TOWARD A NEW STOICISM

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Toward a New Stoicism

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Preface

The e-book you are, hopefully, about to enjoy is a collection of essays in practical philosophy originally published at Figs in Winter, my Substack newsletter, or in one of my previous blogs.

I've been writing about philosophy as a way of life for a good number of years now, beginning with my first book on the topic, Answers for Aristotle: How Science and Philosophy Can Lead Us to A More Meaningful Life, continuing with the well received How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life, and a number of others.

This series of e-booklets (free to download) collects essays that are thematically related and, I think, interesting and useful.

Enjoy, and remember, *Philosophia longa, vita brevis*!

~Massimo Pigliucci

I—The map of the territory

With this essay I am going to begin an in-depth coverage of the second edition of Larry Becker's fundamental book, A New Stoicism, without question the most serious attempt to "update" Stoicism from the end of its first half-millennium run, in the second century of the modern era.

This series will proceed as follow: (i) a brief summary of the changes to the new edition, with a justification of why it was necessary, essentially covering the preface of the book (this chapter); (ii) "the way things stand," discussing chapters 1-3, on "the conceit," "a new agenda for Stoic ethics," and "the ruins of doctrine"; (iii) "the way things might go," covering chapters 4 and 5, on "normative logic" and "following the facts" (Larry's rendition of "live according to nature"); (iv) on virtue (chapter 6); (v) on happiness (chapter 7); and (vi) the postscript, including discussions of "the virtues of virtue ethics in the Stoic tradition," "Stoic politics and virtue politics in general," and "Stoicism as a guide to living well."

Larry passed away in 2018, but I had met with him a couple of years earlier and while I was writing this he gave me generous feedback to make sure that I got his ideas

right. My commentary here refers to the second, updated edition of A New Stoicism. Fasten your seat belts, and hang on for a fascinating ride!

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Larry explains at the beginning of his book that he implemented five substantial changes with respect to the old edition. Even if you have not read the latter, it is going to be instructive to briefly discuss what Becker has done, as it will represent a conceptual map of sorts to help us keep our bearings in the essays to come.

I. Larry reformulated the relationship among Stoic agency, virtue, and the concept of eudaimonia (or flourishing).

The problem this is meant to address is an apparent inconsistency in Stoic thought. For the Stoics, virtue is an end in itself, the chief good of a human life (which they derive from Socrates' discussion in the Euthydemus). But Stoicism is also considered a eudaimonic philosophy, in the Socratic tradition. How can this be, since eudaimonia is usually defined as the ultimate goal for this class of philosophies? How can the chief good be both a virtuous life and a eudaimonic one?

Larry proposes a "developmental" account of Stoic ethics (a revised version of the so-called cradle argument, which one finds in Cicero's De Finibus, book II) from which it will turn out that Stoic agency, Stoic virtue, and eudaimonia are all emerging from Stoic practice, being, in a sense, inextricably linked to each other. As a bonus, Becker will also provide an explanation of the famous "paradoxical" Stoic doctrine that virtue is an all or nothing thing, and yet one can make progress toward virtue. After all, they coined the term "prokopton" precisely to indicate one who makes progress in the study and practice of Stoicism.

II. Specifically Stoic moral training and education have to be part of the above mentioned developmental story.

I will not make additional comments about this here, we will get to it in due time.

III. An entirely new treatment of the topic of suicide, which was omitted in the first edition.

Again, no further comment needed at the moment, except that Larry will show that the moral possibility of suicide (under strict conditions) is, in fact, part and parcel of Stoic philosophy, as I've argued here while discussing Epictetus' so-called open door policy.

IV. A major update in the discussion of the available literature on Stoicism, both ancient and modern, a literature that has grown substantially since the 1998 edition of A New Stoicism.

No further comment needed here.

V. A postscript with substantial new material on the topics of virtue ethics, how Stoicism relates to politics and social justice, and Stoicism as a guide to modern living.

This last change is arguably the most impactful for readers interested in the practice of Stoicism, and the fact that it is relegated to a postscript should not deceive the reader. It is there because Larry's main interest is theoretical and grounded in his academic approach. His book is not a practical guide. But the ancient Stoics would have told you

that if you do not have a good grasp of the theory, the practice becomes an empty bag of tricks, which is why they included the study of the fields of physics and logic in their curriculum, as preparatory to the crucial bit, the ethics.

So the one sketched above is the map of the territory ahead. Next up: how and why to update Stoicism to the 21st century.

II—The way things stand, part 1

So far we have briefly examined the reasons why Larry Becker has just published the second edition of his A New Stoicism, which attempts to carry out an ambitious thought experiment: what would have happened if Stoicism had not gotten interrupted, so to speak, in the third century of the modern era, and its practitioners had instead engaged with the philosophy and science of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and finally modernity?

The second entry in this series tackles chapters 1, 2 and 3 of the book, grouped by Becker under the general heading of "the way things stand." Chapter 1 is very brief, and it offers a rather bleak, and yet realistic, view of the history of Stoicism — as well as philosophy as a whole — after the third century. It begins with the assertion that Stoic ethics was "pillaged" and effaced by imperial Christianity, meaning that the Christians, who took over the Roman Empire, also picked and chose their favorite bits of Stoic philosophy (the Logos, the virtues, the concept of duty), and absorbed it into their own, very different, ethical framework.

One could argue, however, that this pillaging is precisely what allowed Stoicism to remain a live presence

for many centuries, unlike, say, its former rival, Epicureanism – which the Christians rejected wholesale because of its unfriendly metaphysics based on atoms swirling in the void. After all, Christian thinkers from Paul to Augustine to Thomas Aquinas engaged with Stoic thought, a process that eventually led to a brief resurgence of the Greco-Roman philosophy during the Renaissance, the so-called Neo-Stoicism of Justus Lipsius and Michel De Montaigne.

Still, Becker is right that during the Middle Ages Christianity came to use Stoic precepts as spiritual exercises and "remedies," while at the same time abandoning or radically transforming core concepts of the philosophy. It is, in fact, the case that Christian monks used Epictetus' Enchiridion as a training manual for spiritual exercises, though they changed every occurrence of "Socrates" to "Jesus." But it is also the case that Thomas Aquinas articulated his famous theory of the seven virtues by subordinating the Stoic ones (prudence, courage, justice, and temperance) to the specifically Christian ones of hope, faith, and charity.

Interestingly, Becker says that the confusion between the philosophy and the "remedies" still obtains today, and I wonder whether he is referring to the onslaught of Stoicism as a set of "life hacking" techniques, which does make a number of prokoptontes feel rather uneasy, skeptical of what may be construed as a borderline perversion of the philosophy. (After all, making money or becoming

successful aren't Stoic objectives, they are mere preferred indifferents)

Becker then suggests that Stoics have gradually abandoned their original metaphysics, in the face of modern mechanistic science, thus decoupling their philosophy from theology. As we shall see later on, he does not think this was a bad move, but rather an incomplete one: if the universe is not a living organism then one needs a new account of the Logos, and if Providence is not the result of the activities of that organism, then one needs a new account of Fate and the web of cause-effect.

We then come to the rise of Romanticism, which resulted in the rejection of even Stoic techniques, let alone the broader philosophy, on the ground that some of what the Stoics regard as destructive emotions ought to be embraced, rather than rejected. More importantly, Becker is implicitly critical of David Hume's fact-value distinction (which is, indeed, rejected by a naturalistic ethics like the Stoic one), and thinks it problematic that both modern social science and philosophy bought into it. The Stoics thought that social science is integral to the study of ethics, not a completely distinct field.

The chapter ends with the observation that moral truth is increasingly given a coherentist interpretation in modern philosophy, an interpretation according to which:

"Pluralism, relativism, and irony abounded, alongside various forms of dogmatism about natural duties and the

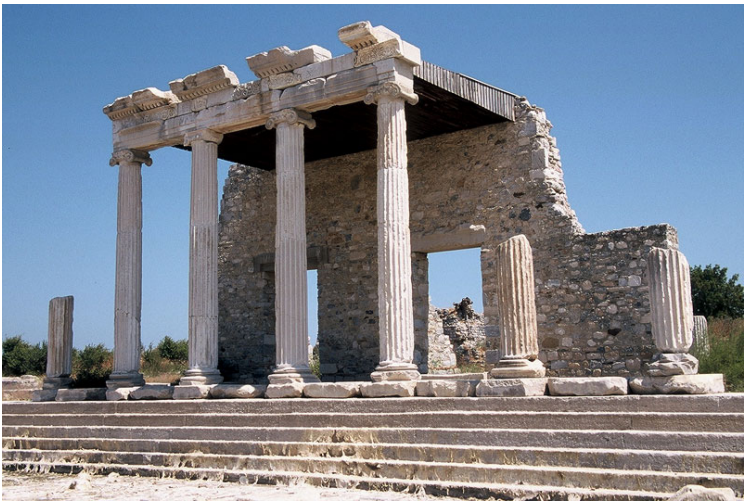
intrinsic moral worth of human beings. … It is a complete disaster. Only a few are escaped to tell you." (p. 4)

After this rather dark view of things, chapter 2 sets out to establish a new agenda for Stoic ethics. This too is a rather brief chapter, in which Becker imagines a book that hasn't been written yet, one in which the old Stoic teleology is replaced by the idea that "living according to nature" is reinterpreted as meaning living according to the dictates of practical reason, all things considered. That book would also argue that such normative propositions cannot be constructed a priori (as in, say, Kant), but rather depend on empirical knowledge of the natural world at large, and of human nature more specifically.

That same hypothetical book would then describe a practical philosophical regime aimed at building character, a regime that emphasizes control over one's mental states in order to overcome whatever obstacles to living well one may encounter in the course of her life. The book in question would also argue that virtue is always one and the same thing: conformity to practical reason and wisdom, thus recovering, by a different route, the ancient Stoic concept of the unity of the virtues.

That imaginary book is not the one that Becker has actually written, he says (though methinks he has come pretty darn close!), but A New Stoicism certainly represents of very good outline of that more complex endeavor, an endeavor that begins with chapter 3, a broadly declarative survey of the possibilities open to modern Stoicism.

It is this survey that represents the meat of the first section of the book, and to which I now turn. It begins by admitting that "our" critics, as Larry charmingly (in my mind) puts it, think of Stoic ethical doctrine as a mix of two types of components: on the one hand, a number of notions that are sensible, but also common to other Hellenistic philosophies, and are thus not distinctively Stoic; on the other hand, some notions that are distinctively Stoic but are untenable. The latter include the ideas that the only good is virtue, that virtue does not admit of degrees, and that nonetheless one can make progress towards it. Boldly, Becker warns his readers that he will defend a modern version of all these "paradoxa Stoicorum," as Cicero called them.



Stoa at Miletus, photo by the Author

In order to prepare the ground for his project, Larry tackles the famous relationship among the three fields:

physics, logic, and ethics. He admits that modern science no longer includes any notion of teleology, and yet that we can still recover a version of the quintessentially Stoic idea that an understanding of the world is pertinent to the study of ethics. Contra much modern philosophy, that is, ethics is not an autonomous enterprise for the Stoic.

