” reason separates us from wild beasts and grants us the ability to attain virtue—but only if we use reason correctly. If we act solely to fulfill the desires of “our stomach or our genitals” or indulge in “haphazard, filthy, or unconsidered” action, we sink to the level of sheep.¹⁰⁷ Irrationality reduces us to the level of animals. We must utilize our reason in acting or we forfeit our chance at the highest good. But acting appropriately to our human nature is difficult, as demonstrated by the vast number of people enslaved to false ideals. Epictetus acknowledges that “it is no ordinary matter merely to fulfill our profession as a man.”¹⁰⁸ Our mind confuses indifferents with the true good, and virtue is waylaid in pursuit of transient pleasures. Through inappropriate actions we destroy our rational faculty —virtue becomes more and more distant as we lower ourselves to act in the nature of beasts rather than human beings.¹⁰⁹ We reject our true nature. In order to achieve freedom and virtue, a moral transformation must occur.

Freeing oneself from undeserved regard for external objects and irrational desires moves the individual back to the path of virtue. In general terms, this involves reinstating rationality in one’s actions and reevaluating one’s affections. Instead of acting on irrational desires, the individual should only perform appropriate actions. Endowing actions with reason allows the individual to avoid falling into an animalistic state. Further, the individual must revise what he considers valuable. This reevaluation of human life and the final good can free a man from

¹⁰⁶ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” I.1.11.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” II. 9.1

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

slavery. Following this valuation overhaul, one can gain a greater perspective on life. No longer can the tyrannical externals rule one's actions. Instead, the individual recognizes that whatever happens, "if it be outside the sphere of choice, [it] is nothing to me."¹¹⁰ Should my friend grow ill and die, I recognize it as the natural course of events I cannot change. Should I lose my life savings, I recognize that happiness comes only from virtue and not from material goods. Should I be threatened with chains, I recognize these as fettering my hands and legs and not my control over my mental disposition toward virtue. Distinguishing between indifferents and the good is thus crucial in freeing the individual from bondage to external beings and goods and in moving her closer to virtue.

For a greater facilitation of moral progress, Epictetus includes a strategic, three-step plan to guide the student of morality toward virtue. His method is simple but rigorous, involving only three steps. First, the student must learn to control his desires. Learning to control his passions ensures that he will "neither fail to get what he desires nor fall into what he would avoid."¹¹¹ No longer will the student experience disturbances, tumults, misfortunes, or calamities. As a result, he will no longer exhibit jealousy, envy, or sorrow. Each of these passions is produced by a thwarted desire or incurrance of our dislikes. By removing these passions, one removes misplaced value judgments. Hence, Epictetus sees this self-control as the most pressing need in an individual's life; fluidly living in accordance with nature rids oneself of the passions that render reason passive. Once the student masters this step, he moves to improving his actions so that they include only what is appropriate. This skill ensures the student will "act in an orderly manner and after due consideration, and not carelessly."¹¹² Each impulse is carefully considered and only the appropriate is selected. However, to act appropriately only part of the time is not

¹¹⁰ Epictetus, "The Discourses," I.29.24.

¹¹¹ Epictetus, "The Discourses," III.2.1.

¹¹² Epictetus, "The Discourses," III.2.2.

enough to reach virtue. The third and final step is thus concerned with the “achievement of certainty.”¹¹³ By this, Epictetus means that no matter the time or circumstance, the moral progressor will learn to act and react in the appropriate manner. Nothing will catch the student off-guard. Again, assent plays a large role in this last step. Certainty involves assenting only to correct impressions; the mind refuses to accept an “unexamined impression” without first interrogating it to see whether or not it is appropriate. The student learns never to act without consideration. Exercising these abilities contributes to the training Epictetus sees as necessary for moral improvement.

Ultimately, Epictetus sees this moral training as the goal of philosophy. The final human good lies in virtue as the perfection of reason; it requires rationality and “the capacity to deal with these impressions.”¹¹⁴ Reaching this state of complete virtue is difficult. Philosophy, however, can help. It does not promise earthly goods or externals; instead, philosophy is the art of living.¹¹⁵ As such, entry into the discipline comes at the heels of severe self-appraisal. An individual turns to philosophy upon becoming conscious of his own weakness and incapacity, hoping philosophy will provide the truth:

The beginning of philosophy is this: the realization that there is a conflict between the opinions of men, and a search for the origin of that conflict, accompanied by a mistrust towards mere opinion, and an investigation of opinion to see if it is correct opinion, and the discovery of a certain standard of judgment.¹¹⁶

Philosophy promises an essential human truth; it is toward this that students of philosophy are drawn. Epictetus asserts that “unable as we are to fulfill the profession of man, we take on in addition that of the philosopher.”¹¹⁷ Philosophy is more than just memorizing lines of

¹¹³ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” III.2.5.

