Stoic *Apatheia* Reconsidered: The Role of Vice-Directed Passion in Moral Progress

Simon Shogry
Brasenose College, University of Oxford
simon.shogry@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

Abstract: The Stoics notoriously argue that *apatheia*, or the complete elimination of passion, is a consequence of possessing virtue. Are they committed to the even stronger claim that passion is necessarily deleterious to moral progress? No, I argue here. By grieving his own state of vice, regretting his past vicious actions, and feeling shame at the prospect of acting badly, the non-Sage is not made worse in his progress toward virtue. To defend this interpretation I do not propose that the vice-directed passions consist in fully veridical beliefs. Rather, I suggest they are analogous to cases of morally-improving deception.

1. Introduction

Ancient Greek moral psychologists are sharply divided on the relationship between virtue and passion. The intuitive Aristotelian model, on which human excellence demands a "mean" amount of anger, fear, and other passions, is rejected by the Stoics, who argue more radically that virtue entails *apatheia*, the complete elimination of passion. This extreme conclusion is defended with a battery of Stoic arguments, the most fundamental of which is standardly taken to be the following:

(1) The virtuous agent (or "Sage") never forms false beliefs.
(2) All passions are false beliefs.
(3) So, the virtuous agent never experiences any passion.

Premise (1) is stated explicitly in our sources (Stob. 2.111.18-20, DL 7.121) and falls out of the Stoic identification of virtue with knowledge (*epistēmē*), the highest epistemic achievement open to human beings, which prevents its possessor from giving assent to any falsehood. Premise (2), although lacking direct textual support, is held to be required by the Stoics' cognitivist analysis of the passions and the

typical examples they use to illustrate it.[1] On this analysis, every passion consists in a complex belief predicating (i) goodness or badness to an object that is either present or in prospect, and (ii) appropriateness to a practical response. So, for instance, the soldier's fear of dying on the battlefield consists in his belief that *(i) Death is bad and in prospect, and (ii) it is appropriate to weep, cower, and hide*.[2] The Stoics regard both conjuncts, (i) and (ii), as false, since on their account death is not bad – it is merely a "dispreferred indifferent" – and shrinking from it is not appropriate. Generalizing from such a case, we get (2). Since all passions consist in false evaluative and practical judgments, they are condemned as blameworthy, harmful, and epistemically-defective attitudes, with their complete eradication in the Sage following from her more general insusceptibility to misjudgment.

Recently, however, the status of (2) as an exceptionless Stoic tenet has come under attack. To get a sense of this interpretative controversy and appreciate its wider stakes, let's consider how (2) is seen by its proponents as licensing a stronger version of *apatheia* in Stoicism, such that *apatheia* is not only a consequence or facet of virtue, as in (3), but also a recommendation to the non-Sage about how to make progress toward virtue.

(4) To make progress toward virtue, the non-Sage must acquire beliefs that are both true and justified (i.e. "grasps").
(5) The evaluative belief in (i), that the object of the passion is either good or bad, is always false.
(6) So, to make progress toward virtue, the non-Sage must never experience any passion.

On the Stoic view, one necessary condition for possessing knowledge, and so virtue, is that all of one's beliefs are "grasps" (*katalēpseis*), i.e. both true and justified. So to the extent that the non-Sage replaces their false beliefs and true non-grasps with grasps, they make progress toward Sagehood, as (4) states. Yet, says (5), the

---

[1] See e.g. Frede 1986, 100; Long and Sedley 1987, v. 1, 420-1; Nussbaum 1994, 366-7; Cooper 1999, 458; and, most recently, Kamtekar 2025, 432-6. The lack of direct textual support for (2) is emphasized in the seminal Brennan 1998, 50-2.

[2] I mark propositional contents with italics. I use "belief" as a translation of *hupolēpsis*, the Stoics' generic term for any act of taking to be true. "Belief" is thus synonymous with "assent" (*sunkatathesis*) and "judgment" (*krisis*). Some Stoic texts suggest the passion is caused by, rather than identical with, a complex belief conjoining (i) and (ii), but see Graver 2007, 33-4, and Brennan 2005, 91-3, for how they can be reconciled with the identity-view.

evaluative belief in (i) is always false, as we saw above in the fearful soldier's mistaken judgment that *Death is bad*.

But here the generalization breaks down. As Tad Brennan and Margaret Graver have demonstrated, Stoic sources attest that non-Sages suffer grief over their present vice, regret over their past vicious actions, and shame at the prospect of acting viciously.[3] These vice-directed passions, as I will call them, do not mis-predicate badness in the manner of the soldier's fear, since on the Stoic account vice and vicious actions are genuinely bad (not "dispreferred").[4] So some passions rest on a true belief in (i) – e.g. *My present state of vice is bad*, affirmed by the non-Sage grieving his own vice – which, if justified, would amount to a grasp as well. We should not conclude (6) too quickly, then, and the Stoics may not have advocated a "sweeping ban" on all passions in the non-Sage.[5] *Apatheia* could be a description of one aspect of the virtuous life without also laying out a pathway to achieve it.[6] Indeed, the vice-directed passions may even *advance* the moral progress of those who experience them, insofar as they involve a grasp in (i).[7]

Defenders of (2) and the strong version of *apatheia* reply that (2) is not falsified by the existence of vice-directed passions. For even if (i) is true and amounts to a grasp, (i) does not exhaust the content of the vice-directed passion, which contains, as we have seen, an appropriateness judgment (ii) as well. And this latter component, it is argued, is always false, rendering the conjunction of (i) and (ii) false.[8] This leads to a second argument for the strong version of *apatheia*:

(7) To make progress toward virtue, the non-Sage must perform actions which are appropriate.
(8) The actions associated with vice-directed passions in (ii) are never appropriate.