For Becker ethics is subordinate to science and logic — as it was for the ancient Stoics. But we need to be careful to understand what he means by this, because his approach is a hell of a lot more sensible than that of scientistically inclined writers such as Sam Harris and Michael Shermer. The subordination derives from the fact that the subject matter of ethics is human character and conduct, together with pertinent mental and social phenomena. It stands to reason, then, that the person concerned with ethics ought to study human nature. Moreover, the methods of ethics are those of rational discourse, which therefore implies that one needs a good handle on logic, understood in the broad sense (i.e., not just the study of formal reasoning) that the Stoics were interested in. (For a modern and sensible approach to a broad conception of rationality see Julian Baggini's The Edge of Reason.)

Other characteristics of ethics are that it is normative, since it is in the business of saying what people ought to do, not just of describing what they actually do; it attempts to construct an account of normativity itself (i.e., why ought people do certain things?); and, practically speaking, is mostly in the business of organizing facts (about the world and humanity) and sifting them through a logical sieve. I

find this general account of the nature of ethics incredibly compelling, and much better – especially in terms of applicability – than pretty much anything else I've seen from professional moral philosophers from Kant on.

The next bit is just as provocative, and yet, again, I think Larry is right on target. He characterizes modern ethics as narrowly concerned with a special domain, or defined by a special point of view or set of commitments, generally referred to as "moral." Stoic ethics, by contrast, is a much broader enterprise, attempting to provide "overriding and final" judgments about all human actions. These judgments are overriding and final because they are arrived at all things considered, taking into account self-interest, altruism, prudence (in the sense of practical wisdom, or phronesis), and even etiquette.

Becker suggests that the Stoic approach (which in this respect is typical of all "Socratic" philosophies) is superior because it directly addresses the question that no modern meta-ethicist has been able to solve: if ethics is concerned only with the sub-set of moral decisions, why should people give priority to that particular criterion whenever it contrasts with other relevant criteria, such as self-interest? Stoic "ethics," instead, includes considerations of self-interest, and others, from the get go, since it is about judgments arrived at all things considered.

Larry then returns to something that is going to be controversial among modern Stoics: the issue of teleology. I have to state at the onset that my own position is essentially aligned with his, and yet that I welcome an

ecumenical version of Stoicism where alternative (e.g., pantheistic, or even theistic) metaphysics are possible. I do not see a contradiction between welcoming a plurality of positions on a given topic and yet at the same time personally thinking that one of them is better than the others (presumably, so do my fellow Stoics who think of themselves as pantheists or theists, with respect to those doctrines).

Essentially, Becker accepts modern science at face value. If science does not require teleology, and in fact rejects the notion of an organic universe in favor of a mechanistic (or, more modernly, a quantistic-relativistic) one, so be it. Stoicism will accommodate such notion. The most important components of this view are that:

"Cosmology does not tell us why there is something rather than nothing, and whether a god produced it. Metaphysics does not thoroughly reconcile human freedom with determinism, or with indeterminism, or with combinations of the two; it does not fully reconcile the description of human consciousness as an object with the nature of subjective experience; it does not fully resolve problems about the nature of time, identity through time, and causality." (p. 11)

The idea is that, so far as we can tell, there is no reason to think that our galaxy, planet or ourselves are special in any way. The universe is indifferent toward us and takes no special notice of or concern for our affairs.

Next, reminds us Becker, Stoic ethics is naturalistic, meaning that it constructs normative propositions, all things considered, from facts about human values, preferences, projects, commitments, and even conventions. This is important, because it amounts to a rejection of absolute moral truths, while at the same time not embracing relativism. The idea of mind independent moral truths is rejected as incoherent (akin to, say, mathematical Platonism), since ethics is the study of human prescriptive actions. Conversely, relativism is also a no starter because there are objective facts about human nature and the human condition that constrain our ethical choices.

Ethics, then, applies to normally functioning human beings. Not to pathological ones (say, psychopaths) or to Martians (who, presumably, will have their own ethics, all their things considered). Becker, wisely, stays clear of any essentialist definition of human nature, and instead thinks the Stoic approach is useful for:

"Huge percentages of normally formed human beings [who] are purposive, socially interactive, reciprocally benevolent language users; have complex emotional-response dispositions and profound attachments or bonds to other people or things; deliberate and make choices; [and] typically have some limits or boundaries that they will try to protect categorically." (p. 12)

How, then, do the biological and social sciences contribute to the Stoic ethical project? In three ways: (i) they offer facts about human behavior that can be used to construct ethical arguments; (ii) they offer theories, for instance in evolutionary biology, that help us make sense of the biological nature of human behavior and the degree of its plasticity in response to varying circumstances; and (iii) they provide empirically based analysis of human rationality and its limits.

Finally, for now, Stoic ethics is about particulars, meaning how individual human beings ought to behave under their specific circumstances:

"Stoic ethical theory begins with the particular — with fully situated individuals — and works carefully out to more general matters." (p. 13)

The next chapter will address the last two sections of chapter 3 of A New Stoicism: norms and moral training (including values, preferences, commitments, projects, standards, social roles, conventions, and institutions), as well as the relationship between virtue and happiness.

We have just reviewed much of the first meaty section of Lawrence Becker's A New Stoicism, as part of my ongoing commentary on this crucial book for anyone interested in how Stoic philosophy can be updated and developed for the 21st century. Here I am going to complete that section, by focusing on the last two bits of chapter 3 of the book, respectively dealing with the relationship between norms and moral training, and with the relationship between virtue and happiness.

Larry tackles different sub-topics within the context of norms and moral training: values, preferences and commitments, projects, standards, and the triad of social roles, conventions and institutions. Let's take a look in turn.

In terms of values, Becker asks us to consider different meanings of the apparently straightforward phrase "X is good." As (moral) agents we may mean that we approve of X, or like it, or desire it as an end. In other instances, what we mean is that X is instrumental in achieving some other goal that we like or desire. In this second case, it's perfectly possible that we may like the end we are aiming at (a healthier body, say) but loathe the necessary means to get there (a lot of time spent at the gym).

There are more meanings of "X is good" that we need to distinguish. For instance, when we point to a good exemplar of something (this is a good Chianti), or when we say that something is appropriate given some specific circumstances (it is good to take your hat off when you enter a Church, even if you don't believe, out of respect), or when something is regarded as valuable (it is good to be healthy), or finally when X is good-for-something (a hammer is good for nailing things).

The point is that not all of these categories of "X is good" actually entail action on our part, and when they do, the motivation may be different, and so may be our reasoning about it in order to act wisely, which is a major goal of Stoic training. Indeed, broadly speaking:

"Stoic training aims to make it possible for agents to evaluate their own (and others') values by (a) identifying the facts about an agent's values relevant to choices in each situation and suspending, as appropriate, further discussion of irrelevant values; (b) making the relevant values into a coherent set (insofar as possible), or at least one that is not self-defeating; (c) evaluating them in terms of their motivational forces for the agent; and (d) rank ordering those motivational forces." (p. 15)

In fact, one could take points (a)-(d) as a working operation of wisdom.

Two additional crucial aspects of Stoic training, according to Becker, concern preferences and

commitments. Both are motivators of our actions, but preferences do not necessarily correspond to our values. For instance, I may want to be healthy and minimize my risk of dying of cancer, and yet I prefer to indulge in smoking. Larry correctly characterizes this as a type of akrasia (weakness of the will) and says that:

"Stoic training aims to negate the internal motive force of a preference when it conflicts with what is possible, or when it does not track the facts about values." (p. 16)

Categorical commitments are, well, categorical, meaning that they hold not as a function of something else, but because we value them in themselves. For instance, honor, dignity, integrity, or privacy. Here:

"Stoic training aims to make emotional response dispositions into homeostatic devices, set to eliminate damaging effects that do not have countervailing productive ones." (p. 16)

In other words, a Stoic attempts – of course within the limits of what is humanly possible – to use reason to overcome akrasia (i.e., to do things we genuinely recognize as good for us, even though they may not be pleasurable in themselves) and to align her emotional responses with the sort of fundamental value that she claim to hold (or, failing that, to force herself to admit that she do not, in fact, hold such values).

More generally:

"Stoic training aims to negate the internal motive force of a categorical commitment when it conflicts with what is possible, or with what ought to be done, all things considered." (p. 17)

If you think that's impossible or undesirable you have forfeited a major role of reason in human affairs, and the Stoics ain't gonna follow you there. (Indeed, none of the Hellenistic schools would, not even the Epicureans or the Cyrenaics.)

Next, to have projects is part and parcel of what it means to be a conscious agent. But our projects may be in partial conflict with each other, or some projects may entail other ones as sub-components. It is therefore an objective of Stoic logic to help the agent navigate the conflicts and entailments presented by her own projects in the best way possible. This would be one area of application of phronesis, the virtue of prudence, or practical wisdom.

Larry then briefly talks about standards that agents apply to their own conduct, while pursuing their projects. Standards of, for instance, efficiency, difficulty, and even style, may determine which projects the agent decides to tackle and how. And we are reminded that it is an axiom of Stoic ethics (in the reformulated version presented in A New Stoicism) that an agent should (logically) not get involved in projects that are impossible or clearly beyond

the agent's capability (the aptly termed "axiom of futility," which we will revisit soon).

Let me spend a minute on this point, since it was often misunderstood by readers of the previous edition of the book. The obvious objection is that some projects may seem impossible, but they are actually doable, and if the agent gives up before even attempting them then Stoics will achieve far less than their potential. Obviously. But that sort of underachievement would be un-Stoic to begin with. Stoics don't give up a fight on the ground that it may not succeed. And sometimes even engage in a fight they know they are going to lose, if there are reasons other than success that justify it (e.g., setting an example for others). What Larry is talking about here is the rather commonsensical thing that we ought – both logically and ethically – to carefully consider our options and direct our efforts away from Pindaric flights. For instance, I may desire, at age 53 and with an average body, to start a professional career as a soccer player. That would be foolish (i.e., illogical) and it would get in the way of other projects that I ought to do, negatively affecting people I care for and love (i.e., it would be unethical).

Finally, in terms of social roles, conventions, and institutions, these of course are common regulators of our social life, and they are defined and constrained by a number of rules applying to them. In evaluating our social roles, and the conventions and institutions that affect them, we should keep in mind that:

"Stoic moral training aims to develop in each agent the disposition to seek social roles, conventions, and institutions in which she has more rather than less control of her own life, unless having less can be shown to make a countervailing contribution toward a good life for her." (p. 20)

Stoa at Lindos on Rhodes, Wikimedia

The last part of chapter 3 of A New Stoicism deals with virtue and happiness. As useful background, keep in mind that Larry will argue in the chapter on virtue (#6) that ideal Stoic agency, virtue, and happiness are inseparably linked in Stoic ethical theory. Ideal agency is necessary and sufficient for Stoic Virtue, which is in turn necessary and sufficient for Stoic happiness.

Becker begins his discussion of virtue and happiness by reminding us that Stoicism is a type of eudaimonism, which means that the philosophy aims at making it possible for us to live a life of flourishing, a meaningful life. But it does not follow (somewhat contra Aristotle) that there is only one such life possible, or that one way of achieving flourishing is better than others. It also doesn't mean, however, that anything goes. It is a major aspect of any eudaimonic philosophy to help its practitioners to frame things so that they will be able to decide which life projects truly lead to flourishing, and which ones lead away from the path of virtue. There is, most obviously, no such thing as a eudaimonic psychopath. Moreover, even if we begin on a particular path, and something happens that forces us to deviate from it, we may still recover a sense of flourishing by taking a different, hitherto unconsidered, path. Which means that:

"Stoic training aims to make it possible for us to salvage some form of a good life under adversity, and to be able to handle sudden, massive changes in our circumstances." (p. 20)

Larry then provides an important definition:

"Living virtuously is the process of creating a single, spatiotemporal object — a life." (p. 21)

The worth of your life isn't necessarily, at any moment, going to be the sum of the worth of its individual components. But it is the case, according to Becker, that any evaluation of the components of your life — in order to be meaningful — will have to be carried out within the broader context of your entire existence as a virtuous project. For instance, I may be working temporarily at a coffee shop because that's one way I can help paying for my college tuition, which will then aid me to get on a career path that is important to me and good for the human polis at large (say, as a lawyer helping disadvantaged or poor people). The work in the coffee shop in itself has relatively little worth, it's a job like many others. But in the context of the broader project of my life, it becomes an important piece of the puzzle. (That said, remember that a good Stoic will be able to adjust her path depending on circumstances, there is no one virtuous life.)

