



## Paper 1: Good, bad and indifferent

### *Zeno of Citium*

The Stoic school of philosophy was founded sometime around 300 BC in the ancient Greek city of Athens, by Zeno of Citium (which is in Cyprus).

Zeno was born in 335 BC. The ancient author Diogenes Laertius (third century AD), in his *On the Lives, Opinions, and Sayings of Eminent Philosophers*, tells us that Zeno was thirty years old when he was shipwrecked close to Athens. In the city, he sat down next to a bookseller who was reading aloud the second book of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* about Socrates. Zeno liked this so much that he asked the bookseller where he could meet with men like Socrates. As chance would have it, the Cynic philosopher Crates walked past at that very moment, and the bookseller pointed him out. 'Follow that man,' he said, and that is how Zeno came to be a student of Crates. There is another account (also related by Diogenes Laertius) which says that Zeno was already in Athens when he heard about the loss of his ship, upon which he gave up his career as a merchant and turned to philosophy, studying first with Crates, and after that with other philosophers.

Yet another story included in Diogenes' biography is that Zeno's father, Mnaseas, a merchant who frequently went to Athens, would bring back with him books about Socrates, which he gave to the young Zeno who, upon attaining adulthood, set off to study philosophy at Athens, having been inspired by the books. Diogenes Laertius cites ancient sources which say that Zeno consulted an oracle to find out what he should do to live the best life, and the god's reply was that he should 'take on the complexion of the dead', which Zeno understood to mean that he should study the writings of the ancient philosophers.

These biographical details are too uncertain for us to accept with any degree of confidence, but what we can be sure of is that Zeno came to Athens and studied with a number of philosophers, including Crates, before establishing his own school.

Zeno's followers were called Zenoians at first, but because Zeno taught his classes in the painted colonnade (*poikile stoa*) – so-called because it was decorated with murals by Polygnotus and other fifth-century artists – located at the north-eastern side of Athens' central *agora* (marketplace), they soon came to be known as 'the men from the Stoa', or Stoics. He was active until his death in 263 BC.

None of Zeno's works survive, though Diogenes Laertius records their titles, including *Of Life According to Nature*, *Of Emotions*, *Of Duty*, *The Republic*, *Of Greek Education*, and *Ethics*. Zeno's teaching, both oral and written (though not unmodified by his successors) established and inspired what many have deemed was the most

successful of the Hellenistic schools. In the ancient world, Marcus Aurelius is often considered to be the last of the Stoics, which means that the Stoic school lasted for almost five centuries. Stoic strands can be seen in the history of thought down through the ages, from its influence on early Christian thought, to Humanist thought in our own age, whose beliefs in the fellowship of all people and the primacy of reason were first woven into Stoic doctrine over two thousand two hundred years ago by Zeno of Citium.

### ***What is good?***

Is there anything that *really has value*? Is there something that *really ought to be pursued*? On our quest for well-being, on our search to find the best way to live, at what should we aim?

What should we value, and what should we do to fully flourish? What is of ultimate importance? In the midst of uncertainties of all sorts, when people can cheat us, when illness can strike without warning, when life is in essence precarious, we may wonder whether aiming to live well and to fully flourish makes any sense at all.

Much of the foundation that Stoic ethics rests on was laid down many years before Zeno even thought of taking up his studies. In Plato's dialogue, *Euthydemus*, written about one hundred years before Zeno opened his school, we find a discussion of what promotes happiness. Socrates, the narrator of these extracts, is conversing with the young man Clinias, son of Axiochus:

And now, O son of Axiochus, let me put a question to you: Do not all men desire happiness? And yet, perhaps, this is one of those ridiculous questions which I am afraid to ask, and which ought not to be asked by a sensible man: for what human being is there who does not desire happiness?

There is no one, said Clinias, who does not.

Well, then, I said, since we all of us desire happiness, how can we be happy? – that is the next question. Shall we not be happy if we have many good things? And this, perhaps, is even a more simple question than the first, for there can be no doubt of the answer.

He assented.

And what things do we esteem good? No solemn sage is required to tell us this, which may be easily answered; for every one will say that wealth is a good.

Certainly, he said.

And are not health and beauty goods, and other personal gifts?

He agreed.

Now, can there be any doubt that good birth, and power, and honours in one's own land, are goods?

He assented.

And what other goods are there? I said. What do you say of temperance, justice, courage: do you not verily and indeed think, Clinias, that we shall be more


right in ranking them as goods than in not ranking them as goods? For a dispute might possibly arise about this. What then do you say?

They are goods, said Clinias.

Very well, I said; and in what company shall we find a place for wisdom – among the goods or not?

Among the goods.

