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Michael Vazquez, “Hopeless Fools and Impossible Ideals,” *Res Philosophica* 98.3 (2021): 429-451

Hopeless Fools and Impossible Ideals

Abstract: In this article, I vindicate the longstanding intuition that the Stoics are transitional figures in the history of ethics. I argue that the Stoics are committed to thinking that the ideal of human happiness as a life of virtue is impossible for some people, whom I dub ‘hopeless fools.’ In conjunction with the Stoic view that everyone is subject to the same rational requirements to perform ‘appropriate actions’ or ‘duties’ (*kathēkonta/officia*), and the plausible eudaimonist assumption that happiness is a source of normative reasons only if it is in principle attainable, the existence of hopeless fools demonstrates that the Stoics were pluralists about the ultimate justificatory basis of rational action. Hopeless fools are required to behave just like their non-hopeless counterparts, not because doing so is conducive to their happiness, but because doing so conforms with the dictates of Right Reason

§0 Introduction

On one common construal, an ethical theory is eudaimonistic if it accepts the following truism: happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the final object of human desire and the ultimate justification of all rational action.¹ It is important to distinguish the psychological thesis that we in fact desire happiness as our final end from the normative thesis that one’s own happiness is the ultimate *justification* for action. Plausibly, many of the ancients did hold the psychological view², but in this paper I will focus on the latter thesis, which Roger Crisp aptly called “Monistic Rational Eudaimonism” (Crisp 2003, 64). The view is monistic because happiness serve as the *only* ultimate source of reasons for action; it is rational because it is a claim about our normative or justifying reasons rather than a claim about our motivating or explanatory reasons; and finally it is eudaimonistic because the sole and ultimate source of reasons is *happiness*—not just anyone’s

¹ This is what Vlastos dubbed the eudaimonist axiom (Vlastos 1991, 203). Anglophone scholarship is indebted to Vlastos’ understanding of eudaimonism, but the view has a venerable history going back to Eduard Zeller’s *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*.

² For a classic statement, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097a25–b16 and Plato, *Symposium* 205a2-3.

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happiness, and not the happiness of the community, but *one’s own* happiness.³ So we should add ‘egoism’ to Crisp’s formulation, yielding ‘Monistic Egoistic Rational Eudaimonism’. I’ll call this MERE for short.

I have outlined the basic tenets of MERE, which I take to be one dominant account of the structure of ancient ethical theory, only to suggest that the Stoics deviate from this fixture in one subtle yet significant way. There are several ways one might reject or modify MERE. For example, one could reject the agent-relativity of ‘egoism’, such that everyone’s happiness, or the happiness of my community, are the ultimate aim of rational action. This is an especially tempting interpretive move when it comes to the Stoics, since their seemingly cosmopolitan injunctions are facially akin to modern conceptions of impartiality and altruism. In this regard, though, appearances are misleading. For the Stoics grounded the rationality of other-regarding behavior—even the self-effacing behavior of exemplars like Cato and Regulus—in a form of self-love. The Stoic doctrine of ‘appropriation’ or ‘affiliation’ (*oikeiōsis/conciliatio*)⁴ maintains that even radically altruistic behavior is grounded in an attachment to one’s own constitution’ (*sustasis/constitutio*)—in particular, the individual’s drive to preserve her ruling part (*hēgemonikon/principatus*) in a natural state.⁵ This is true of the baby who tries to walk for the

³ One should not conflate ancient conceptions of *eudaimonia* with narrowly prudential or self-regarding motivations or forms of behavior. Almost every substantive conception of happiness in the ancient world cut across our modern distinction between ‘moral’ and ‘prudential’. Most ancient ethical theorists countenanced the possibility that acting in a way that accords with one’s own *eudaimonia* requires someone to subordinate her prudential good, or to sacrifice life and limb, or to act for another’s sake *simpliciter*. Cf. Cooper 1975, 89-90 n1: “happiness tends to be taken as referring to a subjective psychological state, and indeed one that is often temporary and recurrent.” Cooper prefers ‘flourishing’ for this understandable reason.

⁴ I will supply standard Latin translations for many of the Greek Stoic technical terms introduced.

⁵ This is my understanding of the Stoic claim that every animal has an ‘impulse’ (*hormē*) ‘to preserve itself’ (*epi to tērein heauto*) (D.L. 7.85; D.L. = Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum*). The first thing to which an animal is attached (*prōton oikeion*) is its own self and constitution, an attachment that governs all ensuing behavior and motivation.

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first time (Sen. *Ep.* 121.8)⁶, the adult who takes ordinary means to preserve life & limb (Cic. *Fin.* 3.16)⁷, and also Regulus when he decided to submit himself to Carthaginian torture on behalf of Rome (Cic. *Off.* 3.99)⁸. The full range of prudential and altruistic behavior observable in creatures like us finds its source in an attachment to one's self. Instead of suggesting that the Stoics deviated from MERE by revising or rejecting egoism, I will argue that they rejected monism. That is, for the Stoics there is not one but *two* ultimate sources of reasons for action: one's own happiness and the Natural Law. So my claim is that the Stoics are 'pluralistic egoistic rational eudaimonists'.

My case will proceed as follows. First, I provide a brief primer on the central notions of Stoic ethical theory that are necessary for the problem space of this paper (§1). I then reject two common ways scholars have attempted to ascribe pluralism to the Stoics (§2). I then argue that monism faces a decisive objection rooted in the Stoics' pessimism about some agents' prospects for attaining moral perfection. If decisive, the objection implies pluralism about the ultimate source of practical norms (§3). In the following section I defend the central interpretive claim of my argument against monism, namely the Stoic commitment to the existence of hopeless fools (§4). With the ground cleared of existing interpretations of Stoic eudaimonism, I outline the rudiments of a novel account of Stoic pluralism (§5). I conclude by suggesting that even if some or all of us are doomed to be hopeless fools, the Stoics think we all have independent reason to act *as if* happiness were within reach (§6).

⁶ Sen. *Ep.* = Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*.

⁷ Cic. *Fin.* = Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*.

⁸ *Off.* = *De Officiis*.

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§1 An Opinionated Primer on Stoic Ethics

Like any other eudaimonistic ethical theory, Stoicism had its own substantive conception of the goal (*telos/finis*) of human life. Stoic scholars provided a range of distinct formulations of the end, but the underlying vision is that one's ultimate good is to live in agreement with nature (*phusis/natura*)—both one's own individual nature as a rational animal and the rational, cosmic nature of which we are parts.⁹ Living in accordance with nature consists in living in accordance with virtue, which is wholly constitutive of happiness (D.L. 7.87). On the Stoic view, virtue is the only good (*monon to kalon agathon/honestum solum bonum*), since it is the only thing that ever truly *benefits* its possessor (S.E. M.11.22-26)¹⁰. Everything else is merely indifferent (*adiaphoron/indifferens*). The practical content of virtue lies in the Stoic doctrine of 'selection' (*eklogē/selectio*), or the discrimination or choice of indifferents every action involves. Selection is what we do when we exercise our agency in the world, or engage with things strictly outside virtue and vice. Indifferents like health and wealth are indifferent with respect to one's happiness—their possession or lack makes no difference as to whether one is happy or wretched—but they are emphatically *not* indifferent with respect to action (D.L. 7.104-5).¹¹ Naturalness and unnaturalness provide a metric for non-moral value (*axia/aestimatio*) (Cic. *Fin.* 3.31; S.E. M.11.59-61; Stob. *Ecl.* 2.82-5)¹². The kind of value of indifferents like health and death have is a kind of 'planning' or 'prospective' value—a value that guides our deliberations

⁹ For the full range of Stoic *telos*-formulae, including changes in response to Academic criticism, see Long and Sedley 1987, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Vol. 1), Sections 63-64.