Interestingly, Larry stresses that keeping in mind this whole-life frame of reference is both congruent with the general eudaimonic approach, and yet distinguishes Stoicism from, as he puts it, both Epicureanism and its "modern welfarist offshoots," by which I take it he means utilitarianism and other kinds of consequentialism. (John Stuart Mill, the father of the modern version of utilitarianism, was heavily influenced by Epicureanism.) The reason for this is because, for a Stoic (but not an Epicurean or a utilitarian), how well her own life is going is only partly, and sometimes only to a small extent, assessed by way of her internal, subjective experience. Indeed, the Stoic will

always seek to compare her understanding of her own eudaimonia with that of others, particularly of her role models and "friends of virtue," as Aristotle calls them – those people who will let you know whether you are deviating from a virtuous path, and will help you stick to it. One doesn't pursue eudaimonia by oneself; it is, in a deep sense, a communitarian project.

One final note: at the end of chapter 3 we find the first of the book's Commentary sections, in which ancient texts are quoted, sometimes at length, and the secondary literature on relevant points is mentioned. Those who want to ratchet things up to the next level will want to wade deeper into these sections.

Larry Becker's A New Stoicism is now getting into the heavy lifting of the second part of the book, "The way things might go," comprising chapters 4-7 on normative logic, living according to nature ("follow the facts," in Becker's rendition), virtue, and happiness. This essay comprises chapter 4, on normative Stoic logic.

Admittedly, this bit is not for the philosophically faint of heart, as the material is difficult to get through, despite (or maybe because) the brevity of the chapter itself. Still, it is very well worth the effort, as one gets, among other things, the beginning of an explanation of how Stoics bridge the so-called is/ought (fact/value) divide, which David Hume allegedly thought unbridgeable, but that any naturalistic ethics has, in fact, to bridge.

The first issue that Larry approaches in this context is defining norms and normative propositions, since ethics is a prescriptive (i.e., normative) discipline (as opposed to a descriptive one, like psychology). Norms — in this context — are simply facts about the behaviors of agents, i.e., about their goals, projects and endeavors. Normative propositions, then, are representations of facts about norms, and they can be true or false but can acquire no

other truth value (i.e., Stoic logic is classical logic, not, for instance, paraconsistent).

Any logic is characterized by "operators," i.e., by the logical equivalents of things like "plus," "minus," "divided by," "multiplied by," and so forth in mathematics. Standard deontic logic (a major modern approach to the use of formal logic in ethics) has operators like "obligation," "permission," and "prohibition." Stoic moral logic, instead, uses operators like "requirement," "ought," and "indifference," to which we now briefly turn.

Beginning with the definition of requirement:

"To say that an agent is required to do (or be) x is to say one or more of three things: (i) it may be to say that her doing or being x is in some sense a necessary condition for her pursuing some endeavor she has; (ii) it may be to say that within the terms of some endeavor, she ought to be (or it is required that she be) sanctioned for doing or being non-x; or (iii) it may be to say that her doing or being non-x would be a 'nullity' in her endeavor." (p. 39)

For instance, if my endeavor is to become a better person, then I am required to practice the four cardinal virtues of practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance; I should be sanctioned if I do not practice those virtues (the word "sanctioned" here does not refer to formal punishments, it could simply be the result of me chastising myself when writing my evening diary, for

instance); and if I do not behave virtuously then I am not in the process of becoming a better person.

Next, ought:

"To say that an agent ought to do or be x is to say that her doing (or being) x is advisable (but not necessarily required) in terms of some endeavor that she has." (p. 38)

Notice that "ought," here, does not have anything like the standard meaning that it has in modern moral philosophy, where it indicates an imperative. We as Stoics cannot make sense of moral imperatives that are detached from specific goals or endeavors, hence the "advisable rather than requires" bit above. Think of these as conditional imperatives, of the type: IF I want to do x, THEN I ought to do y.

Finally, indifference:

"The indifference operator is interpreted as a logical remainder. To say that it is a matter of indifference whether an agent does x is to say that her doing x is neither advisable nor inadvisable, neither required nor prohibited." (p. 39)

In the case of my endeavor to become a better person, it is indifferent whether I am wealthy or not, as wealth has nothing to do with being a good person.

Becker then proceeds to distinguish three sets of possibilities to be used in our reasoning: logical,

theoretical, and practical. Logical possibility is the largest set, and it includes the other two. It refers to things that are possible because they do not entail a logical contradiction. For instance, insisting in attempting to square the circle is futile, since we know that this is logically impossible.

Theoretical possibility refers to things that may be done, because they are not logically impossible, though whether they will be done depends on a set of pragmatic considerations. It is certainly logically possible to establish a human colony on Mars, for instance, but it may not be advisable to do so. Which means that practical possibility is

the smallest set, contained by the other two, and refers to things that are logically and theoretically possible as well as, in fact, pragmatically realizable. My writing this commentary series on Larry's book falls, obviously, in this latter category, as it is compatible, in practice, with a number of other endeavors I am currently engaged in. (Having another meeting with my Dean, by contrast, is pragmatically impossible, or so I tell myself right before politely declining his invitation.)

One more piece of the logical puzzle before we get to bridging the is/ought gap: it will often be the case that there will be conflicts among some of our endeavors and goals. Stoic logic comes built in with a way to resolve at least some of these conflicts from the get go: requirements take precedents over oughts, and both of these take precedence over indifferents. This is practically very important, because, among other things, it makes sense of what Stoics mean by "preferred indifferents." If my goal is to become a more virtuous person (as it should be, if I'm a Stoic), then it is a requirement for me to practice the cardinal virtues, and that requirement overrides oughts related to other projects that may interfere with my main goal; both requirements and oughts related to compatible projects, in turn, override my pursuit of preferred indifferents, if that pursuit conflicts in any way with the requirements and oughts that have logical-ethical precedence. If pursuing wealth, say, is something I can do only by compromising my practice of virtue, then it is required of me, as a Stoic, not to pursue wealth.

We now get to how Stoics bridge the is/ought gap. Becker begins his treatment of this topic with an analogy: if I want to play a game, say chess, and win, then I ought to follow its rules, as well as to implement certain defensive and offensive strategies. If I don't follow the rules, then I'm not playing the game. And if I don't implement good strategies then I will not win at the game. Similarly with any kind of naturalistic philosophy, like Stoicism: IF I want to be a productive member of the human polis and live a flourishing human life, THEN I should be engaging in certain behaviors and not others (e.g., practice virtue, not comport myself like a psychopath). This conditional imperative follows from certain facts about human nature and human society, and it is the result of deliberate reflection on my part, "all things considered," i.e., once I have evaluated all my priorities and goals in life.

As Larry puts it, for Stoics means/ends reasoning of the type just outlined is the underlying form of all practical reasoning. Most of our normative propositions, however, will be of the "nothing else considered" type, i.e., they will apply to local goals or endeavors. For instance, if my goal tonight is to have a romantic dinner with my partner, then I ought to buy some wine and flowers, and perhaps the ingredients to cook a good meal. But this sort of normative propositions can be in contrast with other normative propositions, e.g., tonight I really ought to grade my students' papers, as a result of my commitments as a teacher and a professional. But I cannot both grade papers

and set up a romantic dinner on the same night, for pragmatic reasons.

Stoic logic, as laid out by Larry, provides various means to resolve conflicts between normative propositions. Specifically:

"We resolve such conflicts by means of rules for generating superordinate normative propositions that dominate the conflicting ones. … When one endeavor is embedded in a more comprehensive and controlling one, the latter's norms are superordinate. … When we recognize one endeavor as subject to assessment and correction by another, the latter's norms are superordinate. … Sometimes norms of the same ordinal rank conflict. We resolve such conflicts with forced choices." (pp. 43-44)

So, for instance, if I think of the need to spend a romantic evening with my partner and of the need to grade my students' papers as on the same ordinal rank, then I juts have to make a forced choice between the two. But more likely then not, one norm will actually be superordinate: in this case, grading papers is part of my duty, both ethical and contractual, toward my students and employer. By contrast, spending a romantic evening is pleasant, but not a duty toward my partner, certainly not on that particular night. I should, then, grade the damn papers and promise to my partner that I will make it up to her the following night (at which point I will have an additional ethical duty to fulfill a promise made). Of course, the final level of

superordinacy is represented by my duty to be a moral, virtuous person. That duty overrides everything else, including grading papers, should the two norms come into conflict.

The chapter ends with a succinct statement of four axioms of Stoic logic. These are explained in more depth, together with some additional axioms, in the appendix to the book devoted to formal logic, but the brief description that follows is sufficient for the general reader:

Axiom of Encompassment. The exercise of our agency through practical intelligence, including practical reasoning all-things-considered, is the most comprehensive and controlling of our endeavors.

Axiom of Finality. There is no reasoned assessment endeavor external to the exercise of practical reasoning all-things-considered.

Axiom of Moral Priority. Norms generated by the exercise of practical reasoning all-things-considered are superordinate to all others.

Axiom of Futility. Agents are required not to make direct attempts to do (or be) something that is logically, theoretically, or practically impossible.

V-Following the facts, part 1

The ancient Stoics were famous for a number of slogans that sounded, to outsiders, rather paradoxical (so much so that Cicero wrote an entire book on paradoxa Stoicorum). One of the most famous ones is the idea that we should live "according to nature." In his update of Stoicism for the 21st century, Larry Becker rephrases this as "following the facts," which gives the title to the fifth chapter of his A New Stoicism. But chapter 5 is about much more than just a recasting of an ancient motto, as we shall see in this essay, part of my ongoing commentary on Larry's book. Indeed, the discussion of this chapter will require two separate essays, but it will be worth the investment of time and effort.

Right off the bat, Becker gives his readers the punch line, which is worth keeping in mind throughout the following discussion:

"Following nature means following the facts. It means getting the facts about the physical and social world we inhabit, and the facts about our situation in it – our own powers, relationships, limitations, possibilities, motives, intentions, and endeavors – before we deliberate about

normative matters. It means facing those facts — accepting them for exactly what they are, no more and no less — before we draw normative conclusions from them. It means doing ethics from the facts — constructing normative propositions a posteriori. It means adjusting those normative propositions to fit changes in the facts." (p. 46)

This means three things: (i) the framing of Stoic ethics as naturalistic, as it was in ancient times, and therefore grounded in our best scientific understanding of the world; (ii) the rejection of the original Stoic teleological view of nature, because it is no longer compatible with the scientific worldview; and (iii) a naturalistic bridging of the is/ought gap. These three points by themselves go a long way toward achieving the goal of articulating a 21st century version of Stoic philosophy that can still be reasonably called "Stoic."

