

COLLOQUIUM 6

THE GOOD IS BENEFIT:

ON THE STOIC DEFINITION OF THE GOOD

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ABSTRACT

“Only virtue is good” is a key thesis of Stoic ethics, and it is perceived as wildly implausible both by modern commentators and ancient critics. The Stoics themselves initiate the reception of their philosophy as paradoxical. But, at the same time, they claim that their theories are in agreement with preconceptions, i.e., with those notions that we acquire early in life as part of the natural development of reason. According to the Stoics, our preconception of the good is that the good benefits. That is how the Stoics define the good—“the good is benefit.” As they claim, their ethical theory is in agreement with preconceptions because it fully captures this idea. This paper explores the relationship between the preconception, the definition, and the conception of the good, and offers an analysis of how the ideal agent comes to acquire the conception of the good.

The Stoics describe the key moment of ideal development, the moment in which the agent forms the conception of the good and understands that *only* virtue is good, as an instantaneous transition, from foolishness to wisdom.¹ Scholars have scrutinized this developmental story; it belongs to the most famous aspects of Stoic ethics.² In this paper, I shall discuss what I take to be an important, and underappreciated, component of Stoic thought about this development: the definition of the good as benefit. This definition, as I hope to show, is integral to the Stoics’ account of how the ideal agent acquires the conception of the good, and central to the claim that their ethics, as paradoxical as it may seem, is in agreement with our preconceptions.

Like the ancient critics of the Stoics, contemporary scholars have a hard time finding Stoic ethics plausible: the instant transition to virtue, and the momentous recognition that everything one used to consider good—things

¹ Throughout this paper, I shall be concerned with the *early* Stoics. I shall not attempt to discriminate between their views (even though it seems likely that many of the ideas I discuss have been formulated by Chrysippus).

² I shall engage in particular with two recent papers: Michael Frede pursues the question of how the Stoics can present a process of coming to acquire the conception of the good as *natural* (2001). Brad Inwood discusses the Stoic emphasis on *experience* within the theory of concept-formation, and asks how we can understand the acquisition of the conception of the good in this context (2005).

which according to the Stoics have *value*, like health, wealth, strength, beauty, life, etc.—really are not good, because *only* virtue is good. We are tempted to say that what is most prominent about the Stoic theory is, in the words of the ancient discussion, how *paradoxical* it is. And surely, this is how the Stoics themselves see their theories. They proudly advertise them as paradoxical in a quite literal sense: as against opinion.³

But Stoic methodology should give us pause. According to Chrysippus, the Stoic theories are amazing.⁴ But this does not mean that they aim to revise our most fundamental assumptions. Stoic theories are in agreement with our *preconceptions*, and that means, very roughly speaking, in agreement with what, in some way, we have thought all along, merely in virtue of having reason. It is a key aspect of Stoic methodology and epistemology that preconceptions are a criterion of truth.⁵

But how can the Stoics meet this criterion? Presumably, preconceptions are what we have before (ideally) turning into wise persons ('sages'). Prior to this transition, we call health, wealth, life, beauty, etc., good, i.e., we seem to be deeply confused about the good, or, loosely speaking, entirely 'on the wrong track.' So how can our preconceptions, which must somehow play a role in the way we—as fools—think about the good, be a criterion for the theory of the good? Is it not the case that once we come to understand what is good and bad, we are adopting a wholly new outlook, one that is really *not* in agreement with our previous perspective? What I hope to show is that the Stoic theory of the good—and by implication, Stoic ethics quite generally—in fact aims to meet the criterion of being in agreement with the preconception of the good, and that the content of this preconception is captured in the definition of the good as benefit.

The Stoic definition of the good has received less scholarly attention than other aspects of Stoic thought about the good. To some extent, I suspect, this is because we are still the victims of a tradition which the Stoics

³ For Zeno, see *Gnomologion Monac.* 196 (*Gnomol. Vatic.* Ed. Sternb. 295) (= SVF 1.281), for Cleanthes see Arrianus, *Epict. Diss.* IV 1,173 (= SVF 1.619); see also Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 4.

⁴ In Chrysippus' words, it is due to the exceeding greatness and beauty of the Stoic teachings that they seem like fiction and not on the level of humans and human nature (Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1041F).

⁵ According to DL 7.54, Chrysippus is "at variance with himself" when he says that preconceptions and sense-perception are criteria. The variance, I think, must refer to the fact that the Stoics are well known for emphasizing that cognitive impressions are *the* criterion of truth. As I hope will emerge in the course of this paper, the thesis is not in disagreement with Stoic epistemology. With respect to my discussion of Stoic preconceptions and definitions, I am much indebted to Brittain (2005).

themselves initiated, a tradition which emphasizes the paradoxical side of Stoic ethics in a one-sided way.⁶ Further, the evidence on those Stoic theories which shall be central to my discussion—first and foremost, the theories of preconception and definition—is very sparse. In fact, it is a complicated question whether the Stoics actually thought that there *is* a preconception of the good.⁷ While it may seem that this should obviously be the case, trying to find an explicit statement to this effect proves difficult.⁸