¹⁰ S.E. M.11 = Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* XI.

¹¹ Practical reasoning and deliberation are concerned centrally with the indifferents that are indifferent with respect to happiness but naturally stimulative of impulse and repulsion. Some indifferent things, like the number of hairs on one's head, are indifferent both with respect to happiness and with respect to action. This axiological and psychological thesis marks the difference between Cynicism and Stoicism.

¹² Stob. *Ecl.* = Joannes Stobaeus, *Eclogues* (citations keyed to Wachsmuth's edition)

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about how to exercise our agency by providing reasons for action (Brennan 2003, 263ff; see also Cooper 1998, 269-70). This way of putting it captures the attitude of indifference we are supposed to have towards our possession or lack of things like health and wealth, but the earnestness with which a Stoic is required to deliberate about them.

The correct selection in any situation, made on the basis of a proper reckoning of non-moral value, constitutes the appropriate or befitting action (*kathēkon/officium*). Sages and fools alike are capable of performing appropriate actions, but only the Sage does so virtuously and from an infallible disposition.¹³ And while the possession or lack of indifferents makes no difference to our well-being, "the manner of using them is constitutive of happiness and unhappiness" (D.L. 7.104-5, trans. Long & Sedley). In other words, the perfect disposition to make the right kind of selections among indifferents, or to exercise our agency on the raw material Zeus has given us, is constitutive of happiness. In this way, Stoic virtue is the counterfactually robust disposition to act correctly on the basis of one's reasons, and valuable and disvaluable indifferents are the sources of those reasons. That is why indifferents are called the material of virtue (*hulē tēs aretēs/materia sapientiae*), and virtue the perfectly reliable skill of using that material well (Plut. *Comm. not.* 1069E; Cic. *Fin.* 3.61)¹⁴.

¹³ On my interpretation, the defining characteristic of virtue is not that it causes an agent to perform distinctive actions, but that it causes an agent to do the sorts of things everyone does from time to time with absolute reliability and stability. When used to describe *actions*, 'virtue' picks out the intensional and adverbial aspect of an action (the 'how', as Kerferd explained in 1978). Calling an action virtuous is just another way of saying that an appropriate action issued from a virtuous disposition. Herein lies the difference between the 'perfectly right actions' (*katorthōmata/recte facta*) of the Sage and the merely 'appropriate actions' (*kathēkonta/officia*) shared by Sages and Fools.

¹⁴ Plut. *Comm. not.* = Plutarch, *De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos*.

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In order to make sense of this picture of virtue as the perfect disposition to select otherwise indifferent things, the Stoics analogized to the structure of games.¹⁵ After comparing Socrates' handling of "imprisonment, exile, drinking poison, being deprived of wife, leaving children of orphans" in good form to playing a game well, Epictetus enjoins us all as follows:

So ought we also to act, exhibiting the ball-players carefulness about the game, but the same indifference about the object played with, as being a mere ball. For a man ought by all means to strive to show his skill in regard to some of the external materials, yet without making the material a part of himself, but merely lavishing his skill in regard to it, whatever it may be. (Epict. *Diss.* 2.5.19-21; trans. Oldfather)¹⁶

Life is a game, and the fully rational Sage will try her best to play the game well. She will select among the indifferents that are made available to her on the basis of reasons already accessible to her foolish counterpart. But in contrast to her unenlightened counterpart, she knows that *achieving* the contingent internal aims of the game is, in the final analysis, a matter of indifference.

§2 Pluralism Misconstrued

With this picture of Stoic agency in mind, we can see why a tempting and pluralism-friendly reading of the Stoics is misguided. Here's how one such view goes:

Pluralism about Reasons: The Stoics are pluralists because they held that 'indifferents' like health and wealth are non-derivative sources of reasons for action in their own right.

¹⁵ This is done in modern scholarship as well. The earliest example to my knowledge is De Lacy 1943, 123-124. See also Barney 2003, 316; Striker 1996, 244ff & 309ff; Klein 2014, 106.

¹⁶ Epict. *Diss.* = Epictetus, *Dissertationes*.

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According to this view, indifferents like health and wealth are valuable items which provide reasons for action *alongside* the reasons generated by genuine goods and evils like virtue and vice. Of course, the relationship between those two kinds of reasons will be asymmetric, such that the goodness of virtue enjoys lexical priority over the mere value of indifferents.¹⁷ Even so, the problem is that this view distorts the hierarchical structure of reasons for action evidenced by the game analogy above. Virtue just is the skill of playing the game well, or the perfectly robust disposition to use indifferents like health, poverty, and sickness excellently. Like any other player, the seasoned athlete is responsive to reasons and considerations within the game. As the only 'good', virtue is the condition on which indifferent things like health and wealth are sources of practical reasons in the first place. Another way to think about the higher-order status of virtue's goodness is that virtue gives us reasons to engage in practical agency, or a reason *to play the game*.¹⁸ On either construal, the Stoic's hierarchical structure of reasons for action is incompatible with pluralism about reasons because it implies that virtue and vice are reason-givers *of the same kind* as indifferents like health and wealth. In fact, however, the Stoics thought that indifferents are the sole basis on which we make decisions about how to act (Cic. *Fin.* 3.60; see also Plut. *Stoic. repugn.*¹⁹ 1042D). But the goodness of virtue and the prospect of happiness are what make it the case that we have reason to engage in practical activity in the first place. In

¹⁷ See, for example, Sen. *Ep.* 92.11: "If good health, rest, and freedom from pain are not going to thwart virtue..." (trans. Long & Sedley). See also, Cic. *Off.* 3.13: "always to concur with virtue; and as for other things that are in accordance with nature, to choose them if they do not conflict with virtue" (trans. Griffin). Broadly speaking, this is the view which Barney calls the "Dualist Model" of practical reasoning, and which Brennan calls the "Salva Virtue Model" (Barney 2003, 330; Brennan 2005, 184). Frede articulated the kind of worry about the dualist model I share with several commentators: "If that were the Stoic position, it would be open to the criticism, in fact raised by some of its opponents, that it threatens to collapse into the position of its Platonistic and Peripatetic rivals, and differs only in terminology." Frede 1999, 91. Cf. Inwood 2010, 223.

