

# *Beyond the Soul and Virtue: Benefit in Stoic Ethics*

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## **Abstract**

Readers of Stoic ethics may find ‘benefit’ (*ōpheleia*) an essential but enigmatic concept. It directly connects to some critical terms of Stoic ethics, such as ‘good’ and ‘virtue,’ but there is no extant discussion of a definition. Beyond the superficial connections, what makes ‘benefit’ beneficial? Why is benefit a good thing? I argue that these essential questions remain unanswerable for a good reason: Stobaeus committed to a specious claim about benefit in his Anthology, which has misguided later commentaries. Either the Stoics themselves made a stronger contrast between sages and inferior people at the cost of coherence, or Stobaeus simply mischaracterized the Stoics’ ideas in his descriptions. This paper aims to clarify Stobaeus’s inaccurate description and reconstruct a coherent and comprehensible interpretation of benefit in the Stoic spirit, with the help of Stoic cosmology. To benefit is to further nature’s agreement. Given the available evidence, I argue that Stoics seem to, or should, be committed to my interpretation. This paper is structured as follows. Section 1 offers a quick background of Stoic ethics. Section 2 discusses two important characteristics of benefit. Section 3 discusses Stobaeus’s description of benefit and inferior people. Section 4 attempts an interpretation of benefit. Finally, Section 5 discusses Inwood and Gerson’s interpretation and argues that it is inadequate.

## **1. Background: Virtue, Sage, and Appropriate Action**

The Stoic value system divides things into three categories: the good, the bad, and the indifferents. The virtues (*aretē*) are good, including “prudence, justice, courage, moderation, and the rest”.<sup>2</sup> The vices (*kakia*) are bad, including “foolishness,

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<sup>2</sup> Diogenes Laertius, 7.101–3, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 58A.

injustice, and the rest”.<sup>3</sup> The indifferents (*adiaphora*) include everything else, such as “life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, noble birth, and their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, low repute, ignoble birth and the like...”.<sup>4</sup> Though we may often prefer some indifferents over their opposites—e.g., life over death—the preferred indifferents are far less important than virtues.

The Stoics also divide people into two categories. The sages (*sophos*) are virtuous, wise, and happy all at once.<sup>5</sup> Sages are always happy because “happiness consists in virtue since virtue is a soul which has been fashioned to achieve consistency in the whole of life”.<sup>6</sup> In addition, sages possess all virtues. “Menedemus of Eretria eliminated the plurality and the differentiations of the virtues, holding that there is a single one, called by many names; for it is the same thing that is called moderation and courage and justice, like ‘mortal’ and ‘man’”.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, sages never make mistakes, not because they know everything in the world, but because they know when to withhold judgement if a mistake is possible. According to Stobaeus, “They [the Stoics] say that the wise man [a sage] never makes a false supposition, and that he does not assent at all to anything incognitive, owing to his not opining and his being ignorant of nothing”.<sup>8</sup> In brief, the Stoics set the bar to be a sage so high that only few in humanity have ever achieved virtue.

The rest of us are all inferior people (*phaulos*).<sup>9</sup> For the Stoics, if one is not virtuous and wise, then he is vicious, silly, inferior, and base. One cannot be partly virtuous and partly inferior. Diogenes offered an illustration — “a stick must be either straight or crooked, so a man must be either just or unjust, but not either more just or more unjust, and likewise with the other virtues”.<sup>10</sup> Oddly, the Stoics would call the vast majority of humanity inferior and vicious; however, this does not mean that nobody can do anything right. With some help from luck or the advice of sages, we non-sages are still capable of appropriate actions (*kathēkonta*), “which [have] an affinity with arrangements that are according to nature.”<sup>11</sup> Appropriate actions are the best actions in a given circumstance. Even better than appropriate actions are the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> I follow Prof. Richard Bett in using the gender-neutral translations, ‘sages’ and ‘inferior people’, instead of the traditional gendered translations, “wise men” and “base men”. For an argument for the gender-neutral translations, see Bett 2012, p. 531. For an argument against the gender-neutral translations, see Inwood and Gerson, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> Diogenes, 7.89 in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 61A.

<sup>7</sup> Plutarch, “On Moral Virtue”, 440E–441D, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 61B. For an explanation on the inter-entailment of virtues, see Bett 2012, p. 533.