Larry uses this framework to go back to his axiom of futility, which I presented last time: "Agents are required not to make direct attempts to do (or be) something that is logically, theoretically, or practically impossible."

This, he maintains against the obvious objection, does not mean that Stoics aren't supposed to take risks, or to attempt endeavors that are unlikely to succeed. It is simply the rather commonsensical view that if you have good, solid reasons to think that something is impossible, either in general or for you personally, it is then foolish to attempt it. Anyone who argues against this has not spent sufficient time in the real world, I think.

The next move is to flesh out the idea of normativity, which is always a stumbling block for any moral philosophy. If norms are independent of facts about the world — as much modern philosophical tradition maintains (think Kant) — then one is faced with the question of where on earth norms come from (and the answer can't be transcendental either, as in "God says what's right or wrong," as demonstrated 24 centuries ago by Plato in the Euthyphro). If, conversely, norms can be read straight off facts (as in much contemporary, misguided literature of the "neuroscience will solve all your problems" kind), then one faces the issue of which facts, exactly, are normative, and why? What Larry is attempting here is the only reasonable middle way: a naturalistic ethics that is grounded in facts about human nature, but that filters them through a logical system aimed at producing an ethics of flourishing, not just survival.

That is why Larry argues that there can be no source of norms other than the endeavors of individual agents, and that all such endeavors are, at bottom, facts about the character and conduct of those agents. The question then, is to see which characters and conducts we want to foster, and which ones to discourage. As he says, my commitment to fidelity within a relationship may imply a requirement about you being faithful as well, but — crucially — both norms are the result of my own endeavor of having a successful relationship.

Becker clearly states something that is obviously true not just of Stoicism, but of virtue ethics in general:

"Stoic ethics is messy because the social world is messy. We begin (and end) our deliberations in terms of actual human beings, rather than hypothetical, idealized, or schematic ones." (p. 50)

That is why Stoics reject universal moral approaches, like deontological or utilitarian ones, and why the answer to any sensible moral question is always going to be: it depends (on the particulars of the case). The fact that someone may be dissatisfied with such "messiness" is a reflection of their own state of mind, not of the world as it actually is.

This messiness is in part the result of the fact that our commitments are varied and have a tendency to come into conflict with each other, like the classical one of family vs

work. Larry discusses various types of integration across commitments, where some commitments take partial or absolute priority over others, while sometimes one simply has to make arbitrary decisions, or split resources (time, energy) equally between competing commitments. The key is practical reasoning "all things considered":

"Given all relevant projects and possibilities throughout my whole life, I ought, now, to do (or be) X." (p. 54)

This is why self-reflection and continuous re-evaluation of one's projects and commitments — what Socrates would call "the examined life" — is necessary. It is how we dynamically reassess our priorities and partition our resources in order to maximize eudaimonia, or flourishing.

Please note that of course my projects can and will also at some point come into conflict with yours, and such conflicts will be resolved in a similar fashion, by reasoning and agreeing on ranking of the relevant inter-personal norms. Becker provides a specific example to give his readers an idea of how this works out in practice:

"Suppose I mow my lawn on Sunday mornings, while next door you are trying to achieve serenity, pray, and keep the day holy. If we happen to agree that your project is more important than mine, and thus dictates to mine, our problem is settled. We have interpersonal horizontal integration in that case. If we find that our conflicting Sunday morning endeavors are each embedded in a more

encompassing project (tolerance in my case, neighborly love in yours), then we have the basis for another familiar sort of conflict resolution." (p. 55)

Stoic pragmatism comes into sharp view when we realize that conflicts are endemic to human social life, and that there is nothing in Stoic ethics that mandates a commitment to resolve all and every inter-personal conflict. Life, again, is messy, and it often remains that way despite our best efforts.

A few concluding observations about the first part of chapter 5 of A New Stoicism. Larry correctly observes that human practical reasoning is ad hoc, involves conditional inferences, generalizations, and error correction. This sort of procedure is built into what it means to be a human agent. Because of language, we are capable of representing to ourselves, and others, our goals and norms, and we are also in a position to assess and – when necessary – reform, those goals and norms. This recursivity made possible by language has the following, crucial, consequence:

"If one pursues practical reasoning in a thoroughgoing way, one aims at constructing a general theory of the normative elements of one's life all things considered – that is, a moral theory of one's life. The next step is to represent one's own life as an instance of a type, and to construct a moral theory for that type of life. Types of lives may then be considered as various ways in which moral

agency itself may be expressed. And when one has reached the issue of normative propositions for the life of an agent as such, one has reached a form of universal moral theory." (p. 60)

VI-Following the facts, part 2

We have come to the second part of chapter 5 of A New Stoicism, broadly devoted to a modern reconstruction of the famous Stoic motto, "live according to nature." As we have seen, Larry re-interprets this as "follow the facts," a concept he further elaborates in this manner:

"Following nature means following the facts. It means getting the facts about the physical and social world we inhabit, and the facts about our situation in it – our own powers, relationships, limitations, possibilities, motives, intentions, and endeavors – before we deliberate about normative matters. It means facing those facts – accepting them for exactly what they are, no more and no less – before we draw normative conclusions from them. It means doing ethics from the facts – constructing normative propositions a posteriori. It means adjusting those normative propositions to fit changes in the facts." (p. 46)

The second part of this chapter, in my commentary, begins with a developmental account of moral motivation, which takes on, and updates, yet another fundamental Ancient Stoic concept, that of oikeiosis, or "appropriation"

(of broader concerns than just one's own preferences and needs), in turn the base for the Stoic concept of cosmopolitanism, related to the discipline of action and the virtue of justice. As you can see, there is much packed into these pages.

As Becker points out, the best outline we have of the Stoic theory of moral development is found in Cicero's De Finibus, book III, and that outline, already in its original form, was broadly compatible with what modern psychology tells us about the matter. The theory can be presented in five steps:

1. We begin life as egocentric beings, focused on the satisfaction of our desires and the accomplishment of our own goals, which are not all pleasurable (like learning how to walk).

2. Our egoistic affections and motivations eventually become dispositional, meaning that they generate certain dispositions to pursue projects and achieve goals, which we begin to apply beyond the original, narrow set of affections and motivations.

3. One of the things we develop a disposition to acquire is knowledge, which initially is useful to satisfy our immediate needs, but later on becomes something we are interested for its own sake, and that we apply to a much broader range of objects and concerns:

"We are repelled by error, ignorance, and falsehood. Modern studies of cognitive development, especially language acquisition, provide ample evidence of this." (p. 62)

4. We learn to translate all of the above in appropriate acts, by formulating general rules and principles, which we test in actual situations. We become conditioned to act appropriately (not in the sense of politely, but as in most likely to be effective for the task at hand), and doing so – like seeking knowledge above – becomes something we value in its own right.

5. By way of normal psychological processes (which include, for instance, a concern for others, a sense of empathy, and so forth) as well as by the sort of conscious deliberation we call practical reasoning, we develop an interest in moral good and, in the Stoic context, virtue.

How do we decide what to do in life, both right now and by way of long term projects? Many of our endeavors are "heteronomous," i.e., derived from other people's or societal expectations, a number of which may be subliminal, assimilated without conscious reflection. For instance, we may orient ourselves toward a particular career path and not others because our parents expect us to do so, or because society deems other projects to be inappropriate, or risky, and so forth.

This, of course, is not ideal from a Stoic perspective, since as Stoics we put a premium on autonomous agency and our capacity of judgment. We then need to convert heteronomous projects into autonomous ones, appropriating those that fit our goals and desires upon reflection, and possibly discarding others that don't.

Larry maintains that for Stoics agency defines autonomy, but also that agency has a peculiar characteristic that does not apply to other aspects of human psychology or physiology: it is recursive, meaning that it applies to itself, attempting to improve by constant feedback between our reasoning ability and the empirical input provided by our experiences. To put it simply, it is natural for human beings to become better and better at exerting their own volition in every and all of our endeavors.

Becker reiterates that Stoics are determinists — by which I take it he means that we believe in universal cause and effect, something rather uncontroversial, which allows us to skirt the metaphysical and epistemological quagmire that the word "determinism" usually gets philosophers and laypeople alike bogged into.

But, Larry immediately admits, if one is a determinist, then what might be the difference between the workings of agency and those of something as prosaic as, say digestion? The difference is recursivity: digestion is as natural a process as agency, for humans, but it very clearly does not apply recursively to itself, which means that it does not improve by way of such recursion. Agency does.

That is why it made sense for the ancient Stoics to insist that we can improve our faculty of judgment, prohairesis, by continuous exercise, while we can't improve our ability to digest in the same fashion.

Moreover, and just as importantly, most psychological and physiological processes have a limited scope of application: digestion applies to food, and nothing else. Agency, by contrast, applies to everything. Agency is the most comprehensive process we can engage in. This will become particularly important in the next chapter, when Becker will present is famously controversial idea that Stoic virtue can be redefined, in modern terms, as "ideal" agency. He rephrases the point in this revised edition by arguing that ideal agency is necessary and sufficient for Stoic virtue, which is in turn necessary and sufficient for Stoic eudaimonia. (Spoiler alert: he is aware that psychopaths have agency too, but he has an argument for

why theirs is not ideal, and therefore for why there is no such thing as a virtuous psychopath.)

Larry takes seriously the limitations of being human. He is perfectly aware that there is a lot of variation in the population in terms of the strength of the agency of different individuals, as well as of the fact that agency can be weakened by all sorts of external factors (imbibing alcohol, taking drugs) as well as internal ones (neurological damage, because of genetic causes, disease or accident). People so affected, temporarily or permanently, will be weakened agents, and they will therefore have more trouble than others practicing virtue and conducting a Stoic life. In extreme cases (such as severe mental impairment), it will be impossible for them to do so.

Nonetheless, for normally functioning human beings agency is characterized by the following attributes: (i) it is resistant to extinction by other psychological processes; (ii) whenever it is exercised, even weakly, it tends to reinforce itself (because of recursivity); (iii) through its own exercise it can become the most comprehensive and controlling of our constitute powers; (iv) when extinguished, it is highly likely to reboot itself; and (v) when it develops errors, these can be reduced and corrected by its further exercise.

At this point the chapter returns, more fully, to the issue of determinism. Becker asserts that as modern Stoics, just like the Ancient ones, we hold that human freedom consists in the exercise of agency. If you couple this position with the acceptance of cause-effect determinism this makes the Stoic theory of moral responsibility a type of

compatibilism. Neither Larry nor, frankly, I have much interest in rehashing confused and ultimately fruitless discussions about "free will." We are happy with a pragmatic take on the issue (you do make decisions, right? Good, then you own them), with an account in terms of combinations of external and internal causes (like the famous story of Chrysippus' cylinder), and with the conclusion that our agency, or faculty of judgment, or volition, can be improved by ways of reflection and exercise. Everything else is, to be blunt, mental masturbation (my phrase, not Larry's).

(Incidentally, Becker, in this section of chapter 5, also discusses fatalism and indeterminism, but the broad picture is the one I have outlined here. I leave it to the reader to delve into the details and side paths as an exercise in philosophical reading.)