¹⁸ Whether virtue is itself a reason (e.g. a 'reason to care' about the game) or a condition on reasons within the game is something I discuss elsewhere, but which makes no difference to the immediate point.

¹⁹ *Stoic. repugn.* = *De Stoicorum repugnantiis*.

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other words, the Stoic view so far appears to be perfectly compatible with Crisp's monistic conception of eudaimonism outlined in the previous section, according to which happiness is the *sole*, ultimate justification of rational action.

A different way scholars have developed pluralism is by approaching the question from the angle of moral psychology:

Pluralism about Rational Concern: The Stoics are pluralists because they held that there are two non-fully-overlapping domains of rational *concern*: (1) the life in accordance with Nature and (2) the merely natural life. Only the former matters for our happiness (it is our sole end or *telos*), but the latter is also a source of reasons.

On this view, the 'merely natural life' is concerned with success in attaining and preserving valuable indifferents like health, reputation, financial prosperity, and so on.²⁰ This kind of life goes well when the world cooperates—when your personal health is secure, your friends are numerous, your career is satisfying, and so on. In contrast, the 'life in accordance with Nature' is the life that accords with Nature's providential plan. It is often not as rosy as the natural life, from our finite point of view, but the goodness and value of this life far surpasses the concerns associated with the first kind of life.

I think this form of pluralism fails on several fronts, but I'll mention just one that stems from the Stoic commitment to providence and the denial of tragedy. 'Pluralism about rational concern' holds that the scope of rational concern contains aims and objectives that are not uniformly coextensive, so there is possibility for rational conflict. By rational conflict I mean competition between genuine, *pro tanto* reasons for acting—say, between reasons for doing what accords with virtue and reasons for doing the opposite. While this might seem to many of us a

²⁰ For example, see Striker 1996, 60. Cf. Irwin 1996; Kamketar 2005.

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recognizable and ineliminable feature of our moral lives, such conflict is something the Stoics were at pains to rule out. Such a picture poses a threat to the rationality of living in the way Zeus wants us to, especially when Zeus' plan involves forgoing conventional goods like health and life. After all, it provides genuine and non-arbitrary rational grounds for the immoralist to invoke when explaining why he looked out for himself rather than his fellow citizens. In a word, the view poses a threat to the sovereignty of virtue, a thesis which the Stoics steadfastly defended.²¹

On the basis of considerations of the kind adduced above, monism remains an attractive interpretation of Stoic eudaimonism, and one which in recent years has gained additional currency and traction.²² In the next two sections I offer an argument against monism, and thereafter advance a novel conception of Stoic pluralism that avoids the kinds of worries just enumerated.

§3 The Threat to Monism

Monistic Egoistic Rational Eudaimonism (MERE) is arguably the most natural reading of Stoicism, especially if one is inclined to interpret the Stoics in light of their Socratic heritage. I think that interpretive impulse is a welcome corrective to the tendency to read the Stoics as modern-looking outliers in the ancient ethical tradition. At the same time, however, I am

²¹ For a clear statement of this position, see Klein 2015. Vivid examples of this thesis can be found in Cicero's *Off.* (see especially the legendary tale of Regulus at 3.99). When setting out my proposed conception of pluralism below, it will become clear why the fact that the two domains of rational concern are non-overlapping is of central import. The co-extension of merely appropriate actions and perfectly appropriate actions is one crucial way in which my view diverges from other kinds of pluralism attributed to the Stoics and espoused by thinkers like Herillus. See footnote 61 below.

²² This debate has largely centered on the psychological thesis of eudaimonism, and specifically on the status of 'selection' (*selectio/eklogē*) as a motivating and evaluative impulse directed at indifferents. A clear statement of the so-called 'two-motivators' view can be found in Kamtekar 2005. Prominent defenses of the Stoic commitment to the Socratic 'guise of the good' include Frede 1999 and Klein 2020. Cf. Larmore 1990, 16.

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convinced that adherents of monism face a decisive problem that implies the negation of monism. The objection is that the Stoic ideal of happiness is impossible for at least some people. I've dubbed the group of people for whom happiness is in principle out of reach 'hopeless fools'. Hopeless fools are agents who will only ever act foolishly or out of a vicious disposition. And as scholars widely agree, anytime a fool acts, even when he performs the appropriate action, his action is a moral mistake (*hamartēma*/peccatum) (Stob. *Ecl.* 2.99).²³ A fool perpetuates his unhappiness whenever he acts, and hopeless fools can't but perpetuate their own misery. Whether hopeless fools are many or few, pluralism follows from their existence (Premise 3 below) and the ancient eudaimonist assumption that 'prudential ought' implies 'can' (Premise 2 below). In what follows, I'll begin by setting out the argument for this conclusion, followed by a gloss on each of the premises.

The Argument against Monism:

1. According to the Stoics, every agent has an ultimate reason to ϕ .
2. If an agent has an ultimate reason to ϕ , then either (2a) she must be able to act on that reason or (2b) she must be able to act on derivative reasons that would make it the case that, at some point in the future, she could act on that ultimate reason.
3. The Stoic ideal of happiness as a life of virtue is impossible for at least some people, namely 'hopeless fools'.²⁴
4. *Hopeless fools* cannot have ultimate reason to ϕ that is rooted in their own happiness because they are not able to act on that reason (\neg 2a), nor are they able to act on derivative reasons that would make it the case that, at some point in the future, they could act on that ultimate reason (\neg 2b).

²³ See, for example, Long 1968, 343. Moral mistakes or wrong actions are wrong either because someone omitted to perform the appropriate action (*kathēkon*) or because one acts contrary to right reason (Stob., *Ecl.* 2.93). The fool, in virtue of his disposition, invariably satisfies the second condition.

²⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify the role of this premise in the overall argument against monism.

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5. So, the Stoics must have countenanced at least one additional ultimate and non-derivative source of reasons—whether for hopeless fools or for all of us. That is, the Stoics are *pluralists* about the ultimate source of reasons for action.

Implicit in the above argument is the uncontroversial Stoic premise that *all of us*, hopeless fools included, are subject to normative requirements and scrutinizable for our actions. We are *all* required to perform ‘appropriate actions’ (*kathēkonta/officia*), i.e. the sort of actions shared by Sage and Fool alike, and which texts like Cicero’s *On Duties* enjoin each and every one of us to perform (Cic. *Off.* 3.14; *Fin.* 60-1). What the argument shows is that at least some of us, but possibly all of us, have reasons to act that cannot be rooted in the prospect of our own happiness. I’ll now unpack some of the premises in more detail.

