

# STOIC VIRTUE: A CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION

Robert Weston Siscoe  
University of Arizona  
rwsiscoe@email.arizona.edu

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## ABSTRACT

The Stoic understanding of virtue is often taken to be a non-starter. Many of the Stoic claims about virtue – that a virtue requires moral perfection and that all who are not fully virtuous are vicious – are thought to be completely out of step with our commonsense notion of virtue, making the Stoic account more of an historical oddity than a seriously defended view. Despite many voices to the contrary, I will argue that there is a way of making sense of these Stoic claims. Recent work in linguistics has shown that there is a distinction between relative and absolute gradable adjectives, with the absolute variety only applying to perfect exemplars. I will argue that taking virtue terms to be absolute gradable adjectives – and thus that they apply only to those who are fully virtuous – is one way to make sense of the Stoic view. I will also show how interpreting virtue-theoretic adjectives as absolute gradable adjectives makes it possible to defend Stoicism against its most common objections, demonstrating how the Stoic account of virtue might once again be a player in the contemporary landscape of virtue theorizing.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Stoicism, Virtue, Gradable Adjectives

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## INTRODUCTION

Diogenes of Sinope held little hope that there are any truly virtuous people. He is said to have searched the streets of Athens, carrying a lamp in broad daylight, claiming he was looking for an honest man. Diogenes claimed that much of what dominated an Athenian life – social status and material wealth – were hindrances to virtue, and thus that truly honest or virtuous people were exceedingly rare.<sup>2</sup> Surely though Diogenes was far too cynical. We know many honest people – honest parents, honest bankers, and honest friends – even though there are social pressures that undermine the virtues. Part of Diogenes’s error seems to be that he thought a person could not be honest without being completely honest. Even if Diogenes was right about the obstacles to virtue in daily life, was he not wrong to think that a person could not be honest without shedding all such attachments? I will be arguing that there is a way of understanding Diogenes that can make sense of his seemingly outlandish claim, a way of interpreting virtue terms on which there is no one honest or virtuous unless there is someone who is perfectly so.

The claim that virtue requires perfection, an infamous Stoic doctrine, is thought to be implausible for a myriad of reasons. To begin with, our ordinary virtue ascriptions far outpace those of the Stoic. According to Stoicism, only the perfectly virtuous sage is actually virtuous – everyone else is vicious. As already mentioned though, our applications of virtue terms are hardly limited to those who are completely virtuous. We often describe those with small moral foibles as virtuous, making the Stoic position seem almost absurd. Furthermore, it is difficult to understand how the Stoic view can make sense of moral progress and virtue comparisons, further components of our commonsense moral lives. These three pressing worries for the Stoic conception of virtue – ordinary virtue ascriptions, virtue comparisons, and moral progress – are all outlined in detail in Section 1. How, then, can anyone maintain that virtue requires perfection?

In this paper, I will be arguing that it is possible to maintain that virtue requires perfection by holding that virtue-theoretic terms are absolute gradable adjectives. Recent work in linguistics has revealed a distinction between relative and absolute gradable adjectives, categories that, with a few notable exceptions, were previously conflated. Positing this divergence explains a wide range of linguistic phenomena, cementing the relative/absolute distinction as orthodoxy on gradable adjectives.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, the contrast between absolute and gradable adjectives has been ignored within philosophy as well – a blind spot in need

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<sup>2</sup>See Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum* 6.41. The more accurate translation of what Diogenes inquires as he is traveling through the streets is that “he is looking for a man.” The reason that he cannot find one is that he takes man to be essentially rational. By living apart from virtue, however, the citizens of Athens are also not living completely rational lives, hence Diogenes’s criticism that he cannot find a man as he cannot find anyone completely virtuous and thus rational.

<sup>3</sup>See Kennedy (2007). The other notable exceptions to the widespread neglect of this distinction are Kennedy and McNally (2005), Rusiecki (1985), and Unger (1975).

of remedy. In Section 2, I detail the relative/absolute distinction, outlining the characteristics that separate relative from absolute gradable adjectives, setting the stage for arguing that virtue-theoretic terms resemble absolute gradable adjectives.

One crucial difference between relative and absolute gradable adjectives is how their truth-conditions are determined. The denotations of relative gradable adjectives, including ‘tall’ and ‘expensive,’ shift across context, allowing that a child who is not considered tall amongst adults can still be considered tall for their age and that a handbag that is not expensive to the cultural elite is nonetheless expensive for those in the middle class. When terms like ‘virtuous’ and ‘honest’ are taken to be relative gradable adjectives, the natural result are accounts on which their truth conditions differ along with the context. This is problematic for the Stoics, however, because applications of ‘virtuous’ and ‘honest’ then only require meeting the contextually relevant standards. On the other hand, unlike relative gradable adjectives, the denotation of absolute gradable adjectives remains fixed on the maximal element in the underlying scale regardless of the context. Absolute gradable adjectives are thus not context-sensitive and always pick out objects that satisfy the top of their scales. Interpreting virtue terms as absolute gradable adjectives, a task that I attempt in Section 3, thus makes it possible to defend the Stoic view that virtue requires perfection.

Taking virtue-theoretic adjectives to be absolute gradable adjectives not only helps capture the Stoic view that being virtuous requires being fully virtuous, as I will in Section 4, it also provides a response to the three primary objections to Stoic virtue. Absolute gradable adjectives still permit distinctions below the maximum of their underlying scales, thus providing a route to understanding virtue comparisons and moral progress. Furthermore, imprecise attributions of absolute gradable adjectives are often made, but such attributions are literally false, not true in any context. If virtue terms are absolute gradable adjectives, then many of our ordinary uses of virtue terms are also imprecise uses, allowing the Stoics to make sense of ordinary virtue attributions.

The primary goal of this paper then is to argue that, by interpreting virtue terms as absolute gradable adjectives, there is a route to defending the Stoic account of virtue. In Section 1, I will lay out the Stoic view, outlining both the Stoic commitments on virtue as well as some of the most common objections leveled against it. In Section 2, I will then describe the distinction between relative and absolute gradable adjectives, noting the tests that are often used to distinguish them along with the differences in their truth conditions. I will then argue in Section 3 that it is not implausible to develop the Stoic position by interpreting virtue-theoretic adjectives as absolute gradable adjectives. To begin with, the Stoics interpret virtue terms on the linguistic model of ‘straight,’ an absolute gradable adjective. Furthermore, virtue terms pass many of the tests attributed with absolute gradable adjectives, providing a case that ‘straight’ and ‘virtuous’ are of the same semantic kind. I then use this observation in

Section 4 to respond to the critiques of Stoic virtue, arguing that the work on absolute gradable adjectives provides a route to defending the Stoic view. In the conclusion, I will consider some of the consequences for virtue ethics if we not only accept that taking virtue terms to be absolute gradable adjectives is a promising route to defend Stoicism, but that virtue-theoretic adjectives in fact are absolute gradable adjectives. On this understanding of virtue terms, Diogenes is not mistaken about the truth-conditions of virtue terms; he simply refuses to use ‘honest’ imprecisely.