⁶ Further, the most general difficulty in the study of early Stoic ethics—that we only have fragmentary evidence—almost inevitably leads us to later authors, such as Seneca and Cicero. Seneca and Cicero, each in their own way, seem to me to minimize Stoic emphasis on the good as benefit. Seneca complains that those who think that the good is the useful are those who consider wealth, horses, wine, and shoes as good. They take a cheap view of the good (*Letter* 120, 2). Cicero, when he engages with Panaetius' views, seems from the outset of *De officiis* to be interested in the idea that the honorable and the useful might provide us with two distinct types of considerations (1.9-10). It is further interesting to note that Cicero does not seem to *like* the early Stoic definition of the good as benefit. He writes: "The definitions offered [by the Stoics] do differ from each other, but only very slightly; for all that, they are getting at the same point. I agree with Diogenes who defined good as that which is perfect in its nature. He followed this up by defining the beneficial (let us use this term for *ὠφέλημα*) as a motion or condition which is in accord with what is perfect in its nature." (*De fin.* 3.33; tr. Inwood 2005, 273-4).

⁷ Epictetus clearly thinks that there is a preconception of the good (*Discourses* 1.22.1-3 = LS 40S). He also discusses the issue of how possessing evaluative preconceptions is one thing, and applying them to particular instances is another; according to Epictetus, it is in the application of these preconceptions that opinion comes to be added (2.11.1-8; cf. Long's translation and discussion of the passage in 2002, 79-82). But we cannot take it for granted that Epictetus is in agreement on this point with the early Stoics. M. Frede argues that a preconception of the good is central to the Stoic theory of motivation; however, he also mentions that Cicero's report of early development does not talk about such a notion (2001, 75 and 78). On the Stoics' conception of reason and evaluative notions, cf. Cooper 2004.

⁸ Sources on the Stoic theory of the good mostly relate to three topics: (i) The thesis that only virtue is good, (ii) the Stoic definition of the good as benefit; (iii) the ideal development of an agent, who, at the moment of becoming wise, acquires the conception of the good. Stobaeus relates a variety of distinctions which at least partly do not seem to be on the same, principal level of the Stoic theory as (i), (ii), and (iii). Some of them seem to elucidate the minutiae of *how* virtue is good; e.g., virtuous moods like joy are classified as 'goods in process', and virtuous dispositions like undisturbed stability as 'goods in state' (on this distinction, and similar matters, cf. Stobaeus 2.731-13; 2.58,5-15; 2.70,21-71,4). Others seem to take up technical terms which are familiar from other philosophers, and relate them to the Stoic theory; cf. a distinction between goods that are *τελικά* and others that are *ποιητικά* (2.71,15-72,6). Cf. also the distinction between goods of the soul, external goods, and those which are neither this nor that—this distinction is evidently inspired by similar distinctions in other schools, and does not amount to much in Stoic ethics (SE, PH 3.181). On such terminological anachronisms (a term I borrow from Sedley), cf. the observations which Sedley (1983) makes on some other aspects of the presentation of Stoic ethics in Stobaeus.

Accordingly, after introducing a core piece of testimony in Section 1, I shall devote Sections 2 and 3 of this paper to a detailed discussion of the evidence on this issue, and the various considerations which make it less straightforward than it might seem. As I shall argue in Section 4, we need to turn to the definition of the good in order to see, via the relationship which the Stoics think holds between preconceptions and definitions, how they think about the preconception of the good. Its content is that the good benefits. If this is correct, the Stoics seem to be able to claim that their ethics is in agreement with the preconception of the good. In Sections 5 and 6, I then turn to two objections which might be raised against my interpretation.

I should add a brief remark on terminology. It has become customary to refer to that concept of the good which is integral to *knowledge* of the good as the ‘conception’ of the good, and I shall abide by this convention. Another way in which we might refer to this concept is by calling it the ‘scientific concept’—that concept of the good that the sage, who has a scientific understanding of things, has. My question can thus be rephrased as asking how the preconception of the good relates to the scientific concept of the good, and, along the way, to the notions of the good which progressors might have.

I. *The good is benefit or not other than benefit*

Under the heading ‘On what is good and bad and indifferent’, Sextus says that according to Epicurus we cannot investigate anything without a preconception, and he continues as follows:

[...] Well then, the Stoics, holding on to ‘common conceptions’ (so to speak), define the good in this way: “Good is benefit (ὠφέλεια) or not other than benefit,” by ‘benefit’ meaning virtue and virtuous action, and by ‘not other than benefit’ the virtuous human being and the friend. For virtue, which is a disposition of the commanding-faculty, and virtuous action, which is an activity in accordance with virtue, are, precisely, benefit; while the virtuous human being and the friend, also being themselves among the good things, could not be said to be either benefit or other than benefit, for the following reason. Parts, the sons of the Stoics say, are neither the same as wholes nor are they different from wholes; for example, the hand is not the same as the whole human being (for the hand is not a whole human being), nor is it other than the whole (for it is *together with* the hand that the whole human being is conceived as a human being). Since, then, virtue is a part of the virtuous man and of the friend, and parts are neither the same as wholes nor other than wholes, the virtuous human being and the friend have been called ‘not other

than benefit.’ So that every good is encompassed by the definition, whether it is benefit or not other than benefit.⁹ (M11.21-24)¹⁰