The upshot, then, is this:

"Consider, now, two alternatives: on the one hand a life in which agency plays no causal role, and on the other a life in which agency plays a persistent and pervasive part in the causal story of its every waking moment. We Stoics simply report that we prefer our lives to be of the second sort and find the idea of that kind of life more than sufficient to assuage our longing for autonomy and metaphysical liberty." (p. 71)

What about responsibility? Here Larry's answer is clear and carefully articulated:

"Agents are fully responsible for their acts if and only if they (a) are aware of what they are doing; (b) are aware of the causes of their actions; (c) assent to acting in those ways from those causes – that is, are acting in accord with norms they recognize as their own; (d) are aware of the causes of their assent – that is, the causes of their own norms; (e) thereby introduce new causal factors into the determination of their actions through their awareness of the causal conditions that shape it; (f) are aware of this iterative, self-transformative causal process; and (g) assent to that, in the sense that they recognize that this process is normative for them." (p. 72)

If one wishes to have a more robust sense of agentic responsibility one is out of luck, because of cause-effect determinism. If one wishes to have a significantly less robust sense of agentic responsibility – along the lines of "my brain made me do it," or "this was bound to happen since the Big Bang," then one is out of luck because he will not be able to actually act as if he really believed in such weakened or non-existence sense of responsibility. Once again, some sort of compatibilism is the only philosophically viable, and pragmatically useful, way around these issues.

A nice corollary of Larry's analysis of agentic responsibility is a good way to make sense of the famous dichotomy of control: in what sense, within a deterministic universe, are some things "up to us," as Epictetus puts it, while other things are "not up to us"? In the sense that

agency has causal powers within the universal web of cause-effect, again, like Chrysippus argued, so that things are under our control if and only if we can exercise our agency on them, while human agency itself does not, of course, magically stand outside of the universal causal web. Stoics believe in agency, but not in magic.

Virtue is the quintessential concept in virtue ethics (hence, obviously, the name) and in Stoicism in particular. The entire, long and complex, chapter 6 of Larry Becker's A New Stoicism is dedicated to it, and I in turn will devote two essays to that chapter, as part of my ongoing commentary on this most important book.

The chapter begins with the acknowledgement that the Ancient Stoics put forth a number of doctrines that were a bit hard to swallow, like the idea that virtue is one thing, and that it does not admit of degrees. That's the sort of statement that famously led Cicero to talk of Stoic "paradoxes." Larry's whole project, of course, is to modernize our philosophy while retaining as close a family resemblance to the original as possible, and in that spirit he recognizes that there are three fundamental notions in Stoicism: agency (based on the faculty of judgment that Epictetus emphasized), virtue (four of them, as we know), and eudaimonia (the life worth living). His suggestion is that these three, though conceptually distinct, are so causally interconnected that for all effective purposes having one means having the others, and lacking one means lacking the others. I think he is essentially correct on

this, and that his approach recovers much of the "paradoxical" ideas of the ancient Stoics, but in a way that is palatable for modern philosophical sensibilities:

"We make the argument that such virtue is achieved only through a natural course of moral development ending in a specifically Stoic form of ideal agency, and we reiterate the claim that the virtue it produces is sufficient for eudaimonia. … Ideal agency is relentlessly aimed at the only thing that is ultimately good, namely, achieving and sustaining Stoic virtue-in-the-singular, from which – and only from which – a Stoically appropriate form of eudaimonia will emerge." (p. 90)

Most of chapter 6 is then devoted to slowly building an argument for why the above is, indeed, the case. Becker begins by considering the development of virtue through agency. An important component of this argument relies on the already advanced idea (chapter 5) that agency acts recursively, perfecting itself through acting on itself (remember the contrast between agency and any other human mental or physiological process, like digestion). If virtue is essentially indistinguishable from perfected agency, then virtue itself – like everything that is perfect – does not admit of degrees. But agentic activity makes progress toward the state of perfected agency, and so, similarly, there is progress in virtuous activity, toward virtue itself. This rather elegantly, and a bit more clearly, recovers the Ancient Stoic notion that one can make progress – after

all, students of Stoicism referred to themselves as prokoptontes (m.) and prokoptousai (f.), i.e., those who make progress – and yet that all but the Sage are unvirtuous, because virtue itself is not a matter of degree.

We then need to talk about the nature of agency. Agency, maintains Larry, is constituted by elements that may be "received" (i.e., arrived at without the aid of one's agency) or "constructed" (i.e., resulting from the exercise of one's agent). To begin with, there is the classic Stoic "cradle argument," the observation, supported by modern developmental psychology, that agency emerges during the normal course of human development, initially as a natural, instinctive behavior, and later, gradually, as a behavior shaped by external influences, habit, and conscious reflection and decision making. Notice the qualification "normal": as Larry drily puts it:

"Question: what is worse than a psychopath? Answer: a psychopath with really strong agentic powers." (p. 93)

Received elements of agency include our endowments, i.e., impulses, drives, and predispositions to react in certain ways to given situations.

Becker here does a little bit of a (useful) detour into the concept of consciousness. He reminds us that Stoics are materialists, and that we therefore reject any kind of mind-body dualism. Nonetheless, we do not endorse the reductive view that the mind and the body are identical, and that therefore mental activity can be explained away, in

the way, say, in which the "rising" and "setting" of the Sun is explained away by celestial mechanics. Rather, Becker's position is similar to that of philosopher of mind John Searle (and my own), that mental activity is an emergent property of the physical brain and its interaction with the internal and external environment.

Moreover, Larry takes note of the existence of two distinct types of processing of information in the human brain, unconscious and conscious (what Daniel Kahneman famously referred to as System I and System II). If so, then of course the possibility exists that the two processes will yield contrasting results in any particular instance, generating intra-agentic conflicts, so to speak. This does not present a problem for Stoic philosophy, as already the Ancient Stoics recognized the existence of non-deliberative behavioral dispositions. But they, like Aristotle, and like modern Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, believed that the two systems can be linked by way of deliberate habituation: we consciously decide to engage in certain behaviors, and the more we do so the more this generates an automatic disposition toward those behaviors. Virtue, in other words, is at least in part a matter of (Stoic) practice.

Fun fact, known to the Stoics, and amply confirmed by modern cognitive science: the power of agency can be manipulated (usually impaired) in a number of ways, for instance by way of chemicals, such as alcohol or drugs. That's probably why Diogenes Laertius said that Stoics "will take wine, but not get drunk." (VII.118)

Our characters are then shaped over time, by a combination of early dispositions that we have as infants, affects we develop by interacting with people and objects around us, and so forth, in an iterative fashion. The results may be very different for different people:

"It is also [the case] that through the iterative learning processes mentioned above, some of us become basically trusting, optimistic, confident, outgoing, benevolent, nonaggressive children with high self-esteem. Others become basically distrustful, pessimistic, anxious, introverted, malevolent, and aggressive, with low self-esteem." (p. 103)

What about the constructed elements of agency? These arise from the fact that, at some point in our development — call that the age of reason, around when we are seven years old — we acquire a rational capability to represent our purposive activity to ourselves and others by symbolic means, i.e., by language. We then use our memory, imagination, and ability to generalize, in order to understand our experience in propositional terms. Moreover, because of a natural, built-in propensity to reduce cognitive dissonance, we strive to minimize the discrepancy between the conclusions we reach and the results we achieve. (Sometimes we do that rationally, at other times by way of rationalizing, which is not a good thing.)

The results of this activity include the ability to control (within limits) our impulses, the tendency toward reciprocity in dealing with others, the development of a certain degree of benevolence, as well as emotionality towards others. At a higher level of agentic development we encounter traits such as courage, endurance, and perseverance, which begin to look a lot like (Stoic) virtues. All of this made possible by building on natural human dispositions, augmented by our constant representing to ourselves our preferences and goals, while at the same time attempting to maximize their achievement (through the continuous perfection of agency).

Finally, we arrive at a constructed concept of who we are, an idea of self, and to the related virtue of integrity:

"By the time we develop the ability to represent the self-other distinction symbolically, we not only have a sharply defined body to refer to as the self but a growing assortment of memories, attachments, projects, emotions, and behavioral dispositions as well that we include in our consciousness of ourselves as agents. … Thus one sort of 'integrity project' arises: an endeavor to exercise our agency in ways that are consistent with our image of ourselves." (p. 112)

Of course, the crucial point here is not just that Stoicism is about developing agency — that's just what human beings in general do, including psychopaths. The idea, rather, is to develop healthy agency. But that modifier,

"healthy," requires further arguments. Here Larry deploys the same metaphor used by the Ancient Stoics, drawing a parallel between a healthy body and a healthy mind:

"A perfectly healthy human body has a complete and intact structure, standardly configured; all the parts of that structure, from skeleton to skin, function in their nominal ways. … A perfectly healthy agency likewise has a complete inventory of intact, nominally functional elements and integrated, homeostatic systems whose development is timely and complete." (pp. 113-114)

The idea is that psychological health will map on a good moral (i.e., virtuous) character, while psychopathology will correlate with vice. To continue the analogy with physical fitness, just as the latter is the result of both one's constitution and of one's conscious efforts at training (for muscles, aerobic capacity, etc., including of course a healthy diet), so is psychological health a matter of one's early dispositions of character, augmented by one's deliberate training in perfecting virtuous agency.

Becker then tells his readers that – again as in the case of physical training – human beings may be able to proceed from being fit to virtuosity, i.e., they may excel at what they are doing, as a result of abilities and training. One can become an Olympian athlete, just like one can make serious progress toward wisdom. By definition, of course, ideal Stoic agency is virtuoso agency, the sort of

agency that culminates in the figure of the Sage. Interestingly, there may be a price to pay for this:

"The bulked-up muscles of a virtuoso bodybuilder may exclude her from many other pursuits (ballet, or competitive swimming, for example). The intellectual dispositions of a virtuoso rational-choice theorist may likewise exclude him from polite company." (p. 119)

Much has been written on the concept of the Stoic Sage, and Larry's view of it – in agreement with Seneca's – is that this isn't a logical impossibility, but rather the rare instance of a human being that has developed her virtuous agency to the upper limits possible for a member of our species. The Sage is not "perfect," whatever that means, and it is certainly not omniscient. But she would win the gold medal at the Olympics specialty of virtue, if there were such a thing. (Which there wouldn't be, in the ideal Stoic Republic, because Stoics don't see much point in competing for the sake of showing one's superiority…)

Larry points out that there is no reason to believe that the development of virtuoso agency should result in one and only one kind of person. Even Sages will be very different from each other. More pragmatically important, perhaps, is also is contention (obvious, by this point, but worth reiterating) that whatever the Ancient Stoics thought, we no longer have any reason to believe that virtue is limited to members of a particular gender, ethnicity, or

religion. Stoicism and the practice of Stoic virtue is for everyone, in a truly cosmopolitan spirit.

Arete, virtue, at the Library of Celsus in Ephesus, photo by the Author

Here is the next important step, which I can do no better then let Becker himself explain in some detail:

"Ideal Stoic agents will clearly have many of the traits that are standardly called virtues. They will act in a principled way toward others, treating similar cases similarly by criteria of fittingness and proportionality. That fits an ordinary description of a narrow sense of *justice* and is a trait that healthy agents will construct (and ideal ones will perfect) from primal reciprocal responses, generalization, and rationality. They will exhibit justice in a wider sense of the term as well, for they will construct cooperative dispositions from the persistent need to integrate and optimize endeavors that arise from both their primal benevolence and their narrow self-interest, and to solutions to distributive questions that are rational and stable in a given social environment with a given set of resources. *Wisdom* in two senses is also included in the notion of ideal agency. Such agency is the practical ability to optimize the success of one's endeavors, and means having wisdom in the narrow sense of practical intelligence (phronesis), along with the knowledge necessary for effective deliberation and choice. But the move from healthy to fit agency, and then to the limit of versatility for it, inevitably means that ideal agents will frame their deliberations in terms of what is best for their whole lives. That frame of reference, together with the enormous breadth and depth of knowledge required to make practical intelligence effective in it, surely qualifies as wisdom in a broad sense (sophia). … *Courage*, endurance, and perseverance are also parts of fit agency, as we mentioned earlier. And *temperance* or moderation

(sophrosyne) will be evident in the modulation of passion, affect, emotion, attachments, and purposes necessary to integrate one's endeavors (personally and socially) in terms of an optimal whole life." (p. 124)

I have highlighted the four standard Stoic virtues in the passage above in order to help the reader see the big picture of how, in Larry's mind, they are interconnected and fit nicely with his account of virtuous (and eventually virtuoso) agency.