---

[3] Brennan 1998, 51; 2003, 289-90; 2005, 96n11; Graver 2007, 191-211. See also Vogt 2012, 178-81, and Sorabji 2002, 32-3, 51-3. The textual evidence for such passions is examined below.
[4] The Stoics say the bad is "everything which either is vice or shares in vice" (Stob. 2.58.1), including all vicious actions (Stob. 2.70.16-7), i.e. actions performed on the basis of vice (DL 7.96).
[5] Brennan 2005, 96n11. Cf. Cooper 2005, 176: all passions "are thoroughly bad states of mind, not to be indulged in by anyone, under any circumstances".
[6] Graver 2007, 210: the falsity of (5) prompts "further reflections on the old ideal of *apatheia*".
[7] Warren 2022, 153.
[8] Kamtekar 2025, 434; White 1995, 243-4. Cf. Sorabji 2002, 49-50.

(9) So, to make progress toward virtue, the non-Sage must never experience a vice-directed passion.

On the Stoic view, one necessary condition for possessing virtue is that all of one's actions are "appropriate" ones (*kathēkonta*). So to the extent that the non-Sage performs an appropriate action, rather than an inappropriate one, they make progress toward Sagehood, as (7) states. Yet, says (8), the action judged to be appropriate in element (ii) of the vice-directed passion is never in fact appropriate; hence (ii) is false. In the background here is the Stoics' cognitivist theory of action, on which *S* φ's by forming the belief that *φ-ing is appropriate*. This action-guiding belief is true when φ-ing is objectively appropriate in S's practical scenario, and false otherwise.[9]

Interpreters who defend (8) point to the figure of Alcibiades, the Stoics' example of a non-Sage who grieves his own vice (Cicero, *Tusc*. 3.77). Alcibiades' recognition in himself of a bad moral character is heart-wrenching, and he reacts with tears and feelings of dejection. Such negatively-charged affective responses the Stoics call "contractions of the soul", and, according to proponents of (8), they are never deemed the appropriate response to the presence or prospect of something bad. On this reading, the ancient Stoics can be fairly characterized as "stoic" in today's sense of the term, insofar as they proscribe negative affect as such. So since Alcibiades' grief consists in the complex belief that *(i) My present state of vice is bad and (ii) it is appropriate to contract the soul*, the conjunction comes out false in virtue of (ii) being false.

Existing attempts to resist the strong version of *apatheia* have rejected (8), a strategy which seems to me, however, to strain the textual evidence. So instead I will dispute (4) and (7), or, more precisely, the assumption that they are to be understood as absolute requirements. In some practical scenarios, the Stoic Chrysippus argues, the non-Sage cannot act appropriately without forming a false belief, and it is because he forms a false belief that he acts appropriately: in such cases, violating (4) is psychologically necessary for the non-Sage to comply with (7). Analogously, I suggest, in the case of the vice-directed passions the non-Sage complies with (4) at the cost of violating (7): the false appropriateness judgment in (ii) – *psychic*

[9] (7) does not collapse into (4), since the true action-guiding belief that *φ-ing is appropriate* need not amount to a grasp. I return to this point below.

contraction is appropriate – is a necessary side-effect, given his psychological make-up, of grasping the badness of vice or vicious action in (i). I argue that these cases of deception and vice-directed passion are morally neutral in themselves and, crucially, allow the non-Sage to avoid an outcome that is worse for his moral development. In this way some violations of (4) or (7) end up assisting the non-Sage in his attempt to become good.

2. Vice-directed Passions

I begin with evidence for the vice-directed passions, with a view to clarifying their psychological dynamics and propositional form. Let's start with Alcibiades' grief:

> T1: We are told that Socrates once persuaded Alcibiades he was unworthy to be called human and was no better than a manual laborer despite his noble birth. Alcibiades then became very upset, begging Socrates with tears to take away his disgraceful character and give him a virtuous one. What are we to say about this, Cleanthes? Surely you would not claim that there was nothing bad in the thing which moved Alcibiades to grief?[10] (Cicero, *Tusc*. 3.77)

A mainstay of the ancient tradition on Alcibiades, this story is cited by Cicero as part of a larger assessment of different methods of emotional consolation (*Tusc.* 3.75-9). Specifically, it is cited to expose the limitations of the method favored by the Stoic Cleanthes, on which the mourner should be persuaded that the thing he is grieving is not really bad, and hence that his evaluative judgment (i) is false. Such a method is inapplicable in Alcibiades' case, Cicero argues, since the object of Alcibiades' grief is his own vice, which Cleanthes, like any other Stoic, must agree is bad. So T1 indicates that Alcibiades' grief rests on the true evaluative belief (i) that *The vice I possess is bad*. His own vicious disposition is the "disgraceful character" he wishes to remove, and, as his tearful plea to Socrates implies, he responds to its presence by affirming that (ii) *psychic contraction is appropriate*.

---

[10] Tr. Graver modified. *Quid enim dicemus, cum Socrates Alcibiadi persuasisset, ut accepimus, eum nihil hominis esse nec quicquam inter Alcibiadem summo loco natum et quemvis baiolum interesse, cum se Alcibiades adflictaret lacrimansque Socrati supplex esset, ut sibi virtutem traderet turpitudinemque depelleret —quid dicemus, Cleanthe? num in illa re, quae aegritudine Alcibiadem adficiebat, mali nihil fuisse?*

Given (8), then, (ii) is false, a result I assume for the sake of argument. But let's examine further the epistemic status of (i). Recall that, according to (4), it is not just any true belief that advances moral progress but only those which are justified as well and so count as grasps. Does Alcibiades' true evaluation in (i) meet this condition? Scholars have assumed so, since it is Socrates who persuades him to accept (i).[11] Alcibiades does not come to believe *accidentally* or *by luck* that his character is vicious and that vice is bad: his endorsement of (i), being based on Socratic argumentation, is given for the right reasons (even if not yet fully stabilized in the manner of *epistēmē*).[12] The first sentence of T1 may further support this reading. Alcibiades has come to appreciate that class distinctions (being a "manual laborer" or of "noble birth") are irrelevant to happiness and incomparable in value with virtue and vice, in a way that anticipates the Stoic insistence that social status is indifferent.