## 1 STOIC VIRTUE

Before we get started, it will be helpful to get clear on a few issues. To begin with, I do not intend to be offering an historical interpretation of the Stoics. My goal, rather, is to show how some problems pressed against Stoics can be met by considering contemporary work in linguistics. As the Stoics were obviously not privy to such developments, this aim prevents me from offering a strict historical interpretation of the Stoics. What I will be offering instead is an attempt to make consistent a package of Stoic commitments that the majority of Stoic scholars have found contradictory. In that sense, this project is an interpretation of the Stoics. However, since the solution will be framed in terms of a distinction in contemporary linguistics between relative and absolute gradable adjectives, the understanding of the Stoics offered in this paper is a contemporary interpretation. To the extent that I make use of Stoic writings then, I only take myself to be showing that such moves are consonant with certain aspects of Stoic thought, not that the Stoics would completely endorse my solution. Just as I do not intend to offer an exact historical interpretation of the Stoics, I also do not provide a complete defense of the Stoic view of virtue. My goal in this paper is just to show that certain Stoic commitments can be made consistent, not to argue against competing theories of virtue. In the conclusion, I do explore some of the upshots of my interpretation of the Stoic account of virtue, but a full defense of the view that the virtues are in fact in accord with Stoic doctrine will have to be left to further work.<sup>4</sup>

Another point that is worth keeping in mind is that there is no one such thing as *the* Stoic account of virtue – there are instead many individual Stoics with divergent accounts of the virtuous life. Because there is no one thing that is the Stoic understanding of virtue, it is not possible to defend *the* Stoic view on virtue. For this reason, I will be focusing on aspects of Stoic theorizing about virtue that have significant overlap across a diverse set of Stoics. In laying out the Stoic view, then, we will be looking for areas of widespread consensus in Stoic thought. Once these have been established, I’ll then proceed to develop a route to embracing these elements of the Stoic account of virtue.

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<sup>4</sup>Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for helping me to get clear about the scope of the argument of this paper.

Finally, even though I intend to argue for a detailed Stoic account of virtue, due to limitations of space, there will be parts of the overlapping Stoic consensus that I will not be able to defend. This paper unfortunately cannot encompass all of Stoic theorizing – that virtue is the only good or that virtue is completely an internal affair – but nevertheless aims to argue for a set of Stoic claims that are especially contentious. In order to avoid confusion, in this section I will outline the elements of Stoic virtue that will be pertinent for this paper, later offering a single solution that can be used to secure all of these claims. Our first task, then, is to lay out aspects of Stoic virtue that I will offer a strategy for defending.

### 1.1 VIRTUE AND VICE

The first element of Stoic virtue that this paper will focus on is the thought that virtue requires moral perfection. On the Stoic view, only the perfectly virtuous sage can truly be described as virtuous. Virtue is so lofty that a person who attains it is on par with the gods. Cicero contends that, on the Stoic view, “Virtue in man and God is the same... For virtue is nothing else than nature perfect and brought to a summit: it is, therefore, a point of similarity between man and God,”<sup>5</sup> while of the sage Dion, Plutarch says, “Zeus does not exceed Dion in virtue.”<sup>6</sup> For this reason, ancient commentators describe the virtuous person as being “rarer than the Ethiopian phoenix.”<sup>7</sup> Cicero goes so far as to say that “It happens more often that a mule begets than that a sage comes into existence.”<sup>8</sup> Modern commentators have upheld this reading of the Stoics, taking ‘virtuous’ to truly apply only to the perfectly virtuous.<sup>9</sup> There is thus a wide consensus that the Stoics endorsed **Perfect Virtue**:

- (1) **Perfect Virtue** – Only the perfectly virtuous are truly virtuous

For the Stoics, the perfectly virtuous person is identified with the sage, of which there have been very few in history. The average person falls below moral perfection, and thus cannot be truly described as virtuous. Thus, the Stoics take a quite contentious stance with **Perfect Virtue**, contending very few people have ever been actually virtuous.

The difficulty of the Stoic position does not stop, however, with arguing that only the perfectly virtuous are considered virtuous. The challenge only deepens with the Stoics drawing a strict line between virtue and vice. According to the Stoics, “nothing is between virtue and vice,”<sup>10</sup> a point that they drive home

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<sup>5</sup>See *De legibus* 1.25 (*SVF* 1.564). Where possible, the location of these excerpts has been given both in H. von Armin’s *Stoicim veterum fragmenta (SVF)* and A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley’s *The Hellenistic Philosophers (LS)*.

<sup>6</sup>See *De communibus notitiis* 1076A (*SVF* 3.246, *LS* 61J).

<sup>7</sup>See Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De fato* 199.16-18 (*SVF* 3.568, *LS* 61N).

<sup>8</sup>See *De divinatione* 2.61.

<sup>9</sup>See Becker (1998), pp. 119-126, Brouwer (2014), ch. 3, Jedan (2011), ch. 4, Long (1986), pp. 204-205, Sandbach (1975), p. 28, and Zeller (1880), pp. 266-270.

<sup>10</sup>See Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum*, 7.127 (*SVF* 3.40, *LS* 61I).

with a number of metaphors. One common analogy is to describe the vicious person as drowning, something that can happen whether they are close to the surface or far below the waves, making it irrelevant how close they are to being virtuous: [The Stoics] say, “but 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>11</sup> Cicero compares being in a state of vice to being blind, saying that just as “a puppy on the point of opening its eyes is no less blind than one just born,” likewise the person about to attain virtue remains vicious.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Chrysippus argues that those who are closer to virtue are nevertheless vicious, as the traveler who “is a hundred furlongs from Canopus, and the man who is only one, are both equally not in Canopus.”<sup>13</sup> It is thus generally agreed that, in addition to **Perfect Virtue**, the Stoics endorsed **Bivalence**.<sup>14</sup>

(2) **Bivalence** – Everyone is either virtuous or vicious

With **Bivalence**, the Stoics held that there is no one that is not either virtuous or vicious. There are no vague cases – anyone who is not virtuous is vicious. When we combine **Bivalence** with **Perfect Virtue** though, it follows that everyone who is not perfectly virtuous is vicious. If it was counterintuitive to accept **Perfect Virtue**, then even more so the combination of the two. Not only are the Stoics committed to the rarity of the sage, but they are also committed to thinking that almost everyone who has ever lived is vicious.

## 1.2 CONCERNS ABOUT STOIC VIRTUE

The combination of **Perfect Virtue** and **Bivalence** might seem to make the Stoic position on virtue practically a non-starter.<sup>15</sup> Should we really think that almost everyone is vicious? Critics of the Stoic account of virtue have pressed a number of objections that are thought to conclusively show that the Stoic rhetoric about virtue was just that, rhetoric. The first of these considerations is that the Stoic account of virtue is too demanding. Must a person really be perfectly virtuous in order to be virtuous at all? Such a requirement seems quite unrealistic. After all, most of us know several people we would call virtuous – virtuous parents, virtuous mentors, and virtuous friends – and thus it appears that the Stoic view cannot make sense of many of our applications of ‘virtuous.’ Even though these people are not perfectly virtuous, it is nevertheless seems fitting to call them virtuous. The first problem, then, with the Stoic view is that it does not seem to permit that ordinary people are virtuous even though

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<sup>11</sup>See Plutarch, *De communibus notitiis* 1063A-B (*SVF* 3.539, *LS* 61T).

<sup>12</sup>See *De Finibus* 3.48 (*SVF* 3.530).

<sup>13</sup>See Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum*, 7.120 (*SVF* 3.527).

<sup>14</sup>Contemporary commentators who attribute **Bivalence** to the Stoics include Becker (1998), p. 119, Brouwer (2014), ch. 3, Sandbach (1975), p. 28, Sellars (2003), p. 61, and Sharples (2014), p. 106.

