Ataktos: a dialogue on Stoic ethics

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It's one of those bits of historical bad luck that no complete work by any of the first three heads of the Stoic school of philosophy (Zeno of Citium, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus) survives. We have some fragments of their many books and reports of what the early Stoics thought and said, but these are all very hard to puzzle out. The Roman philosopher and rhetorician Cicero attempted to provide popularised Latin versions of the doctrines of Stoics and Epicureans in *De Finibus* (*On Goals*). His works are one of our many sources for what the Stoics thought and are reasonably readable. In what follows, I've tried to do the same thing. Cicero has representatives of the different Hellenistic philosophical schools explain their views about what happiness consists in, but he allots a whole chapter to each school. I try to bring the Epicureans, Aristotelian and Stoic views about happiness into sharper contrast in less space. For a general overview of Stoicism, see the Stanford On-line Dictionary of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu).

Scene: the painted porch (*stoa poikilê*) in Athens, 272 BC. Zeno of Citium, aged 62, is sitting in the shade of one of the columns writing on a wax tablet with his stylus. He is approached by Ataktos, an Athenian about your age.

A: Good afternoon. You're the esteemed Stoic philosopher Zeno, aren't you? May I ask your advice?

Z: (not looking up) It's a public place. You can ask whatever you like. And I, for my part, don't need to talk to perfect strangers in this very pleasant public place.

A: But I have something that I would be willing to trade for some advice. Lysias, who studies dialectic with Diodorus, is keen to impress me. He's told me a new sophism that is making the rounds among the Megarians. I'll share it with you if only you'll give me some advice.

Z: Ah, a new logical puzzle! You certainly know my tastes, boy. Let's have it. If I've heard it already, I'll give you advice. If I haven't heard it, I'll give you *good* advice.

A: OK, here goes. If you never lost something, you have it still: but you never lose your horns. So, therefore, you have horns.

Z: Oh splendid! It doesn't seem to turn on the fact that a word names both a thing and itself, like thisone: What you say comes out your mouth. You say a wagon, so a wagon comes out your mouth. It'smore like the question, 'Have you stopped beating your wife yet?' It presupposes that one of two thingsmust be true when it might be the case that neither is. But, if this is so, what of the principle that one oftwo opposed propositions must be true. Hmmmm. Anyway, what does Lysias say that Diodorus says about it?

A: Zeno. I hate to be impertinent, but you *did* promise to give me some good advice in exchange for a sophism that you haven't heard. Frankly, I don't *care* whether I still have the horns I never lost. What's sure is that I'm caught in the middle of what threatens to become a very ugly domestic dispute and I need some help *now*—before I go home. Tell me quick. What is happiness? What should I pursue and how shall I live?

Z: Anything else boy? Allbloodymighty Zeus!

A: I know it's asking quite a lot, but here's my situation. Grandfather studied philosophy with Aristotle at the Lyceum. He thinks it's more than about time for me to start exercising my capacities for moral and intellectual reasoning. He's always at me. 'Ataktos, what have you done today that was courageous? Did you take the proper pleasure in it? Did it proceed from a stable state of your character? How can you expect to be happy if you don't engage in the activities characteristic of virtuous people?' It's really getting on my nerves. I mean he is always the perfect gentleman—politically involved, using his money to endow choruses and other public benefits. In addition, he is active in the mathematics study circle at

the Lyceum and he and Theophilus are cataloguing the different kinds of fish caught near Lesbos. If he's right about happiness, then I suppose I'd better get with the program, but I need to be sure that he is right. Otherwise I would be acquiring all these habits for nothing.

But that isn't the half of it. My father has been hanging out in Epicurus' garden. He and my grandfather have been having arguments about the nature of pleasure that are getting downright unpleasant. My father says that in putting so much stress on the exercise of practical and theoretical virtue, Grandad is confusing the means with the end. He says we value courage and do courageous actions simply because the acquisition and exercise of the virtues are the best strategy for having a life filled with pleasure. Grandfather gets very cross—well, he says he isn't *very* cross: he's only cross to the right degree for the circumstances—anyway, he says that the capacity to feel pleasure is common to all the animals and thus it can't be a fit goal for human beings. A truly fine speciman of humanity will *feel* pleasure in the course of exercising his practical and theoretical virtues, but he does not act for the *sake of* this pleasure. Rather, he chooses to do what is courageous because it is fine and good. He says that father doesn't do anything for the right reasons. Further, he thinks that father isn't sufficiently involved in the political and social life of Athens. He says father might as well be a pig wallowing in the mud of Epicurus' garden.

