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** (ὁρμή, hormê): the soul’s movement towards an object; desires, wants, passions; in rational beings ideally grounded in assent.

2. **Oikeiôsis** (οἰκείωσις): 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 persist in their being (*Ethics* IIIP6). 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 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 (προκωπτῆ, 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** (ἀγαθὸν, 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 ὀμολογουμένης, diathesis homologoumenos), 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’ (εὔροια βίου, euroia biou), or ‘living in agreement’ (ὁμολογουμένος ζῆν, homologoumenos zên). Cleanthes: ‘living in agreement with nature’.

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 σοφός, 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 (ἅταραξια, ataraxia). The wise lack passions (hence ‘stoical’) but have true feelings (εὐπάθεια, 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, kathêkonta turn into kathôrhôma (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’.