<sup>15</sup>Geert Roskam (2005) says rhetorically, “No doubt this view should not be taken seriously” (p. 15.).

it seems completely appropriate to describe them as such, a fact captured by **Ordinary Virtue**:

(3) **Ordinary Virtue** – It is appropriate to describe ordinary people who are not completely virtuous as virtuous

The Stoic view appears to be clearly out of step with **Ordinary Virtue**. If hardly anyone is actually virtuous, then why would it be appropriate to call our friends and neighbors virtuous? The Stoic account seems clearly lacking in that it fails to capture this fact about our virtue talk.

One way to make sense of **Ordinary Virtue** is to argue that being truly virtuous does not demand being perfectly virtuous. Contra the Stoics, being virtuous could instead require something like being virtuous *enough*. Christine Swanton provides just such an account, giving the following analysis of virtue:

“A virtue is a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or *good enough way*.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Swanton, whether or not the Athenian is virtuous depends not on whether they are fully in accord with virtue but whether they are doing *good enough* given their situation. Dan Russell agrees, contending that being virtuous enough is sufficient for being virtuous:

“It seems undeniable that being *virtuous enough* is a sufficient condition for being virtuous tout court – not perfectly virtuous or even virtuous without qualification, but nonetheless virtuous in a genuine, bona fide sense.”<sup>17</sup>

On Dan Russell’s account, being virtuous enough in a given situation is sufficient to be considered virtuous full stop – it is not required that a person be perfectly virtuous to be called virtuous. Thus, on Swanton’s and Russell’s accounts, even if perfect virtue is unattainable, we can still make sense of why **Ordinary Virtue** is true – we call our parents and friends virtuous because they are in fact virtuous.

Another criticism of the Stoic conception of virtue is that it cannot account for degrees of virtue. It is obvious that one person can be more virtuous than another even if neither are perfectly virtuous, but the strict Stoic doctrine that only the completely virtuous are virtuous while the rest are vicious is too coarse-grained to capture this distinction, or so the charge goes. Julia Annas formulates this objection to the Stoic view of virtue as follows:

[Being less than fully virtuous] would be troubling if we insisted on a rigorist approach, such that a person either is virtuous or is not virtuous

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<sup>16</sup>See Swanton (2003), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup>See Russell (2009), p. 112.

at all. This would have the result that only the fully virtuous person is virtuous, while none of us are virtuous at all. This is in fact the Stoic position, but it is a very awkward one, since it strictly allows for no difference between the mediocre non-virtuous and the horrendously vicious non-virtuous.<sup>18</sup>

On Annas's interpretation, Stoics cannot distinguish between the moderately and the extremely vicious. Anything that falls short of perfect virtue is vice, making the Stoic view incapable of making finer-grained judgments about the level of virtue and vice in each person. For this reason, Stoics are saddled with judging that the occasionally dishonest are just as bad as pathological liars, labeling both simply as falling short of the virtue of honesty. This view, Annas says, "allows for no difference between the mediocre non-virtuous and the horrendously vicious non-virtuous," making the Stoic opinion quite out of keeping with commonsense notions of virtue.

Lawrence Becker takes the same perspective, arguing that the Stoic take on virtue is powerless to say that anyone who falls short of virtue is more virtuous than another. On Becker's understanding, because virtue is an all-or-nothing affair, ordinary citizens are just as vicious as serial killers:

Virtue is the only good, and it is an all-or-nothing affair. No one who falls short of being a sage has any trait that can be called good at all, nor can one such person be any better or more virtuous than another. There are sages, and then there are the rest of us. Sages are equally virtuous; the rest of us (serial killers and mild-mannered reporters, mass murderers and their innocent victims) are all equally vicious.<sup>19</sup>

Becker argues that, because the Stoics endorse a strict reading of virtue that labels only the sage as virtuous, it is not possible to draw any distinctions between non-sages. All are equally vicious. If this is right though, then surely the Stoics were mistaken about virtue. Everyday people are more virtuous than mass murderers, so much the worse for any theory of virtue that says otherwise. Let's call this fact about virtue that Stoicism fails to capture **Comparative Virtue**:

(4) **Comparative Virtue** – For two persons that both fall short of perfect virtue, it is possible for one of them to be more virtuous than the other

Like with Annas's criticism, **Comparative Virtue** is an indictment of Stoic virtue for failing to capture the range of virtue ascriptions that we make. We can and do say that there are ordinary folks who are more or less virtuous, and insofar as the Stoic doctrine cannot make sense of this, it fails to capture our standard concept of virtue.

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<sup>18</sup>See Annas (2011), p. 65.

<sup>19</sup>See Becker (1998), p. 118.



The final criticism of Stoic virtue that we will look at is that it cannot account for moral progress. By the Stoic's own lights, moral progress is possible. Plutarch and Stobaeus both attest to the Stoic endorsement of the man who makes moral progress, the *prokopton*.<sup>20</sup> According to Cicero, Cato the Younger characterizes the *prokopton* as advancing through five distinct moral stages, the final step being the one that takes the *prokopton* from vice to virtue.<sup>21</sup> The Stoics, then, believe in the potential of **Moral Progress**, even when a particular *prokopton* has not yet become morally perfect:

(5) **Moral Progress** – It is possible to make moral progress without becoming perfectly virtuous

The difficulty with **Moral Progress**, however, is how to conceptually locate its possibility within the Stoic framework. If all non-sages are vicious, how can we describe the movement towards virtue?

Many commentators maintain that the *prokopton* endorsed by the Stoics is ultimately paradoxical. Dirk Baltzly, for instance, says that the Stoics cannot be literally interpreted as endorsing **Moral Progress**:

“Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as moral progress for the Stoics (if that means progress within morality), and they give the charming illustration of drowning to make their point: a person an arm’s length from the surface is drowning every bit as surely as one who is five hundred fathoms down.”<sup>22</sup>

On Baltzly’s reading, the Stoics should not be thought of as arguing for progress in virtue since there is no such thing – anyone who is not virtuous is vicious. F. H. Sandbach agrees, concluding that the Stoics could not seriously have endorsed **Moral Progress** since it creates a paradox with their other views:

“Although the Stoics defended the paradox, it may be doubted whether they took it very seriously. Perhaps a more effective encouragement to effort was provided by the figure of the man ‘making an advance’ (*prokopton*), still involved in the waters of wickedness, but making his way toward the surface. Critics claimed that he was inconsistent with the paradox, and to common sense he is.”<sup>23</sup>

Sandbach’s understanding is that taking someone to grow in virtue, moving his way towards the water’s surface, was not conceivable on the Stoic view. Using such language may have helped the cause of virtue, since it might have encouraged people to make moral progress, but Sandbach doubts that this can be made compatible with the other Stoic commitments.

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<sup>20</sup>See Plutarch, *De Profectibus in Virtute* 75C (*SVF* 3.539, *LS* 61S) and Stobaeus, *Florilegium* 4.22 (*SVF* 3.510).

<sup>21</sup>See *De Finibus* 3.20 (*SVF* 3.188, *LS* 59D).

<sup>22</sup>See Baltzly (2019).

<sup>23</sup>See Sandbach (1975), p. 45. Other commentators that take issue with **Moral Progress** include Roskam (2005), pp. 23-25.