Z: Hmm. I can see that your family life is a bit difficult at the moment. The first thing that you must realise is that both of them are absolutely, positively, dead wrong.

A: Oh, but wait Zeno. It gets even worse. Mother got fed up with their quarrelling and left the household. She's taken up with the Cynics and won't even come home. She wears her cloak doubled over so she can sleep rough in the streets and carries such food as she can beg from passers-by in a rucksack. Naturally, the family is absolutely mortified. Though she isn't speaking to father, she keeps meeting me when I go to the gymnasium in the mornings and talking to me about what I must do with my life. She thinks *I* should be sleeping rough too! She says that money and influence are absolutely meaningless as far as happiness goes. She says that whoever is happy is utterly self-sufficient and that whether you continue to be rich isn't always under your control. Thus, these things are no part of happiness and are not even properly called good things, but are utterly indifferent.

I've tried to tell her that she needs to take better care of herself—that she'll become ill playing at being homeless. She says that even health isn't important for happiness. The Cynic philosophers tell her that only those who are virtuous are happy and that they are happy regardless of what befalls them. Father and grandfather don't find that so bad. It is commendable to praise virtue. But mother and her Cynic friends think that a great deal of what people call virtuous or moral behavior is, in fact, not really so. She called it 'indifferent'. It's really quite shocking. She told me the other day that it was only a convention that incest was wrong and that, as things were by nature, there was nothing wrong with it. Or even cannibalism! Father says that he will have her brought back to the house by force. She is his wife and by the laws of Athens he commands her, but she just spits at him and says that she is a 'citizen of the world' (*cosmopolitan*) and that the only real marriage is between two people who both want to be with one another and only for as long as they want this. Oh she has thrown off convention! That's for sure. One of the household slaves saw her the other day in the marketplace having a .... uh, well, you know ... ah, sort of amusing herself and all. *In the marketplace*! She told him that she was simply being self-sufficient and that it was a pity she couldn't get rid of hunger simply by a similar rubbing of her stomach.[1] One understands now why they call the Cynics cynics.[2]

I must tell you Zeno, I find her advice even more bizarre than my father's or my grandfather's. How could anyone think that it isn't better to be healthy than to be sick? And if it is better to be healthy, then health is a good thing. And if health is a good thing, then surely it must contribute to our happiness in some way or another.

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[1] For details of the outrageous behavior of the Cynics, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (London, 1925), book 6. Hicks is a bit prudish in his translation. If you suspect something worse than what he says, you're probably right. For an overview of ancient Cynicism, see 'Cynics' qv Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. The character of Ataktos' mother is inspired from the famous female Cynic philosopher, Hipparchia.

[2] 'Cynic' literally means 'of the dog'.

I shouldn't trouble you with my mother. She's clearly mad. Let's leave her out of this and simply tell me whose advice I should listen to, my father's or my grandfather's.

Z: Would it surprise you, Ataktos, if I told you that your mother is less mad than the rest of your family? When I first came to Athens from Citium, I studied philosophy with Crates, who was also a Cynic. Later I studied in Plato's Academy. Neither the Cynics nor the Platonists are entirely correct, but they have some valuable insights.

Let's consider what your mother said about health. She says that it is indifferent and not a good thing at all. Why do you suppose she says that?

A: I don't know. Perhaps because it isn't always good.

Z: Under what circumstances would health not be a good thing?

A: Well, suppose that a king ordered you to do something terrible. If you were sick and couldn't get out of bed, you wouldn't have to do this terrible deed. But if you were healthy, you'd either have to do it or else suffer the consequences.

Z: Splendid! This shows that there are times when you would be better off not being healthy. But what is good is not like that at all. If something is *really* good then you're *always* better off with it than without it. Surely that is just part of what we mean by 'good'. As we see it, benefiting the person who has it stands to being a good thing just as heating something stands to being hot. What is genuinely good *inevitably* benefits, just as what is hot inevitably heats. Now, can you think of anything which is unconditionally good in this way?