(*Euthydemus* 278e–279c, trans. Jowett)

 **IN YOUR JOURNAL.<sup>1</sup> Make a list of all the goods that Socrates identifies. There are two distinct types of goods, here, (a) the ones that Socrates mentions first, and (b) the ones he mentions last. Try to think of headings for the two types of goods.**

The second group is easier to identify and name: this group of goods consists of *temperance* (i.e., self-restraint), *justice*, *courage*, and *wisdom*. These could be named as ‘personal qualities’, ‘spiritual qualities’, ‘parts of one’s character’, or something like that. They can also be called the *virtues*, which is what the ancients called them. For the Stoics, as this course will make clear, the virtues are of key significance to living well.

The first group of goods includes wealth, beauty, ‘personal gifts’ (perhaps intended to cover features such as strength, good eyesight, intelligence, a good voice, etc.), ‘good birth’ (of significantly less importance for us today), power and honours. But what shall we name them collectively? Just ‘Goods’, perhaps? Or ‘Goods that practically everyone pursues’, or ‘What most people want’? Maybe even ‘What I would like to have myself!’ Or ‘Goods that bring happiness’.

A bit later, Socrates continues:

You remember, I said, our making the admission that we should be happy and fortunate if many good things were present with us?

He assented.

And should we be happy by reason of the presence of good things, if they profited us not, or if they profited us?

If they profited us, he said.

And would they profit us, if we only had them and did not use them? For example, if we had a great deal of food and did not eat, or a great deal of drink and did not drink, should we be profited?

Certainly not, he said.

Or would an artisan, who had all the implements necessary for his work, and did not use them, be any the better for the possession of all that he ought to possess? For example, would a carpenter be any the better for having all his tools and plenty of wood, if he never worked?

Certainly not, he said.

And if a person had wealth and all the goods of which we were just now speaking, and did not use them, would he be happy because he possessed them?

No indeed, Socrates.

Then, I said, a man who would be happy must not only have the good things, but he must also use them; there is no advantage in merely having them?

True.

Well, Clinias, but if you have the use as well as the possession of good things, is that sufficient to confer happiness?

Yes, in my opinion.

And may a person use them either rightly or wrongly?

He must use them rightly.

That is quite true, I said. And the wrong use of a thing is far worse than the non-use; for the one is an evil, and the other is neither a good nor an evil. You admit that?

He assented.

(*Euthydemus* 280b–281a, trans. Jowett)

[Note: Benjamin Jowett's translation made in the nineteenth century translated the Greek term *ōphelimos* as 'profitable'. For us, the notion of 'profit' is pretty much confined to business and making money, which creates an emphasis that Plato, and Jowett, did not intend. *Ōphelimos* means helpful, useful, advantageous, beneficial. Try swapping Jowett's 'profit' and 'profited' for 'benefit' and 'benefited', and the sentences may seem less stilted.]



**IN YOUR JOURNAL.** Explain why, according to Socrates, merely having possession of good things is not sufficient to confer happiness.

**What does Clinias conclude is sufficient for happiness?**

Clinias concludes that *using* the good things that one possesses, and using them *well* or *properly* ('rightly') is sufficient to confer happiness. Socrates makes the following conclusion:

Then, I said, Clinias, the sum of the matter appears to be that the goods of which we spoke before are not to be regarded as goods in themselves, but the degree of good and evil in them depends on whether they are or are not under the guidance of knowledge: under the guidance of ignorance, they are greater evils than their opposites, inasmuch as they are more able to minister to the evil principle which rules them; and when under the guidance of wisdom and virtue, they are greater goods: but in themselves are nothing?

That, he said, appears to be certain.

What then, I said, is the result of all this? Is not this the result – that other things are neither good nor bad, and that wisdom is good, and ignorance is evil?

He assented.

(*Euthydemus* 281d–e, trans. Jowett, modified)

Socrates says that for conventional goods, such as wealth, health and power, to truly benefit their possessor, they must be used properly, ‘under the guidance of wisdom and virtue’. That is, the first sort of goods identified in the first extract above can confer benefit only if the agent also possesses the second sort of goods, the *virtues*, or qualities of character. What we see is that for benefit to result, the virtues have a job of work to do in guiding our actions.

### ***The indifferents***

The Stoics would later agree with Socrates when he says that conventional goods are ‘in themselves nothing’, that they are ‘neither good nor bad’. Although popularly conceived of as ‘good’, it is clear to see that wealth, for example, can as easily be used to cause harm as it can be used to produce benefit. Wealth may be used by its possessor to harm others, or even themselves (as would be the case for someone who ended up using their wealth to obtain illegal drugs resulting in damage to their health or even death – or in their being caught and sent to prison). Clearly the wealth cannot be considered in *itself* as good. What is *really good* lies in those qualities of character, the virtues of temperance, justice, courage and wisdom, through whose application the conventional ‘goods’ may be used to benefit the agent, as well as, often, other people too.