## 2 GRADABLE ADJECTIVES: RELATIVE AND ABSOLUTE

We can now see that the burden of proof that is on the defender of Stoic virtue as the advocate of the Stoic account of virtue must find a way to capture (1)-(5). One way to make sense of (1)-(5) would be to say that only some of these claims are true and offer an error theory for the remainder. Such an account might endorse **Perfect Virtue**, **Bivalence**, and **Moral Progress**, for instance, and explain why we mistakenly believe **Ordinary Virtue** and **Comparative Virtue**. An even stronger response, however, would be to propose a strategy that vindicates all of (1)-(5), showing that Stoic virtue has nothing to fear from the stock objections offered by Stoic critics. This latter response is what I will aim for in this paper. I will argue that understanding virtue terms as absolute gradable adjectives allows the Stoic interpreter to accept (1)-(5) as true, making Stoic virtue capable of answering its most pressing objections. However, before I make the case that virtue-theoretic adjectives are plausibly thought to be absolute gradable adjectives, I must first introduce the distinction between relative and absolute gradable adjectives.

### 2.1 RELATIVE GRADABLE ADJECTIVES

The orthodox view of gradable adjectives is that they come in two varieties, relative gradable adjectives and absolute gradable adjectives, henceforth RAs and AAs.<sup>24</sup> Relative gradable adjectives, adjectives like ‘tall,’ ‘large,’ ‘long,’ and ‘expensive,’ are characterized by an underlying degree scale on which objects in the domain fall.<sup>25</sup> Because this scale imposes an ordering, uses of comparative constructions are then true and false depending on whether they mirror this underlying structure. For example, (6) is true just in case John has a greater degree of height than Harry:

(6) John is taller than Harry.

This ordering, however, is not all that goes into determining whether (7) is true:

(7) John is tall.

The truth of (7) also depends on a threshold on the underlying scale. If the degree of John’s height is clearly greater than the threshold, then (7) is true,

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<sup>24</sup>This distinction is due to Kennedy (2007), Kennedy and McNally (2005), Rusiecki (1985), and Unger (1975). The characteristics of absolute gradable adjectives have also been studied by Rotstein and Winter (2004), though their focus was on the distinction between partial and total gradable adjectives.

<sup>25</sup>Though the scale approach of Cresswell (1977), Heim (2000), Kennedy (2007), and von Stechow (1984) has been the most influential, the primary competitor is a view on which the extension of a gradable adjective displays contextual shifts with the basis for comparatives being quantifications over possible precisifications of the adjective’s extension, a view whose development runs through Fine (1975), Kamp (1975), Klein (1980), Larson (1988), and Pinkal (1995). The scale view holds a distinct advantage though in explaining the distinction between relative and absolute adjectives (Kennedy, 2007).

and if the degree of his height is clearly lower, then (7) is false.<sup>26</sup> As previously mentioned, the threshold in question is contextually determined. The degree of height which a primary school child must possess to be considered tall is much lower than the degree that a basketball player must possess.

The contextual thresholds of RAs can be adjusted to differentiate between most individuals that differ to some degree on the underlying scale.<sup>27</sup> In a selection task with two heaps of sand, (8) is felicitous even if the piles of sand are not particularly tall, so long as one is taller than the other:

(8) Point to the tall one.

RAs thus have an accommodating contextual threshold in that it can be adjusted to differentiate between most points on the underlying degree scale. Relative gradable adjectives lose this feature, however, at the extreme ends of the scale. If I am at a professional basketball game looking at two players well above seven feet, or at a national park admiring two very tall redwoods, (8) is infelicitous. This infelicity demonstrates that, though RAs can be used to distinguish between objects that fall in the middle of their degree scales, their contextual thresholds cannot always be adjusted to differentiate between objects that fall on the extreme ends of the degree scale.

Another feature of relative gradable adjectives is that they always give rise to Sorites paradoxes. With ‘tall,’ the paradox gets going with (9):

(9) For whatever height you are, one inch of height does not change whether you are tall or not.

The trouble of course is created by the fact that (9) seems true. This can be explained by the fact that RAs cannot be used to pick out a maximally specific degree on the underlying scale. As previously noted, an object falls with the extension of an RA like ‘tall’ if it possesses a degree of height that is *clearly greater* than the relevant threshold, a description meant to accommodate for borderline cases. Even though there are basketball players who are obviously tall and others who are not, there are others that it is unclear whether they should be classified as tall or short, and may even seem right to say that they are neither. This vagueness makes it such that (9) is intuitively correct, leading to the Sorites.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>With talk of degrees that are clearly lower or higher than the relevant threshold, I am following Rotstein and Winter (2004), Kennedy (2007), and Kennedy and McNally (2005) in holding that the extension of a relative gradable adjective includes those items that “stand out” relative to the contextual threshold in order to accommodate the possibility of borderline cases. The view that relative gradable adjectives have a contextual threshold, however, has a much longer history. See Barker (2002), Bartsch and Vennemann (1972), Bierwisch (1989), Cresswell (1977), Fine (1975), Kamp (1975), Klein (1980), Lewis (1970), Pinkal (1995), Sapir (1944), von Stechow (1984), and Wheeler (1972).

<sup>27</sup>See Kennedy (2007), Kyburg and Morreau (2000), Sedivy et al. (1999), and Syrett et al. (2006 and 2010).

<sup>28</sup>For evaluations of what types of semantic accounts of gradable adjectives can diagnose

## 2.2 ABSOLUTE GRADABLE ADJECTIVES: TOTAL AND PARTIAL

Absolute gradable adjectives include ‘dry,’ ‘straight,’ ‘pure,’ and ‘empty.’ Like relative gradable adjectives, absolute gradable adjectives can be used in comparatives. Every eligible object in the domain is assigned a certain degree on the underlying scale, making (10) true so long as the mug is filled to a greater degree than the cup:

(10) The cup is emptier than the mug.

Furthermore, just as with RAs, this degree scale is not all that goes into determining whether (11) is true:

(11) The cup is empty.

The accuracy of (11) depends on whether the fullness of the cup falls within a certain range. Unlike with RAs, however, this range cannot be characterized as a contextual threshold that can be adjusted simply by distinguishing between two points on the degree scale. Supposing that the mug is three quarters full and the cup only halfway, (10) is still true, but the following command is infelicitous:

(12) #Point to the empty one.

AAs thus do not have thresholds that are contextually accommodating as do RAs.<sup>29</sup>

The infelicity of (12) in the above case may seem analogous to the case of the tall basketball players or the tall redwoods. Why not say that, just like with RAs, there are parts of the scale that a contextual threshold cannot distinguish between? What separates the infelicity of (8) from the infelicity of (12) is that, in the former case, the infelicity occurs with two objects that are at the scale’s extreme, while in the latter case, the infelicity occurs with objects in the middle of the scale. The cups are three quarters and half full, whereas both basketball players, and both trees, are very tall. This asymmetry is reinforced by the fact that, while RAs cannot be used to differentiate between objects on the extreme end of a scale, AAs can. Consider, for instance, a cup that is completely empty and a mug that has a swallow of liquid left. In such a case, both (10) and (12) are felicitous. RAs and AAs thus differ in the following way – RAs can be used to distinguish between objects in the middle of a scale but not at the scale’s extreme, while uses of AAs cannot distinguish between objects in the middle of the scale, but can at the end of the scale.

Because absolute gradable adjectives do not possess a threshold that is contextually flexible in the same way as relative gradable adjectives, there are cases in which they do not give rise to Sorites paradoxes. If the cup has exactly one

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the existence of borderline cases and the Sorites paradox, see Graff Fara (2000), Kennedy (2007), Pinkal (1995), and Rusiecki (1985).

<sup>29</sup>See Kennedy (2007), Kyburg and Morreau (2000), Sedivy et al. (1999), and Syrett et al. (2006 and 2010).

ounce of liquid in it and is for that reason not empty, there is no temptation to accept a sentence like (13), which is essential for the paradox to get started:

- (13) For however full a container is, one ounce of liquid does not change whether it is empty or not.