A: Ah, I see! This is why mother's Cynic friends say that only virtue is good. It's never better to be stupid than wise or cowardly than brave. I suppose that a coward might *think* that it's better to be cowardly and run away but that's only because he thinks that it's good to be alive, no matter what. But *I* don't think that just being alive is always good no matter what. In fact, I'd rather be dead than be like Agrippa's father. He's so senile he doesn't even know his own family!

Z: Yes, this is the insight that the Cynics have that is correct. Strictly speaking, things like health or even life itself are not good, much less things like wealth. It also shows that your mother is far wiser in these matters than your grandfather and his friends in Aristotle's school. They think that happiness consists in the exercise of practical and intellectual virtues, correct?

A: Yes, that's what he's always saying. Frankly I'm getting a bit tired of it.

Z: And what are some of these practical virtues according to your grandfather?

A: Well, there are a lot of them, but he's particularly keen on justice as well as magnificence.

Z: What does he say about these?

A: Magnificence is the ability to give just the right amount of money to charities and things. Oh, and buying your friends presents which are neither cheap nor so outrageously expensive that people think you've got no sense. So, the virtue of magnificence is a state of character which is concerned with choices about the distribution of money. The right choice is the one that hits the mean between two extremes, tasteless vulgarity on the one hand, and being cheap on the other. Getting this right involves acquiring the ability to spot the right level of giving, that is, doing what a person with practical wisdom would do in that circumstance. Special justice—not the sense in which being just is more or less equivalent to the whole of virtue, but justice as a virtue distinct from the others—is about proportional equality in the distribution of things which are good and bad. It includes justice—

Z: —Yeah, yeah, enough already! Your grandfather certainly has seen to your education very thoroughly. I don't really care to hear a complete recitation of book five of Aristotle's *Ethics*. This will be enough to make my point. Aristotle and your grandfather say that happiness consists in the life of rational activity in accordance with virtue, yes?

A: Yes Zeno. Both practical and theoretical virtue.

Z: Let's confine ourselves to practical virtue for the moment. Tell me, boy, can you exercise the virtue of magnificence without large sums of money with which to give the gift which strikes the mean between tasteless vulgarity and stinginess?

A: No Zeno. I suppose you can't. This is why Aristotle says that the happy life includes a minimum of things like money and good family and things like that.[3] You need these things in order to exercise at least some of the virtues.

Z: Now, are things like money inevitably a benefit to the person who has them?

A: No, we've agreed that it is not.

Z: So, by making money a constituent or part of happiness, Aristotle has made something that is not genuinely good an essential part of the good life, hasn't he?

A: Well, yes Zeno, I suppose he has now that you put it that way.

Z: Furthermore, couldn't there be conflicts between these two constituent elements in happiness? I mean, couldn't the acquisition of sufficient funds to exercise one's magnificence be at odds with what the virtue of justice or truthfulness requires?[4]

A: Yes it's easy to imagine situations like that.

Z: So hasn't Aristotle made the goal of living—this collection which includes both the exercise of the virtues as well as some money and some friends and so on—an unstable and potentially internally inconsistent goal?

A: Well, he might say that the contribution that the exercise of the virtues makes to one's happiness is so much greater than the contribution that money makes that there couldn't ever really be any conflict.

Z: He could indeed say that. [Pauses and looks intently at Ataktos] Can you think of any *reason* why that might really be the way that it is? Sure – it would save his position from this objection. But is it *true*?

A: I'm not sure what to think about this, Zeno.

Z: Well, leave that for a moment. Here's another point. What about virtues which don't obviously involve money or influence, like justice? Aristotle says that happiness consists in a life in which you exercise the virtues. But it seems clear that he thinks of this in terms of doing virtuous actions. Suppose you think that someone deserves to pay a penalty for a crime and you are in the jury. You act to distribute what you think proportional equality – that is, justice – requires and vote to convict him. But suppose that his accuser has misled the jury. In fact, the man is innocent. Have you achieved what you set out to achieve? A just action?