¹¹⁴ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” I.8.2-5.

¹¹⁵ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” I.15.1-2.

¹¹⁶ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” II.11.13.

¹¹⁷ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” II.9.22.

Chrysippus. It promises to deliver a certain standard of judgment to guide human life toward the good. As such, Epictetus believes the philosopher should inspire and facilitate moral improvement: philosophers “exhort us not to be contented with mere learning, but to add practice also, and then training.”¹¹⁸ They provide practical and philosophical guides. Philosophy is a discipline that attracts those who recognize their failure in fulfilling their role as a human being and who wish to alter this position. Philosophy guides its disciple toward reason and virtue, hence the emphasis on training and improvement. Epictetus’ assertion summarizes the relationship between philosophy and humanity: without the knowledge of what is truly good and what is not, one cannot be a philosopher—or, more importantly, a man.

But Epictetus’ mantra of philosophical training contains another crucial point: in insisting upon training, Epictetus admits progress. His philosophy softens the barriers between Sage and non-sage. He explicitly argues for improvement in Book III Chapter 8.4, where he says that once we exercise ourselves to deal with impressions, “we shall make progress.” The training program Epictetus outlines is not a pointless pursuit. Rather, the power of habituation is fully acknowledged in a moral context. Intentional habituation through training solidifies our mental dispositions so that we shall “never assent to anything unless we get a convincing impression.”¹¹⁹ Such a statement provides a side of Stoic moral improvement heretofore unseen, that of the stages between total depravity and sagehood. Time and again, Epictetus emphasizes the role training plays. He states that one should give thought to “nothing other than the proper use of impressions,” constantly evaluating choices made throughout the day and reminding oneself of one’s true nature as a rational creature.¹²⁰ Epictetus acknowledges intermediacy. The chasm

¹¹⁸ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” II.9.13.

¹¹⁹ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” III.8.4.

¹²⁰ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” IV.6.34-5.

between the two extremes still exist, but a footbridge now runs between them. Epictetus answers the question “where is progress, then?” by stating:

If any of you, withdrawing himself from externals, turns to his own faculty of choice, working at it and perfecting it, so as to bring it fully into harmony with nature; elevated, free, unrestrained, unhindered, faithful, self-respecting: if he has learned too, that whoever desires, or is averse to, things outside his own power can neither be faithful nor free, but must necessarily be changed and tossed back and forth with them; must necessarily too be subject to others, who can procure or prevent what he desires or wants to avoid: if, finally, when he rises in the morning, he observes and keeps to these rules; bathes and eats as a man of fidelity and honour; and thus, in every matter that befalls, puts his guiding principles to work, just as the runner does in the business of running, or the voice-trainer in the training of voices: this is the man who is truly making progress, this is the man who has not travelled in vain.¹²¹

Epictetus’ insistence that moral progress exists provides an easier explanation of motivation for Stoic moral improvement. He soothes concerns of meaninglessness by insisting the journey toward virtue has not been in vain. The moral progressor no longer has nothing to show for his actions; instead, he can point to his assents to impressions and desires to demonstrate how far he has come from the depths of his vices. Epictetus preserves the motivation of the moral progressor.

But does this new acknowledgement of moral progress undermine Early Stoic doctrine? The Stoic philosophers preceding Epictetus clearly did not support any concept of incremental improvements in morality; all the primary sources available from the earlier incarnation of the school makes this position explicit. As stated at the outset of this essay, Cicero reported that the Stoics denied any increase in the highest good,¹²² while Plutarch stated that the soul deals in “absolute badness” until its sudden transformation into virtue, in which it sheds all the vice it “failed to remove even in part over a considerable time.”¹²³ These examples demonstrate the rejection of gradient progress in Early Stoic thought. Virtue and vice admit no intermediate in

¹²¹ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” I.4.18-21.

¹²² Cicero, *de Finibus*, III.48.

¹²³ Plutarch, “On Moral Progress,” 75C.

these early accounts. Yet, Epictetus' *Discourses* directly contradicts this view. His philosophy describes perceptible progress through training. Although Epictetus maintains that virtue itself is not acquired until one completely eradicates vice, improvement is still incurred through hard work. This view contains the entire problem. If Epictetus only abides by some Stoic doctrine and not others, is his argument for moral progress truly Stoic?