If the cup has exactly one ounce of liquid in it, taking away that ounce of water makes it true that the cup is empty, making (13), the first step along the route to the paradoxical result, clearly false. This is because there is a clear cutoff point for the distinction between empty and not empty. With ‘tall,’ it is not clear at what point adding one inch of height will take someone from not being tall to being tall, but in the case of the empty glass, it is clear when taking away another ounce of liquid will make it empty.<sup>30</sup>

Absolute gradable adjectives come in two forms – total and partial. Total AAs require the absence of a particular property. A dry table is not wet to any degree, a straight line is not at all bent, and pure gold does not contain any impurities. The truth of partial AAs, on the other hand, requires only that objects possess a minimal degree of the property described. A table is wet if it has even a small degree of wetness, a line is bent if it is just under one hundred and eighty degrees, and gold is impure if it contains some amount of impurity.<sup>31</sup> AAs often come in pairs – wet and dry, bent and straight, impure and pure, open and closed – with one of the pairs behaving as a total AA and the other a partial AA. This is the case so long as the AAs in question are contradictories. ‘Wet,’ for instance, is synonymous with ‘not dry,’ and ‘dry’ with ‘not wet,’ yielding the result that ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ are a total/partial pair. ‘Empty’ and ‘full,’ on the other hand, are not contradictories in that ‘empty’ does not simply mean ‘not full,’ so ‘empty’ and ‘full’ do not form a total/partial pair. ‘Empty’ and ‘full’ are, in fact, both total AAs, as both can create failures in the “point to” selection test.

Even though many uses of total AAs requires the absence of a particular property, it is possible to create a context in which approximations are also considered to satisfy sentences attributing total AAs. It can be acceptable to say that a table is dry even if is slightly damp when the purpose is to cover the table with a tablecloth that you do not want to get soaking wet. Similarly, it can be acceptable to say that a glass is full even if it could be slightly more full than it is. Total AAs can thus give rise to Sorites paradoxes in such contexts. Does adding one more drop of water change whether the table is dry or not? Does taking away a drop of water prevent the cup from being full? Negations of partial AAs exhibit the same characteristic, as ‘not bent,’ ‘not wet,’ and ‘not

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<sup>30</sup>The fact that Sorites-paradoxical results disappear in some cases with AAs has been noted by Burnett (2014), Kennedy (2007), and Pinkal (1995).

<sup>31</sup>For more on the distinction between total and partial absolute adjectives, see Burnett (2014), Cruse (1986), Kennedy (2007), Rotstein and Winter (2004), and Yoon (1996). Kamp and Rossdeutscher (1994) entertain the distinction as well, but under the description of a distinction between universal and existential adjectives.

impure' behave like total AAs. Absolute gradable adjectives that do not give rise to the Sorites in any context are partial AAs and the negations of total AAs. Because partial AAs require that an object possess a minimal degree of the property in question, objects that possess none of the property will then falsify the crucial premise of the Sorites:

- (14) For however wet a table is, taking away one drop of water will not make it dry.

If there is only a single drop of water on the table, then (14) will be false of that table. Likewise, since negations of total AAs are synonymous with partial AAs, negations of total AAs also do not give rise to Sorites Paradoxes.<sup>32</sup> The lack of Sorites-paradoxical results for partial AAs and negations of total AAs is associated with the presence of a top-closed or bottom-closed scale. A table can be maximally dry, and thus 'wet' does not give rise to a Sorites march, whereas, for the RA 'tall,' it is not possible to be maximally tall. For however tall you are, it is always possible to possess a degree more height. Because 'tall' has an open scale, 'not tall' gives way to the Sorites just as easily as 'tall' does.

### 2.3 VAGUENESS AND IMPRECISION

How should we characterize the contextual variation allowed by AAs? Why under some circumstances can the use of an AA still lead to a Sorites paradox? The difference between the contextual variation in RAs and AAs is best understood as the distinction between vagueness and imprecision.<sup>33</sup> The guiding thought with imprecision is that a particular point plays a central role in the meaning of the term used. For instance, if it is said that Mary arrived at three o'clock, the precise time three o'clock plays a crucial role in the meaning of the sentence. Such a statement could be made imprecisely, if Mary arrived at 2:58 or 3:02, for instance, but this does not undermine the thought that precisely 3:00 constrains the meaning of the assertion. With gradable adjectives, the maximal or minimal points on the scale play a central role in the meaning of AAs. A glass that is completely full counts as full in any context, but when the standards of 'full' are relaxed, this is not due to a contextually determined threshold, as with RAs, but merely imprecise uses of 'full,' a term which depends for its meaning on maximal fullness. When the standards are thus relaxed and a degree or so below complete fullness counts as full, then it is unclear at what lesser degree of fullness a glass stops counting as full due to the imprecision.

A test to distinguish between vague and imprecise predicates is whether the gradable adjective in question allows for natural precisification. The meanings of vague terms can only be precisified by introducing stipulative definitions,

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<sup>32</sup>For more on the Sorites and absolute gradable adjectives, see Burnett (2014) and Kennedy (2007).

<sup>33</sup>For more on the distinction generally, see Krifka (2002 and 2007), Lakoff (1973), Sadock (1977), and Sauerland and Stateva (2007). For the distinction as it relates to absolute gradable adjectives, see Pinkal (1995) and Kennedy (2007).

whereas with imprecise terms, natural language contexts can independently precisify the term. With imprecise AAs, contexts can be established in which only the maximal degree satisfies the standards. Even though a sports stadium can be described as empty on a day of low attendance, nothing but complete emptiness will be under consideration when a construction boss overseeing the demolition of the stadium inquires whether it is empty. It is also possible to eliminate borderline cases from consideration. Twenty-two karat gold only permits impurities to eight percent, but a jeweler may establish a higher standard for pure' with a use of (15):

(15) The gold for the rings needs to be pure, but this gold is twenty-two karat, so it will not do.

Similarly, if a surface is being used for an experiment and needs to be so dry that it has no water molecules on it at all, a scientist can use 'dry' to pick out this property:

(16) The table needs to be dry, but the surface still has a few stray water molecules, so it will not do.

Vague RAs, however, allow no such precisifications. Not only do RAs not have closed scales, thus not allowing for precisification to a maximal or minimal degree, but strict cutoffs cannot be created either. The world record height for a redwood tree is 380 feet. A forester that is looking for tall trees cannot create a cutoff for 'tall' by a use of (17):

(17) #I'm looking for tall redwoods, but this one is 375 feet tall so it will not do.

Thus, RAs cannot be naturally precisified, while AAs can, securing that uses of RAs can be vague while uses AAs can be imprecise.

The fact that AAs accept natural precisification and RAs do not can also be demonstrated by answers to queries. If before the demolition of the stadium, the construction foreman asks the owner of the stadium whether it is empty, the owner is untruthful if they say (18) when there is only one person left in the stadium:

(18) The stadium is empty.

For the purposes of demolition, only a completely empty stadium will do, and therefore 'empty' is precisified to mean no people whatsoever. The same cannot, however, occur with an RA like 'tall.' Suppose that a record-hunter heads to the national park looking for a record-setting redwood. Even though the park does not have any trees over 380 feet, the forester cannot for this reason truthfully say (19):

(19) The park does not have any tall redwoods

Even though the purpose of the conversation is finding a record-setting redwood, this does not precisify the meaning of ‘tall’ up to any redwoods that are record-setting. The key difference then between vague and imprecise adjectives is that imprecise adjectives can be made more precise, possibly even establishing strict cutoffs, while vague adjectives cannot.