A: No Zeno, but it's hardly your fault. Aristotle would say that you acted from ignorance of the specific facts of the case and that means that what you did was involuntary.[5]

Z: Yes, I agree. It is not Aristotle's view that you have done something vicious, but he can hardly say that you achieved any part of the goal of life. This, you will recall, is the exercise of the virtues and by that I take him to mean the actual *achievement* of virtuous actions. Don't you think that's what he means?[6]

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3 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a31–b8.

4 Epictetus, a Roman Stoic, makes this sort of criticism in *Discourses* I.22, 13–14.

5 *Nic. Ethics*, bk 3, chapter 1.

6 In *Nic. Ethics* 1111b26–30 and 1112b11–16 Aristotle treats the goal of crafts as the achievement of the result, not simply the competent exercise of the craft. If he would be willing to say the same thing about the goal of the exercise of virtue, then he would seem to fall prey to the criticism Zeno offers here. For a complex but thorough discussion of Stoic criticisms of Aristotelian ethics, see T. Irwin, 'Stoic and Aristotelian Conceptions of Happiness' in *The Norms of Nature*, M. Schofield and G. Striker (eds) (Cambridge, 1986), 205–44.

A: I'm not sure. You've certainly given me a lot to think about. If I may just go over it one more time to be sure I understand, you think that Aristotle makes at least two mistakes. First he thinks that external goods, or so-called goods, are part of happiness alongside the possession and exercise of the virtues.

Z: Yes, that's exactly right. Maybe you should hang around the Painted Porch more often young man. You're pretty sharp.

A: Second, you think that there's something wrong with the idea that virtuous action actually requires that, say, the people that you mean to treat justly actually get what they really deserve.

Z: Excellent. And the unifying theme in both these criticisms is that nothing which is relevant to your happiness fails to be under your control. Whether one has money is not something that is always up to you. Nor is it always up to you whether you achieve a just distribution of goods among other people. Your attempt to do what is just may misfire through no fault of your own. Recall when I asked you what things are always good and you said that it is always better to be brave than cowardly, wise than stupid and so on. These things *are* up to you, aren't they?

A: Well, if you mean by 'being brave' 'doing what you can in order to achieve the action which is really brave', then I agree.

Z: This is a good first approximation of our view.

A: So, are you saying that virtue alone is the good? This is all that one needs for happiness, so that moneyand health—these things are all matters of indifference? This is just what my mother has been telling me, but she's clearly mad! She's living in the streets like some kind of animal!

Z: Your mother is right when she says that virtue and virtue alone is the good. Having this is both necessary and sufficient for happiness. She is mistaken, however, if she thinks that health and a place to live are *absolutely* indifferent. Let's pursue this discussion further by talking a bit about your father and the Epicureans. He says that pleasure or the absence of pain is the good, right?

A: Yes. He says that the limit of pain is the absence of physical pain and mental anxiety. Positive pleasures, like gourmet meals, vary but do not increase the condition of static pleasure.

Z: What argument does he provide for the identification of the good with pleasure?

A: (grinning broadly) One thing he says is that children and animals, who haven't had their natural good sense messed up by hearing you Stoics, always pursue pleasure.

Z: (rolling his eyes) Yes, that is just what his ilk would say. In some sense, you know, we agree with him. Since happiness cannot be a condition that is at odds with our natures, what children and animals uncorrupted by false ideas pursue *is* good evidence for what is really *worth* pursuing. But he is wrong to think that these innocents pursue pleasure. He simply hasn't looked at nature closely enough. Consider the pains that animals endure to mate and raise their young. Does he really think that the fish who fight their way upstream to get to their spawning grounds, foregoing food for weeks, are really pursuing pleasure? Or the tortoise on his back. At least at first, he can't be in pain. Why, if he were pursuing pleasure and he was turned over in a sunny spot after having just completed a full turtle meal, I suppose that he would just sit there and enjoy himself until he felt the need to get some pleasure from some other source, wouldn't he? But that's not what he does, is it?

A: No, as soon as he's turned over, he struggles and struggles to get himself right side up again. It does look like an awful lot of work.