<sup>8</sup> Stobaeus, 2.111,18–112,8, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 41G.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Inferior’ could be considered harsh by the general public, but it appropriately captures the negative connotations of the Greek term *phaulos*. Admittedly, calling almost everyone vicious or inferior is one of the strange things about Stoic ethics.

<sup>10</sup> Diogenes, 7.127, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 61I.

<sup>11</sup> Diogenes, 7.108, in *The Stoic Reader*, 101.108.

right actions (*katorthōmata*), a special kind of appropriate actions done by the sages according to their virtues.

The Stoics take these two theses to be compatible: 1) Inferior people can make progress towards virtue; 2) All inferior people are equally inferior. Plutarch quoted an illustration: “just as in the sea the man an arm’s length from the surface is drowning no less than the one who has sunk five hundred fathoms, so even those who are getting close to virtue are no less in a state of vice than those who are far from it”.<sup>12</sup> Inferior people closer to virtue may perform more appropriate actions, but their soul is in the same inferior state with other inferior people. According to Chrysippus, “The man who progresses to the furthest point performs all proper functions [i.e., appropriate actions] without exception and omits none”.<sup>13</sup> Though inferior people are all equally vicious, one can, in some sense, make progress towards virtue by performing more and more appropriate actions. Furthermore, “virtue is teachable... as is evident from the fact that inferior men become good [i.e., virtuous people]”.<sup>14</sup> Though the Stoics set a high bar for virtue, they are still optimistic that inferior people can become sages.

## 2. Two Characteristics of the Stoic Conception of Benefit

This section aims to locate ‘benefit’ in the Stoic conceptual framework. There are two main characteristics of benefit agreed upon and emphasized by the Stoics. First, benefit is defined by virtue. Diogenes wrote that “to benefit is to change (*kinein*) or maintain (*ischein*) something in accordance with virtue, whereas to harm is to change or maintain something in accordance with vice.”<sup>15</sup> If an action is done per one’s virtue, someone receives some benefit from this action. Moreover, benefit helps define good. Sextus Empiricus wrote that “the Stoics, sticking fast to the common conceptions so to speak, define the good as follows: “Good is benefit or not other than benefit, meaning by ‘benefit’ virtue and virtuous action... For virtue, which is a disposition of the commanding-faculty, and virtuous action, which is an activity in accordance with virtue, are benefit directly.”<sup>16</sup> Benefit is virtue or virtuous action, and it is the only genuinely favourable action. The Stoics emphasized that benefit is related to virtue and virtue alone. Preferred indifferents, such as health and wealth, might serve as means of virtuous actions. For example, a sage can give to charity according to her virtue. However, what really benefits is the sage’s virtuous action, not the money she gave.

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<sup>12</sup> Plutarch, “On Common Conceptions”, 1063A–B, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 61T.

<sup>13</sup> Stobaeus, 5.906,18–907,5, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 59I.

<sup>14</sup> Diogenes, 7.91, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 61K. The Stoic definition of ‘good’ includes virtuous people. See *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 60G.

<sup>15</sup> Diogenes, 7.102, in *The Stoics Reader*, 101.102.

<sup>16</sup> Sextus Empiricus, “Against the professors”, 11.22–6, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 60G.

Second, the Stoics also emphasized that benefit is common (*koinos*). Stobaeus wrote that “all goods are common to the virtuous, and all that is bad to the inferior. Therefore a man who benefits someone also benefits himself, and one who does harm also harms himself. All virtuous men benefit one another ... but the foolish are in the opposite situation.”<sup>17</sup> Benefit is shared by all virtuous people. Thus, a virtuous action does not only benefit an individual or a small group, but every virtuous person simultaneously. I will address two alternative interpretations of Stobaeus’s quote.

One may explain the commonness of benefit as a result of the social practices of the virtuous. Contingently, sages only benefit but never harm each other. If sage Alex benefits sage Bailey today, Bailey will benefit Alex back tomorrow; sages always choose to benefit each other. Although this interpretation captures sages in interaction, it does not explain Stobaeus’s description that: “all virtuous men benefit each other, even though they are not in all cases friends of each other or well disposed [to each other] ... because they do not have a [cognitive] grasp of each other and do not live in the same place.”<sup>18</sup> Sages can benefit each other without even knowing each other. If we interpret common benefit as merely reciprocal, then sages have to pick out specific benefit receivers for each virtuous action, which requires interaction. However, Stobaeus argued that interaction is not required for benefit between sages. Therefore, interpreting common benefit as reciprocal social practices is inadequate.