Assaf Toledo and Galit Sassoon argue that the orthodox view is wrong to think that absolute gradable adjectives are used imprecisely. They present contrasts of total AAs that they claim tell against the standard account:

- (20) This kitchen knife is clean.
- (21) This surgical instrument is clean.
- (22) This child’s shirt is dirty.
- (23) This tuxedo is dirty.

If total AAs are used to pick out the maximal element on the underlying scale, then why are uses of (20) and (22) acceptable in cases of cleanliness and dirtiness that are less stringent than is required for uses of (21) and (23)? This extends to other examples as well – why do we not hesitate, for instance, to say wine glasses are full when they are only filled halfway?<sup>34</sup> According to Toledo and Sassoon, such cases show that the interpretation of AAs cannot just depend on the maximal element in the scale. Rather, other factors must be considered as well, like the type of object of which they are being ascribed, generating shifting standards when applied to kitchen knives and surgical instruments.

Despite the contentions of Toledo and Sassoon, these examples do not show that the standard view is inadequate. All of their examples can be predicted by the orthodox account as acceptable imprecise uses. Imprecise uses are acceptable whenever the property they pick out is good enough for the practical purposes at hand. In the case of kitchen knives and surgical instruments, the characteristic use of the latter requires much more so far as cleanliness is concerned, so the standards for uses of (21) are more demanding than uses of (20). Likewise, tuxedo’s are worn in circumstances where being spotlessly clean is the norm, so acceptable uses of (23) require less dirt than those of (22). What about wine glasses? The standard view predicts that if it is permissible to ascribe fullness to a wine glass when it is not maximally full, this is because there is some practical goal that can be satisfied by wine glasses that are less than completely full. This prediction is confirmed – amongst wine connoisseurs it is common knowledge that a wine glass is only filled halfway in order to allow the wine to be properly aerated, the same purpose for which wine decanters are used. Having room to swirl the glass allows the aroma of the wine to be released.<sup>35</sup> Thus, there is a practical purpose at play when half full wine glasses are described as full, allowing such data to be captured by the orthodox account.

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<sup>34</sup>See Toledo and Sassoon (2011). They borrow the wine glass example from McNally (2011).

<sup>35</sup>See Fox (2011) and McCarthy and Mulligan (2015).



### 3 THE STOICS AND ABSOLUTE GRADABLE ADJECTIVES

The distinction between relative and absolute gradable adjectives can help us make headway on how to understand the Stoic claims about virtue. In particular, by taking virtue-theoretic terms to be absolute gradable adjectives, we can offer a perspective that secures the truth of (1)-(5). This is not to say that this is how any particular Stoic author would have responded to these issues – as previously stated, this paper is not meant to be an historical reconstruction of the Stoic position. Rather, my aim will be to show that understanding virtue terms as AAs is consonant with many Stoic commitments and that it can respond to some of Stoicism’s most serious criticisms.

#### 3.1 SIMPLICIUS ON TENORS AND CHARACTERS

The first connection that suggests virtue terms should be interpreted as absolute gradable adjectives is the Stoic claim that the virtues ought to be thought of as ‘characters’ (*diathesis*) rather than ‘tenors’ (*hexis*).<sup>36</sup> Aristotle took the virtues to be tenors,<sup>37</sup> but the consensus is that Stoics chose instead to conceptualize the virtues differently, equating them with characters. This is the terminology that both Plutarch and Diogenes use in characterizing the Stoic position:

**Plutarch** – All these [Stoics, Menedemus of Eretria, Aristo of Chios, Zeno of Citium, and Chrysippus] agree in taking virtue to be a certain character (*diathesis*) and power of the soul’s commanding-faculty<sup>38</sup>

**Diogenes Laertius** – Virtue is a consistent character (*diathesis*), choice-worthy for its own sake and not from fear or hope or anything external<sup>39</sup>

Not only do both Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius summarize the Stoic position by saying that virtues are a sort of character (*diathesis*), but Simplicius argues that this choice was motivated by the Stoic account of virtue. In his commentary on Aristotle’s *Categories*, Simplicius distinguishes between tenors (*hexis*) and characters (*diathesis*), arguing that the Stoics understood the virtues as characters due to their lack of gradability:

[The Stoics] say that tenors (*hexis*) can be intensified and relaxed, but characters (*diathesis*) are not susceptible to intensification or relaxation. So they call the straightness of a stick a character, even though it is easily alterable since it can be bent. For the straightness could not be relaxed or intensified, nor does it admit of more or less, and so it is a character. For the same reason the virtues are characters, not because of

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<sup>36</sup>Sedley and Long translate *diathesis* as ‘character’ and *hexis* as ‘tenor,’ whereas Barry Fleet’s (2002) translation of Simplicius renders *diathesis* as ‘condition’ and *hexis* as ‘state.’ Because the Long and Sedley translation is used most often, I will stick with the language of tenors and characters.

<sup>37</sup>See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1105b25-26.

<sup>38</sup>See *De Virtute Morali* 440E-441D (LS 61B).

<sup>39</sup>See *Vitae Philosophorum* 7.89 (SVF 3.39, LS 61A).

their stable feature but because they are not susceptible to intensification or increase.<sup>40</sup>

For the Stoics, characters are states that are non-scalar, either a character can be attributed to an object or it cannot. The model is that of straightness – a rod is either straight or bent, there is no in between. Diogenes Laertius also attributes the model of straightness to the Stoics: “For as [the Stoics] say, 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>41</sup> The virtues then are also characters.<sup>42</sup> Just like a stick is either straight or bent, a person is a person is either virtuous or vicious. The Stoics thus rejected the Aristotelian view that the virtues are tenors, classifying them instead as characters.<sup>43</sup>

### 3.2 VIRTUES AS ABSOLUTE GRADABLE ADJECTIVES

For our purposes, Simplicius and Diogenes Laertius picked an apt comparison – we have already seen that ‘straight’ is an absolute gradable adjective, and so it makes sense to use this example to distinguish between *hexis* and *diathesis*. As it turns out, the distinction between tenors and characters maps onto the distinction between RAs and AAs. In both cases, the difference is that the latter possesses an importantly non-scalar component.<sup>44</sup> The Stoics chosen linguistic model for virtues, ‘straight,’ is clearly an AA. Given the similarity between characters and properties picked out by AAs, is it possible to also interpret virtue terms as absolute gradable adjectives? We can begin by observing that virtue-theoretic adjectives, including the generic ‘virtuous’ along with the more specific

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<sup>40</sup>See Simplicius, *On Aristotle’s Categories* 237.25-238.20 (*SVF* 2.393, *LS* 47S). For more on the Stoic choice to take virtues as tenors (*diathesis*), See Jedan (2011), pp. 59-60, and Rist (1977), p. 3.

<sup>41</sup>See *Vitae Philosophorum*, 7.127 (*SVF* 3.40, *LS* 61I).

<sup>42</sup>The Stoic rejection of the virtues as *hexis* also might have been due to a slightly different understanding of these terms than Aristotle. Simplicius (238.2-238.32) notes that the Stoics applied *hexis* to a number of concepts that Aristotle would have characterized as *diathesis*, introducing the possibility that Aristotle and the Stoics diverged on the precise meanings of these terms. What is important for the current interpretation of the Stoics though is how they understood the contrast between *hexis* and *diathesis*, even if this is not a view shared by Aristotle.