We may suppose, then, that Alcibiades' grief consists in a grasp in (i) and a false appropriateness judgment in (ii), and thus offers a paradigm case for our investigation. Do the Stoics recognize further passions with the same structure? One plausible candidate is regret:

> T2: Regret is grief over errors that have been done, on the grounds that they have come about through oneself.[13] (Ps-Andronicus II.15)

> T3: Regret is grief over actions that have been done, on the grounds that they were errors committed by oneself; and this is a passion of the soul which produces unhappiness and internal strife. For insofar as the regretful man is vexed at what has happened, to that extent he is distressed at himself for having been responsible for these things.[14] (Stob. 2.102.25-103.4)

T2 says nothing about the appropriateness judgment associated with regret, e.g. whether regret motivates contraction, as in Alcibiades' grief, or instead affect-less

---

[11] Cf. Graver 2007, 191; Warren 2022, 154.

[12] For a detailed reconstruction of the conditions under which non-perceptual propositions are grasped, see Schwab 2024.

[13] Μεταμέλεια δὲ λύπη ἐπὶ ἁμαρτήμασι πεπραγμένοις ὡς δι' αὑτοῦ γεγονόσιν.

[14] Εἶναι δὲ τὴν μεταμέλειαν λύπην ἐπὶ πεπραγμένοις ὡς παρ' αὑτοῦ ἡμαρτημένοις, κακοδαιμονικόν τι πάθος ψυχῆς καὶ στασιῶδες· ἐφ' ὅσον γὰρ ἄχθεται τοῖς συμβεβηκόσιν ὁ ἐν ταῖς μεταμελείαις ὤν, ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἀγανακτεῖ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ὡς αἴτιον γεγονότα τούτων.

avoidance-behavior. But the former is what we would expect, given that contraction is considered an essential feature of grief (Cicero, *Tusc*. 3.68), and regret is a species of grief. Consistent with this expectation, T3 says that the regretful agent feels "vexed" and "distressed at himself", descriptions which likely refer to psychic contraction in (ii).[15]

But how should we specify the evaluative belief in (i)? Clearly, the object being grieved is the regretful agent's own past action – something which he thinks has "come about" and been "committed" by himself, for which he is "responsible" – and which he now regards as an "error". So it looks like we have in (i): *The past action I committed is bad because it is an error.*

It is not clear, however, how "error" is being used in T2 and T3, and so what grounds the perceived badness of the regretted action. Here we should note that "error" (*hamartēma*) is a technical term in Stoic ethical theory, with a wide and narrow usage. The wide usage picks out any action done on the basis of vice (Stob. 2.106.1-2): such actions are "erroneous" because they flow from an imperfect, vicious disposition that lacks *epistēmē*. The narrow usage, by contrast, picks out a specific class of actions performed on the basis of vice: those which are inappropriate, as opposed to appropriate (Stob. 2.86.10-11, 93.16-18). Inappropriate actions are "erroneous" because, in addition to flowing from an imperfect, vicious disposition, they also fail to discharge the objective demands of the agent's practical scenario, and, as we saw in (7), standardly inhibit the moral progress of the non-Sage.[16] So, if either of these technical usages is in play, regret can be understood as a "moral emotion": a negative appraisal by the agent of their own past actions, grounded in a newfound appreciation of their moral defects.

But perhaps "error" is not being used in either technical sense, instead reflecting a non-moral conception of error, connected with a perceived failure to obtain the agent's own prudential or self-interested goals. It could then pick out an action

---

[15] On *achthos* as a species of grief, see Stob. 2.92, DL 7.112, Ps-Andronicus II.7. We need not take *aganaktein* as referring exclusively to psychological movements correlated with anger (cf. Warren 2022, 145-7).

[16] Reconstructing a precise account of the appropriate- and inappropriate-making features of an action is an ongoing area of research in Stoic ethics. For some plausible proposals, see Vazquez 2023 and Brennan 2005, 169-230.

assessed in retrospect as leading to a missed opportunity for e.g. wealth, sex, or career advancement, deemed bad and regretted on these non-moral grounds.

We have, then, at least three options for specifying the evaluative belief (i) in regret:

> (R-Wide): *The past action I committed is bad because it was performed on the basis of vice.*
> (R-Narrow): *The past action I committed is bad because it was inappropriate.*
> (R-Non-Moral): *The past action I committed is bad because it thwarted my acquisition of externals.*

The three versions of (i), when affirmed by the non-Sage, differ in truth-value.[17] (R-Wide) and (R-Narrow) are true, and so potentially grasped, since they correctly specify why the agent's past action is bad, unlike (R-Non-Moral), for it is not its connection to the loss of externals, but rather a causal basis in vice or deviation from what is objectively appropriate, which makes an action bad.[18] So only the forms of regret involving an evaluative judgment of the (R-Wide) or (R-Narrow) type can fit the "Alcibiades paradigm" of a grasp in (i) and false appropriateness judgment in (ii): in such cases the regretful agent may have a true and justified appreciation of why his past action is bad and respond to this realization with psychic contraction.

Our final candidate vice-directed passion is shame, which, like regret, takes many forms. However, the two kinds of shame discussed most extensively in our early Stoic sources could not possibly conform to the "Alcibiades paradigm" we are searching for.[19] Shame (*aischunē*) as "fear of disrepute" is directed toward an indifferent, not vice or vicious action, and so could not include a true predication of badness in (i), whereas shame (*aidōs*) as "caution toward proper censure" is a "good feeling" (*eupatheia*) and so found in the Sage alone.[20] But perhaps the early Stoics recognize a third kind of shame, which, like *aischunē*, is a species of fear experienced

---

[17] On the truth-conditions for propositions of the form *p because q*, see DL 7.74. Cf. Warren 2022, 154-5, who omits the *because…* clause in (i) and so arrives at different conclusions.
[18] Stoic texts (see n4* above) suggest that the fundamental bad-making feature of an action is its causal basis in vice, with inappropriate actions counted as bad because they could only be performed by vicious agents.
[19] The treatment of shame in the later Stoic Epictetus is less clear-cut: see Graver 2007, 206-8 and Kamtekar 1998. However, in this paper I am concerned only with evidence for the early Stoics.
[20] *Aischunē* as fear of disrepute: DL 7.112; Stob. 2.92.3-4; Ps-Andronicus III.2. Disrepute as dispreferred indifferent: DL 7.106. *Aidōs* as good feeling: DL 7.116, Ps-Andronicus VI.4. Good feelings limited to Sage: DL 7.116, Cicero, *Tusc.* 4.12-14.