Another explanation of the commonness of benefit appeals to the structure of souls and actions: if sages benefit someone, they also benefit their own souls. For example, if sage Catherine benefits sage Dive with a virtuous action, she also benefits herself by making her soul more virtuous. Although this interpretation captures the Stoic emphasis on the soul, it leads to a dilemma: nobody can benefit and improve their soul at the same time. Sages can benefit, but they already have perfect souls for they are perfectly virtuous. How can they further improve their soul beyond perfection? Inferior people can make progress, but they neither possess virtue nor can perform virtuous actions. How can they benefit anyone? I will further argue against this interpretation in Section 5.

### 3. A Tension in the Descriptions: Can Inferior People Receive Benefit?

Stobaeus did not think inferior people can receive benefit. He explicitly wrote that “no base man [i.e., an inferior person] either benefits or is benefited.”<sup>19</sup> By definition, inferior people are not virtuous; thus, they cannot benefit because they cannot act

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<sup>17</sup> Stobaeus, 2.101,21–102,3, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 60P.

<sup>18</sup> Stobaeus, “Anthology, 2.11”, in *The Stoics Reader*, 102.11i.

<sup>19</sup> Stobaeus, “Anthology, 2.11’, in *The Stoics Reader*, 102.11d.

per their nonexistent virtue. However, I argue that Stobaeus's commitment that inferior people cannot *be benefited* is mistaken and untenable for three reasons. Once this commitment is corrected, we will be in a position to understand benefit.

### 3.1 A Sage-Inferior-Person Interaction

First, Stobaeus cannot explain a sage-inferior person (hereafter, SIP) interaction. "All virtuous men benefit one another ... but the foolish are in the opposite situation."<sup>20</sup> When two sages interact, they benefit each other; when two inferior people interact, they harm each other. This characterization does delineate a clear contrast between sages and inferior people. However, what happens when a sage interacts with an inferior person? They cannot benefit each other: the inferior person cannot be benefited; they cannot harm each other: the sage cannot be harmed. However, benefit and harm are supposed to be common. How can Stobaeus make sense of a SIP interaction? Is such interaction possible?

One possible response is acknowledging the possibility of such interaction but denying that benefit and harm are reciprocal between sages and inferior people. The sage receives benefit, but the inferior person receives harm. However, this interpretation suggests that it is virtuous for sages to 'take advantage' of the inferior people. If a sage knows their interaction can only harm the inferior, will it still be virtuous for her to interact with the inferior person? Though the sage is benefited, would the Stoics be willing to accept such selfish actions as ethical and virtuous? Harm, like benefit, is not about indifferents but about souls. Therefore, the Stoics cannot simply dismiss this harm as trivial, rendering this response problematic.

The other possible response is to deny the possibility of a SIP interaction. One possible argument is that sages and inferior people cannot interact because sages are rare. If there were no sages alive while Stobaeus was writing, they could not interact with inferior people. Another possible argument is that virtuous people tend to live together and perhaps in one city. In such cases, the separation between sages and inferior people dismisses the theoretical tension within SIP interactions. Neither inferior people are benefited, nor are sages harmed, due to the lack of interaction.

However, I argue that the appeal to the separation between sages and inferior people is not only inadequate to resolve this tension, but also goes against the Stoic spirit. This separation lacks the modal strength to provide a theoretical solution to the tension. It could at most describe what is happening in the world: most inferior people do not know many sages, so they are not often benefited. However, this statistical generality does not suggest that inferior people *cannot* be benefited. Furthermore, this separation conflicts with the Stoic view of the community. Cicero

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<sup>20</sup> Stobaeus, 2.101,21-102,3, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 60P.

wrote that “we are driven by nature to desire to benefit as many people as possible...”.<sup>21</sup> Separating sages and inferior people into two different worlds prevents sages from benefiting as many people as possible. Hierocles argued that one should care about the entire human race with his illustration of concentric circles. He wrote that “the outermost and largest circle, which encompasses all the rest, is that of the whole human race...it is the task of a well tempered man, in his proper treatment of each group, to draw the circles together somehow towards the centre...”.<sup>22</sup> The Stoics teach people to concern themselves with the whole human race, and thus separating sages and inferior people is against the Stoic spirit.