Premise 1 follows from at least one authoritative account of rational eudaimonism.²⁵

Premise 2 expresses the thought that the prospect of happiness—or at the very least the fruits of one’s efforts in pursuit of it—is the impetus behind ancient inquiries into our *telos*. It is difficult to imagine producing a single text that definitively proves this, since it is a broad claim about the theoretical underpinnings of eudaimonist ethics. But I believe that no ancient philosopher would have cared about happiness if it was either in principle out of reach or if our pursuit of that unattainable ideal was not to some extent good. The problem is that the Stoics thought the latter, i.e. getting anything good out of our pursuit of virtue even if we fail to achieve it, was a non sequitur. That’s because the Stoics were firmly committed to the view that only virtue is good, and more importantly, that virtue’s goodness does not spill over into anything else.²⁶ Someone

²⁵ According to this account of ancient eudaimonism, happiness is the sole and ultimate reason to act. Our doxographic sources confirm the Stoic commitment to both psychological and rational eudaimonism. Both forms of eudaimonism are taken for granted throughout Cicero’s presentation of ancient ethical theories in *Fin.*

²⁶ Hopeless fools *can* have ‘good flowing’ or ‘virtuous’ days in the sense that they fulfill components of Stoic happiness (e.g. not getting angry, doing one’s duty, etc.), but it does not imply that any fraction of that good is itself good—an idea the Stoics firmly rejected.

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who *almost* gets to virtue has a life that is just as bad as the person whose moral progress never gets off the ground. Making an A+ effort in pursuit of virtue but failing to get there is no more *good* than not trying at all, even if the effort is rationally required. Goodness does not come in degrees, nor does it come in any other form than the perfect virtue of the Sage. Stoic happiness is an all-or-nothing affair, and degrees of moral progress that fall short of virtue do not make a difference to our well-being (Sen. *Ep.* 118.15-17; Plut. *Comm. not.* 1063A-B; D.L. 7.127). One may reasonably find such a view objectionable or counter-intuitive, but their textual basis as Stoic views is secure.²⁷

Regarding the disjuncts of Premise 2, it is clear how the perfectly virtuous agent can act on her ultimate reason to be happy (as virtuous, all of her actions are *ipso facto* happiness-producing), and we can also make sense of the foolish progressor who, although vicious right now, can act on derivative reasons that are rooted in his future prospect of happiness. Some day, with enough practice, he might get there. My claim is that it would be unintelligible to suggest that the ultimate basis for ϕ -ing is happiness even though happiness is *in principle* out of reach, as it is for hopeless fools.²⁸ The relevant sense of possibility here is *causal*. A fool can only have derivative reasons to act that are rooted in the prospect of happiness if those reasons bear the right sort of causal relation to bringing about the end (*viz.* virtue), and if it is possible for that causal relation to obtain. To understand the relation in which the hopeless fool stands to his own

²⁷ I think this view is particularly difficult for an Aristotelian to swallow. There is something rather flat-footed about suggesting that happiness is about *getting* goods or *bringing* good things about. But there is a Socratic provenance to thinking about happiness as the acquisition of good things, and the Stoics talk in this way as well. See Plato, *Symposium* 205a and *Euthydemus* 279a.

²⁸ An alternative way to think about it, suggested to me by Jeremy Reid, is to get to pluralism by showing that even though hopeless fools are unable to achieve the cognitive state that is constitutive of virtue, they are subject to other epistemic norms in virtue of being rational creatures designed by Zeus (e.g. to assent only to cataleptic impressions). So, they are at least constrained by these epistemic norms, even if not the eudaimonistic ones.

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happiness, it is helpful to focus on the contrast between the hopeless fool and the non-hopeless fool. For the non-hopeless fool, happiness is in a loose manner of speaking 'out of reach', which is to say that virtue is for him altogether unlikely. That unlikeliness can be understood in a modal sense, such that in no nearby possible worlds does the non-hopeless fool successfully complete the sequence of appropriate actions with the reliability and understanding required for the cultivation of virtue. That unlikeliness can also be understood probabilistically, in which case we can compare the non-hopeless fool's chances of attaining virtue to winning the Powerball lottery.²⁹ The prospects of success for the non-hopeless fool are vanishingly small—so small, that one might deride the non-hopeless fool for earnestly trying or for thinking he has a shot. The plight of the hopeless fool is distinctive, however. His prospects are not vanishingly small, since he has no prospect whatsoever. Whereas the non-hopeless fool is playing a lottery that very few will win, the hopeless fool is simply not in the running. In the next section I will provide an argument for why we should think the Stoics were committed to the existence of such an agent (Premise 3).

§4 The Existence of Hopeless Fools

Compared to Aristotle, who is relatively optimistic about the prospect of attaining virtue, the Stoics are pessimists about moral perfection.³⁰ Despite the Stoics' optimism about the means given to us by nature for attaining perfection, they are deeply pessimistic about our prospects of perfection. In this respect the Stoics find company with an otherwise unlikely crew. Consider

²⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this example, and for pressing this point.

³⁰ For the right sort of well-bred men, that is. I see no reason to doubt that, among the *aristoi*, virtue is well within reach. And they have exemplars of virtue to emulate, whereas no Stoic Sage is among us.

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Augustine’s combination of perfectionism with the total depravity of human nature (Augustine, *Enchiridion* 118) or Kant’s notion of ‘radical evil’ (Kant 1996, 6:32). Although the latter two posit the need for extra-human assistance in one form or another—the Stoics certainly do not—the Stoic view shares with them an abiding pessimism about our ability to overcome the obstacles to perfection. Such pessimism, I take it, is compatible with the idea that the ingredients of perfection have been given to us³¹, and that in principle perfection is attainable by our own naturally endowed powers.³²

The Stoics were not shy about lamenting the ubiquitous corruption of our rational nature. The sources of corruption boil down to the “persuasiveness of external realities” and “communication with [one’s] companions” (D.L. 7.89, trans. Mensch; see Brouwer 2020 for a detailed treatment). So, even though the “nature’s starting points are never distorted,” (Ibid) the Stoics are confident that most of us have deeply ingrained false beliefs about, for example, the goodness of wealth or the badness of death.³³ And dislodging these deeply ingrained beliefs is voluntary only in the loosest sense of the term (cf. Bobzien 1998, 276-301; Brennan 2005, 288–304; Graver 2007, 167–171). On the basis of these claims it seems reasonable to conclude that, at least sometimes, the hand we have been dealt in life precludes the sort of cognitive self-mastery that is constitutive of virtue.³⁴

³¹ This belief is shared by other naturalists like the Epicureans, and provides a basis for thinking that neo-natal motivations play a foundational role in specifying the human good (hence the so-called ‘cradle arguments’).

³² This is precisely the point at which an Augustinian accuses the Stoics of pride (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 19.4; *Retractationes* 1.2).

³³ These false beliefs are the dispositional basis of the fool’s affect and behavior. When they become hardened and entrenched, they are called ‘sicknesses’ (*nosēmata*) (Stob. *Ecl.* 2.93). For a fuller analysis of the various scalar psychological conditions of the fool and the Sage, see Graver 2007, 133-148. On the important difference between beliefs about value and beliefs about the appropriate response to value, see Graver 2007, 35-46 (and 144-145, in connection to the latter distinction and the ‘pathetic syllogism’ more generally).