The complete definition of the good as benefit is ‘the good is benefit or not other than benefit.’ Virtue is good, and it is benefit straightforwardly. But persons (as a whole) do not exhibit virtue; the *souls* of persons can be virtuous. The wise man and his friend—and that means, quite generally, wise persons—are good insofar as virtue is a *part* of them. The distinction between ‘benefit’ and ‘not other than benefit’ thus cautiously observes the difference between the wise person and her virtue.¹¹

Sextus says that this definition is in agreement with common conceptions; but I shall rephrase his claims in terms of preconceptions.¹² The most straightforward way of reading the passage is to think that, according to Sextus, the Stoics’ definition of the good is in agreement with the preconception of the *good*. Sextus thus implies, first, that according to the Stoics there *is* a preconception of the good. He further claims that the definition ‘the good is benefit or not other than benefit’ is in agreement with this preconception. This seems to indicate that he assumes there is a certain kind of relationship between a preconception and a definition: the definition captures the content of the preconception. But it seems implausible that ‘the good is benefit or not other than benefit’—a rather complex phrase—is the content of a naturally acquired preconception. The claim that this definition is in agreement with the preconception, however, does not commit us to thinking that ‘the good is benefit or not other than benefit’ is the content of the preconception. We might think that, for the definition to be in agreement with the preconception, it would be enough if the content of the preconception was that the good benefits. As we can gather from a passage in Aristotle’s *Topics* (VI.9, 147a34), it is a commonplace

⁹ The text continues with a distinction between three senses in which ‘good’ is used, which may appear to add evidence to how the Stoics distinguish between definitions and so-called ‘delineations’ (SE, M 11.25-27). As Brittain convincingly shows, this is a misleading impression (2005, 197-199). M 11.25-27 and related passages in Stobaeus and Diogenes Laertius are discussed by Reesor (1983).

¹⁰ Tr. based on Bett, LS, and Bury, with changes; cf. the shorter version in PH 3.169-171.

¹¹ Stephen Menn alerted me to the fact that my original way of putting things implied that the soul, rather than the virtue of the sage, is the ‘part’ which the Stoics discuss here.

¹² This is not to say that there are no important differences between preconceptions and common conceptions. I tend to think that the two notions have been conflated in later antiquity, which explains why I am not attributing much importance to Sextus’s precise choice of terminology here. Cf. Obbink (1992); Jackson-McCabe (2004, esp. 324-325); and Brittain (2005). With respect to the Stoics’ own use of these terms, it seems that common conceptions are a sub-set of conceptions; cf. Brittain (2005, 177-179).

in ancient discussions to say that the good benefits. This must be what Sextus says the Stoic definition is in agreement with, and as I shall argue, this is a plausible picture.

II. *Preconceptions*

The Stoics' developmental account of how we ideally achieve virtue is difficult to understand. A particularly vexing, but as yet little discussed, question is this: Which notion of the good does the agent have *before* undergoing the transition to virtue, thereby acquiring the conception of the good?¹³ It is not surprising that this question has not received much scholarly attention. The Stoics carefully avoid all mention of the good before getting to the grand finale of the story, the agent's arrival at the conception of the good. In other contexts, they do not tire of telling us that the fool considers things like health and wealth good, rather than recognizing that only virtue is good. But within the developmental story, there is no mention of these earlier notions of the good. As we can see in Cicero, the agent progresses from (i) early impulses for self-preservation and affiliation, to (ii) an increasingly consistent selecting and deselecting of things of value and disvalue, namely health, wealth, illness, poverty, etc., to (iii) the recognition that only consistency is genuinely good (*De finibus* 3.20-22).¹⁴ Neither in stage (i) nor in stage (ii) is the good mentioned. The Stoics do not portray progressors as selecting what they mistakenly *consider good*; rather, they portray them as selecting things of value or natural things. Would it not seem that the progressor selects what she *considers good*? The Stoics steer away from this way of putting things in the context of the developmental account. Perhaps they are not burdening the already difficult theory of ideal development with yet another intricate issue: the issue

¹³ Jackson-McCabe insists on keeping two questions apart: how the conception of the good is acquired (according to Seneca, *Letter* 120 and Cicero, *De Fin.* 3.20-22, by analogy), and how human beings come to have a preconception of the good (2004, 336 f). More strictly speaking, I think we should distinguish three questions: (i) how one ideally acquires the conception of the good when turning into a sage, which, in my view, is the topic of Cicero, *De fin.* 3.20-22; (ii) how one might come up with the notion of virtue being the only good *without*, at this point, turning into a sage, which, in my view, is the topic of Seneca's *Letter* 120; (iii) what it means to have a preconception of the good.