by the non-Sage but, like *aidōs*, based on a correct appreciation that vicious action is properly censured as bad. Consider this text:

> T4: And virtue is choiceworthy for itself: for we feel shame in relation to things we do badly, as if knowing that only the fine is good.[21] (DL 7.127)

This brief comment is not further explained but suggests a form of shame directed at "things we do badly": i.e. moral errors, in the wide or narrow sense, which "we" non-Sages perform.[22] So, like regret, shame of this kind is a self-directed passion involving a negative moral assessment by the agent of their own bad actions, albeit not restricted to those in the past but including future ones in prospect as well.[23] In such cases, it is "as if" the shameful agent "know[s] that only the fine is good". Here the Stoics allude to their bedrock axiological claim that only virtue, and what participates in it, is good, which they say is "the same in force" (*isodunamei*) or "equivalent" (*ison*) to the claim that only the fine is good (DL 7.101). T4 therefore indicates a limited form of epistemic success in the negative moral assessment underpinning shame. Even if the shameful agent falls short of *epistēmē* strictly speaking ("as if knowing…"), they can grasp the badness of their past or prospective moral errors in (i). So shame of this kind may partially conform to the "Alcibiades paradigm", insofar as it belongs to the non-Sage and can rest on an evaluative grasp.

Now, as to the action featuring in (ii), T4 is silent. But there is no sign here or elsewhere that contraction *cannot* be involved in shame of this kind, or that its constituent appropriateness judgment must, or even can, be true.[24] So let us tentatively propose, as distinct from the non-Sage's fear of disrepute and the Sage's caution toward proper censure, "progressor shame", as we may call it, consisting in the complex belief that *(i) Moral errors I have committed in the past or may commit in future are bad, and (ii) it is appropriate to contract the soul*. Progressor shame, alongside

---

[21] Reading Dorandi's text: καὶ αὐτὴν (sc. τὴν ἀρετὴν) δι' αὑτὴν αἱρετὴν εἶναι· αἰσχυνόμεθα γοῦν ἐφ' οἷς κακῶς πράττομεν, ὡς ἂν μόνον τὸ καλὸν εἰδότες ἀγαθόν.

[22] Cf. Stob. 2.110.23-111.2: the Sage is "never ashamed" (*mēdamōs kataischunesthai*) since he possesses virtue and always acts virtuously.

[23] Admittedly the present tense *prattomen* in T4 is ambiguous here. But since this form of shame is presumably a species of fear, we would expect a perceived bad *in prospect* as included among its objects.

[24] Scholars disagree on whether fear involves a fixed practical response in (ii), as grief is accompanied by contraction. See helpful discussion in Klein 2021, 237-242. For present purposes, the important point is that there is no evidence in early Stoic sources that shame, as a species of fear, *cannot* motivate contraction in (ii), or that its appropriate judgment in (ii) is sometimes true (cf. Brennan 2005, 96n11).

Alcibiades' grief and the two kinds of moral regret discussed above, offer concrete examples of the vice-directed passions whose potential to assist moral progress we will now examine.

3. Chrysippus on Harming and Making Worse

How could experiencing a passion of the "Alcibiades paradigm", consisting in a grasp in (i) and a false appropriateness judgment in (ii), support moral progress? To answer this question, I will first investigate how deception may be morally helpful to the deceived agent and then apply this account, *mutatis mutandis*, to the vice-directed passions. This strategy is justified, I believe, by the following text – completely ignored in our debate – in which Chrysippus groups together "certain cases of fear, grief, and deception":

> T5: Chrysippus grants that there are certain cases of fear, grief, and deception which harm us but do not make us worse. Read the first of his books *Against Plato on Justice*.[25] (Plutarch, *Com. Not.* 1070e-f)

Which notions of "harming" and "making worse" are operative here, such that the former does not imply the latter? Elsewhere the Stoics say that "to harm is to change or sustain on the basis of vice".[26] Hence all psychological activities produced by the disposition of vice – moral errors in the wide sense – count as harms (and indeed as harms to the agent herself).[27] "Making worse" we could then understand as "making worse *with respect to moral progress*": to be made worse by being brought further away from virtue.[28] The Stoics are clear that not all harms make worse in this sense, since everything the non-Sage does, including the actions which bring them closer to virtue, are done on the basis of vice.[29] So Stoic ethical theory needs a distinction between harming and making worse so construed: although all moral errors in the wide sense are harmful, they will differ from each other in their effect on the vicious agent's gradable degree of moral progress, so that only some "make worse" by

---

[25] ἀλλ' ὁμολογεῖ γε Χρύσιππος εἶναί τινας φόβους καὶ λύπας καὶ ἀπάτας, αἳ βλάπτουσι μὲν ἡμᾶς χείρονας δ' οὐ ποιοῦσιν. ἔντυχε δὲ τῷ πρώτῳ τῶν πρὸς Πλάτωνα γεγραμμένων περὶ Δικαιοσύνης.

[26] DL 7.104: βλάπτειν δὲ κινεῖν ἢ ἴσχειν κατὰ κακίαν. See also SVF 3.78.

[27] A general Stoic tenet (Stob. 2.101.21-24), which Chrysippus affirms in his *Demonstrations Concerning Justice* (Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1041b-e).

[28] Cf. Bonhöffer 1890, 304-5, Forschner 1981, 140n68, and Babut 2002, 224n345.

[29] See Plutarch, *Com. Not.* 1063a-b, Cicero, *Fin*. 3.48, and discussion in Brennan 2005, 170-2.

bringing the agent further away from the state of perfection and stability in belief that is virtue. The surprise in T5, then, is not that harming comes apart from making worse, but rather that "certain cases of fear, grief, and deception" are denied to make us worse. Contrary to what we would expect from (4) and the strong version of *apatheia*, Chrysippus seems to insist that certain passions and deceptions have a *neutral* effect on the agent's progress toward virtue.