Z: The conclusion that we Stoics draw from this is that an animal's first instinct is not toward pleasure, but toward the things which will preserve it in its natural condition. We call such things 'the primary things according to nature'. Animals and plants instinctively understand what sorts of things preserve their particular constitutions and what things don't. Otherwise our turtle would never bury himself in the mud where there is no food or no warmth at the onset of winter. The primary things according to nature

are appropriate to us and the relation between these things and ourselves we call 'appropriation'.[7] The Epicureans are simply wrong: by nature, all living things pursue what is appropriate to them and not simply pleasure.

Recall that I said we Stoics agree with your mother and the Cynics about what is good. Only virtue is *good* and only it should be *chosen*. However, you don't see me living in the streets like your mum and her barmy Cynic friends. They have mistakenly supposed that there is nothing between what is good and what is completely indifferent. The things according to nature have *value* and ought to be *selected*. We think of the relationship between what is good and what has value a bit like the relationship between the king and his court. Only the king is royal. He is above all others. But even though the members of the court are not royal, they are nonetheless not common either. So too, we say that only the good ought to be chosen, since this itself is necessary and sufficient for happiness, but what has value may reasonably be selected over the alternatives. There is actually a three-fold distinction. There is what is good—that's virtue—and what is bad—that's vice. On the other hand, there are the things according to nature which are appropriate to us and which it is rational to prefer. These are things like good health. We say that such things have value and ought to be preferred. Their opposites, like illness, are 'dispreferred'. On the third hand, so to speak, there are the things which really are matters of indifference, like whether one has an odd or even number of hairs on one's head.

A: This seems to me a very sensible approach Zeno. I said earlier that I could imagine situations in which health or wealth wouldn't be good—if, for instance, I used my wealth to feed a habit that was actually very bad for me. Still, it does seem rational to prefer being healthy and wealthy to their alternatives – at least unless you realise that you are in one of those unusual situations where these things aren't really in your interest. Still, it strikes me as odd that you say that it is rational to prefer these things, but that they aren't really good and that only virtue is good and makes the person who has it happy. What do you Stoics think virtue and happiness really are?

Z: Let me tell you some more about the relationship between virtue and the things according to nature. You and I agree that things like good health, a warm, dry place to live and so on are appropriate to us. That is, our natures are such that these things are fitting for us. Because God has seen to it that the world is rational and good throughout, we select these things automatically from an early age.

A: This is the first thing that you've said about God, Zeno. How did he get into this?

Z: (speaking softly) Here boy, let me show you God. Look. (sweeps his arm across the Agora and the Parthenon) We Stoics say that God is a material breath or spirit (*pneuma*) which interpenetrates the whole of creation. God is the mind of the world and this is his body. You and I are parts of God, just as your hands are parts of your body. The story (*logos*) of what God does some call 'fate' or 'Nature'. We say that God acts out the same history of the world in cycles, with intervals in between in which everything is consumed in fire.

A: (speaking softly) You're a nice guy, Zeno, but you're a complete nutter. (speaking more loudly) What the hell do you mean saying I'm god! That's irreligious! If my sainted mother knew that I was talking to someone who ...

Z: Shhh. Shhhhh. Not everyone is ready for such subtle philosophy. This is part of the reason that we don't just tell people what happiness is. Our philosophy is completely integrated. You can't *really* grasp what we say about virtue and happiness unless you understand what we say about the nature of the world and human beings.[8]

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[7] The Greek term translated as 'appropriate' is *oikeion*. One standard sense of this word 'suitable' or 'fitting', but it also carries the connotation of something which stands in a natural relation of affection to me. Thus, one's blood relatives are (or at least ought to be) *oikeioi*.

[8] The extent to which the Stoics' views in moral philosophy depends upon their metaphysics is a matter of contention among scholars of ancient philosophy. For the view that Stoic moral philosophy is largely independent of their view about god and the world, see Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993). For a different view, see John Cooper, *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton University Press, 1999) chapter 20.

A: Look Zeno, I don't really have time to sign on for the long course. I just need to come up with some answers about what I need for happiness fast—before I get home and walk into another scene of philosophical-cum-domestical violence! Just give me the short version, eh?

Z: Ok, I'll try, but you're clever enough that you really ought to come and hang out with us in the Stoa. Anyway, you'll at least accept that the world is ordered in a rational way. That's why it is that we can understand it in the first place, right?

A: Yes, I accept that. I might even accept that this is god's doing. Go on.