SIP interactions are necessary for Stoicism. If we allow that inferior people can be benefited, sages can interact with inferior people and hence benefit them in accordance with their virtues.

### 3.2 *The Logic of Stobaeus’s Description*

Stobaeus might not have meant to argue that inferior people cannot be benefited, because the supporting sentence does not entail the claim. He wrote that “...no base man [i.e., an inferior person] either benefits or is benefited. For benefiting is <to change> or maintain something in accordance with virtue, and being benefited is to be changed in accordance with virtue”.<sup>23</sup> The conjunctive “for,” suggests that the latter sentence supports the former. However, this support falls short of an entailment. I reconstruct his argument in standard form:

- (P1) *Benefiting* is <to change> or maintain something in accordance with virtue.
- (P2) Inferior people cannot *change or maintain* something in accordance with virtue.
- (C3) Thus, inferior people cannot *benefit*.

This argument is sound because the implicit assumption (P2) is true. Inferior people do not possess virtue; therefore, they cannot act in accordance with virtue. Consider the other argument:

- (P4) *Being benefited* is to be changed in accordance with virtue.
- (P5) Inferior people cannot *be changed* in accordance with virtue.
- (C6) Thus, inferior people cannot *be benefited*.

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<sup>21</sup> Cicero, “On Ends, 3.62-8”, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 57F.

<sup>22</sup> Hierocles, qtd. in Stobaeus 4.671,7–673,11, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 57G.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Please note that “angle brackets < > represent material supplied by the editors [i.e., Inwood and Gerson] of the original Greek and Latin texts to repair a gap in the ancient text caused by damage or omission by scribes in the course of transmission” (“Abbreviations and Conventions”, in *The Stoics Reader*).

This argument is unsound because the implicit assumption (P5) is false. Nothing intrinsically prevents an inferior person from being changed in accordance with virtue. Whether an action is in accordance with virtue depends on the subject instead of the object. If the subject is virtuous, the action is guaranteed to be virtuous. The vice of an object cannot override the subject's virtue.

"To change or maintain" can have different interpretations. A stronger interpretation requires a causal role of the action. For example, a sage gives some advice to an inferior person. If the inferior people would act otherwise without the sage's advice, then the sage changed or maintained something. A weaker interpretation requires an action to change something in the modal strength. In this example, if the inferior people would perform an appropriate action without the sage's advice, but the sage's advice made the appropriate action more likely, then it changed or maintained something. Since the Stoics emphasized the modal strength of one's reasoning behind actions, as evidenced by their distinction between appropriate and right actions, I suggest the weaker interpretation. However, the sage can benefit the inferior people on both interpretations. They just do so slightly less often when we adopt the stronger interpretation.

### 3.3 Clement's Description of God's Benefit

Stobaeus's commitment conflicts with an argument made by another Stoic — Saint Clement of Alexandria — that God benefits everyone. He argued that "God is agreed to be good; therefore god benefits. But the good in so far as it is good does nothing but benefit; therefore god benefits everything... therefore god cares for and attends to man".<sup>24</sup> God benefits everyone, virtuous and inferior alike. If benefit is only available among the virtuous, how can God benefit the inferior people?

One possible response is that God's benefit and humans' benefit are two different notions. Humans can only benefit sages, but gods can benefit everyone. However, this is incorrect because the distinction conflicts with the idea that god(s) and virtuous humans benefit each other equally. Plutarch wrote that "according to Chrysippus... Zeus does not surpass Dion [i.e., a random name of a sage] in virtue, and Zeus and Dion are benefited equally by each other when one meets with a motion of the other since they are [both] wise".<sup>25</sup> God(s) and virtuous humans benefit each other equally because they do not differ in virtue. Thus, there is only one kind of benefit in a god-sage interaction. Furthermore, the direct connection between virtue and gods' benefit suggests that there is only one concept of benefit. The Stoics were not equivocating two notions of benefit.

<sup>24</sup> Clement, "The Teacher", 1.8.63.1–2, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 601.

<sup>25</sup> Plutarch, "On Common Conceptions", 1076A, in *The Stoics Reader*, 32.