³⁴ One might think Plato and Aristotle are in the same boat given their views on the importance of formative childhood education. But Plato and Aristotle are at least entitled to theorize about the goodness of moral *progress*, which violates the Stoics’ binary conception of virtue and vice.

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Some scholars have even entertained the possibility that the early Stoic ideal of Sagehood is impossible full stop.³⁵ There is no smoking gun passage for this view, but advocates of this view arguably have a preponderance of inductive evidence in their favor. Cicero tells us that “it happens more often that a mule begets than that a sage comes into existence” (Cic. *Div.* 2.61).³⁶ Multiple sources tell us that the Sage is as rare as the mythical phoenix (Sen. *Ep.* 42.1; Cf. Alex. *Fat.* 199.16 and Quint. *Inst.* 12.1.18-19).³⁷ One does not need to look far into our sources to find utterly pessimistic claims about the extension of fools and Sages:

...if the majority of men are bad, or rather, if there have been just one or two good men, as their fables maintain, like some absurd and unnatural creature rarer than the Ethiopians’ phoenix...how could man not be the most miserable of all creatures in having vice and madness ingrown in him and allotted? (Alex. *Fat.* 199.14-22; trans. Long & Sedley)

The Stoics speak often about the divine and god-like knowledge of the Sage, her complete extirpation of the passions and the deeply ingrained false beliefs that cause them.³⁸ In short, there is some reason for the Stoics to conclude that the set of Sages, past and present, is empty.³⁹ But why think that must always be true? Barring any definitive and reliable evidence, the claim that

³⁵ As Andree Hahmann points out, three eminent scholars of Hellenistic philosophy—Long, Pohlenz, and Hadot—held that the Sage is merely a theoretical construct (eine theoretische Konstruktion) or an ideal benchmark (einen idealen Referenzpunkt) (Hahmann 2008, 89). Contrast this with Hirzel, who claims that Zeno did claim to be a Sage and that Cleanthes “had not yet lost his belief in the attainability of the ideal” (“Kleanthes war der Glaube an die Verwirklichung des Ideals noch nicht erloschen,” reference from Brouwer 2014, 127; Cf. *Ibid.*, 104; Sellars 2006, 40-41; Brennan 2005, 36; and Hankinson 2003, 59).

³⁶ *Div.* = *De Divinatione*. See also Cicero’s reference to the Stoics at *Amic.* (= *De Amicitia*) 18: “...their understanding of wisdom is such that no one on earth has to this day attained it” (cf. 21) (trans. John Davie).

³⁷ Alex. *Fat.* = Alexander, *De Fato*; Quint. *Inst.* = Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*. Contrast this pessimism with Seneca’s praise for Cato’s wisdom at *De Constantia Sapientis* 2.1.

³⁸ See SVF 3.544-684 for a collection of evidence about the Sage (SVF = Hans von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*). See also Cicero’s *Paradoxa Stoicorum* (passim) and *Tusculanae Disputationes* 5.81-2.

³⁹ See also S.E. M.7.433: “according to the Stoics themselves, Zeno and Cleanthes and Chrysippus and the others from their school are reckoned among the inferior persons, and every inferior person is ruled by ignorance” (as quoted in Brouwer 2014, 94).

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the Stoic ideal is *in principle* impossible remains at best an inductive hypothesis.⁴⁰ Its appeal stems from the tenor of the Stoic's moral rigorism and pessimism, but its greatest deficit is that it seems to contravene the paradigmatically Stoic idea that, no matter our circumstances, it is always in our power to respond rightly and rationally. The impossibility of Sagehood, or cognitive perfection, would also make nonsense of the Stoic defense of the possibility of knowledge from skeptical attack. Nonetheless, I think there are more secure grounds for the weaker claim that Sagehood is impossible for some people, whom I dub hopeless fools.

Broadly, my argument for the existence of the hopeless fool runs as follows. Vice and wickedness are necessary and ineliminable features of Zeus' good and rational cosmic plan. If we think of the unfolding of providence throughout history as a kind of cosmic drama, then we might say that some people have been cast in the role of hopeless fool. The Stoics maintain that Zeus' plan is perfect, faultless, and not subject to revision or improvement. If it can be shown that hopeless fools are an integral and necessary feature of this cosmic drama, then pluralism follows. Before proceeding, I should note that hopeless fools cannot possibly know *that* they are hopeless. The thesis I am defending is one about the objective condition of certain people, and it does not imply anything about the sorts of attitudes we ought to have in light of this general fact.

So why should we think that hopeless fools are a necessary part of Zeus' good and rational cosmic plan? I think the answer comes out of Stoic discussions of theodicy and explanations of evil more broadly. Consider the following selection of securely orthodox Stoic passages:

⁴⁰ That said, if one is worried that the unlikelihood or near impossibility of Sagehood is an inductive claim, recall that Stoic arguments about Nature's design, purpose, and rationality often take this form.

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- (1) Chrysippus writes as follows: Vice, by comparison with terrible accidents, has its own peculiar explanation. For in a way it does occur in accordance with the rationale (*logos*) of nature, and its occurrence is not, so to speak, useless in relation to the whole world. For otherwise the good would not exist either... (Plut. *Stoic. repugn.* 1042E-F; trans. Long & Sedley)
- (2) Chrysippus...treats [vice] as not only the product of necessity or in accordance with fate, but also as in accordance with god's reason and with the best nature (Ibid, 1050C-D; trans. Long & Sedley).
- (3) Chrysippus' reply to this, when arguing the point in his *On Providence* book 4, is as follows: 'There is absolutely nothing more foolish than those who think that there could have been goods without the coexistence of evils. For since goods are opposite to evils, the two must necessarily exist in opposition to each other and support by a kind of opposed interdependence (Gel. 7.1; trans. Long & Sedley)⁴¹.
- (4) Likewise, [Chrysippus] says, while through nature's plan virtue was being created for men, at the same time vices were born (Ibid).

(1) and (2) tell us that there is a non-arbitrary and rational explanation for the existence of vice and foolishness in the world. (3) and (4) tell us that the existence of vice and foolishness is not only in accordance with Zeus' plan, but that it *has* to be that way. The kind of reasoning found in (3) and (4) is applied to other kinds of conventional 'evils', like natural disasters and suffering. The structure of the Stoic reply is always the same: evil (vice being the only true evil) is a necessary and inextricable part of the overall good and blemishless plan. It's hard for us to see this from our finite point of view, especially when we have been given the role of dealing with or living with such troubles. Viciousness beyond repair is but one such evil, so it should not surprise us that the Stoics thought, for some people, virtue is not a live possibility. Their plight is unfortunate in some sense, but it is part of the good and providential plan.⁴²

⁴¹ Gel. = Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*.