In the next section I proceed on the hypothesis that this interpretation of T5 is correct and propose that the deceptions Chrysippus has in mind are those which function as the causal basis for the non-Sage's performance of an appropriate action. T5's cases of fear and grief will then be the vice-directed passions of the "Alcibiades paradigm". Despite being harmful, as activations of the disposition of vice, these mental states have a neutral, not negative, effect on the agent's moral progress and are commended to him on the grounds that no better outcome, with respect to moral progress, is available in the scenario, given the make-up of his psychological profile.

4. Deception and Moral Progress, and the Analogue in Vice-Directed Passion

So then, when is forming a false belief, and violating (4), the necessary means by which the non-Sage acts appropriately and complies with (7)?

> T6: First of all, everyone must grant me what even the sternest of the Stoics admit, namely that the good man will go so far as to tell a lie on occasion, and sometimes even for quite trivial reasons: with sick children, for example, we feign many things for the sake of what is useful for them and promise to do many things which we are not going to do; all the more, an assassin must be turned away from killing a man, and the enemy must be deceived to save the country. Thus lying, which in some circumstances is blameworthy even in slaves, in others is praiseworthy in the Sage himself.[30] (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 12.1.38-9)

[30] Tr. Russell modified. *Ac primum concedant mihi omnes oportet, quod Stoicorum quoque asperrimi confitentur, facturum aliquando bonum virum ut mendacium dicat, et quidem nonnumquam levioribus causis, ut in pueris aegrotantibus utilitatis eorum gratia multa fingimus, multa non facturi promittimus, nedum si ab homine occidendo grassator avertendus sit aut hostis pro salute patriae fallendus: ut hoc, quod alias in servis quoque reprendendum est, sit alias in ipso sapiente laudandum.*

T6 assumes that if S utters a falsehood, S lies. It then reports the Stoic view that the Sage (or "good man") will lie to non-Sages in certain circumstances, and that such lies are praiseworthy. The Stoic position is presented as intuitive, since these praiseworthy lies are somehow "useful", either all-things-considered or for the deceived person in particular. Now, the Stoics elsewhere characterize preferred indifferents, such as health, life, and political stability, as "useful" (Stob. 2.84.4-6) and assume that appropriate actions are those which typically select these "useful" preferred indifferents.[31] So perhaps T6 indicates that the Sage's lies are praiseworthy when they enable the performance of appropriate actions in the non-Sage, or at least the omission of an inappropriate one.

We can make these points more precise by considering other sources which show greater familiarity with Stoic theory.

> T7: They say that the wise man does not lie but is truthful in all circumstances; for lying does not consist in saying something false, but in saying something false [a] in the manner of someone in error and [b] in order to deceive one's neighbors. They believe, however, that he will sometimes employ falsehood in several ways without assenting [to it].[32] (Stob. 2.111.10-5)

Note first that T7 emphasizes that the Sage's uttering of falsehoods does not imply that he believes them himself; for that would run afoul of (1). Second, and in contrast with T6, T7 denies that uttering a falsehood is sufficient to lie. Rather, two additional conditions must be met: "saying something false (a) in the manner of someone in error and (b) in order to deceive one's neighbors". The Sage, in uttering a falsehood, clearly fails (a), since to be "in error" in this context is to have a vicious disposition that generates the decision to utter a falsehood.

> T8: He [the Sage] never lies, even if he speaks a falsehood, owing to the fact that it is uttered not from a bad but from a sophisticated [i.e. virtuous] disposition. The doctor says something false about the health of the sick

---

[31] See n16* above.

[32] Tr. Inwood-Gerson, modified, reading Wachsmuth's text. Λέγεσθαι δὲ μὴ ψεύδεσθαι τὸν σοφόν, ἀλλ' ἐν πᾶσιν ἀληθεύειν· οὐ γὰρ ἐν τῷ λέγειν τι ψεῦδος τὸ ψεύδεσθαι ὑπάρχειν, ἀλλ' [a] ἐν τῷ διαψευστῶς τὸ ψεῦδος λέγειν καὶ [b] ἐπὶ ἀπάτῃ τῶν πλησίον. Τῷ μέντοι ψεύδει ποτὲ συγχρήσεσθαι νομίζουσιν αὐτὸν κατὰ πολλοὺς τρόπους ἄνευ συγκαταθέσεως.

> person and promises to give him something but does not give it. He says something false but does not lie; for it is with a view to the health of the person in his care that he takes such a recourse.[33] (SE M 7.42-3)

Conditions (a) and (b) are connected, insofar as the utterer of falsehoods seeks to deceive others only if he has an erroneous, vicious disposition. To be motivated to deceive is peculiar to vicious agents; hence the Sage never lies. This is illustrated in T8's example of the Sage-doctor.[34] His utterance does not aim at deception but instead at some other objective, namely, the "health" of the non-Sage patient to whom he speaks the falsehood. As in T6, this could be heard as a reference to preferred indifferents and thus to appropriate action.

So what does the Sage positively intend in uttering a falsehood, if not deception? It will help to first flesh out T8's medical case. Suppose that Billy is ill and simply needs a dose of Medicine X to regain his health; taking Medicine X is thus the appropriate action for Billy to perform. Suppose further that Billy is a non-Sage with a peculiar psychological profile: he holds the false belief (perhaps owing to excessive social-media use) that Medicine X is effective only if he has first received a dose of Serum Y, and he refuses to take Medicine X in any other circumstance. The Sage-doctor, having treated Billy in the past, is aware that he holds this false belief and knows what Billy's health requires, and so tells him a falsehood, "I am giving you Serum Y," when in fact it is only a placebo. Billy goes on to take the placebo and, when offered Medicine X in turn, consumes this too.

Schematically, we can represent Billy's case as follows: given the make-up of his belief-set, assenting to the falsehood *p* is psychologically necessary for him to act

---

[33] Tr. Bett. καὶ οὔποτε ψεύδεται [sc. ὁ σοφός], κἂν ψεῦδος λέγῃ, διὰ τὸ μὴ ἀπὸ κακῆς ἀλλ' ἀπὸ ἀστείας αὐτὸ διαθέσεως προφέρεσθαι. καθὰ γὰρ ὁ περὶ τῆς τοῦ κάμνοντος σωτηρίας ψεῦδός τι λέγων ἰατρός, καὶ ἐπαγγελλόμενός τι δώσειν μὴ διδοὺς δέ, ψεῦδος μέν τι λέγει, οὐ ψεύδεται δέ (πρὸς γὰρ τὴν τοῦ ἐπιστατουμένου σωτηρίαν αὐτῷ τὸ τοιοῦτο λαμβάνει τὴν ἀναφοράν).