A worry is that Saint Clement, a Christian theologian, could have appropriated the Stoic term for his own purpose. Stoics could have argued that inferior people could not receive benefit, which is against the Christian spirit that God benefits everyone. Thus, Clement altered the meaning of benefit slightly to be compatible with Christian ideas. Therefore, we should not regard Clement's description as evidence of this particular interpretation of Stoic ideas. I think that we should interpret Clement's argument with caution, possibly as "applied Stoicism," because of his Christian influence. However, we should also not completely disregard this evidence, because Clement's argument's conceptual relation between 'good' and 'benefit' matches the one in other Stoics' descriptions. As I quoted before, Clement argued that "God is agreed to be good; therefore God benefits".<sup>26</sup> There is a direct connection between the concepts of good and benefit, which matches the Stoic definition of good as "benefit or not other than benefit".<sup>27</sup> This agreement suggests that relations between concepts in Clement's description are isomorphic to relations between concepts in descriptions by other Stoics: if Clement appropriated the Stoic concept of benefit, he must also have appropriated good and virtue. Thus, it still supports that inferior people could be benefited. When these two Stoics disagree, I do not argue that Clement is a more trustworthy source than Stobaeus. However, the existence of Clement's passage offers another piece of evidence that Stobaeus's commitment could have been a mistake.

In brief, I argue that allowing that inferior people could be benefited offers a more consistent picture of Stoicism. Although Stobaeus explicitly wrote that inferior people could not be benefited, he either simply mischaracterized the Stoics' ideas or the Stoics themselves made a stronger contrast between sages and inferior people at the cost of coherence. I argue that inferior people could be benefited for three reasons. First, the evidence does not entail the claim that they cannot be. Second, Stobaeus cannot explain a SIP interaction. Third, Stobaeus is in conflict with Clement. From the last two sections, I have gathered three features of benefit from the Stoics' descriptions: (1) benefit is about virtue rather than indifferents; (2) benefit is common; (3) inferior people and sages alike can receive benefit. In the next section, I propose an interpretation in accordance with the above three descriptions and explain why benefit is beneficial.

#### **4. Understanding Benefit: Bridging Stoic Ethics and Cosmology**

I argue that benefit furthers the agreement of nature. A virtuous action brings nature into a state of agreement more than its alternatives could. Conversely, an inferior action takes away others' opportunity to perform a virtuous action, advancing nature's agreement less than its virtuous alternative could. Specifically, virtuous

<sup>26</sup> Clement, "The Teacher", 1.8.63.1–2, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 60I.

<sup>27</sup> Sextus Empiricus, "Against the professors", 11.22–6, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 60G.



actions make people agree in everyday activities. Generally, virtuous actions help inferior people progress towards virtue, thus furthering the universe's agreement towards the ultimate conflagration.<sup>28</sup> I will first explain my interpretation, then support it with two arguments.

The ultimate agreement of nature consists in everything being virtuous. The Stoics believed that nature would return periodically into a state of virtuous fire. Plutarch wrote that "Whenever they [the Stoics] subject the world to conflagration, no evil at all remains, but the whole is then prudent and wise".<sup>29</sup> At that time, everything agrees because everything is virtuous. However, this is not the case at the time this paper is being written: at least part of the universe, namely the author himself, is an inferior person who lacks virtues. With this difference, I propose a way to explain the degree and progress of nature's agreement, similar to how the Stoics explained an individual's progress towards virtue. Nature is said to be in more agreement, or closer to the state of virtuous fire, if more members, such as individual human beings, are virtuous.

This cosmological agreement of nature is compatible with Stoicism's ethical end (*telos*)—living in agreement with nature (*homologoumenōs tēi phusei zēn*). Diogenes summarized Chrysippus's explanation, "living in agreement with nature comes to be the end, which is in accordance with the nature of *oneself* and that of *the whole*, engaging in no activity wont to be forbidden by the universal law, which is the right reason pervading everything and identical to Zeus, who is this director of the administration of existing things".<sup>30</sup> Our ethical goal is to live according to nature's plan. If we can do so and achieve virtue, we further nature's agreement by making more things virtuous. The benefit of virtuous actions can further be understood in these terms.