<sup>43</sup>One potential difficulty with this understanding of the Stoics is Stobaeus’s position that the virtues are tenors (*hexis*), a view he articulates both explicitly (*SVF* 3.104, *LS* 60L) and by arguing that virtue can be characterized as *episteme* (*SVF* 3.280, *LS* 61D) combined with taking *episteme* to be a *hexis* (*SVF* 3.112, *LS* 41H). Long and Sedley (1987) recognize this difficulty, arguing that general tenors must be differentiated from mere tenors. The former is just any kind of state, a genus of which characters is a species. On this general understanding of tenor, character is a type of tenor but one that does not admit of degrees. The latter classification, mere tenors, applies to states that do admit of degrees (p. 376). As applied to the challenge in interpreting Stobaeus, both virtue and *episteme* can be general tenors without contradicting the view that the virtues are also characters, but the virtues are not *mere* tenors. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to address these textual difficulties in Stobaeus.

<sup>44</sup>Just as AAs are a species of gradable adjectives, Sedley and Long (1987) classify tenors as a species of enduring state (p. 376).

‘honest’ and ‘courageous,’ are clearly gradable. They function felicitously both in comparatives and with degree modifiers:

- (24) Mary is more virtuous/honest/courageous than John
- (25) Mary is very virtuous/honest/courageous, the most virtuous/honest/courageous person I know

Virtue terms are obviously gradable adjectives, but a gradable adjectives of what stripe? Absolute or relative? Total or partial? Can virtue terms be modeled on an absolute gradable adjective like ‘straight,’ or are is their behavior rather more similar to a relative gradable adjective like ‘tall’?

It is helpful here to note that virtue-theoretic adjectives modify a wide range of object types. Our discussion will focus on persons and actions, the relevant objects of appraisal within ethics. In both cases, virtue-theoretic adjectives function like total AAs in “point to” tests, both in the middle of and at the extremes of the underlying scales. Tests with objects in the middle of the underlying scale do not allow differentiation. If John has lied three times today and Mary only two, even though an honesty comparative like (24) is acceptable, the following command is infelicitous:

- (26) #Point to the honest/virtuous person

Tests at the extreme end of the scale, however, do allow such distinctions. Consider if Mary has told no lies and John one. Not only is the honesty comparative (24) felicitous in such a scenario, but the command (26) is as well. The same holds true for assessments of actions. If John hid in his foxhole but Mary managed to will herself out of the trench, a use of (27) is true. However, if Mary subsequently cowers at the gate of the enemy stronghold, despite the fact that she is more courageous, (28) is infelicitous:

- (27) Mary’s action was more courageous than John’s
- (28) #Point to the person whose war effort was courageous

Had Mary stormed the gates though, not only would (27) have been true, but (28) would have been an acceptable request as well. Virtue-theoretic terms thus display the same asymmetry that total AAs do with RAs in that they cannot be used to distinguish objects in the middle of the scale but can be used to do so at the scale’s extreme.

Because the scale of virtue has a maximal element, uses of virtue-theoretic adjectives also do not always create Sorites marches. For example, (29) is clearly false when considering the difference between telling one lie or none at all:

- (29) For however dishonest a person is, telling one less lie will not make them honest

It is possible that, for a person who has told one lie, having told one less lie will make them honest. An important issue to note is that being an honest person,

and a virtuous person more generally, is not just grounded in particular actions. Virtues are dispositions, and as such, they can fail to manifest due to the absence of triggering conditions or be masked when such conditions obtain. A dishonest person can therefore have told no lies at all due to their unmanifested disposition to be dishonest. On this understanding, then it is no surprise that (29) comes out false. In this case, it is not false because virtue terms do not always lead to the Sorites, but because a dishonest person is not made honest by having told one less lie. To account for this, we can alter (29) as follows:

(30) For however dishonest a person is, the disposition to tell one less lie will not make them honest

With (30), we are not simply altering the manifestations of the person's dispositions, but whether they have the disposition altogether. Changing a person from being disposed to tell a lie in a particular scenario to no longer being so disposed can thus change whether or not they are honest.

Further confirming that virtue terms are total AAs is the fact that virtue talk is subject to natural precisification. Virtue terms are sometimes used to rule out those that are quite vicious. If a job candidate lies on an application, a manager could refuse to consider them with a use of (31):

(31) We need someone who is honest

On other occasions though, virtue language can be used to rule out those that are vicious even to a small degree. Suppose that an intelligence agency is hiring a spy and, in the course of their interview, even though they do not lie, they nevertheless fail to divulge one of their previous marriages. Intelligence staff may move on from the candidate with a use of (31) even though the candidate is very honest, a much stronger standard than someone who outright lies on their application.

The case for virtue terms being total absolute gradable adjectives is thus fairly strong. One way to develop the Stoic account of virtue then is by taking virtue-theoretic adjectives to be AAs, uniting the Stoic model of 'straight' and virtue terms under one semantic kind. Another reason to think that this reading does not do too much violence to the Stoic view is their treatment of the virtues and vagueness. Even though the Stoics were one of the earliest sources to consider the Sorites paradox, they never entertained the thought that virtue terms could give rise to a Sorites. Instead, there is an obvious cutoff in cases of virtue. In considering Chrysippus's exploration of Sorites-type arguments, Susanne Bobzien points out that virtue was not something that Chrysippus took to create a Sorites march: "In the case of Stoic virtue, there is no such pattern. Rather, virtue is a limit. Once something is a heap, it can still grow from a small heap to a bigger heap; once something counts as many, it can grow from just many to very many, etc. But once someone has become virtuous, they have become fully, maximally, perfectly, and most virtuous at that very

time.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, another point of agreement between the Stoic account of virtue and understanding virtue terms to be AAs is that virtue terms do not give rise to the Sorites.<sup>46</sup>

Because there are good arguments to think that virtue terms are neither contextually variable nor give rise to Sorites paradoxes, it is plausible that virtue terms are total AAs. This is not to deny that it is possible to create a Sorites context with imprecise uses of ‘virtuous.’ ‘Virtuous’ and ‘vicious’ are contradictories, and thus the total AA should be capable of generating the Sorites when used imprecisely. ‘Vicious’ is a partial AA as a set of actions that embody vice to even a small degree are vicious, and ‘virtuous’ is total for it is true of sets of actions that possess virtue to a maximal degree. Sure enough, ‘virtuous’ does give rise to Sorites-paradoxical results when used imprecisely. Consider a case where a bank teller is described as virtuous even though he has forged one check. Will adding one more forged check to his resume make him vicious? Because it is not clear that one more illegal money order would make him vicious, the crucial premise of the Sorites takes hold. The partial AA, on the other hand, does not yield this result because it is associated with a strict cutoff. This is true of ‘vicious,’ as a believer who does not possess any degree of vice cannot be described as vicious in any context.

#### 4 DEFENDING STOIC VIRTUE

In the last section, I made the case that taking virtue adjectives to be absolute gradable adjectives is a promising development of the Stoic account of virtue, uniting a number of Stoic commitments. In this section, I will show that understanding virtue terms as AAs can also make sense of (1)-(5). If virtue terms are absolute gradable adjectives, this means that they track an underlying top-closed scale as represented in Figure 1. To be virtuous is to reach the maximum point in the scale. This makes sense of **Perfect Virtue** – just like with fullness, only those who are at the top of the scale of can truly be called full or virtuous. The scalar representation also helps make sense of **Bivalence**. Just like every stick that is not straight is bent, everyone that is not virtuous falls below the top degree in the scale, below the waves of the sea, and is for that reason

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<sup>45</sup>See Bobzien (2002), p. 227.