Z: Well, as we grow older, we discover other things that are appropriate to us. We start with certain basic things, like nourishing food and a warm place to live. Non-rational animals never get beyond this point. They live their lives just by seeking the things that are appropriate to their natures. We say that whenever any living thing selects something appropriate to its nature it has performed what we call a proper function (*kathêkon*). So, when our turtle buries himself in the mud at the beginning of winter, he performs a proper function. We differ from the turtle in being able to reflect philosophically on the nature of proper functions.

A: This too sounds reasonable.

Z: Yes, it *is* reasonable, because human beings are by nature reasonable creatures. That is to say, rationality is one of the things appropriate to us, just like proper food and a warm, dry place to sleep. We say this has two consequences. First, it is appropriate to my nature to seek the perfection of my own rationality. We'll see in a moment what this comes to. Second, other human beings, insofar as they are rational, are appropriate to me.[9] Given that this is so, it may well be that it is rational to select the state of affairs in which *you* have a warm, dry place to live rather than to select such a dwelling for *myself*. After all, both you as a rational being and a suitable dwelling are things that are appropriate or akin to me. The particular circumstances will determine which course of action is the better one. Thus, preferring the things that nature teaches us to prefer is not at odds with concern for others. One simply has to pay attention when nature teaches the advanced lessons, and not stop listening to nature when we have learned tthat the things that satisfy our basic needs are appropriate to us.

Given what I have said, do you agree that a human being may perform a proper function in selecting a warm place to live or in acting so as to secure such a dwelling for other human beings? Recall what we meant by 'proper function'.

A: Yes Zeno. I see why you think both of these are proper functions. In performing a 'proper function' you select something that – though it is not necessarily good – accords with your nature as a rational being.

Z: Now, consider the *pattern* of reasoning about what one ought to select that regularly results in the performance of proper functions. This would be a pattern of reasoning which reflects on what things are appropriate to us and to the nature of the world around us. We Stoics call reasoning in this way *homologia* or agreement with nature. It consists in the rational selection of the things according to nature. The first sense in which we mean this should now be clear to you. When you engage in this pattern of reasoning, there is agreement between your *individual nature* and that of the world around you. You select things that are appropriate to you. Of course you must bear in mind that one of the things appropriate to you may be that other rational creatures—themselves things that are also appropriate to you—get things which are appropriate to them.

A: Ok, suppose that I have acquired the capacity for reasoning well about what is and is not appropriate. If I regularly activate that capacity for reasoning well about such matters, then I'll generally *get* the things which are appropriate to me and this is what you fellows call happiness, right?

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[9] Remember the connotation that *oikeion* carries: other human beings are 'akin' to me.

Z: Wrong! You've forgotten that preferred things are not good. They have a kind of relative value, but they aren't good. For the first time, however, we may now glimpse what really is good. That condition of your soul which permits consistent and stable rational selection and which brings about agreement with nature is virtue. You might mistakenly think that there are two things that we set up as the goal of life or happiness: the rational selection of the things according to nature and the possession of those things. This is false. The things according to nature are a bit like an acquaintance who introduces you to someone who then becomes your dearest friend. The pursuit of these things which are appropriate to your nature introduces you to the *condition of your soul* that gives rise to that pattern of selection or way of choosing—the perfection of rationality. You then come to realise that it is the consistency and rationality *in the act of choosing*, and not the *attainment* of the things which are so chosen that is your highest good.

A: What you say is very odd Zeno. Look, suppose life is a bit like a game. There's an object to the game and we call this happiness. If life were like an archery competition, by your lights the good archer shouldn't worry about actually hitting the target because he'll reckon that the object of the game is to have good form regardless of whether one hits the bullseye. That's what your consistent and stable pattern of rational selection is like.