The specific agreement of nature can manifest itself as concord among people. I wish to emphasize that "[sages] are in agreement about matters concerned with life".<sup>31</sup> Virtuous actions are disjunctive when conflicts shall be avoided but concerted when cooperation is preferred. Here is an illustration: Three different jobs (farmer, blacksmith, and fisherman) are available for three sages (Eric, Frank, and Grace). According to their nature, each sage should have a best option, and their options shall not conflict. Since they are virtuous and wise, it will be easy for the sages to sort out each other's talents and preferences. Therefore, they act in agreement with nature's ideal plan. The order of action does not matter; when nature plans for Eric to be a farmer, this plan is commonly known to the group. Frank and Grace will not

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<sup>28</sup> The Stoics believe that our world will eventually return to a state of virtuous and intelligent designing fire. See Section 3 "Physical Theory" of SEP entry *Stoicism* and Chapter 52 "Everlasting Recurrence" of *The Hellenistic Philosophers*.

<sup>29</sup> Plutarch, "On Common Conceptions", 1067A, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 43N.

<sup>30</sup> Diogenes, 7.87–9, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 63C.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

choose to be a farmer even if they can choose before Eric. No matter what happens, sages agree with each other, therefore they are in the best agreement with nature. Thus, sages benefit each other by actualizing nature's best plan.

Similarly, nature not being in agreement can manifest itself as discord among people. Suppose the same task is assigned to three inferior people: Harry, Isabella, and John. Nature's ideal plan is inaccessible to all participants. Suppose Harry chooses first, and if he was a sage, Harry should choose to be a fisherman. However, due to his ignorance, Harry only has a one-in-three chance to pick the appropriate action. Thus, it is quite likely that Harry chooses either Isabella's or John's best option. The inferior people cannot manifest nature's ideal plan without significant luck. They can then become hostile: e.g., Isabella and John both want to be the blacksmith, so they fight for it. However, the sages will never be in such a situation. Inferior people harm each other by not furthering nature's agreement, while also making nature agree less when the inferior action is not an appropriate action. The illustration only considers three inferior people, so some luck seems tolerable; however, many more agents are involved in each real-world action. Therefore, it is extremely hard for inferior people not to harm other people.

However, the agreement of nature is more abstract than in my illustrations; benefit and harm have a deeper meaning than a superficial agreement. What ultimately benefits everyone is the ideal world where everyone is virtuous, and nature is not in complete agreement until then.<sup>32</sup> When more people are virtuous, nature agrees better. Furthering nature's agreement has a twofold meaning. Specifically, a sage actualizes nature's ideal plan at any given moment; generally, a sage helps people progress in their virtue, ultimately bringing nature into a state of agreement. "Furthermore we are driven by nature to desire to benefit as many people as possible, and especially by giving instruction and handing on the principles of prudence".<sup>33</sup> Cicero's quote supports the more abstract notion of nature's agreement. Sages wish to benefit people with the progress of their souls, which ultimately makes nature in total agreement.

With virtue, a sage's action is guaranteed to agree with nature. If an inferior person acts in accordance with her vices, then very likely, nature's ideal plan is "disrupted." The inferior person harms others with mismatches and conflicts. One potential worry is that given the Stoic providentialist view of the universe, how can an action benefit more? If non-virtuous actions are also part of nature's plan, how can they still harm? Would not all actions carry out nature's ideal plan, and thus, are virtuous?

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<sup>32</sup> Stoics also believed that we are already in the best possible world with God's providence. (See Bett 2009, vol. 6, 392.) Please note that this belief is compatible with nature's incompleteness, which is an *internal* comparison among temporal stages within our world. However, the Stoic best possible world belief concerns an *external* comparison with other possible worlds.

<sup>33</sup> Cicero, "On Ends", 3.62-8, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 57F.

According to Long and Sedley, “On the Stoic view determinism and moral responsibility are not merely compatible, they actually presuppose each other”.<sup>34</sup> Thus, I assume that human responsibility can be preserved, though it is possible that the Stoics themselves were not consistent. With a potential solution to resolve the tension between human responsibility and fate, a solution for the tension between benefit and fate should be similar. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, I wish to bracket the tension between benefit and determinism.

Since there is no extant definition of benefit in the primary sources, I cannot back my interpretation with direct evidence. I propose my interpretation with two arguments. First, the textual position suggests that benefit and concord are related. Second, interpreting benefit with nature’s agreement satisfies the three characteristics discussed in Sections 2 and 3. I do not argue that my interpretation is the only possibility. It is possible to have another consistent interpretation that can satisfy all three characteristics of benefit. In that case, I do not have any argument for my interpretation beyond the textual position of Stobaeus’s discussion of concord. However, no such interpretation yet exists in a well-known and acknowledged format, and the logical space for benefit in the Stoic conceptual framework is not very broad given the three confining characteristics. Therefore, I propose my interpretation as a pioneering approach for the topic.