[34] Presumably, satisfying (a) is necessary but not sufficient for satisfying (b). So it is possible for a non-Sage not to intend to deceive with the utterance of a falsehood and so not to lie. One might think, then, that T8's example of the doctor is designed to illustrate this possibility, and so that this doctor is not supposed to be a Sage. However, since he appears to be introduced as an example of an agent with a "sophisticated" i.e. virtuous, disposition, it seems best to construe him as a Sage-doctor as I do above. This is a doctor who does not lie because his utterance of a falsehood meets *neither* (a) *nor* (b). Similarly, T6 seems to assume that a Sage will utter falsehoods in a medical context.

appropriately by assenting to the true appropriateness claim *q*.[35] So let *p* be *I have consumed Serum Y*, and *q*, *It is appropriate for me to take Medicine X*. In uttering "I am giving you Serum Y", the Sage anticipates that Billy would not assent to *q* unless he first accepted the falsehood *p*.[36] So it is not deception as such, but rather getting Billy to perform the appropriate action, which is the Sage's true intention, as part of his wider protreptic mission to help others become good.[37] Uttering a falsehood is the only way he can discharge this mission in these circumstances, with this particular non-Sage.

Further evidence confirms that the Sage does not *intend* to deceive the non-Sage in such cases, even though the deception is foreseen as a necessary condition for the non-Sage's performance of the appropriate action.

> T9: Furthermore, Chrysippus says that both god and the Sage implant false impressions, not asking us to assent or yield [to such impressions] but merely to act and form an impulse in relation to the appearance, but that we inferior persons out of weakness assent to such impressions.[38] (Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1057a-b)

What the Sage "asks" the "inferior" non-Sage to do is to perform the appropriate action. T9 describes this action as being "in relation to" the false appearance implanted by the Sage (e.g. in uttering "Here is Serum Y"), since the non-Sage would not undertake the appropriate action unless he first assented to the false appearance.[39] The false belief, we may assume, functions as the perceived grounds for his decision to act appropriately and thus is causally and evidentially connected to it.[40]

---

[35] I assume that Billy's assent to the true appropriateness claim *q* is not justified, since it is based on the false belief *p*, and so does not count as a grasp. So his assent to *q* conforms to (7) but violates (4).
[36] Here I agree with Bobzien 1998, 273-4 and Long 1971, 99-101 that the non-Sage's assent to the falsehood is a necessary means for his performance of the appropriate action, and that this psychological fact is anticipated or foreseen by the Sage.
[37] On the Sage's wider protreptic mission, see the texts assembled in Shogry 2024, 14n21.
[38] Tr. Long and Sedley, modified. αὖθις δέ φησι Χρύσιππος καὶ τὸν θεὸν ψευδεῖς ἐμποιεῖν φαντασίας καὶ τὸν σοφόν, οὐ συγκατατιθεμένων οὐδ' εἰκόντων δεομένους ἡμῶν, ἀλλὰ πραττόντων μόνον καὶ ὁρμώντων ἐπὶ τὸ φαινόμενον· ἡμᾶς δὲ φαύλους ὄντας ὑπ' ἀσθενείας συγκατατίθεσθαι ταῖς τοιαύταις φαντασίαις.
[39] Here "impression" (*phantasia*) seems to be used interchangeably with "appearance" (*to phainomenon*).
[40] The Chrysippean position in T9 is not committed to the possibility of action without assent. The point is rather that the non-Sage's assent to *q*, and so his appropriate action and impulse, would not

T9 clarifies, then, that, in uttering a falsehood to the non-Sage, the Sage intends for him to perform the appropriate action and assent to the true appropriateness claim but *not* to the false appearance it is related to. This might seem a specious distinction, for the Sage foresees that his utterance will result in the non-Sage's assent to the falsehood *p* and consequently to the true appropriateness claim *q*; otherwise, he wouldn't have uttered it in the first place. So how can the Sage intend the goal (appropriate action) but not the means (false belief) which he foresees?

The worry becomes more pressing in light of the Stoic claim that holding a false belief is a way of being *harmed*. For assenting to what is false is characteristic of a vicious disposition (cf. (1)) and an error (Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1056e-f), all cases of which are harmful to the agent who commits the error.[41] So does the Sage *harm* the non-Sage by uttering a falsehood to him?

Chrysippus replies as follows:

> T10: If the impressions brought about the assents self-sufficiently, then Sages would do harm when they produce false impressions. For Sages frequently make use of falsehood in relation to those who are bad and present a plausible impression [to them]; but this [plausible impression] is not the [self-sufficient] cause for the assent [in the non-Sage], since then it would also be the [self-sufficient] cause of the false belief and of the deception.[42] (Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1055f-1056a)

Chrysippus concedes that, in uttering a falsehood to "those who are bad", i.e. to non-Sages, the Sage is (at least partly) responsible for producing in them a false impression. Thus T9 describes the Sage as "implanting" false impressions in the "inferior person". But the responsibility for the *assent*, and so for the harm of holding a false belief, falls to the non-Sage alone.

---

have occurred if he had not also assented to the false appearance it is related to, namely, *p*. Merely entertaining without assenting to *p* is not sufficient to move the non-Sage to assent to *q*.

[41] See n27*.

[42] Tr. Bobzien, modified. βλάψουσιν οἱ σοφοὶ ψευδεῖς φαντασίας ἐμποιοῦντες, ἂν αἱ φαντασίαι ποιῶσιν αὐτοτελῶς τὰς συγκαταθέσεις· πολλάκις γὰρ οἱ σοφοὶ ψεύδει χρῶνται πρὸς τοὺς φαύλους καὶ φαντασίαν παριστᾶσι πιθανήν, οὐ μὴν αἰτίαν τῆς συγκαταθέσεως· ἐπεὶ καὶ τῆς ὑπολήψεως αἰτία τῆς ψευδοῦς ἔσται καὶ τῆς ἀπάτης.