The Stoics refer to the conventional ‘goods’, including wealth and health, as the *indifferents*, because such ‘goods’ are indifferent with respect to being good or bad. They fall into neither category. The conventional ‘goods’ are also indifferent with respect to our really needing them to achieve true well-being and for its being possible for us to flourish. This does not mean that we should ourselves be indifferent towards the indifferents, as we will see later. Such things as food and shelter, and possibly a few other things, are clearly needed for living at all. In saying that these things are indifferent, the Stoics do not mean that we can actually live entirely without them. In some way they are needed and even desired, but however we come to understand this, the Stoics insist that the indifferent things are not in themselves good or bad.

### ***The virtues***

For the Stoics then, of supreme importance is the development of character: what matters more than anything is that we should in all circumstances, and at all times, act virtuously, which means that when it is appropriate we must act with self-restraint, we must be just towards others, we must face difficult or painful circumstances with courage, and we must choose our activities and carry them out

wisely. The Stoics maintain that merely in doing this, if we can do this, we will live well, we will be happy. Nothing else is required for us to flourish fully.

For many, if not for all, changing our attitude towards the ‘indifferents’, the conventional ‘goods’ that are not really good at all, is very difficult. For many people, their material ‘goods’ are of ultimate importance: they quite literally devote their lives to acquiring and maintaining these indifferent things. We live in a society that says loudly and persistently, in so many ways, that material goods are of extreme importance. So many people expend their efforts upon the pursuit of, not what they need, but what they have been convinced they want. Sadly, this is a futile endeavour, for no matter how much is obtained, it is inevitable that there is always more to acquire, more to want. Clearly there is some sort of folly at work here. Indeed, the Stoics describe people who are not Stoic sages, as fools.

 **Read Seneca, Letters from a Stoic, Letter 9, from ‘The wise man, nevertheless...’ (halfway down page 52) to the end (= Moral Letters, 9.18–22).**

Here is the story of the philosopher Stilpo,<sup>2</sup> who was head of the Megarian school. He lived too early to be a Stoic, and was in fact one of Zeno’s teachers. Very few people have the misfortune to lose everything, as Stilpo did when Demetrius’ forces captured and sacked his home town. Starting out as students who wish to ‘make progress’ towards leading the philosophic life, the idea that someone should be able to retain their equanimity and poise, and truly remain a ‘happy man’ amid such destruction and loss, sounds preposterous.

Stilpo did not regard as valuable anything that could be taken away from him. These things are not ‘in our power’, not ‘in our control’ as the Stoics say, and they are the indifferent things. Stilpo’s happiness is dependent only upon possession of the ‘valuables’ that he still has with him, and these are the virtues, ‘the qualities of a just, a good and an enlightened character’.

This does not mean that Stilpo did not care for his wife and children, and for his material possessions. While it was his lot to have them, he cared for them as a man of good character should. To get a better grip on this we can make a distinction using terms that the ancient Stoics did not actually employ. We need to distinguish between our interests and projects on the one hand, and the *way* we carry on the business of pursuing our interests and furthering our projects on the other. Everything that we engage in in daily life will further some project which in turn satisfies some interest we have. Interests would include earning an income, gaining an education, staying healthy, raising children, etc., etc. A project is some activity we perform which furthers an interest, such as taking a course at a local college, or taking up a new diet. Notice that interests and projects concern indifferent things (with the singular and unique exception of our interest to perfect our characters and thereby to fully flourish and live happily). But the *way* we carry out our projects – noting that the way we act in pursuit of something is entirely distinct from the project itself – concerns our

capacity to act virtuously, to act in ways characteristic of the person who has perfected their character. *This*, say the Stoics, is what is good or bad, and this is what is of supreme importance.

Once we adopt this view of how we engage in our affairs, we can see that when disaster strikes, whether in small ways as frustrating setbacks, or as complete calamities, it is our interests and projects that are harmed. As agents endeavouring to perfect our characters, to act in ways that are proper for rational human beings, *we have not been harmed*. Seen in this way, agents – that is, sentient, rational creatures, capable of deciding what to do and the means of doing it – are not the sort of thing that *can* be harmed. Stilpo could well have said: ‘All my interests and projects have ended today. My interests to be a good husband and a good father have been brought to an end – I can no longer pursue them. So too for all my other activities. I can no longer be a good friend to my neighbours, for all my neighbours have been slain.’

However, he could have continued: ‘But my wife and children, my neighbours and all my possessions, were never really mine to begin with. Fate entrusted them to me for a time, and now they have been taken back. What is truly my own, my capacities to act wisely and with self-restraint, to be just and courageous, I still have, and these truly good things I will deploy upon my new interests and projects. I will be a good friend to all whom I meet; I will deal fairly with people – in short, I will carry on as before, doing my best to perfect my character and to be a good man.’