<sup>46</sup>Due to the close connection between virtue and *episteme* outlined in Footnote 42, we might also expect that many epistemic traits are expressible using absolute gradable adjectives. An interesting case study in this regard is rationality. ‘Rational’ cannot be used with a contextually accommodating threshold in the middle of its scale. Suppose that, upon looking out the window and seeing no rain outside, Mary forms the belief that it is lightly raining. John, on the other hand, forms the belief that it is not only cloudy and raining, but also hailing. In such a case, even though Mary’s belief is less irrational than John’s, the following is an infelicitous request:

#Point to the one who believed rationally.

Therefore, the unmarked form of ‘rational’ cannot be used to distinguish between beliefs in the middle of the underlying scale of rationality. It could well be then that the Stoic view that virtue-theoretic adjectives are AAs also has applications within epistemology.

vicious. Taking virtue-theoretic terms as absolute gradable adjectives can thus make sense of the basic Stoic picture of virtue.

Interpreting virtue adjectives as AAs also provides avenues of response to the critics of Stoic virtue. Take **Ordinary Virtue**, for example. As we have seen, AAs can be used imprecisely. When we say that a stadium is empty on game day, we are not being as precise as when we say that the stadium is empty for a demolition. The former application of ‘empty’ is strictly false, but it is good enough for the practical interests at play. The stadium does not need to be entirely empty on game day as it does when a deconstruction project is in the offing. This point holds for the virtues as well. It is true to say that a person is honest or courageous only if they are completely so. However, imprecise uses of virtue-theoretic adjectives still have their place – such uses can have practical value, like when making hiring decisions that do not require someone who is completely honest. This allows the Stoics to make sense of **Ordinary Virtue**, that we often describe those who are not completely virtuous as virtuous. Even though such descriptions are literally false, it is appropriate to describe them in this way because we are often not concerned with perfect virtue on a day-to-day basis. Nevertheless, a theory of virtue does not have to answer to merely imprecise applications of a concept. The Stoics can maintain that only the fully virtuous are truly virtuous even though we often use virtue terms imprecisely.

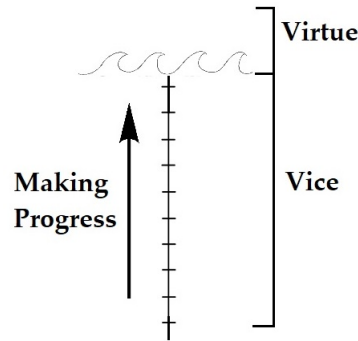


Figure 1: Absolute Virtue

What about **Comparative Virtue**? Even though total AAs only permit application of the unmarked form at the top of the scale, they nevertheless allow comparisons in the middle of the scale. With ‘straight,’ even though it is only true that a perfectly straight line is straight, it is possible to make true comparative claims, like that rod A is straighter than rod B. Likewise, with virtue terms, we have seen that it is possible to compare two individuals on the underlying scale associated with the virtues. As we have seen, it is permissible to use virtue terms in comparatives and with degree modifiers:

- (32) Mary is more virtuous/honest/courageous than John
- (33) Mary is very virtuous/honest/courageous, the most virtuous/honest/courageous person I know

Even though neither Mary nor John are perfectly virtuous, (32) and (33) are felicitous due to comparisons on the underlying scale. Thus, despite the fact

that neither Mary nor John can be truly described using the unmarked form, comparing where individuals fall on the underlying scale can make sense of **Comparative Virtue**.

Similarly, this underlying scale is what makes **Moral Progress** possible. Even though the *prokopton* only becomes virtuous after traversing the final step on the scale, they were nevertheless making progress before they reached this final stage. These improvements did not change their overall moral evaluation, they still remained vicious at each step, but they nevertheless could satisfy **Moral Progress** before the last stage in their moral development. Annas defends the Stoics on this point, saying that, instead of talking about degrees of virtue, we can instead speak in terms of degrees of moral progress:

The idea that there are no degrees of virtue does not mean that there cannot be degrees of progress towards virtue. And the Stoics do believe this, since they talk about the person who is making progress in living better, the *prokopton* or ‘progressor’. When you reorder your priorities and try to live up to your new commitments, you are progressing towards virtue, and there can certainly be degrees of that.<sup>47</sup>

According to Annas, if we understand the Stoics as advocating progress towards virtue rather than progress within virtue, then it is not inconsistent for them to hold **Moral Progress** along with their other commitments. This progress, then, can proceed along the underlying scale even though the change from vicious to virtuous only happens at the final stage.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to give a contemporary interpretation capable of defending the Stoic account of virtue. By understanding virtue terms as absolute gradable adjectives, Stoics can maintain that (1)-(5) are all true, offering an updated defense of a view that is often thought to be beyond the pale. This modest stance, that taking virtue terms as AAs can help the Stoics respond to certain sorts of criticisms, is not to say that the view offered in this paper is correct. My purpose in this paper has been to show that, if we understand virtue terms as AAs, there’s a contemporary interpretation of the Stoics that can offer responses to some of its most pressing criticisms. If we go a step further, however, and agree that virtue terms are absolute gradable adjectives, then this has a significant number of consequences for theorizing about virtue.

If it is right to think of ‘virtuous’ as a total AA, then several philosophers have missed the mark when theorizing about virtue. Take Rosalind Hursthouse, for example. Hursthouse holds that whether or not a person is virtuous comes in degrees:

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<sup>47</sup>See Annas (2016).

“As I noted...whether or not an adult definitely has a particular virtue is a matter of degree.”<sup>48</sup>

On Hursthouse’s view, whether or not a person possesses a certain virtue comes in degrees. If the development of the Stoic view that is advanced in this paper is correct, however, then Hursthouse is mistaken. Obtaining a particular virtue requires perfection, and those who do not achieve this perfection do not properly possess the given virtue. Likewise, the contextual accounts of virtue offered by Swanton and Russell are incompatible with a perfectionist understanding of virtue. If the Stoics are correct, being virtuous is not simply a matter of being *virtuous enough*, but being completely virtuous.<sup>49</sup> Hursthouse’s, Swanton’s, and Russell’s views are mistaken. A person cannot be virtuous if they only respond to the circumstances of life in a way that is good or virtuous enough. If a person’s actions are only good enough or virtuous to a high degree, then at best that person can satisfy a virtue predicate that is used imprecisely.

Furthermore, if virtue-theoretic adjectives are AAs, then Diogenes was right to have a pessimistic view on the prospect of virtuous Athenians. The majority of the citizens of Athens harbored some degree of vice, making most of them, if not all, vicious. Instead of taking Diogenes to be unrealistic, however, and expecting too much of the Athenians, we can see that his high standards captured the semantics of virtue terms. Diogenes refused to go along with imprecise applications of virtue terms, instead insisting that they be used in accord with their actual truth conditions. Far from being a madman, Diogenes saw what only the Stoics have had the courage to maintain – virtue requires moral perfection.

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<sup>48</sup>See Hursthouse (1999), p. 145.

<sup>49</sup>Russell (2009) is an interesting case, as he anticipates several of the insights offered in this paper. He notes that “thinking of virtue in terms of ideals is required on account of the very sort of satis concept that virtue is.” (p. 112) Russell also notes that virtue-theoretic adjectives as well as adjectives like ‘full’ have thresholds that are fixed by practical purposes (p. 118), anticipating what can be seen by identifying virtue-theoretic adjectives as absolute gradable adjectives.



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