At this point Becker returns to his crucial notion that virtue, ideal agency, and eudaimonia, are tightly linked and completely interdependent within Stoic philosophy. Given all the above, ideal Stoic agency is both necessary and sufficient for achieving virtue, and virtue in turn is necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia. This also means that the virtues are indeed unified, in the specific (modern) sense that virtue is a single and comprehensive endeavor that guides the Stoic moral agent. The separate virtues are thought of as dispositions that need to be coordinated in order to yield ideal agency.

Interestingly, Larry takes sides in the context of an ancient dispute among the Stoics themselves, and I think it is the right side he comes down in favor of:

"We do not imagine, as perhaps Chrysippus did, that the Sage's very motivations are harmonized, with the result that desire and passion are unified with reason and will, thus producing tranquility by removing conflicts at their

roots. Rather we follow Posidonius in supposing that conflict remains constitutive of healthy, mature agency, and that the function of agency proper is to cope with it, not necessarily to root it out." (p. 126)

This is more important than it may seem at first glance, because the upshot is that, whatever Chrysippus and perhaps Epictetus may have thought, a reasonable Stoic does not attempt to eliminate even the negative emotions, since that is, as a matter of fact, impossible for a human being (and thus in violation of what Becker calls the Axiom of Futility). Rather, Stoicism is about coping with the unhealthy aspects of our mental life while cultivating the healthy ones, in what I have called an exercise in shifting the emotional spectrum.

VIII-Virtue, part 2

Let us finish the discussion of the central concept of virtue as reconciled by Larry Becker in his A New Stoicism, specifically the idea of virtue as the product of ideal agency, elaborated upon in the second part of chapter 6 of the book.

Larry begins by responding to his critics and laying out an 11-step moral argument for virtue. I will introduce each step by quoting from the text, and add my own commentary.

Step 1: "I have many endeavors – many things I want to do – and each of those endeavors warrants normative propositions about what I ought (or am required) to do or be, nothing-else-considered."

Remember that "normative" here does not mean some sort of categorical imperative, but rather something akin to a hypothetical, or conditional, imperative. IF I wish to do X, THEN I need to do Y. And "nothing else considered" means that we are, at this stage, talking about local projects, not (yet) about the lifelong project of living as a good Stoic.

Step 2: "One of my endeavors is practical reasoning nothing-else-considered – practical reasoning devoted solely to the task of implementing any occurrent endeavor I might have – including itself."

This refers back to the recursive property of agency, the fact that agency, unlike, say, digestion, can be applied to itself and improve over time. What this particular step is saying is that one of the goals I wish to pursue as an agent is to implement whatever it is that I want to do locally, right now (i.e., nothing else considered).

Step 3: "My normative practical reasoning about my endeavors, done serially, routinely generates a welter of conflicting requirements and oughts."

Of course, if I wish to accomplish goals X, Y and Z, it is inevitable that some conflict will arise between two or more of those goals. I want, for instance, to be a good partner, good father, and good teacher. But I only have so much physical and mental energy, so many hours in the day, and so forth. That means there will inevitably be trade-offs among the requirements generated by my attempt to accomplish all the goals I am after.

Step 4: "However, none of my endeavors, considered separately, routinely claims all the resources available for the exercise of my agency – even for a single day."

If I focus on one goal at a time, then typically this isn't going to be all-consuming, even for a brief period. We all juggle multiple endeavors, every day.

The choice of Hercules: Vice or Virtue?, image from Wikimedia

Step 5: "Thus even the sequential application of practical reasoning nothing-else-considered to a long, arbitrarily selected series of target endeavors will routinely face local optimization problems – conflicts between two

endeavors that can be solved by integrating them so that both of them can be pursued successfully."

So what do you do if there are conflicting demands imposed by the fact that you want to be a good partner, father, and teacher? You are now facing an optimization problem, which demands to be treated as more than just a single task nothing else considered, because you have to take into account other things simultaneously. Notice that optimizing does not mean reaching perfection, it just means doing your best given your goals and the resources you have available.

Step 6: "The indefinitely repeated, stepwise solution of local optimization problems eventually results in global optimization, but as I reflect on this process in the course of integrating any two projects, I see that I may fail in my local endeavor if I do not now consider matters globally."

Optimization is something that needs to be reiterated across all your relevant projects, with the aim of optimizing things globally. That's why you need to move from nothing-else-considered to all-things-considered. This, let me clarify in response to some readers' comments, does not mean that one need to be omniscient! "All-things" here just means every relevant bit of information you can assemble and that is pertinent to accomplishing your many goals. Let's say you are about to buy a house. "All-things" doesn't mean that you have to know everything there is to know

about real estate; it just means that you need to consider the multiple tasks that you have to complete in order to file a successful mortgage application, make an offer that is likely to be considered by the seller, think about what sort of renovations, if any, you want to make and how much they will cost, and so forth. This is practical reasoning informed by practical knowledge.

Step 7: "When I reason all-things-considered, however, I am no longer engaging in an endeavor whose aim is local optimization. Rather, every endeavor that I consider (because it defines an aim for me; is normative for me) becomes a target for the optimizing work of practical reasoning."

By this step we have expanded our concern from one goal at a time, nothing-else-considered, to all our relevant endeavors, all-things-considered. So our practical reasoning, as Becker says, now applies "globally."

Step 8: "Further reflection reveals that even if my most comprehensive and controlling endeavor is solely to perfect the exercise of my agency based on the sort of practical reasoning I ought to do, and if I succeed in that endeavor, then I will by definition succeed in optimizing the success of all my endeavors — over my whole life."

This is a crucial step, so we need to pay attention or something very important is going to slip by. What Larry is

saying here is that even if we decide to focus solely on improving the exercise of our agency, that – by definition – will also result in the optimization of everything else I want to do, because that's what agency does: it allows us to figure out how to accomplish our goals in the best way possible. So devoting oneself to the pursuit of agency perfection is the same thing as devoting oneself to optimize all our goals during our entire life.

Step 9: "Any normative proposition that is sound in my case is sound also for anyone who is relevantly similar to me."

Another crucial step. All of the above, and therefore also the forthcoming conclusion of the argument, applies to agents that are relevantly similar to me, i.e., individuals who are social, capable of reasoning, wish to accomplish a number of tasks in their lives, and wish to do it well. It does not apply to, say, a psychopath, who is not sufficiently similar to me. I don't know if it applies to Martians either, I would have to know more about them as biological and social beings to be able to determine.

Step 10: "Healthy agents will acquire strong norms corresponding to the usual notions of wisdom, justice, benevolence, beneficence, courage, temperance, and other traits that are standardly called virtues. Indeed, developing such traits is a necessary condition for

developing one's agency from health to fitness to virtuosity."

A third crucial step: given the sort of social being capable of reason that typical human beings are, THEN (and only then) it follows that developing our agency (as Becker says, from mere health to fitness to virtuosity, if possible) is the same thing as practicing the standard Stoic virtues. (Notice that the partial list given in this step is a mix of primary and secondary virtues; the primary ones are practical wisdom, courage, justice and temperance.)

Step 11: "Since any normative proposition warranted by the endeavor to perfect our agency is ultimately traceable to a requirement that we make this our most comprehensive and controlling endeavor, it will dominate any conflicting requirement from any other endeavor."

Finally, perfecting our agency (which means practicing the virtues, which allows us to optimize across all our lifetime endeavors) requires that we focus first and foremost on the very task of perfecting our agency. That's why in Stoicism pursuing virtue is the primary goal, and everything else falls into the categories of preferred and dispreferred indifferents.

If you don't find the above argument convincing, perhaps that's because you are under the mistaken impression that it applies to every agent. Not so, says Larry very clearly in a crucial caveat:

"It is important to keep in mind that this argument is sound only for agents of the sort described in our developmental story, and that it is a mistake to characterize them solely in terms of rationality. Pure practical reason, shorn of the rest of the psychology of healthy human agency, does not yield the normative propositions described in steps 1–11. … Rational agents with a significantly different psychology (for example, rational agents who are primarily pleasure seekers, or who have only a very limited and thoroughly integrated repertoire of endeavors) fall outside the scope of this argument." (p. 131)

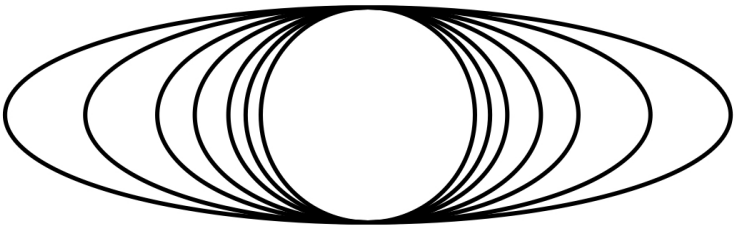
That is, Epicureans will be unmoved by the argument. So be it. Psychopaths will never be virtuous. That's a fact of life. And as I said above, I'm agnostic about Martians.

Two more points to finish chapter 6: about the all-or-nothing nature of virtue, and about the unqualified good the virtue is. These are both standard Stoic doctrines, which Larry convincingly re-interprets in modern fashion.

It may seem paradoxical to say that virtue is all or nothing (as the ancient Stoics did) and yet to also state that we can make progress toward virtue (after all, we are supposed to be prokoptontes and prokoptousai — those who make progress). But virtue is perfection of agency, and strictly speaking the only beings who are perfectly virtuous are the Sages. But Sages are as rare as the Phoenix (as Seneca says). That means the rest of us can, and should,

strive toward Sagehood, even if it is ultimately unachievable. In so striving, we are making progress. (If this notion sounds strange, it is no different from Buddhists attempting to achieve enlightenment, even though that feat is also about as rare as the Phoenix.)

Here is a geometric analogy I came up with last night while discussing these issues at my Stoic School of Life. Imagine a perfect circle. It is defined rigorously as a round plane figure whose boundary (the circumference) consists of points equidistant from a fixed point (the center). Any deviation from this makes for something that looks like a circle but isn't (technically, it's an ellipse). If our goal is to draw a circle, but we do not exactly succeed, then we are drawing an imperfect circle. But imperfection comes in degrees. Consider the following figure:



Only the innermost drawing is a perfect circle. All others are ellipses, but they approximate the circle more and more as one moves from the outermost one toward the center. Very few of us could draw a perfect circle by hand (as Giotto is reputed to have done), but we can presumably get better and better with practice. Every time we come

closer and yet do not succeed we are making progress. But every time we do not succeed we have not reached perfection (geometrically defined as above), because perfection is all or nothing, but imperfection has infinite degrees. The same goes for virtue: it is all or nothing, and yet we can (and should) make progress.