¹⁴ This passage is discussed in detail in Frede (2001).

of keeping separate the preconception of the good from the various views about the good which progressors come to hold.¹⁵

In order to understand this in more detail, we need to consider some aspects of the Stoic theory of preconceptions. According to the Stoics, human beings acquire preconceptions (*προλήψεις*) in the first years of their life. We are not born with reason; the commanding-part of the soul is like an empty sheet of paper, ready for writing upon. Preconceptions are that which is first ‘inscribed’ on it, and the first method of inscription is sense perception. When we perceive something white, we have a memory of ‘white’ once the perception has departed; many memories of the same kind constitute experience; in this way, we form the preconception of white (Aetius 4.11.1-4 = SVF 2.83 = LS 39E). Coming to possess preconceptions makes us rational. Once human beings have acquired preconceptions, they begin to *think*.¹⁶ More particularly, this means that we come to have thoughts with content, and can refer to things, for example, as white. Once we have reason, we will almost certainly undergo *further* cognitive development. This involves acquiring new concepts, as well as refining the concepts we already possess as preconceptions. Further, we shall form opinions, such as ‘this flower is white.’ Note that it is a difficult question what opinions do to our preconceptions: an opinion such as ‘this flower is white’ most probably does not affect them. But what if we acquired the opinion that flowers are made of plastic? To what extent would this opinion affect our ability to apply the preconception of flowers?¹⁷ Preconceptions are acquired naturally, and nature guarantees their truth; they thus are *criteria* of truth. But it might seem that we can only *use* a preconception as our criterion if, first, it is not obscured by false opinions, and second, if we know its content.

¹⁵ My commentator Stephen Menn argues that there really is no need to mention any misguided assumptions about the good because the account is an account of *ideal* development. Since I do not engage in a detailed study of the passage here, I shall leave the following open: I am not sure whether the Stoics think that the ideal development is ideal to the extent of not involving a phase in which the agent is grown-up (thus having reason) *and* not yet a sage; if so, she would never be a fool. Even if the Stoics hold such a case to be possible, I think that the ‘less ideal’ scenario which I discuss also needs explanation: that an agent arrives at wisdom, including the conception of the good, but prior to this was a fool.

¹⁶ Cf. Brittain (2005) and M. Frede (1994). See also M. Frede (1996), Sandbach (1971), and Doty (1976). For a recent discussion of the ontology of Stoic concepts, cf. Caston (1999).

¹⁷ Brittain discusses whether ‘foolish inquirers’ (i.e., inquirers who are not only fools insofar as they are not sages, but insofar as they do not make the right kinds of efforts to gain knowledge) lose or ‘subtract an element’ from the preconception (2005, 181).

Among the scarce evidence on preconceptions, passages which discuss the preconception of the gods are comparatively prominent. Epicurus thinks the gods are not invested in the successes and misfortunes of our daily lives. The Stoics attack this view by referring to our preconception of the gods as provident, beneficial, and caring. Epicurus' theology, they claim, is not in agreement with our preconceptions. Drawing on these texts, Bonhöffer argued that, according to the Stoics, there are *only* ethical and theological preconceptions.¹⁸ In recent decades, on the basis of a much-improved understanding of Stoic logic and epistemology, scholars no longer hold the view that preconceptions are limited to evaluative and normative notions. On the contrary, the theory of preconceptions now seems to scholars to be closely connected to perception or experience, and thus more plausibly concerned with preconceptions that have *descriptive* content (witness the example 'white').¹⁹

Thus it might seem that, rather than limiting preconceptions to evaluative and normative notions, the Stoics may actually find it hard to account for such preconceptions. However, the Stoics do not seem to conceive of this as a problem.²⁰ Think of the preconception of the gods as provident and caring. Clearly, this cannot in any straightforward sense arise from the same kind of perception that a preconception of 'white' arises from, and it may actually involve other operations than sense-perception (see below). We should thus not think that the mere fact that 'good' is an evaluative notion means that there can be no preconception of the good.

III. *Concepts*

In the absence of direct evidence for such a preconception, I suggest turning to sources on the various ways in which human beings refine their concepts or come to acquire new ones. From preconceptions we move on to more advanced concepts. For the latter, being taught and making an effort play a role in concept-formation (Aetius 4.11.3). This criterion of being taught and making an effort is obviously somewhat fluid. It is not essential to the Stoics' theory to be able to say whether, for example, hu-

¹⁸ Bonhöffer (1968, 187-222); Cf. Obbink (1992, 197), who calls into question whether we are actually dealing with a primarily theological debate, rather than an epistemological debate about criteria of truth.

¹⁹ Sandbach (1971) already disputed Bonhöffer's assessment. See Inwood (2005, 270) for a discussion of the appropriately broad sense of experience we have to assume here.

²⁰ I think that Seneca presents this point well in *Letter* 120. Cf. Inwood (2005) for a detailed discussion.

man beings will acquire a preconception of snow. Clearly, this will depend on where a child grows up. It is entirely possible to acquire reason without ever having encountered snow. Other preconceptions—and the preconception of the good might be one of them—are likely to be shared by all human beings who have reason.