Z: The comparison is quite apt. This is a consequence that we both acknowledge and enthusiastically accept. Remember our criticisms of the Aristotelian conception of happiness. He seems to think that happiness requires some external things, like money with which to be magnificent or at least opportunities for doing brave things. We say that whether you are happy or not is completely up to you. Now, if happiness required the actual *attainment* of the things according to nature, this would not be so. This is so even in our interactions with one another. I suggested that Aristotle doesn't think that you have what is genuinely good unless your attempt to exercise a practical virtue like justice results in people getting their just desserts. (We can argue about whether he would really say that later, but let's suppose this is right for the moment.) We Stoics say that so long as you have done everything within your power to bring it about that people get their just deserts, you have performed a right action. This term, 'right action' (*katorthôma*), is another of our technical terms. It means a proper function that results from a virtuous condition of one's soul. That's the condition that gives rise to the consistent and stable pattern of rational selection among the things according to nature. The long and the short of it is that we, but perhaps not Aristotle, think that *the right choices made from the right sort of character is sufficient for happiness*. The choices may misfire and things may not turn out how you planned, but that's nothing to do with you or your happiness.

A: There is certainly something very attractive about the idea that our happiness is entirely up to us. If this were true, we would certainly be as self-sufficient as the gods. I wonder, however, whether it is so. Don't you believe that really, really rotten luck can spoil your life? For instance, you might be like poor Priam of Troy – an otherwise good man who sees his son killed and his city sacked. Certainly it would be rational for us to fear such a thoroughly unlucky turn of events.

Z: No, we say even this cannot spoil a person's happiness. In fact, were Priam really virtuous, he would actively will that these things should happen.

A: (incredulously) I beg your pardon?!

Z: Let me return to what I was saying before about god. Hear me out before you scoff. We say that the world is governed by a rational principle. This principle we call god. You agreed before that what is rational is appropriate or akin to us. If events in the world are determined by such a rational principle, then these events are appropriate to us. After all, we are rational and the order of things that happens in the world is also rational. So we are related, like brothers.

Now, it would take a very wise man indeed to see that the sack of Troy and the death of Hector were inevitable parts of the working out of the rational world order. I said above that happiness consists in living in agreement with nature. Had you not been so averse to our theological views, I might have added that it consists in living in agreement with Nature. By 'Nature' with a capital N, I mean, the rational world order. By 'living in accordance with Nature' I mean recognising the rational necessity of

all that does happen and embracing it gladly. Thus, the wise and virtuous person who saw that the sack of his city and the death of his son was part of God's plan would will it. In doing so, he would be living in agreement with Nature.

As far as fearing what Nature might bring, we Stoics say that fear is simply the result of a false judgement. If you fear that what happened to Priam might happen to you, you have simply made a mistake. It is only rational to fear what is genuinely bad. Only vice is genuinely bad and whether you are vicious is entirely up to you. The wise and virtuous person lives a life completely free from such emotions as fear, anger and jealousy. Through his understanding of Nature he may see that the working out of God's plan for the world requires his death at this time and place. Far from fearing it, he wills it to happen since this plan is rational and what is rational is what is appropriate to a creature with his nature.

A: Hmm. What you say is remarkably consistent with your other views. You people are systematic if nothing else. I must admit that I'm awfully attracted by the idea that my happiness is entirely up to me. But when I think about what you mean by 'happiness' I wonder if this is what it was that I was really seeking in the first place. It seems to me that it will amount to going through life trying to be rational in picking and choosing among the things that are suited to my nature. I must admit that I like the idea that other people and their well-being are suited to my nature as well as the obvious basic needs like food and shelter. Part of what bothers me about Father's Epicurean ideas is that treating others justly winds up being simply a good long-term investment in my own pleasure. Surely our duties to others are a bit more than that. Or don't you think so? On the view you Stoics hold, it seems that being rational may involve looking out for other people and helping them, even if I can't expect security and pleasure as a long-term return on that investment.

Z: We do think so. The Epicureans reduce the virtues to mere instruments for the attainment of pleasure. This is unworthy and violates our common-sense assumptions about the value of virtuous choices. You should hardly think my bravery was genuine if you knew I merely thought that saving you from the Persians was the best way of securing pleasure for myself in the long run.

A: Still, it is quite a stretch to think that if I die a horrible, painful death that this too, insofar as it is part of the rational world order, is suited to my nature. It seems stranger still to think that I would actively will this to happen if I were genuinely wise and virtuous.

Z: Then you fail to see that your nature, at its best, is identical with god's. Both of you are rational.

A: That may be Zeno, but I'm also a rational being who has to go home and face a household full of strife. I'll have to think a bit more about all that you've said. It sounds like a fine philosophy for some sort of creature, I just wonder if it is for human beings.