

## Paradoxes and Disputes

(1) *Stoic Paradoxes*. In his *Letters*, Seneca occasionally appeals to views that appear unexpected or strange (e.g., 71.7–8; 71.21). Throughout antiquity, Stoic doctrines were seen as counterintuitive and hence unbelievable: in short, contrary to common opinion and thus paradoxical; i.e. going against (*para*) the beliefs (*doxa*) that are common. (There is another meaning: a paradox can also refer to an inconsistent set of propositions, i.e. a set of claims that could not be true together. This is more the idea behind Plutarch's collection.) Epictetus reports Cleanthes: 'what philosophers say may conflict with common opinion but not with reason' (*Discourses* 4.1.173): it seems certain peculiarities are the consequence of the systematic nature and coherence of Stoic philosophy. In *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, Cicero lists six ideas that violate common sense:

- I. Virtue/excellence is the only good (*ὅτι μόνον τὸ καλὸν ἀγαθόν; hoti monon to kalon agathon*). *Remark*. The indifferents are subject to fate, or 'playthings of fortune' (*ludibria fortunae*, §9), and thus not really in our possession, or 'up to us'. They are also merely naturally valuable, but not morally good. Hence, the idea seems to be that something is a good only if it benefits us at all times. (For the association of good and benefit, see Readings 24 May LS60G). But virtue is the only good that is up to us at all times. So, virtue is the only good.
- II. Virtue is itself sufficient for happiness/flourishing (*ὅτι αὐτάρκης ἡ ἀρετὴ πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν; hoti autarkês hê aretê pros eudaimonian*). *Remark*. The argument for this might run along these lines: virtue is a stable character or internally coherent state of mind (i.e. *hégemonikon* cf. Readings 31 May LS61A); this stability is 'up to us' and hence not hostage to luck or circumstances; for if virtue depended on something other than us, we could not be certain of a good flow of life, or that our lives agree with Nature, and so we could not be happy. So, it is only virtue that secures our happiness (*eudaimonia*), and nothing else.
- III. All immoral actions are equally bad, and all morally right actions are equally good (*ὅτι ἴσα τὰ ἀμαρτήματα καὶ τὰ κατορθώματα; hoti isa ta amartêmata kai ta kathorthómata*). *Remark*. The obvious problem is that not all bad actions seem equally bad. But the idea seems to be this: virtue is total internal coherence of one's character; so, nothing could be added to make it more or less virtuous (cf. Cicero §22); so, all virtuous actions are equally right. And without shades of rightness, all immoral actions are equally bad.
- IV. All non-sages are lunatics/mentally deranged (*ὅτι πᾶς ἄφρων μαίνεται; hoti pas aphrôn mainetai*). *Remark*. Two thoughts might be in play. (a) Only the sage *knows*; the non-sage have more or less confused opinions, and are therefore detached from reality or truth. (b) Only the sage is 'apathic'; the non-sage is driven by passions, and hence their actions are illogical (*ἄλογος*). But see Cicero (Readings for 7 June, LS66D): it seems that Panaetius, a 'middle' Stoic, softened this paradox: most people are non-sages, yet show a likeness

(*simulacrum*) of virtue. Still, the central point stands: virtue does not come in degrees; we can only be closer or further from it.

- V. Only the wise are free; the non-sages are slaves (*ὅτι μόνος ὁ σοφὸς ἐλεύθερος καὶ πᾶς ἄφρων δούλος; hoti monos ho sophos eleutheros kai pas aphron doulos*). *Remark.* The non-wise are ‘slave to the passions’ and thus unfree. Also: the issue of fate shows that freedom of ‘indifference’ is not true freedom. The wise could not have done otherwise, in the sense that *any* alternative course of action is possible at any time. The wise are ‘spontaneously’ free: they agree, or are ‘homologous’, with the flow of Nature, i.e. they reason in line with the cosmic rationale and so co-fate the divine development.
- VI. Only the wise are wealthy (*ὅτι μόνος ὁ σοφὸς πλούσιος; hoti monos ho sophos plousios*). *Remark.* The non-wise desire indifferents and are constantly needy for more. Nothing suffices; wealth is never achieved. The wise have all what they need: virtue. This is the most prized possession possible; nothing could be more valuable.

(2) *The Debate with the Academics.* In *Letter* 71.21, Seneca hints at a debate about the equality of goodness. For the Stoics, the end or goal of life, and what makes our lives happy, is to live in agreement with nature (see Readings 31 May 2016, LS63). Here is a sketch of that debate, which may also explain the several reformulations of the end (cf. LS63B and J).

- (a) Pleasure is a preferable indifferent (see Readings 24 May 2016, LS58A).
- (b) Pleasure is also in accordance with nature (LS58C).
- (c) Anything that is in accordance with nature has value (LS58D).
- (d) So, pleasure has value.
- (e) The end of life is *eudaimonia*, and this is achieved through selecting things in accordance with nature (cf. LS58J).
- (f) So pleasure is relevant for *eudaimonia*, in spite of official Stoic doctrine.
- (g) *Structural Problem 1.* If achieving the end depends on the activity of selecting certain things, it seems the selection (this activity) itself is carried out for the sake of an end, namely to get the selected things. So it cannot have final value, but only instrumental value. So selection cannot be the end: it is strange to regard selecting as such as the end of an action.<sup>1</sup>
- (h) *Structural Problem 2.* Objects of selection must have value to be selected. So they have value independently of being selected. (Or do they have value in virtue of being selected?) But then, there are *two ends*: selecting things according to nature, and getting things according to nature.

But Seneca gives a hint: there is no *moral* difference between two indifferents; what matters is the intention, or reason, for acting in certain ways. Insofar as we understand a situation, we know what is the ‘right’ action, i.e. one that agrees with nature; the *success* (or failure) of this action is irrelevant, morally speaking (see *Letter* 76.28). So, perhaps selection for the right reasons (consistent with cosmic logos) is what matters for *eudaimonia* (see Readings for 31 May 2016, LS61G, 63G).

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<sup>1</sup> See Long & Sedley, *Commentary to LS64*, p. 407.