According to the Stoics, we acquire concepts in a variety of ways: by direct experience, resemblance, analogy, transposition, composition, opposition, and privation; the notions of the just and the good are acquired by nature (DL 7.52-53). The sources do not make it clear whether this list, or some part of it, refers exclusively either to preconceptions or to more advanced concepts; quite likely, at least some of these operations are relevant to the formation of both. For our purposes, the question whether we are here concerned with preconceptions or more advanced concepts is most pressing with respect to the good. Should we think that the *scientific concepts* of the just and the good are acquired naturally? Or are the *preconceptions* of the just and the good acquired naturally? Both are entirely possible and I tend to think that both are, for the Stoics, true. Growing up will, on the Stoics' views about one's early impulses and affiliation, naturally give rise to ethical notions. But it is also an important Stoic idea that, *if* a human being lives fully naturally (i.e., lives a life in agreement with nature), this will lead to the formation of the scientific concept of the good.²¹ While I think that both are true, it is conceivable that the passage refers only to this second point. The passage thus does not constitute indisputable evidence for the claim that the early Stoics thought that there is a preconception of the good.

It now seems that there are, most basically, two ways of arriving at a concept which is more advanced than a preconception. A first possibility is that the advanced concept of X 'grows out of' the preconception of X. This is what I shall call Refinement. However, through many of the aforementioned operations, we can also acquire concepts to which no *one* preconception corresponds. In these cases, there is no direct line from a

²¹ Jackson-McCabe (2004) takes DL 7.52-3 to refer *exclusively* to the acquisition of *preconceptions*. In brief, this is his argument: The passage as a whole must refer to preconceptions since the notions of the good and the just are said to be acquired naturally; and this is the mark of preconceptions. However, the Stoics can speak of a 'natural' development in more than one context. Even though, as Seneca says in *Letter* 120, nature can only give us the *seeds* of the conception of the good, coming to acquire it is, for the Stoics, a *natural* process (cf. M. Frede 2001). Jackson-McCabe in fact needs to admit that, for the list in DL 7.52-3 to make sense, 'natural' here must refer, as he says, to *more* than the *naturalness* which characterizes the acquisition of *all* preconceptions. This 'more,' on Jackson-McCabe's account, is that ethical preconceptions are inborn (2004, 339).

preconception of X to the concept of X. This is what I shall call Novelty. If there is a preconception of the good, arriving at the scientific concept of the good should be a case of Refinement. If there is no preconception of the good, it would have to be a case of Novelty. In the case of Refinement, the preconception of X can serve as a criterion for the theory of X. In the case of Novelty, there is no preconception of X which the theory of X could be in agreement with; the theory, in this case, must be in agreement with other preconceptions.

Let us first consider Refinement. Suppose someone has a preconception of ‘human being,’ and now asks herself the question what human beings actually are. Let us assume she makes some progress. She comes to think that human beings acquire reason in such-and-such a way, act in such-and-such a way, etc., i.e., she acquires various *opinions* about human beings. But as it turns out, one needs to understand nature quite generally in order to understand fully what human beings are: a certain part of the large living being that the universe is. Thus, when she finally comes to *know* what human beings are, she becomes a sage. We might now say that she has a scientific concept of what human beings are. She set out with a preconception, moved through a gradual process of concept-refinement and acquisition of opinions, and finally arrived at the scientific concept of a human being and at knowledge of what human beings are.

To complicate things, let us assume that some of the views the agent comes to hold do not only fall short of knowledge by being opinions (thus being changeable, etc.). Rather, suppose the agent assents to incognitive impressions. Would she, in this case, ‘lose’ her preconception of ‘human being’? Suppose she acquired the opinion that it is natural for human beings to grieve when someone they love dies. In this case, it does not seem to me that she would lose her preconception. She might still come to see why this is misguided, and eventually turn into a sage. But suppose she were to acquire the opinion that human beings can fly. In this case, she might lose her preconception. An agent who is prepared to adopt the view that human beings can fly is unlikely to ever turn into a sage; she is deeply confused. Perhaps the Stoics would say that by virtue of being rational, we actually would *not* accept a theory of human beings that tells us that human beings can fly.

Given the emphasis the Stoics place on how radical a shift in perspective takes place when we acquire the conception of the good, acquiring this conception might not seem to be a case of Refinement. Rather, it might seem to be a case of Novelty. Consider the Stoic example of the notion of the center of the earth (DL 7.53). Before we arrive at the concept of the center of the earth, we do not have a preconception of ‘center of the

earth'. Rather, we have preconceptions of *other things*, like 'center,' 'sphere,' 'earth.' Now we learn that the earth is a sphere, and thus we can come up with the notion of a center of the earth. We shall also come up with the opinion that there *is* a center of the earth. If, however, we come to understand nature fully, and to have a scientific concept of the center of the earth (supposing for the moment that the earth really is a sphere), the view that there is a center of the earth will be a piece of knowledge. In this case, the scientific concept refers to something that, as long as the agent only had preconceptions, she was not able to refer to *at all*.

So is this perhaps how we arrive at the concept of the good? Do the Stoics refrain from mentioning the preconception of the good in their developmental account because they want to say that there *is no* preconception of the good? Do they claim that, starting from preconceptions of what is appropriate, 'belongs to us', is valuable, etc., we are somehow able to sum up these ideas and transform them into one more complex notion, the concept of the good?²² Chrysippus says that his theory of good and bad things is "most in harmony with life and connects best with the inborn preconceptions" (Plutarch, *On Stoic self-contradictions* 1041E = SVF 3.69 = LS 60B).²³ Note that Chrysippus does not say that his theory of the good and bad is most in harmony with the preconception *of the good*. Is it plausible that he means to imply that *there is no preconception of the good*?