I argue that this objection does not hold for three reasons. First, it does not recognize the legitimate development of theories across time periods. Stoicism evolved between the time of its founder, Zeno, and its later proponents, like Epictetus. This was due not only to personal preference or historical trends in philosophical thought, but also due to the need to respond to criticism launched by the Academic Skeptics against Stoic theory. Cicero and others ridiculed the concept that virtue allowed for no middle ground, and to some extent Epictetus' view, like that of other Late Stoics, is a response to this critique. While the difference between early and Late Stoics should rightfully be acknowledged, this difference does not delegitimize Epictetus' writings.

Second, looking to Epictetus provides a solution to the problem of motivation in Stoic moral theory precisely *because* he differs from the Early Stoics. This solution was first pursued as an alternative to the orthodox Early Stoic response. Early Stoics provide an answer to the question of motivation, but only insofar as they tie it back into their holistic philosophical system. One must accept all of their theories in order to accept their account of moral motivation. But for the non-Stoic, or even the new Stoic recruit, a coherent account of moral motivation must be outlined. In this I think Epictetus succeeds in articulating a reasonable account of progression toward complete virtuousness in an accessible manner.

Third, even if we do maintain the Early Stoic strong line that moral progress does not exist, Epictetus still provides an explanation of this that is more user-friendly than that of the original accounts. Epictetus acknowledges the dire odds of becoming a Sage at one point during the *Discourses*. Every Sage begins as a fool. Like an athlete, the Sage must undertake hard winter training to prepare himself and propel himself into virtue. Each individual should engage in such training, although not all are guaranteed to become Sages. The process is too treacherous. Lack of guarantee does not constitute a sufficient reason not to try, however. Epictetus insists that this uncertainty is no reason for common folk to immediately give up on the acquisition of virtue: “What, then: because I am not naturally gifted, shall I neglect all care of myself? Heaven forbid!”¹²⁴ Epictetus believes virtue is worth pursuing in and of itself, not just because it may benefit he who becomes a Sage. It is not just for the title of “Sage” that we aim toward morality. Virtue is appropriate to us as human beings. It is an end in and of itself. Epictetus admits he “will not be better than Socrates,” but declares that as long as he is not worse, “that is enough.”¹²⁵ What matters is holding oneself to a high standard and doing the best of one’s ability to prepare ourselves for the instantaneous transformation to sagehood. We should view morality like we view exercise or investment. Epictetus comments that he “shall never be a Milo and yet I do not neglect my body; nor a Croesus, and yet I do not neglect my property.”¹²⁶ Failure to attain perfection does not preclude effort toward improvement in these pursuits, and neither should it in the case of virtue. We should pursue virtue and take pains to work toward moral improvement instead of indulging in “despair of arriving at the highest degree of perfection.”¹²⁷ This account acknowledges the fear of futility that those new to Stoicism might experience when faced with

¹²⁴ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” I.2.35.

¹²⁵ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” I.2.36.

¹²⁶ Epictetus, “The Discourses,” I.2.37.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

the doctrine of virtue without degrees. Epictetus assures his followers that working toward progress is worthwhile even if they do not reach Sagehood. By doing so, he validates the pursuit of progress.

No matter how we respond to the objection regarding the disavowal of Early Stoicism, Epictetus remains an important influence in the interpretation of how we are to relate to motivation in moral progress. At the very least, if we must indeed maintain a strict absolutist view of virtue and vice, Epictetus reassures the moral progressor of the worth of his actions. And at best, he presents an accessible account of actual progress toward virtue. For those unsatisfied with the orthodox Early Stoic account, this late Roman thinker provides an alternative.

Motivation in Stoic moral progress presents a problem for the theory, but one that can ultimately be solved. Motivation seems impossible in a concept of virtue that allows for no degrees. Not only does the moral progressor fall into despondency upon realizing each action toward progress constitutes an evil action, he becomes paralyzed by comprehending this dichotomy of good and evil actions through good and evil assents. Stoicism, ever the self-contained system, does provide an answer. In fact, in this case, it provides two: one presented by Brennan's revision of motivation's source, and the other by Inwood's approach to Hieroclean *oikeiosis*. Synthesizing the two creates a compelling case for motivation in line with orthodox Stoicism. By acknowledging that we act toward what is appropriate to us, not what is good, we escape the paralysis of non-Sagehood, and through *oikeiosis* we explain why we are inclined to pursue virtue: because we recognize it as what befits us as human beings and are naturally impelled to pursue it. But for those not convinced of the Stoic worldview, an alternative account also exists. By loosening the rigor of Early Stoicism through reading Epictetus, we allow for a view that grants a more generous view of moral progress that encourages training and

habituation in order to reach a more realistic vision of sagehood, or at least not pure viciousness.

Motivation, then, is saved, and we can pursue the moral progress that is appropriate to us once

more.

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