First, the textual position suggests that benefit and concord are related concepts. While I do not argue they are identical, concord and benefit also share a tight connection similar to the relations among good, virtue, and benefit. Stobaeus wrote that:

[The Stoics] say that all good things belong <in common> to the virtuous, in that he who benefits one of his neighbors also benefits himself. Concord (*homonoia*) is a knowledge of common goods, and that is why all virtuous men are in concord with each other, because they are in agreement about matters concerned with life. The base [i.e., inferior] are enemies and do harm to each other and are hostile, because they are in discord (*diaphōnein*) with each other.<sup>35</sup>

Stobaeus mentioned concord and discord between the discussions of benefits and harms. The structure suggests that the concept of concord and discord is connected to benefit and harm.

In addition, my interpretation satisfies all three characteristics of benefit. 1) This account of benefit is related to virtue because only sages know for sure how to act in agreement with nature. Right action is guaranteed to agree with nature. Indifferents

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<sup>34</sup> Long and Sedley 1987, Commentary on Ch. 62.

<sup>35</sup> Stobaeus, “Anthology”, 2.11, in *The Stoics Reader*, 102.11b.

cannot intrinsically benefit because indifferents cannot further nature's agreement. Sometimes preferred indifferents can be selected according to nature's plan, but at other times they do not. 2) Benefit and harm are common to everyone because there is only one agreement of nature: advancing or disrupting its agreement affects everyone simultaneously. Two sages can benefit without knowing each other because they advance the agreement of nature, which is shared by the other. 3) Sages and inferior people alike can be benefited because we share the same nature. In the next section, I will compare and contrast my interpretation with an alternative interpretation of benefit.

### 5. An Alternative Interpretation and Its Inadequacy

In the Glossary of the Stoics Reader, Inwood and Gerson wrote that "in Stoicism, benefit is narrowly defined in terms of the attainment or preservation of a virtuous state of one's soul".<sup>36</sup> This interpretation follows Stobaeus's description that inferior people cannot be benefited since they do not have a virtuous state of soul to be attained or preserved. I have argued against this description in Section 3, showing Inwood and Gerson's interpretation is at least incomplete in that respect. In addition, although they point out a crucial feature of benefit—it is narrowly about virtue and souls, instead of the everyday "benefit" of indifferents—their definition is inadequate because it cannot distinguish virtuous actions from the inferior ones.

Stoics did not only use benefit as a noun (*ōpheleia*) but also as a verb (*ōphelein*). Therefore, benefit is a relation between people. Benefit is common: when one benefits, each receiver has to be benefited. As a noun, benefit can be understood as the attainment or preservation of virtue. One receives benefit if one's virtue is attained or preserved. As a verb, it is more obscure. Can a person preserve the virtuous state of another person's soul? I argue that one cannot. Imagine two sages, Kiely and Laiken. Kiely performs a virtuous action, e.g., walking around prudently, which should benefit all sages, including Laiken.<sup>37</sup> According to Inwood and Gerson's definition, Kiely helps Laiken either attain or preserve her virtue. Trivially, Kiely cannot help Laiken attain virtue because Laiken was presupposed to be virtuous. Therefore, Kiely must help Laiken preserve her virtue. I argue this is impossible for two reasons. First, preservation assumes that virtues can be lost; if not, all actions preserve virtue, making virtue preservation a meaningless tautology. This assumption is contentious yet still possible. According to Diogenes, "Chrysippus holds that virtue can be lost, on account of intoxication or depression,

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<sup>36</sup> Inwood and Gerson 2008, p. 206.

<sup>37</sup> I used walking prudently as an example for the ease of illustration. If a sage does an action, it is guaranteed to be a right action. In addition, walking is one of the classical illustrations in the Stoic discussions. For an example, see Stobaeus, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 59M.

but Cleanthes takes it to be irremovable owing to secure cognitions.”<sup>38</sup> Though there is no extant elaboration on what does “intoxication or depression” mean, we could reasonably assume that most actions done by inferior people cannot intoxicate or depress a sage; otherwise, sages have quite volatile souls, which is against the Stoic spirit that virtues come with fixity.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, inferior actions cannot often endanger the virtuous state of a sage’s soul.