Fully unpacking the justification for this claim would take us into the weeds of Chrysippus' theory of moral responsibility. But, roughly, the Chrysippean proposal being relied on here is that merely entertaining the impression that *p* is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for *assenting* to *p,* and that *assenting* to *p* depends solely on the condition of the agent's mind and the constituents of their belief-set – their psychological profile in other words. Thus, as T10 says, the impression is not the "self-sufficient" cause of the assent, even when the impression itself is "plausible". Rather it is the non-Sage's own "weakness" (T9), i.e. their present psychological make-up and disposition of their reasoning power, which determines whether assent is given and so whether a (self-)harm is incurred. On the Stoic view, merely *entertaining* a false proposition is not harmful, but assenting to it is. So what the Sage produces in the non-Sage does not harm them – consistent with their more general claim that the Sage never does harm (DL 7.123) – whereas the harmful assent and false belief is up to the non-Sage alone.

We can now return to Chrysippus' claim that some deceptions "harm us but do not make us worse" (T5). Falsely believing *p* is an error and so a harm, for which (e.g.) Billy alone is responsible, but also the necessary means, given his psychological profile, by which he assents to *q* and performs the appropriate action. I now want to argue that, in so acting, Billy is not made worse in his level of moral progress and, moreover, that this outcome is better, progress-wise, than the available alternative.

Why is this? Let's consider Billy's epistemic state without the Sage's intervention. In this case, he will lack the false belief *p* but fail to act appropriately by holding the false belief ¬*q*. Alternatively, with the Sage's intervention, he will take on the false belief *p* and on this basis act appropriately by truly believing *q*. Either way, of course, he will retain the entrenched false belief *if p then q*, which the Sage does not attempt to challenge. Now, unless the Sage acts inconsistently with his general protreptic mission, his intervention must be foreseen to produce a superior effect on Billy's moral progress compared to the alternative: in other words, only Billy's interests as a moral agent are salient in motivating the Sage to utter the falsehood. So I would suggest, on behalf of the Stoics, that a belief-set which adds one true appropriateness judgment, *q*, as a consequence of taking on the false situational judgment, *p*, is closer to being virtuous than one which adds no new true beliefs at all. Without the Sage's intervention, the non-Sage acquires no new grasps and fails to act appropriately; with the Sage's intervention, at least he satisfies (7).

It may seem scandalous to attribute such an account to the Stoics. For even if we grant that it is psychologically impossible for the non-Sage to act appropriately without assenting to the falsehood, and that the harm of deception is self-caused, we still might insist that the non-Sage ought never to assent to a falsehood. After all, the Sage does not intend for this to occur, and on the Stoic view nothing is more contrary to human nature than false belief (Cicero, *Fin*. 3.18) – a report that encourages us to take (4) as an absolute requirement on the non-Sage. Indeed, Billy would appear to violate (4) twice over, in assenting to the falsehood *p* and the true, but unjustified, *q*.[43] And so perhaps there is *nothing* Billy can do to maintain his current level of moral progress: he is doomed to be made worse. He faces a genuine moral dilemma, insofar as he is bound by two competing categorical requirements – (4) and (7) – and cannot discharge both.

Fortunately, a more plausible picture is available. Instead of taking (4) and (7) as absolute requirements, the Stoics could have a model that ranks actions according to whether they comply with *both* (4) and (7), *either* of these at the expense of the other, or *neither*. Actions which comply with both (4) and (7) would be morally positive in themselves; those which comply with either, morally neutral; and those which comply with neither, morally deteriorating (i.e. "making worse" in T5's sense). Often the morally positive option is psychologically impossible, as in Billy's case. But the non-Sage would still have reason to prefer acting appropriately on the basis of a deception to an alternative in which he violates both (4) and (7). Consequently, on this model there is no perfect isomorphism between what the Sage would do and what the best available outcome is for the non-Sage's moral progress, given the limitations of his psychological profile.

Let us now, finally, apply these results to the vice-directed passions. That these mental states are (self-)harms follows straightforwardly from their being activations of the non-Sage's disposition of vice. And the denial that the vice-directed passions make him worse is consistent with the model just presented, on which an action that complies with either (4) or (7), but not both, sustains without worsening the agent's moral progress. However, unlike the deception cases, where violating (4) is the cost of satisfying (7), in the vice-directed passions (7) is sacrificed to comply with (4): the appropriateness judgment in (ii) is false, whereas (i) amounts to a grasp. A further disanalogy with the deception cases lies in the fact that (ii) is not the perceived

[43] See n35*.

grounds, or causal-cum-evidential basis, for (i), but instead a side-effect of the grasp. For we may suppose that (e.g.) Alcibiades' psychological profile is such that he cannot believe (let alone grasp) that *Something bad is present* without also affirming that *Psychic contraction is appropriate*.[44] The false appropriateness judgment is therefore a psychological consequence of his grasp in (i), rather than the means to achieving it in the first place. But the crucial point of the analogy holds: just as in the deception cases, experiencing a vice-directed passion would be preferable to any action that violates both (4) and (7), if there is no action satisfying both (4) and (7) open to the agent. Alcibiades is not yet ready to grasp the badness of vice without contracting his soul. But grieving his vice is superior, progress-wise, to the alternative in which he grieves the loss of wealth or fame or, more generally, suffers any ordinary indifferent-related passion.

But why is a passion of the Alcibiades paradigm better for the non-Sage, from the perspective of moral progress, than, for instance, forming a false evaluative belief that does not lead to psychic contraction but instead to an appropriate action? In other words, why should (7) be sacrificed to comply with (4), rather than the other way around? We may suppose that in the vice-directed passions, as in the deception cases, there can be a role for a Sage-mentor to play, whereby he incites (without strictly speaking intending) the non-Sage to satisfy either (4) or (7) at the expense of the other, when satisfying both is psychologically impossible. Why does the Sage not adopt a consistent strategy of prioritizing appropriate action over grasps in all such cases?