Finally, consider the idea — again common among the Ancient Stoics — that virtue is the chief good, as also explained by Socrates in the Euthydemus. Here is how Becker puts it:

"For a healthy agent, no matter what her circumstances, virtue as a set of dispositional powers is unconditionally a good, right up to the moment of death. We can think of no circumstances in which a mature, healthy agent could plausibly hold that the ability to act appropriately, as understood here, is a bad or indifferent thing, all things considered. … It is a good in sickness and in health, war and peace, poverty or plenty, hate or love. It is a good independently of how things turn out (recall the archer). It is a good independently of others' attitudes, actions, virtues, and vices. Moreover, virtue appears to be unique in this regard. Everything else (pleasure, for example) is only conditionally good." (p. 134)

So there you have it, folks: virtue is the same thing as the recursive perfection of agency applied to all our endeavors all-things-considered. It is so for a certain type of agent. It is all or nothing, and yet we can make progress

toward it. And it is the only thing that cannot possibly be misused by us.

IX-Happiness

We are reaching the end of my extended commentary on the second edition of Larry Becker's A New Stoicism, a book aiming at taking several steps toward updating Stoic philosophy for the 21st century, and a must read for anyone seriously interested in Stoic theory. This essay will cover the last chapter of the book, on happiness, while the final entry in the series will deal with an important postscript Larry wrote, about virtue ethics, virtue politics, and Stoicism as a guide to living well.

To begin with, "happiness" for Stoics is really eudaimonia, i.e., it does not refer to a temporary state of mind ("I'm happy that I got a job!"), but rather to our satisfaction with the entire trajectory of our lives. It is, therefore, a reference point for navigation, the "polestar" of not just our ethical theory, but our whole way of life. Why take the the entirety of our life as the reference frame? Because whenever we focus too much on individual episodes we eventually realize that something that seemed at the time to be a catastrophe was actually quite bearable, trivial, even. Similarly, we achieve a goal that we thought was crucial, life changing, even, but it soon turns out to be just another step forward, not really as momentous as it

initially looked. In other words, keeping an eye on the broad picture helps us put things into a better perspective, as well as assess more rationally the significance of what happens here and now.

When it comes to the meaning of life, Becker acknowledges that the ancient Stoics believe in an organic universe, i.e., a universe conceived as a living being, capable of rationality (the Logos). This brought comfort because they conceived of individual human beings as bits of the Logos, and of our lives as made meaningful by the fact that we play an (unknown) part in the doings of the cosmos.

Be that as it may, Larry immediately adds, this pantheistic "god" did not answer to prayer (pace Cleanthes hymn to Zeus, which is not really a prayer – see Enchiridion

LIII.1), and more importantly did not give any clear guidance on action. Epictetus, arguably the most pious sounding of the Stoics, repeatedly tells his students that they need to figure things out for themselves, which is why a major goal of Stoic training is to refine as much as possible one's prohairesis, i.e., the ability to arrive at correct judgments.

Epicurus, Becker reminds us, rejected the idea of a general meaning of life, and both Marcus and Panaetius seem to have harbored significant doubts. Regardless, actionable meaning for the Stoic comes from within, not without. It lies in our practice of virtue, with the goal of living a eudaimonic life, a life actually worth living. The cosmos may or may not play a further role, it does not really matter in practice.

Next, there is the perennial issue of preferred indifferents, which Larry deals with in the following fashion:

"It is true that Stoic happiness does not necessarily include nonagency pleasures – all the other possibilities for what we ordinarily call having a good time. But it is highly misleading to go on to say that such pleasures are superfluous, or that they "add" nothing to virtue. They do not add virtue to a virtuous life, but they add something else to it. … The pleasures of virtue are never to be traded for nonagency ones, but among virtuous lives, those with nonagency pleasures, and nonagency goods generally, are preferred to those without them. Further, with virtue held constant, the more nonagency goods the better." (p. 158)

Indeed, once again, Stoics are neither Cynics nor Aristotelians. We neither think that externals are necessary for a eudaimonic life (like the Aristotelians), nor do we believe they get in the way of it (like the Cynics). This is one of the chief reasons Stoicism resonates with me: it is at the same time a demanding moral philosophy, and yet one that takes seriously that a human life can certainly be augmented by things other than virtue (though it doesn't have to, in order to be worth living).

Becker is also clear that there is no single recipe for which combination of non-agentic (i.e., external) goods is going to work for each of us. So long as we stay away from pursuits that positively harm our moral character, whatever combination of activities and externals happens to work for each of us is fine. There are many different kinds of good Stoic lives. (Again, refreshing compared to the rigidity of the Aristotelian recipe, which tolerates different life styles, but really insists that the preferred one is the life of contemplation.)

How much control can, or indeed should, we strive to exert over our lives? Despite his insistence on keeping an eye on the full trajectory, Larry is also clear that he is not suggesting that we develop detailed and rigid, Soviet-style, many-years plans for our existence. Life is too complex and variable for anything like that. Instead — in perfect Stoic fashion — he introduces a helpful analogy.

Imagine you are piloting an airplane. The airplane represents the character that you wish to develop as an agent. Clearly, you want your plane to be responsive to

your commands so that you can not only set a route, but also make adjustments, and even occasional major changes of course, depending on the external conditions. (I am very much conscious of this as I am writing while in a flight from Brussels back to New York, and we are experiencing some significant turbulence…) Here is how Becker puts it:

"A fixed-wing aircraft is said to have positive stability if it stays in, or returns to, straight and level flight unless pressure is continuously applied to the controls. It has neutral stability when it holds any given attitude (roll, pitch, yaw) in which it is placed, tending neither to exaggerate that attitude nor to return to straight and level flight. It has negative stability when it deviates from any given flight attitude unless corrective control is continuously applied. At the theoretical limit of either positive or negative stability, an aircraft is virtually uncontrollable." (p. 160)

The same goes with our lives. What we are striving for here is not control in the sense of determining everything that happens to us. Epictetus clearly argued that that's just wishful thinking, of the dangerous kind (Enchiridion I.1-3). Instead, we want our lives to be "maneuverable," so to speak, capable of returning to whatever main path we decided after proper adjustments have been made for local turbulence. Sometimes the path itself will have to be altered, a change of course made necessary by the fact that

the goal is to keep flying well and safely, not necessarily to reach a particular predetermined destination.

There is an important caveat introduced by Larry at this point in the discussion, one that signals a certain degree of departure, perhaps, from ancient Stoicism, and yet makes perfect sense and is worth emphasizing. While developing agency means aiming at the ability to optimally control our character, and therefore our responses – including our emotions – it does not follow that we should wish to exercise such control all the time, but only when practical reason demands it.

The example conjured by Becker is that of a woman who is affected by grief, being at this moment distraught by some tragedy that has happen to her recently. But she is in a lounge at her work place, in a uniform, maybe she is a doctor. Suddenly an emergency occurs, a new patient is brought in, and she needs to snap out of her situation and take action. She does so, because practical reason demands it. She is able automatically, effortlessly, perhaps, to set aside – to control – her emotion because she is needed in order to save a life. Once the emergency is over, she may or may not resume her grieving, depending on the new situation. That, and not a hypothetical state of perennial detachment, is what Stoic training is attempting to achieve:

"Being overcome by emotion is no more problematic for a Stoic than being overcome by sleep. Sometimes sleep is dangerous (think of trying to avoid hypothermia), or a

dereliction of duty, even when it is desperately needed. So too for all-consuming grief, or lust. But at other times luxuriating in sleep or passion is a harmless pleasure, much preferred to the tightly controlled variety." (p. 163)

Next, Larry takes up the famous "Sage is happy even on the rack" problem, which, as he drily puts it, is the sort of thing that our ancient brethren have done much to invite sarcasm about. He rightly points out that nothing in Stoic philosophy has ever implied that practicing Stoicism makes one into a superhuman, immortal or invulnerable. Extreme pain, or brain damage, can and will destroy human agency, no matter how many premeditatio malorum you carry out. Under those circumstances the Stoic has limited choices: the prospect of recovering her agency, should the condition in question be reversible; or the hope to get the death she prefers if the circumstances allow it. These aren't particularly satisfying answers to how a Sage will fare on the rack. But it is so, Becker says, because the example is hardly informative of the overall philosophy.

A Sage — which, remember, is as rare as the phoenix, according to Seneca (Letters to Lucilius, XLII.1) — is different from the rest of us because her agency has passed the healthy or even fit levels, and has been developed to the point of virtuosity. Even so, the Sage will suffer on the rack, and she will be different from the rest of us only insofar as she is capable of maintaining her agency under extreme conditions, or to recover it as quickly as possible after she

goes through severe traumas. That's it, and yet, it is a lot. Not a superhuman, but a virtuoso level of humanity.

Larry proposes a sort of classification of different kinds of good Stoic life. The primary type is one in which Stoic virtue is achieved and sustained. It is primary because, as we have seen, virtue is good in and of itself, since it is inextricably linked with both virtuous agency and eudaimonia.

The secondary kind of good Stoic life is available to the person who is making progress toward virtue. She has not developed it to the level of virtuosity, so she is a prokoptousa, not a Sage. Full virtue has not been achieved, and it is not stable, it is an ongoing project.

The tertiary type is available to someone who is not currently on the Stoic path, but for whom that path is still an open possibility. Obviously, not everyone is a Stoic, and we should remember that:

"Stoicism is cosmopolitan and is quite alert to the fact that most people have other conceptions of a good life, many of which are internally coherent, conscientiously and firmly held. … Deeply held religious, philosophical, aesthetic, or agentic commitments fundamentally at odds with Stoicism have always been present. These are not necessarily cases of truncated psychological development. They are often simply divergent from Stoic development." (p. 168-169)

This is a strong reminder that Stoics do not proselytize, though we happily engage in discussions of our philosophy with people who may be interested. Moreover, practicing Stoicism means that we need to cultivate tolerance and acceptance toward other ways of conducting life, so long as they are not destructive (as for instance some religious or political fundamentalisms are — a Nazi Stoic is inconceivable).

What happens when we disagree with someone's choice of a life path? I am going to transcribe exactly what Becker says, because it ought to be kept constantly in mind during our interactions with others:

"It may be that [someone] will eventually adapt to her new circumstances by giving up Stoicism altogether and embracing the notion that what the Stoics regard as only preferred indifferents can actually give her a very good life. Stoics would disagree (silently) about the theoretical point but not try to argue her back into distress. They, too, would much prefer that her life seemed good to her. Stoics are not cruel, though they can be clumsy. The same point can be made about people who willingly take paths away from Stoicism toward other accounts of the good life. When reasoned discussion fails, Stoics wish their critics well and go about their business." (p. 169)

That last line, I think, should be tattooed on our forearms, or at least framed and placed in a prominent place on our desks.

Larry then tackles the issue of whether a Stoic should desire a long life. The ancients, especially Seneca, clearly answered in the negative (Letters to Lucilius, XCIII.2). For Seneca there is no such thing as a premature death, as we die whenever the universe decides it, and the worth of a life is not measured by its duration, but rather by its quality (Letters to Lucilius XCIII.4). Becker would not necessarily disagree, I think, with the basic concept, but he argues that while we can exercise our virtuous agency, there will be reason to do so for as long as possible. We tend to think of our lives in terms of narratives, and here is where the Stoic may diverge from some other people, propelled by a different conception of what makes human life meaningful:

"Lives often end too soon in narrative terms because they are incomplete, and they are too long when they go on pointlessly after they are complete." (p. 170)

And what makes a life complete or not, in a narrative sense, is how the agent herself conceives of her life. Diogenes Laertius says that Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, lived until he was 98 (Lives of the Eminent Philosophers, VII.28). One version of his end says that he starved himself to death (Lives, VII.31), presumably because he reached the judgment that he could not longer be useful. Which brings us to the next topic in chapter 7: suicide.