For at least two reasons, I do not think so. First, it seems entirely implausible to assume that the process of acquiring preconceptions, which is a process of growing 'into' the world, would not lead us to form the preconception of the good. 'Good' is a concept that pervades everyday interactions to such an extent that it seems difficult to see how a child might grow up without acquiring it. And 'good' is actually one of the predicates

²² In Chapter 4 of my forthcoming book *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City* (2007), I discuss these and other evaluative and normative preconceptions that are relevant to the Stoics' account of appropriate action. (By 'what belongs to us' I refer to what is *oikeion*.)

²³ Sandbach argues that *ἐμφυτος* need not be translated as 'inborn' (1971, 48). While I find it artificial to refrain from translating *ἐμφυτος* as 'inborn,' I think we should assume that Chrysippus here uses this term in a loose sense, according to which it does not say that human beings are born with reason (but rather with the early impulses that steer the natural development of acquiring preconceptions and thus reason). Jackson-McCabe argues that Sandbach's hesitations are ungrounded. On his account, ethical preconceptions are innate because they are given to us like the first impulses. However, as it turns out, this still commits him to a less than strict reading of *ἐμφυτος*: "The human individual is not born with ethical conceptions *per se*, only with an innate predisposition to form these concepts owing to *oikeiōsis*." (2004, 340).

that are mentioned in the context of our preconception of the gods.²⁴ It is not clear how ‘good’ could belong to our preconception of the gods, without there also being a preconception of good. It thus seems that acquiring the conception of the good must be a case of Refinement, rather than Novelty.

IV. *The task of definition*

But even if we assume that, according to the Stoics, human beings have a preconception of the good, this preconception can only function as a criterion if we know its content. Where can we turn for evidence on the content of this preconception, if the Stoics do not discuss it? I suggest that we turn to the Stoics’ views on definition. Unfortunately, these views are even less well preserved than Stoic thought on preconceptions. A number of ideas are transmitted, and I shall, in this paper, not attempt to cover all of them, or explain how they make up one consistent theory.²⁵

According to Chrysippus, a definition (ὄρος) expounds the peculiar characteristic (ἴδιον) of the *definiendum* (DL 7.60).²⁶ Presumably then, to be ‘benefit or not other than benefit’ is the peculiar characteristic of the good. But according to another well-known passage, ‘to benefit’ is the peculiar characteristic of the good (DL 7.103).

Perhaps the shorter definition is merely shorthand for the longer one. But it might also be that the Stoics ascribe several functions to definitions.²⁷ As we saw, a definition names the peculiar characteristic of the *definiendum*. It might do so, it seems, in various ways. In a technical definition—such as ‘the good is benefit or not other than benefit’—it might do so in a way which satisfies the standards of scientific knowledge, taking

²⁴ Note that it is not clear whether the Stoics want to claim that we have a preconception of the gods as good, caring, beneficial, where these characteristics are all on the same level. Perhaps our preconception of the gods is that they are good, and that our preconception of the good is that the good benefits. By putting this together, we arrive at the preconception of the gods as beneficial (for testimony which suggests this train of thought cf. Clement, *The teacher* I.1.63.1-2 = SVF 2.1116, part = LS 60I).

²⁵ For a detailed interpretation of Stoic thought on definitions, see Brittain (2005).

²⁶ See also Scholia on Dionysius Thrax, 107,5-7 = SVF 2.226 = LS 32A.

²⁷ Brittain discusses whether we should think that the Stoics distinguish between preliminary definitions, which serve the purposes of spelling out the content of preconceptions, and what he calls ‘real’ definitions, which then are the technical definitions that the sage arrives at. The evidence, however, does not confirm this view. It seems quite possible that Chrysippus’ thesis, according to which definition names the peculiar characteristic, does not only refer to the fully formulated, technical definitions (2005, 186-197).

complicated theoretical considerations into account. But the sources also report another task of definition: definitions capture the content of preconceptions. Galen reports that, according to the Stoics, a definition (ὄρος) “is that which by a brief reminder brings us to a conception of the things underlying words” (*Medical definitions* 199.348,17-349,4 = LS 32D; cf. SE, PH 2.212).²⁸ If this is what definition—or *some* kind of Stoic definition—does, then we have reason to assume that the content of the preconception of the good is that the good benefits. The simpler definition of the good, that it benefits, would capture the content of the preconception. And by doing so, it would help us enormously. It would tell us what our theory of the good needs to be in agreement with.