⁴² If pressed for an explanation for the mechanism or basis for perpetual foolishness, one might look to the Stoic's physicalist account of virtue. Virtue just is a certain 'tension' of the pneumatic fire pervading the comsos. Some people, on this view, are physiologically precluded from Sagehood but not free from rational requirements to perform appropriate actions or duties. The physical basis and high cognitive standards of Stoic virtue explain why

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The above considerations suggest that there are hopeless fools. And *yet* hopeless fools are subject to the same norms of practical rationality as ordinary fools and Sages. On the basis of this alone we can infer that his happiness is not the sole justificatory basis for the actions he is rationally required to perform.

§5 Stoic Pluralism: Natural Law and One's Own Happiness

Recall the second premise in the argument outlined above, namely that for someone to have an ultimate reason to ϕ one must be able to act on that reason or on derivative reasons. From this it follows that if the Stoic ideal is impossible for all or for some, then the Stoics must have identified at least one other source of ultimate reasons. The most natural candidate for this additional source, and one for which we have a great deal of textual evidence, is Zeus' commands—or, to use a less personalist metaphor, the prescriptions of the Right Reason which pervades all things.⁴³ One might wonder why I did not begin this whole discussion with irrefutable textual evidence that the Stoics posited at least two distinct sources of practical reasons, and then proceed to motivate or defend the Stoic's insistence that Zeus is a distinct source of reasons. My strategy in this paper went in the reverse: I began with monistic assumptions and argued on the basis of controversial premises that pluralism must be true, and

not just viciousness, but irreparable viciousness, are features of the providential plan. For the virtuous, conventional and merely apparent evils can be useful in the that they provide an occasion for the display and exercise of virtue in the face of disvaluable indifferents. For non-hopeless fools, those merely apparent misfortunes can play didactic and exhortatory functions that promote their moral progress (which will, in all likelihood, never result in virtue). For hopeless fools, those same indifferents can serve as nullifying conditions that remove the prospect of virtue entirely. For some central Stoic texts, see SVF 2.1168-1186; Sen. *De Providentia* (passim). Cf. Sellars 2018.

⁴³ As Long says, "It would be tedious here to offer an exhaustive list of all the alternative descriptions and all the properties which the Stoics gave to Nature. God, craftsman, artistic fire are alternative descriptions; providence, right reason, law are aspects or properties of Nature" (1970, 88). See Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* (SVF 1.537) and D.L. 7.88.

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then I identified the other source as Zeus. The main reason for going this way is dialectical. Scholars who are already convinced of the monistic character of Stoic eudaimonism are inclined to explain away the evidence that suggests otherwise, especially since that evidence tends to come from Cicero, a commentator with his own agenda and his own, sometimes mistaken, sometimes syncretizing, understanding of Stoicism. No one denies that our Ciceronian texts have a decidedly legislative and juridical ethos, only that these texts are authentically Stoic.⁴⁴

The kind of pluralism I am espousing does not posit extensionally distinct rational 'ends' or 'goals' of life, one which the hopeless fool can achieve and one only the Sage can achieve. On my view the hopeless fool is rationally required to behave just like the Sage and Progressor, not because it is conducive to her happiness (as it is for the Sage), and not because it will help make it the case that one day it will be conducive to her happiness (as it is for the progressor), but because it accords with Zeus' providential plan or Right Reason. Furthermore, the injunctions rooted in our own happiness and the injunctions rooted in Nature's plan are coextensive and mutually reinforcing. This agreement between two distinct but co-ultimate sources of practical norms explains the confusing mention of both sources in our texts, without any careful description of the order of justificatory priority. Sometimes the Stoics seem like deontologists, and at other times they seem like eudaimonists.⁴⁵ One way to mitigate this inconsistency is to appreciate the way in which Stoic ethical theory caters to two radically distinct audiences (aspiring Sages and hopeless fools), without making any pretensions to be able to discriminate

⁴⁴ Whether this is Cicero's doing, or the doing of one of his teachers (e.g. Antiochus) is also controversial.

⁴⁵ Related to the juridical side of Stoic ethics is Cicero's (un-Stoic) theological voluntarism. See Klein 2012, 69. Cf. Cic. *Rep.* 3.22 (*Rep.* = *De Republica*). For a meticulous reconstruction of Stoic arguments for the rationality of cosmic nature, see Powers 2012.

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Sage from progressor from hopeless fool.⁴⁶ The Stoics know well that such facts about our interior lives, which are the locus of moral evaluation, are inaccessible to others.⁴⁷

To explain my view I would like to draw an analogy to Roger Crisp's interpretation of Socratic eudaimonism.⁴⁸ Socrates allegedly held that god's commands are an ultimate and non-eudaimonistic source of reasons that *never conflict*, although possibly extend beyond, the reasons one has in virtue of happiness. Here is Socrates explaining why a soldier takes his position:

So in truth do things stand, men of Athens. Where somebody has taken a position where he thinks it's best, or is positioned by his commander, there, as it seems to me, he must stay and face the danger, taking thought neither for death nor anything else before what is shameful (Plato, *Apology* 28d5-9; quoted in Crisp 2003, 65).

Socrates is claiming that one can 'take a position' either (1) because one thinks it best for oneself, i.e. it is conducive to happiness or (2) because one is positioned or commanded by a superior. On Crisp's reading, Socrates likens his quest to annoy every Athenian citizen as an instance of (b), a kind of *religious duty*. In this case the "god's command" is a source of ultimate non-eudaimonistic reasons.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the injunction of god does not conflict in any with the agent's pursuit of happiness, since obeying god is pious and therefore virtuous. After all, Socrates believes that god would only direct him to act in a way that is conducive to his own

⁴⁶ This is a twist on a more familiar narrative according to which Stoic ethical theory suffers from an inner rift in that it caters to two distinct audiences, namely Sages and fools. With respect to the problem at hand, that distinction is not sufficiently granular, since many fools *are* capable, in the relevant sense, of achieving virtue. For non-hopeless fools, happiness is a genuine prospect and thereby a legitimate source of normative reasons and rational requirements. On various ways scholars have understood the dual teaching of Stoic ethics, see Tsekourakis 1974. Cf. footnote 61 below.

⁴⁷ Not, as broadly consequentialist thinkers would have it, 'right action' or 'external conformity'.

⁴⁸ For the structure of Crisp's view I am indebted to Klein 2010, 7 & 18.

⁴⁹ Crisp's view provides a useful cautionary tale against thinking that because happiness is the fundamental good (monism about the good), then it must be the only source of reasons. Also insightful is the observation that one can reasonably sever the link between one's reasons and one's ultimate good while retaining a monistic view about the good (and without denying coextension).