Second, can Kiely’s action preserve Laiken’s virtue any more than a random inferior action? Imagine a counterfactual world in which an inferior person, Max, was walking imprudently. Compared to the actual world, the state of Laiken’s soul is not affected at all: whether their walk is prudent or not, Laiken can choose the appropriate action (or the right action since she is a sage), i.e., the best available walking route, for herself. Once a sage achieves virtue, she cannot easily lose the virtue for its fixity. To contrast, consider an inferior person who performs many appropriate actions, but does not have virtues yet. The inferior person’s state of soul can be changed by others because she is not yet wise. The preservation of Laiken’s virtue is irrelevant to Kiely’s or Max’s walking around because a sage’s soul is not easily disturbed. If Max’s inferior action and Kiely’s virtuous action do not alter Laiken’s virtuous soul, how can Kiely benefit Laiken while Max does not, under Inwood and Gerson’s interpretation? Even if Chrysippus is correct, a sage can only lose virtues in unusual circumstances, e.g., Max imprudently trips Laiken, and Laiken’s head falls on a stone which happens to cause a severe concussion, and so forth. If this ad hoc possibility is in a close possible world, Kiely’s prudent walk will preserve Laiken’s virtue. However, we cannot expect a rare counterfactual case to happen for each virtuous action. Therefore, a sage’s virtue does not have to be constantly preserved.

If we interpret benefit as furthering the agreement of nature, then virtuous actions can be distinguished from inferior actions. Suppose nature has an ideal plan for each person to walk on a specific route. Kiely benefits Laiken by walking on her own route instead of Laiken’s. Therefore, they achieve concord and are in agreement with nature. If Nat, trying to study virtue, joins the sages walking around, it is easier for him to choose his ideal route since the sages already rule out two possibilities for him. Therefore, ultimately, Laiken and Kiely help Nat progress towards virtue. If the inferior person Max joins their walking and imprudently takes Laiken’s route, Laiken has to choose her second-best route. She can remain virtuous since a sage should not be disturbed by another person’s walking. Laiken was not benefited because of the lack of agreement. However, she was not harmed either because ultimately, the lack of agreement and inferior population only remain: Max was not virtuous in the first place.

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<sup>38</sup> Diogenes, 7.127, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 61I.

<sup>39</sup> See *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 59I.

In general, understanding benefit as preservation of virtue is inadequate because virtue is stable. Sages do not need benefit to actively preserve their virtues at all times. Thus, it is challenging to distinguish benefit from inferior actions. However, agreement of nature is a common task requiring cooperation. Since a sage cannot do everything by herself, my interpretation leaves space for the sages to receive benefits from other sages. The agreement of nature is a more suitable candidate for benefit than the attainment and preservation of virtue. I do not argue that one's attainment and preservation of virtue is excluded from the furthering of nature's agreement. The relation between the attainment of virtue and nature's agreement is similar to the relation between right actions and indifferents: a sage can prudently select some preferred indifferents as a right action. Though indifferents are part of this action, what makes this action virtuous is the sage's virtue. Similarly, sometimes, sages can benefit by helping others achieve virtues; but they do not have to. Benefit really consists of advancing nature's agreement, which is a guaranteed result from right actions.

## 6. Conclusion

Although we do not have a passage explicitly defining benefit and explaining why it is beneficial, we can reconstruct the concept with the Stoics' descriptions. Benefit is beneficial because it furthers nature's agreement. My interpretation of benefit suggests a strong connection between the virtuous state of the soul and the virtuous state of nature, tying the Stoic ethical and cosmological theories together. Though later Stoics appear to focus their philosophical interests solely on ethics, the earlier Stoics treat other areas of philosophy, such as cosmology, on a par with ethics.<sup>40</sup> The connection between cosmology and ethics in early Stoicism explains the unavoidable inadequacy of interpreting benefit merely as the virtuous state of the soul. One advantage of my interpretation is that nature's agreement can be understood at different levels: specifically, it is our everyday concord within the human community; generally, it is the virtuous state of nature. Hence my interpretation retains the Stoic emphasis on virtue over indifferents and captures the Stoic comprehensive view of nature simultaneously.

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<sup>40</sup> Bett 2012, p. 530.

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