Stilpo and Zeno, and the Stoics who came after them, declare that well-being and happiness are to be found not in what we have as material possessions, but what we have in terms of good characters, whose qualities we deploy upon circumstances and situations that we encounter in the course of living. These circumstances and situations are ultimately beyond our control, from an eyelash falling in our eye, to the death of a loved one. Even to focus on this fully and honestly can be unsettling and disturbing, but doing this, and recognising the truth of how things really are, is an important step towards the peace and equanimity that are sought by those striving for enlightenment.

### ***Marcus Aurelius on misfortune and indifferent things***


There is very little doubt that Seneca wrote for publication, and his writings have the polished finish of carefully crafted essays. Marcus Aurelius, however, almost certainly did *not* intend his writings to be published. What we read in the *Meditations* constitutes notes and jottings put down by the author as his own private repository of thoughts and explorations. The ‘chapters’ in the ‘books’ veer from topic to topic, themes are picked up and dropped, then picked up again, seemingly at random.

Unlike Seneca, Marcus is not preaching or teaching, he is merely making notes. But in reading both authors, we get a sense of how these thinkers tried to incorporate Stoic ideals into their daily lives.

If you wish, as you progress through the Course, please use your Journal to write down your own ‘Stoic Notes’, to build your own personal repository of thoughts and explorations.

Marcus' *Meditations* are divided into 'books', each of which is comprised of several 'chapters'. Thus, a reference to the *Meditations* given as 9.4, means 'chapter' 4 of 'book' 9. In the Wordsworth edition (the one recommended for this Course), an asterisk (\*) indicates that a note by the editor will be found in the 'Notes' section that follows immediately upon Marcus' text. Please read these notes, as they are helpful.

When Marcus addresses the reader as 'you' he means *himself*. But in many instances the sense and the force of Marcus' meaning is preserved if we suppose that he is addressing *us*. In addressing himself, Marcus was addressing someone who sought to live as a Stoic, and much of what he says is directly applicable to us.

 **Read Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, sections 4.49 on dealing with misfortunes; 5.36 on how to aid those who have suffered a loss; 8.1 on what is truly good; and 11.16 about indifferent things.**

These readings may come across as somewhat obscure or rather puzzling, but hopefully not wholly so. Marcus is writing to remind himself of what he already knows, and as you become better acquainted with Stoic ideas, you will find that the *Meditations* make more sense than they did at first. You will find also that they are not only a source for Stoic ideas, but are also a source of inspiration for students on the Stoic path.

### ***Exercises***

1. Use your Journal to write up a record of your daily affairs, and try to identify your interests and projects. Try to identify the most basic interests that your life is devoted to, such as being a spouse, being a parent, being an employer or employee; then try to identify some of the projects that you engage in to further your interests. Write how well or how badly any of your projects are going, and write up how you dealt with the situations you face. As the days pass, try to be conscious on an hour by hour basis of which project you are engaged on, and try to be aware of the distinction between *what* you are doing from the *way* you do it.

Pay attention in particular to the way you handle setbacks or frustrations. If anything goes badly, try to be aware that you have not in yourself been harmed, though possibly your *project* has.

Send to your tutor your work on identifying your interests and projects, as well as two or three Journal entries, focusing on those that you feel can demonstrate your capacity to distinguish harm to yourself from harm to your project.

2. Read Letter 91 from *Letters from a Stoic* (pp. 177–83). Seneca takes the news from his friend Liberalis about the destruction of the city of Lyons by fire as a cue for

writing a letter to Lucilius about how we should face misfortune and mortality generally. From what you have learned from this Paper and from Seneca's writing, compose an imaginary dialogue between Liberalis and Stilpo, showing how Stilpo would have advised Liberalis as they stand in the smouldering ruins of the city. If you wish, allow that Stilpo can draw on points that Seneca employs himself in this letter.

Please make copies of your exercises (never part with originals) and send them to your tutor at the Stoic Foundation, using the address at the bottom of page 1 of this Paper.

If you have any queries about the Course or the reading material, please feel free to raise them with your tutor.

### **Notes**

1. Please find a suitable notebook to use as your Journal, or use loose leaves which you can keep in a binder. You will use your Journal for writing up a variety of tasks, including brief exercises in the course of reading the Papers, longer exercises at the conclusion of each paper, and other tasks.
2. Seneca spells the name 'Stilpo' with a 'b'.

### **Bibliography**

HICKS, R. D. 1931. *Diogenes Laertius: Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press.

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<http://www.btinternet.com/~k.h.s/stoic-foundation.htm>

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