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good.⁵⁰

I do not want to take a stand on the interpretive value of Crisp's reading of Socrates, but he presents us with a sophisticated philosophical position worthy of consideration. As Klein argues, while Crisp's view "posits more than one final end or justificatory ground of rational action, it understands these ends as agreeing in what they recommend" (Klein 2010, 7). That is, both grounds uniformly recommend virtuous action. More importantly, the view implies that *all* virtuous action is rationally overdetermined. Socrates' action was rational *both* because it promoted his own happiness and because it fulfilled the god's command. And as Klein points out, there is an immediate counterfactual corollary to this: "If one of the rational requirements it satisfies failed to obtain, an agent would nonetheless have reason to act virtuously because of the other requirement" (ibid, 8). So, for example, if in any given case one's own happiness has no pronouncements or no jurisdiction, an agent has reason to act virtuously because of the other rational requirement—namely because God said so. This picture of overdetermined virtuous action involves what I call 'cooperating norms', or normative reasons which, taken individually and in isolation from the norms with which they are cooperating, are *sufficient* for justifying an action.⁵¹

Analogous to Crisp's Socrates, the Stoics held that Natural Law and one's own happiness uniformly favor the right course of action. 'Right action' is therefore rationally overdetermined in cases where both forms of normativity are involved. But since the hopeless fool there is no prospect of happiness, 'happiness' has no normative jurisdiction over him. This does not change

⁵⁰ Socrates is "a pluralist about reasons, though there is no conflict between them. Virtue provides its own reasons, as do the gods, but these reasons are perfectly consistent with reasons grounded in the advancement of one's own happiness." (Crisp 2003, 66).

⁵¹ For a motivational analogue, see Henson's view on Kantian motivation in Henson 1979.

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the fact that happiness and Zeus' law are, in the case of non-hopeless-fools, coextensive and uniformly cooperating norms.⁵² And the Stoics need not worry about the contingency of the cooperation between happiness and Zeus' law, since the conditions for their uniform and unyielding cooperation are secured by Stoic assumptions about the providential governance of the world.⁵³ So there is *no* conflict between the demands of happiness and the demands of Zeus, and both entail conforming to the dictates of what has come to be known as the Stoic doctrine of natural law⁵⁴:

- (1) True law is right reason, in agreement with nature, diffused over everyone, consistent, everlasting, whose nature is to advocate doing what is proper by prescription and to deter wrongdoing by prohibition. Its prescriptions and prohibitions are heeded by good men though they have no effect on the bad. It is wrong to alter this law, nor is it permissible to repeal any part of it, and it is impossible to abolish it entirely... Whoever does not obey it is fleeing from himself and treating his human nature with contempt; by this very fact he will pay the heaviest penalties, even if he escapes all conventional punishments (Cic. *Rep.* 3.33; trans. Long & Sedley).
- (2) Law is king of all things human and divine. Law must preside over what is honourable and base, as ruler and as guide, and thus be the standard of right and wrong, prescribing to animals whose nature is political what they should do, and prohibiting them from what they should not do (Marcian I *ap.* Justinian *Digesta* 1.3.2; trans. Long & Sedley).
- (3) Law is supreme reason, rooted in nature, which commands things that must be done and prohibits the opposite (Cic. *Leg.* 1.18; trans. Zetzel)⁵⁵.

⁵² This explains why the hopeless fool, fool, and Sage have the same reasons to act.

⁵³ To decide whether those are plausible one must examine the sorts of arguments we find in, for example, Cicero's *dND* (= *De Natura Deorum*).

⁵⁴ Whether the natural law enjoins *kathēkonta/officia* rather than *katorthōmata/recte facta* (i.e. actions rather than dispositions) was the subject of vigorous debate in Stoic scholarship. The dispositionalist account of Stoic natural law has won the day. It is worth noting, however, that one of the crucial passages in favor of the dispositionalist account comes at a highly polemical moment in Plutarch (*Stoic. repugn.* 1037C). It is also worth noting that if the natural law enjoins perfectly appropriate actions, then *a fortiori* it enjoins the sort of conformity a fool can accomplish. Many who subscribe to the dispositionalist account of Stoic natural law attribute the weakening of Stoic rigorism into a system of moral rules and precepts accessible to all to Cicero's syncretizing and Antiochean tendencies. See Obbink & Vander Waerdt 1991; Vander Waerdt 1994a; and Vander Waerdt 1994b. For a countervailing view, see the work of Phillip Mitsis, including 1994, 2003, and 2016.

⁵⁵ *Leg.* = *De Legibus*.

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Texts (1)-(3) articulate the scope of Stoic natural law. The law (or Right Reason or Zeus) commands how we are to behave. The scope of Zeus' commands is comprehensive in the sense that they cover every aspect of our practical lives, from brushing our teeth to standing our ground on the battlefield.⁵⁶ Non-hopeless-fools have normative reasons to perform those very same acts that the law enjoins because of their future prospect of happiness. Hopeless fools do not enjoy this state of rational overdetermination, so they are required to ϕ when ϕ -ing is appropriate only because it accords with the dictates of Right Reason.

Generally speaking, my view amounts to a heavily qualified version of the view that the Stoics offered two distinct moral teachings: one directed at the wise and another at the foolish.⁵⁷ It has not yet been appreciated, however, that the relevant distinction is not the distinction between fools and Sages, but between *hopeless fools* and everyone else. By focusing our attention on the relevant sense of 'impossibility' involved in the fool's moral development, we can see that the hopeless fool is in the unique predicament of being rationally required to conform to norms that could not be grounded in the fact of his current or prospective happiness. In this way, hopeless fools are *trapped* in the sphere of ethical activity Cicero calls 'second-grade moral goodness' (*honestas secunda*).⁵⁸ For the non-hopeless fool, this sphere of ethical activity is

⁵⁶ See Cic. *Off.* 1.4: "For no part of life, neither public affairs nor private, neither in the forum nor at home, neither when acting on your own nor in dealings with another, can be free from duty" (trans. Griffin).

⁵⁷ Of course, as set out in Section 1, I agree with the present-day scholarly consensus that every perfectly appropriate action (*katorthōma*/recte factum) is, *ipso facto*, an appropriate action (*kathēkon*/officium). Although the hopeless and non-hopeless differ significantly with respect to the justificatory basis of their normative reasons, I emphasize the co-extension of the norms that apply to hopeless and non-hopeless alike. The ideal counterparts of the non-hopeless fool and hopeless fool are behaviorally indiscernible.

⁵⁸ *Off.* 3.15: "quasi secunda quaedam honesta." Cicero contrasts 'honestum' with 'similitudines honesti', where the latter refers to the appropriate actions that are performable by fools ("in quibus sapientia perfecta non est").

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one’s ticket to happiness and virtue—albeit a ticket with slim prospects of success.⁵⁹ Hopeless fools alone are required to perform all appropriate actions, or to act just as the Sage and their non-hopeless counterpart would be required to act in their shoes, without the prospect of happiness.⁶⁰ They are consigned to a life of, at best, conformity with the dictates of the natural law understood behaviorally and extensionally.⁶¹

§6 Conclusion

To recap: in this paper I began by rejecting extant pluralist readings of the Stoics on the grounds that they run afoul of the Stoic conception of practical agency as analogous to playing a game. I then presented an argument against monism. The existence of hopeless fools, in conjunction with the view that ‘prudential ought’ implies ‘can’ and the view that *everyone* is subject to the same rational requirements to perform appropriate actions (*kathēkonta/officia*),

⁵⁹ The prospect (however slim) of the non-hopeless fool living up to the natural law’s injunctions to live virtuously explains why the natural law can intelligibly command them to do so.