Preconceptions are not available to us as explicit bundles of claims (or as one explicit claim). In some cases, this may not be too problematic. For example, we might think that someone who begins to investigate the nature of plants can dismiss a theory according to which plants are made of plastic without first making the content of her preconception explicitly available to herself. But things might seem more complicated in the case of the good. Here, our misguided views seem to shape our perspective so deeply that, as long as we have not made the content of our preconception explicit, we might not be able to accurately dismiss any theory of the good. Once definition has done its job of elucidating our preconception, we can see a very important point: that it is *not* part of the content of the preconception of the good that things like health and wealth are good. As inquirers, we can thus give up our attempt to formulate a compelling ethical theory which ascribes some kind of goodness to these things. And we might think that a diligent inquirer could mistakenly have considered that her task: to explain how the way in which virtue and wisdom are good fits with the way in which things like health and wealth are good (this would be a mistake because health and wealth are not good; but it would be a plausible research project for anyone who has not yet clarified for herself the content of her preconception of the good, because health and wealth typically matter to human beings). With the help of the definition of the good as benefit, the inquirer can build her theory, using her preconception as a criterion. Acquiring the conception of the good is thus a case of Re-

²⁸ Cicero focuses on this aspect of Stoic definitions, and praises it: “However much we attack this school, as Carneades used to, I’m afraid that they may be the only real philosophers. For which of those definitions [the Stoic definitions of courage] *does not uncover the tangled conception of courage which lies buried in us all?*” (*Tusc. Disp.* 4.53 = LS 32H, my emphasis).

finement (however, one that is particularly demanding, since our opinions tend to obscure our preconception of the good).

V. *Benefit and Good Use*

For the remainder of this paper, I shall pursue two objections which might be raised against this interpretation. First, one might think that my interpretation makes a rather narrow, formal point.

Against my interpretation, one might suggest that the Stoics' notion of benefit is a much greater resource to them, a resource which indeed makes Stoic ethics somewhat less paradoxical. And one might argue that, in some sense, this is what is indicated at the beginning of this paper: that, by paying close attention to the way in which preconceptions are criteria of truth, we can better understand the way in which Stoic ethics, in spite of the prominent paradoxes, has a 'plausible' side. One might suggest that the notion of the good as benefit is, in a key piece of testimony (DL 7.103), associated with the notion of good use. And accordingly one might think that the Stoic story goes something like this. When we grow up and come to select and reject things of value, we see them as beneficial (or not). To select and reject them correctly is to 'use' them correctly; if we do so, they actually benefit us. As we progress toward virtue, and eventually turn into virtuous agents, we come to see that only virtue benefits *simpliciter*. But virtue *is* the wise use of valuable things. And thus there is a sense in which valuable things benefit—used wisely, *they* benefit.

But this picture cannot be correct. Just as much as only virtue is good, only virtue benefits. According to the Stoics, valuable things *do not benefit*, no matter how perfectly well they are selected (or used). It is thus misleading to think of benefit as some kind of 'link' between things of value and the good—as if both valuable and good things could benefit, if only the valuable things are dealt with correctly. The Stoic notion of 'benefit' is no less ambitious than the Stoic notion of 'good'.²⁹

Let me turn to the famous passage which associates the definition of the good as benefit with the notion of 'good use.'

(1) For just as heating, not chilling, is the peculiar characteristic of what is hot, so too benefiting, not harming, is the peculiar characteristic of what is

²⁹ We might think that the famous passage in Plato's *Republic* that identifies the good and the useful is an apt inspiration here. It is in the context of discussing God's goodness that Socrates explains that whatever is good is useful (*Rep.* II, 379b).

good.³⁰ (2) But wealth and health no more do benefit than they harm. Therefore wealth and health are not something good. (3) Furthermore they say: that which can be used well and badly is not something good. But wealth and health can be used well and badly. Therefore wealth and health are not something good. (DL 7.103; tr. LS; numbers K.V.)

Does this passage not commit us to placing the Stoics' notion of benefit, first and foremost, within a theory of *good use*? My answer to this question is a qualified 'no'. Sections (2) and (3) of the text offer *arguments* for the Stoic thesis that things like health and wealth, not being good, do not benefit. However, (2) and (3) are quite difficult to interpret, and in both cases, as I shall suggest, we should not entirely take the report at face value.

Section (2) rephrases the claim that health does not benefit (let us take this as a sample claim of the relevant kind) as the claim that health *no more* benefits than harms. 'No more' (*ou mallon*) is a notion that originates with Democritus, and becomes an important technical term in Scepticism. A Sceptic may say that honey is no more sweet than bitter. In saying so, he reports that for him, honey sometimes seems sweet and sometimes seems bitter. He is, to use another Sceptical metaphor, stuck between the pull that each appearance has on him, and thus will not assent to either of them. The Stoics claim that health *neither* benefits *nor* harms, and we might think that, strictly speaking, this is not the claim that it *no more* benefits than harms. The subtle difference is this: the Stoics emphasize the point that health does *not at all* benefit or harm, rather than the point that, since it sometimes seems to benefit and sometimes seems to harm, we had better suspend judgment on whether, in reality, it is a beneficial or a harmful thing. Of course, 'no more' might be used in a less than strictly technical, Sceptic sense.³¹ For the Stoic doctrine to be presented with the help of this expression, it would seem to me that we should envisage a context in which someone aims to explain the Stoic thesis, using a term which resonates with those who participate in Hellenistic debates, but goes beyond the Stoics' own terminological repertoire.

³⁰ The Stoic argument, as it is presented here, is strikingly similar to an Epicurean argument. According to Epicurus, one *perceives* that pleasure is the good in the same way in which one perceives that honey is sweet, fire hot, and snow white (*De Fin.* I.30).