Speculation is inevitable here, but I suspect the answer will depend on which intervention makes it easier for the non-Sage to ultimately attain the global consistency and stability in belief which constitutes virtue and *epistēmē*. That is, we can compare two potential interventions – one prioritizing the grasp, the other the appropriate action – according to the overall belief-set that would result, and in the number of revisions that would be needed to remove all inconsistencies from it and make it coherent and secure. The fewer such revisions, the better the intervention. Working out this proposal in detail is too large a task for the present paper. But it is plausible to suppose that a non-Sage who grasps the badness of vice requires "less

[44] Not all non-Sages are so disposed to the presence of what is genuinely bad: see Cicero, *Fin*. 3.68, Galen *PHP* 4.5.28.

work" to be made virtuous than one who has only false evaluative beliefs but manages to act appropriately on isolated occasions.

5. Conclusion

The strong version of *apatheia* maintains that all passions are deleterious to moral progress, since they rest on at least one false belief about what is good or bad, or about what is appropriate to do. I have challenged this view by sketching an alternative model of moral progress, on which the injunction to acquire grasps and act appropriately is not absolute. Chrysippus' neglected remarks in T5 invite us to group together the vice-directed passions with certain forms of deception, and the resulting juxtaposition sheds light on why the Sage would intervene in such a way as to encourage these mental states in the non-Sage: although morally neutral in themselves, they allow the non-Sage to avoid an outcome that is worse for his moral development. While some of the details of this model remain to be fully worked out, it provides a plausible alternative to existing critiques of the strong version of *apatheia*, which strain the textual evidence to make the vice-directed passions fully veridical. If my proposal is along the right lines, then Plutarch's observation (*Mor. Vir.* 452c) that the Stoics frequently employ shame (*aischunē*) for the purpose of "moral correction" (*epanorthōsis*) finds corroboration in Chrysippean Stoicism.

Ancient Works Cited

[Andronicus]. *Peri Pathōn*. Ed. A. Glibert-Thirry. Leiden 1977.

Cicero. *De finibus bonorum et malorum*. Ed. L. Reynolds. Oxford 1998. [*Fin*.]

---. *Tusculanae disputationes*. Ed. M. Pohlenz. Stuttgart 1967. [*Tusc.*]

Diogenes Laertius. *Vitae philosophorum*. Ed. T. Dorandi. Cambridge 2013. [DL]

Galen. *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*. Ed. P. De Lacy. Berlin 1984. [*PHP*]

Epictetus. *Dissertationes ab Arriano digestae*. Ed. H. Schenkl. Leipzig 1916. [*Diss*.]

Plutarch. *De communibus notitiis contra Stoicos.* Eds. M. Pohlenz and R. Westman. Leipzig 1952. [*Com. Not.*]

---. *De Stoicorum repugnantiis*. Eds. M. Pohlenz and R. Westman. Leipzig 1952. [*St. Rep.*]

---. *De virtute morali*. Eds. W. R. Paton, M. Pohlenz and W. Sieveking. Leipzig 1929. [*Mor. Vir.*]

Quintilian. *Institutio Oratoria*. Ed. M. Winterbottom. Oxford 1970.

Seneca. *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*. Ed. L. Reynolds. Oxford 1965. [*Ep.*]

Sextus Empiricus. *Adversus Mathematicos*. Eds. H. Mutschmann and J. Mau. Leipzig 1961. [SE M]

Stobaeus. *Anthologium*. Eds. C. Wachsmuth and O. Hense. Berlin 1912. [Stob.]

Contemporary Works Cited

von Arnim, J. 1903. *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*. Teubner. [SVF]

Babut, D. 2004. *Plutarque: Oeuvres morales, Tome XV (1re partie).* Paris.

Bett, R. 2005. *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Logicians*. Cambridge.

Bobzien, S. 1998. *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*. Oxford.

Bonhöffer, A. 1890. *Epiktet und die Stoa.* Stuttgart.

Brennan, T. 2005. *The Stoic Life.* Oxford.

---. 2003. "Stoic Moral Psychology", in B. Inwood, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, Cambridge: 257-294.

---. 1998. “The Old Stoic Theory of Emotions”, in J. Sihvola and T. Engberg-Pedersen, eds., *The Emotions in Hellenistic Philosophy*, Springer: 21-70.

Cooper, J. 2005. “The Emotional Life of the Wise”. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 43 (S1): 176-218.

---. 1999. “Posidonius on Emotions”, in his *Reason and Emotion*, Princeton: 449-484.

Forschner, M. 1981. *Die stoische Ethik*. Stuttgart.

Frede, M. 1986. “The Stoic Doctrine of the Affections of the Soul”, in M. Schofield and G. Striker, eds., *The Norms of Nature*, Cambridge: 93-110.

Graver, M. 2007. *Stoicism and Emotion*. Chicago.

---. 2002. *Cicero on the Emotions*. Chicago.

Inwood, B. and Gerson, L. 1997. *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings, Second Edition*. Hackett.

Kamtekar, R. 2025. “Stoic Emotion: The Why and the How of Eliminating All Emotions”, in J. Klein and N. Powers, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Oxford: 426-446.

---. 1998. “ΑΙΔΩΣ in Epictetus”. *Classical Philology* 93 (2): 136-160.

Klein, J. 2021. “Desire and Impulse in Epictetus and the Older Stoics”. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 103 (2): 221-251.

Long, A.A. 1971. “Language and Thought in Stoicism”, in his *Problems in Stoicism*, Bloomsbury: 75-113.

Long, A.A. and Sedley, D. 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cambridge.

Nussbaum, M. 1994. *The Therapy of Desire*. Princeton.

Russell, D. 2001. *Quintilian, The Orator’s Education, Volume V: Books 11-12*. Harvard.

Schwab, W. 2024. “Nonperceptual Kataleptic Impressions in Stoicism”. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 62 (3): 367-393.

Shogry, S. 2024. *Stoic Eros*. Cambridge.

Sorabji, R. 2002. *Emotion and Peace of Mind*. Oxford.

Vazquez, M. 2023. “The Black Box in Stoic Axiology”. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 104 (1): 78-100.

Vogt, K.M. 2012. *Belief and Truth*. Oxford.

Warren, J. 2022. *Regret*. Oxford.

White, S. 1995. "Cicero and the Therapists", in J.G.F. Powell, ed., *Cicero the Philosopher*, Oxford: 219-246.