⁶⁰ That is, they are subject to rational requirements on *action* alone, since the prospect of virtuous *disposition* is decisively and in principle out of reach. On the inaccessibility of our hopeless or non-hopeless lot, see §6 below.

⁶¹ There are some parallels between my proposed interpretation of Stoic pluralism and the philosophy of the heterodox Stoic Herillus. Herillus’ distinction between the end (*telos*) and the subordinate end (*hupotelis*) underwrites a strict division between the moral lives of the wise and the foolish. Under the plausible assumption that the ‘subordinate ends’ (*hupoteleis*) refer to the natural and primary objects of human impulse or promoted indifferents, this picture implies the kind of discontinuity between the lives of fools and Sages that I rejected above. One way to take the distinction between the *telos* and *hupotelis* is to say that fools can at best perform merely appropriate actions (*kathēkonta/officia*) in pursuit of such objects as health, wealth, and reputation; the Sage, on the other hand, lives in accordance with an uncodifiable form of knowledge and performs perfectly appropriate actions (*katorthōmata/recte facta*) that range from the counter-conventional (e.g. incest, cannibalism) to the radically cosmopolitan. The precise details of Herillus’ views are difficult to piece together from our meagre evidence, so it is not clear whether Herillus’ pluralism entails the view I just described (and which approximates in some ways the views of another well-known heterodox Stoic, Aristo), or if it simply implies a strict separation and division of labor between the scientific knowledge possessed by the Sage (the true *telos*) and the performance of appropriate actions in accordance with our social relations and other customary practices (an end that extends to all, but which bears no essential connection to our true *telos*). The latter is suggested by *Fin.* 2.43, 4.36, and 4.40. On the connection between the views of Aristo and Herillus on the *telos*, see Marrin 2020. Most important for our purposes is the fact that I reject any view on which the extensional and dispositional requirements of natural law are not convergent, and which sunders the continuity between appropriate actions and virtuous. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to consider other forms of pluralism, both ancient and modern.

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necessitates pluralism. I then advanced my own interpretation of the flavor of pluralism we can impute to the Stoics on textual and philosophical grounds. The kind of pluralism I impute to the Stoics does not posit two extensionally distinct 'ends' or 'goals' of life. The hopeless fool is rationally required to behave just like the Sage and Progressor because it accords with the dictates of Right Reason. The uniform agreement between and co-extension of ethical injunctions rooted in one's own happiness and ethical injunctions of Right Reason explains the frequent conflation of the two in our texts.

Lest this picture leave an aspiring Stoic to despair, I submit that there are good reasons for the Stoic practice of acting *as if* happiness were in reach. That is, the mere existence of hopeless fools does not have immediate consequences for how most people should think about their lives. Even if there are hopeless fools, from *our* finite point of view it is impossible to tell who has been chosen for this enviable role. The opacity of Zeus' plan by itself suggests there is some rational basis for hope or acceptance that we are not hopeless fools.⁶² Furthermore, the possibility of attaining some form of tranquility and contentment that falls short of happiness and virtue might be a reason to hope for or accept the possibility of perfection.⁶³ This view makes good sense of the Stoic's apparent commitment to encourage *everyone* to pursue virtue as far as one is able, and has the effect of mitigating the jarring effect of the existence of 'hopeless fools'.⁶⁴ Our desire for happiness is an ineluctable psychological drive (Stob., *Ecl.* 2.77), and this

⁶² Opacity of the divine plan, even for the wise, is well attributed in our evidence. We can look to the Stoic doctrine of the Sage's 'impulse with reservation' (*hupexairesis*/exceptio) for a clear example. See Epict. *Diss.* 2; Stob. *Ecl.* 2.155.5-17; Sen. *Ben.* 4.34 (*Ben.* = *De Beneficiis*).

⁶³ I prefer the language of 'acceptance' because (a) it does not have the potentially pathological connotations of 'hope' and (b) it enjoys wide usage in contemporary philosophical idiom. For one example of the connotation I worry about, see Sen. *Ep.* 5.7: "'You will cease to fear,' he says, 'if you cease to hope'" (trans. Long & Graver).

⁶⁴ Both (1) the opacity of our inner moral lives and (2) the co-extension of appropriate actions and perfectly appropriate actions explain why there is nothing disingenuous or misleading about the Stoic strategy of encouraging

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psychological thesis coupled with the opacity of Zeus' plan explains why we should hope or accept that we are not hopeless fools.⁶⁵

I conclude by noting that my view vindicates a longstanding intuition that the Stoics are transitional figures in the history of ethics. Sidgwick was correct to observe that "Stoicism furnished the transition from the old Greek view of ethics, in which the notions of Good and Virtue were taken as fundamental, to the modern view in which ethics is conceived as primarily a study of the 'moral code'" (Sidgwick 1886, 95-96).⁶⁶ That is not because the Stoics put the 'right' before 'the good', as some have suggested (Striker 1996, 218-220; cf. MacIntyre 2007, 140; 168-170). The Stoics are committed to fundamentally eudaimonistic or teleological views about the priority of happiness and the good in their ethical theory. Even for the hopeless fool, the *goodness* of the providential plan and the welfare of the cosmic whole do the justificatory work. Yet their pessimism about our prospects of perfection, coupled with their theories of natural law and providence, paved the way for decidedly modern and juridical conception of ethics that is detached from those broader theological commitments.

everyone to perform *kathēkonta/officia*, even whilst being committed to the existence of hopeless fools. They did not lay claim to know whose natural disposition to virtue was stymied as part of the providential plan.

⁶⁵ One might wonder what *grounds* the rationality of the subjective form of acceptance or hope I have just outlined. The answer mirrors exactly what is happening in the case of the objective condition of hopeless fools and ordinary fools: for non-hopeless fools, the subjective norms of acceptance are rooted in genuine prospects of happiness, while for hopeless fools the norms are rooted in Zeus' plan for hopeless fools in the overall cosmic plan. Zeus wants *all* of us to play our roles in this cosmic drama with the seriousness of an actor (cf. Cic. *Fin.* 3.24). The hopeless fool needs to play his part in earnest. This is why, objectively speaking, the hopeless fool has reason to act as if he is not hopeless. But in light of divine opacity and the inscrutable nature of our interior lives, a hopeless fool has the same kind of subjective reasons to act as if happiness were in prospect that non-hopeless fools do. This part of the account is admittedly speculative, but I think this is the only way to unpack the Stoic view in a manner consistent with more secure commitments.

⁶⁶ See also Sidgwick's *Method of Ethics*, Book I, Ch. IX: "This, as was before noticed, was the fundamental ethical conception in the Greek schools of Moral Philosophy generally; including even the Stoics, though their system, from the prominence that it gives to the conception of Natural Law, forms a transitional link between ancient and modern ethics" (1907 edition).

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