Larry's position is very clear, and I find myself in complete agreement:

"Stoicism endorses the permissibility of suicide, but not a requirement of it. It is permissible when suicide becomes the only available way to act virtuously – the only act that is consistent with Stoic virtue itself, or the pursuit of it." (p. 170)

Again he proposes an analogy with sleep: sometimes we may resist it because there is some important project that needs to be completed. But there will be other cases where in fact we should welcome sleep, because resisting it would either be futile or dangerous.

The ancient Stoics explicitly admitted the possibility (though, again, not the requirement) of suicide in a small set of circumstances: on behalf of one's country, on behalf of one's friends, or to avoid severe and indeterminate pain or suffering (which would permanently cripple our virtuous agency). Becker adds that suicide must be the last available option, and that it is always to be decided upon by following the virtue of justice, which means, he points out, that suicide in order to commit murder is out of the question.

What about assisted suicide? The ancient Stoics did not have a problem with it, and in fact Epictetus promptly goes to help a friend when he hears that the friend has decided to starve himself to death (turns out, though, that the friend did not have a good reason to end his life, and Epictetus reproached him – Discourses II.15.4-13). However, our forerunners would not have wanted to put a friend or relative in jeopardy for assisting, if the practice were

against the law of the land. The just thing to do would be to reform the law. This has obvious practical consequences for the ongoing debate on assisted suicide, and it seems to me that the Stoic position is precisely the one outlined here by Larry.

One more, very important, point about suicide:

"Stoic virtue ethics includes awareness of the damage to others that can be done by a suicide, especially within a circle of family and close friends. This is one of the factors that determines whether one's suicide is permissible in the first place." (p. 172)

The chapter ends with a brief discussion of joy as an aspect of eudaimonia. The idea is that exercising virtue in itself brings joy (though we do not do it because of that), even within the context of an otherwise miserable life. If her circumstances are not miserable, however, the Stoic will experience joy just like any other human being. Socrates, Becker reminds us, could make himself at home at a rowdy banquet, and not by declining the wine. The Stoic understands – pace Epicurus – that filling one's life with pleasures and joy is not her proper aim, but she would be foolish to avoid them for that reason.

X-Virtue ethics, political philosophy, and how to live well

We have arrived at the end of my extended commentary of Larry Becker's A New Stoicism. Let me stress one more time that this is the book to read if one is seriously interested in a philosophically coherent update of Stoicism for the 21st century. There is absolutely nothing else like it, period. It is, however, a difficult book to get through, especially the extensive commentaries at the end of each chapter, not to mention the appendix devoted to a presentation of a Stoic system of formal normative logic. That is precisely why, with Larry's approval and help, I wrote these ten essays. Needless to say, the reader will be well served to use this collection as a guide, not a substitute, for reading the actual book.

That said, time now to tackle the last bit, an important postscript to the revised edition of A New Stoicism, which deals with three important topics that Larry had left out of the first edition, and did not feel would fit organically within the main text of the second one: the relationship between Stoicism and virtue ethics more generally; the question of whether a eudaimonic philosophy like Stoicism has enough to say about social and political philosophy; and

why Stoicism has a lot to contribute to practical living in modern times. I will summarize and briefly comment on each of these topics, though I wish Larry had devoted significantly more space to them.

Stoicism and virtue ethics broadly construed

Virtue ethics has seen a renaissance in moral philosophy ever since the work of Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Bernard Williams, and Alasdair MacIntyre, among others. That is because it provides a valuable alternative to the two dominant modern approaches: Kantian deontology and utilitarianism. But plenty of people have noted issues with the chief version of modern virtue ethics, which is based on Aristotle. In particular, its foundation on a teleological view of human nature that is no longer tenable according to modern science.

While it is true that the ancient Stoics in turn relied on a "providential" view of the cosmos rooted in their pantheism, two major differences with Aristotelianism make Stoicism a far more palatable candidate for a modernized virtue ethics: (i) the ancient Stoics themselves clearly saw that the specific details of their metaphysics were ultimately irrelevant to the question of how to live their lives; and (ii) Stoicism provides a thoroughly naturalistic account of ethics, based on the so-called cradle argument which we have already discussed, and which turns out to be eminently compatible with the findings of modern cognitive psychology. This leads Larry to write:

"Ethical theory makes a great deal of sense to me when it is grounded in the reality of the human condition and our developing understanding of the physical and social environments we inhabit. It makes much less sense when it is done a priori or tethered only to our intuitions." (p. 226)

One area I'm going to respectfully disagree with Becker is toward the end of this first section of the postscript, where he hints at the possibility that virtue ethics, particularly Stoic virtue ethics, might provide us with a framework capable of unifying the three major traditions in moral philosophy:

"[Stoic agentic activity] has to unify consequentialist concerns about always acting so as to promote the best consequences, with our deontological concerns about always acting on principle with respect to moral requirements and prohibitions, and with our virtue theoretic concerns about always acting in (good) character." (p. 227)

Well, yes. But I'm pretty sure both utilitarians and deontologists would recoil in horror at the suggestion! And, I think, for good reasons. Even though Larry is here magnanimously stating that virtue ethics would provide a unifying approach "without definitely subordinating one type [of moral philosophy] to the others," it seems to me that it is (Stoic) virtue ethics that would do the unifying, and

that such a feat would be made possible by a focus on virtuous agency, thus implicitly putting virtue ethics at the forefront of the allegedly egalitarian solution. I don't think this really matters a lot, though. The point, which is well taken and should be kept in mind by critics of virtue ethics, is that our approach of course includes both deontological components (because we recognize duties toward others) and utilitarian ones (because we are concerned with the consequences of our action). But the central focus remains on the improvement of our own character, as the surest way to contribute to the betterment of the human polis.

Stoic politics and social philosophy

One of the most persistent (and frustrating, if your Stoic progress is not sufficiently advanced) objections to Stoicism is that it has no concern, or provides us with no tools, for social and political philosophy. The philosophy is too vague, or individualistic, or even egoistic, say the critics. And this despite a significant literature to the contrary.

An obvious observation that should address these concerns a bit is that one of the four Stoic virtues is that of justice, connected to Epictetus' discipline of action — which is meant explicitly to regulate our interactions with others in a just way. As Larry puts it:

"From Socrates onward, it has been argued that those virtues [like justice] defeat radical amoralists like

Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic and ground strong political duties that involve self-sacrifice for the good of one's family, neighbors, and fellow citizens." (p. 228)

In the modern parlance developed by Becker throughout the book, strong agency, virtue and eudaimonia are tightly interrelated, so that a Stoic simply cannot go through her life by exercising virtue only for her own sake, it automatically includes regard for others. This is a consequence, again, of the cradle argument referenced above, which is often presented in terms of oikeiôsis, the gradual "appropriation" of others' concerns that is the basis for Stoic cosmopolitanism.

One thing I need to add to Larry's treatment here. I don't think Stoicism entails a particular type of social philosophy (say, liberal progressivism), though it is incompatible with a number of them (no Stoic Nazis!). As usual, people will say that that's a bug, and I respond that it is a feature. I don't see why liberal progressives (among whom I count myself) should be the only virtuous political agents around. I think one can be a virtuous conservative, libertarian, and a number of other things. Specific solutions to social-political issues will come, as Becker clearly states, from the virtuous application of practical reason. And no particular ideological group has a monopoly on that.

Stoicism as a guide to living well

Finally, Larry tackles the recent growth (which mostly happened after the first edition of A New Stoicism, back in 1998) of the modern Stoicism movement, which has resulted in widespread interest in Stoicism as a practical philosophy for the 21st century – and which is the raison d'être of this very blog.

He mentions a number of available resources for those interested in learning and practicing Stoicism, including – very kindly – my own How To Be A Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern life (but also books by Don Robertson, Bill Irvine, Chris Gill, and even Tom Wolfe's 1998 novel, A Man in Full, whose main character turns around his life through the discovery of Stoicism).

Interestingly, Becker then turns to one of the underestimated ancient Stoics, Panaetius, an exponent of the so-called Middle Stoa and Posidonius' teacher (the latter, in turn, was Cicero's teacher, which is why Cicero wrote a lot, and sympathetically, about Stoicism). The reason for the neglect is that we only have fragments of Panaetius' writings, but one of the important ones comes from Cicero's On Duties. That's the bit where Cicero presents Panaetius' theory of ethical social roles, and it is worth considering as a possible framework for modern living as well (here is my summary of Brian Johnson's treatment of the other major theory of roles in Stoic ethics, the one articulated by Epictetus).

Cicero summarizes the four roles in this fashion:

"It should also be understood that nature has endowed us with two roles, as it were. One of these is universal, from the fact that we all share in reason and that status which raises us above the beasts. … The second role is the one which has been specifically assigned to individuals. … To the above-mentioned two roles, a third is appended, which some chance or circumstance imposes; and a fourth as well, which we take upon ourselves by our own decision." (On duties 1.107, 110–11, 114–17)

Long and Sedley, in their The Hellenistic Philosophers (sec. 66, at E), explain:

"[It is] Panaetius' almost certainly original doctrine that proper functions are specifiable by reference to 'four roles' which each person has. … The word translated 'role' is persona (the Latin for an actor's mask), and Panaetius' theory intriguingly anticipates modern conceptions of personality and role play. Roles one and two refer respectively to the shared rationality of all human beings ('universal nature') and the physical, mental and temperamental nature of the individual. … Equally impressive is the clarity with which he distinguishes the entirely accidental determinants of personal identity (role three) from the career and specializations people choose for themselves (role four). … Collectively the four roles offer an account of the general considerations people should review in deciding on their proper functions — what I ought to do as a member of the human race, as the person with

my natural strengths and weaknesses, as unavoidably involved in these external circumstances, and with the lifestyle and bent I have chosen for myself."

Larry's postscript ends with a brief but illuminating discussion of the relationship among Stoic teaching, training, and "therapy," as well as their joint consequences on the idea of Stoic moral education. Stoic teaching should consist of presenting to students the three classical fields (physics, logic, and ethics), to emphasize how coherent and attractive Stoic philosophy really is. Stoic teaching should also include an outline and justification of our ideas on the development and structure of virtue.

In terms of training, this includes the application of principles and precepts to hypothetical and actual cases,

along the model presented by Epictetus' Discourses. A second aspect of Stoic training should comprise the mental as well as physical rehearsal of one's activities, including such things as the evening philosophical diary as well as exercises in self-denial.

Finally, addressing Stoic therapy, Larry correctly points out that to talk in those terms is actually somewhat problematic. If someone suffers from organic problems that affect one's mentation, then philosophy isn't going to do it, one needs psychological or even psychiatric help. Of course, as I've argued on several occasions, philosophy and therapy may be complementary, and a prokopton may prefer, if she needs therapy, a cognitive approach inspired by Stoic insights, such as REBT and CBT. Whatever one does, once the therapy has succeeded in putting out, or at least controlling, whatever fire was raging in one's mind, one still needs a compass to navigate life in a eudaimonic fashion. And Stoicism has been the best compass around for more than two millennia.

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