

Stoic Ethics: Sketching Key Ideas

Sources. Early Stoics aim to systematise an ethics that roots in Socrates and a Cynic called Krates, who was a teacher of Zeno's. Later Stoics (Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius) discuss philosophical *therapy*, which could be seen as practical ethics. Note that *therapeia* (θεραπεία) means 'looking after' or 'taking care'.

1. *Impulse* (ὄρμη, *hormê*): the soul's movement towards an object; desires, wants, passions; in rational beings ideally grounded in assent.
2. *Oikeiôsis* (οὐκείωσις): the first impulse of *everything* is a sort of appropriation, or familiarisation; a sort of affiliation to something that belongs to the thing in question, hence everything seeks out what is suited to it. A thing's first act of *oikeiôsis* is to maintain itself in existence, or to main its constitution (pneumatic coherence). This is like Spinoza's *conatus*, according to which all things strive perservere in their being (*Ethics* IIP6). *Oikeiôsis* is continuous: minimally, keeping tenor; maximally, appropriate the cosmic constitution. We are cosmopolites (πολίτης τοῦ κόσμου, *politês tou kosmou*).
3. *Kathêkon* (καθῆκον): proper function, whatever we do that is consistent with our nature and has a justification/reason; the appropriate. If *x* is part of our nature, then *x*-ing is best/rational for us to do. Prescriptive power. See LS53Q: impulsive impressions are evaluative, that *x* is *kathêkon* (for me).

Q Stobaeus, 2.86,17–87,6 (*SVF* 3.169, part)

(1) What activates impulse, they [the Stoics] say, is precisely an impression capable of directly impelling a proper function. (2) In genus impulse is a movement of soul towards something. (3) In species it is seen to include both the impulse which occurs in rational animals and the one found in the non-rational; but these species have not been given corresponding names. For desire is not rational impulse, but a species of this. (4) One would correctly define rational impulse by saying that it is a movement of thought towards something in the sphere of action. The contrary of this is repulsion.

4. *Indifferents* (ἀδιάφορος, *adiaphoros*): even what conventionally seems very valuable or disvaluable, such as health or poverty, the value of most things is indifferent, even death and life. Indifferents have no intrinsic *moral* value: they are neither good nor bad. Yet, indifferents that cohere with nature (τὰ κατὰ φύσιν, *ta kata phusin*) have value and are thus *preferred* (προηγμένα, *proêgmena*): health, honour, pleasure etc. They have instrumental value as means of progress towards morality (προκοπή, *prokôpê*) as objects of our choices. Hence, preferred things can be expressed as rules or directives: honour your parents, look after yourself. Such commands prescribe *kathêkonta*. Indifferents that are inconsistent with nature (τὰ παρὰ φύσιν, *ta para phusin*) lack value and are hence 'dispreferred' (ἀποπροηγμένα, *apoproêgmena*).

5. *Value* (ἀξία, *axia*): the significant worth of something; something has value insofar as it ‘accords with nature’; if it contributes to my existence as the sort of thing that I am. Some things have natural value but not moral value.
6. *Good* (ἀγαθόν, *agathon*): the only good is virtue; the only bad is vice. The good constitutes a genuine benefit for the individual; the good is intrinsically valuable (end in itself), or a state of perfection; the key to a happy life.
7. *Virtue* (ἀρετή, *aretê*): ‘a consistent character’ (διάθεσις ὁμολογουμένης, *diathesis homologoumenis*), where ‘homologue’ means something like maximally self-agreeing or internally consistent. An ‘excellence’, stable pneumatic tenor. Since Socrates, knowledge or wisdom is virtue.
8. *Happiness* (εὐδαιμονία, *eudaimonia*): the best possible condition of human beings relative to their nature; flourishing. For Zeno, this is a ‘good flow of life’ (εὐροια βίου, *euioia biou*), or ‘living in agreement’ (ὁμολογουμένως ζῆν, *homologoumenôs zên*). Cleanthes: ‘living in agreement with nature’. To live well is to be in tune with nature, the cosmic flow of things, but also internal harmonious or coherent flow (Plato: the balanced or ‘just’ soul). Moral progress: understanding the rational cosmic plan and how to fit in it, learning about ourselves and our nature, embrace fate willingly (not resist it).
9. *The Passions* (πάθη, *pathê*): a ‘suffering’ or what we now roughly call ‘emotions’. Passions are uncontrolled impulses; distorted, false, or excessive value judgements: over-evaluations (weak opinion: assent to false impressions). They are due to over-tensed psychic pneuma; and include impulses for what is apparently, but not really, good for me (preferable). Example: pain is merely a dispreferred indifferent; pleasure is merely a preferred indifferent. Anger grounds in false judgement that we have been wronged (Seneca) and is the desire for revenge. Passions are not appropriate: no one could intentionally harm anyone or willingly commit an injustice (Socrates).
10. *The Sage* (ὁ σόφος, *ho sophos*): only the wise are virtuous, and hence only the wise are happy. The wise are at ease with themselves and with the universe; hence they achieve tranquillity or non-perturbedness (ἀταραξία, *ataraxia*). The wise lack passions (hence ‘stoical’) but have true feelings (εὐπάθειαι, *eupatheiai*): joy, wishing, watchfulness (caution): like controlled undertows. The wise do not just ‘select’ (preferred) things, they ‘choose’ them, for they have a rational desire (impulse) for the good: they go for the ‘choiceworthy’ things.
The wise action may look the same from the outside, but they are performed by virtuous agents, who *know* what they do agrees with what they choose; since they know about the harmony (concordance) between the individual and the cosmic nature.
Then, *kathékonta* turn into *katorthómata* (κατόρθωμα) or right actions, i.e. not just actions prescribed by nature, but actions that we select rationally for their moral dimension, which we also understand, and that we perform ‘perfectly’.