³¹ On technical and non-technical uses of the expression, cf. Bett (2000, 30-32). In the course of explaining Socrates' reasoning in Plato's *Euthydemus* 278e-281e, Long arrives at the conclusion that, at this point in the dialogue, "it seems that health in general is no more good than it is bad." Long here uses 'no more' as an illuminating paraphrase, rather than a technical term, and we might think that the Stoics could have used it as such (1996, 27).

Section (3) ascribes a train of thought to the Stoics which makes use of another notion that resonates with the participants of Hellenistic debates: the idea that the things which are conventionally considered goods can be used well and badly. Section (3) tends to remind scholars of Platonic arguments to the effect that things which can be used well or badly are not in themselves good (cf. *Euthydemus* 280e-f and *Meno* 87e-88a).³² In a number of dialogues, Plato has Socrates discuss how things like wealth or health need to be used correctly, or with wisdom, rather than incorrectly, or foolishly (with ignorance). The precise interpretation of these passages is controversial, and we cannot enter into it here. What is important for our purposes, and perhaps uncontroversial, is this: (a) Things like health and wealth can be used well and badly. (b) While they are not good in themselves, they *actually can be or become good*, or, *they actually can benefit*, namely if they are used correctly (wisely, etc.).

DL 7.103 attributes (a) to the Stoics, but not (b). So much seems correct: Even though the passage associates the Stoic notion of benefit with the notion of good use, it does not do so in the sense discussed above—the text does not suggest that, according to the Stoics, good use of indifferents makes *them* beneficial. Another aspect of the report seems more problematic. (a) is presented as the Stoics' *reason* for saying that things like health and wealth are not good. This further claim should in my view be taken with some caution.³³ The Stoics would certainly agree that a rich person can use her wealth in better or worse ways. But this is not their principal way of explaining *why* wealth is a mere preferred indifferent, rather than good. The Stoics have their own—and actually, as I suggest, quite different—story to tell, a story which perhaps might be presented as their way of developing further and spelling out the Socratic notion of good use. According to the Stoics' account, preferred indifferents are 'in agreement with nature'; things like health and wealth have value because of the way in which they contribute to the natural life of a human being. And this value is a 'mere value' (ἄξία), rather than the value of real goodness, because health and wealth do not contribute to an agent's happiness. The

³² Cf. Long and Sedley's commentary in LS Vol. 2, 350. Francesca Alesse argues that the use of 'χρησθαι' in DL 103 is in line with *Euthydemus* 280d4-6. From this passage, she writes, 'derives' the *Stoic notion of χρεία* (2000, 326-7). It is important to keep in mind that, for it to be true that a passage in Plato was influential among the Stoics, we by no means need to assume that the Stoics did not develop the ideas they found *further*. For an approach of this kind, which focuses on Stoic *engagement with* and *further development of* certain Socratic views, cf. Striker (1996) and Long (1996).

³³ The same reasoning is mentioned in Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1048C and Sextus Empiricus, M 11.61. See also DL 7.104.

wise person selects and rejects valuable things perfectly, and it is this perfect selection which makes her life go well, or, be a ‘happy life.’ Whether she gets any of the valuable things that her selection and rejection is concerned with is irrelevant to her happiness.³⁴ This, I suggest, is at least the most prominent argument which the Stoics make for why health and wealth are not good.

The ideal way of dealing with things of value is, by the Stoics, described as selecting and rejecting them perfectly. We might paraphrase this and say that, if one does so, one uses these things well. Or, we might think that perfect selection and rejection is the Stoics’ way of *spelling out* what good use is. If this is so, then it is not surprising that the sources mention the Socratic idea of good use. At the same time, the Stoics’ way of explaining this idea might be quite distinctively their own.³⁵

But if, on the suggested interpretation, the Stoic thesis that only virtue and virtuous action benefit is as paradoxical as the thesis that only virtue and virtuous action are good, then it does look like I have overstated things in my introduction, saying that we tend to focus in a one-sided way on the paradoxical side of Stoic ethics. While Stoic ethics is no less paradoxical for the definition of the good, I would still want to resist this conclusion. The fact that Stoic ethics seems paradoxical to us shows how confused *we* are. There is a point to the Stoics’ claim that really, once we understand things, Stoic philosophy turns out to be fully in agreement with the very assumptions which make us rational. If we were less confused, it would no longer seem extreme to us; rather, Stoic philosophy would end up looking like the most obvious theory. That naturally acquired notions are criteria of truth is, as it were, the promise that, if we only make enough progress, things will ‘fall into place’, and the Stoic theories will appear entirely natural to us. This is not an obvious implication of the Stoics thinking that their theories are *true*; for one might also hold that a view is true and yet recognize that it is (thoroughly) revisionist. What I am suggesting is that the Stoics are, in effect, claiming that their theories only *seem* revisionist. If we were actually to become wise, we would see how, quite to the contrary, it is the everyday opinions of fools which in fact ‘re-*wise*’ the notions that nature supplies us with.

³⁴ Cf. the example of the archer in Cicero, *De fin.* 3.22.

³⁵ In his discussion of *Euthydemus* 278e-281e, Long notes the difference between *using* things like health and wealth, and *selecting* them. However, Long then employs a notion, ‘controlled by wisdom’, which makes the difference between both conceptions less visible—both ‘wise selection’ and ‘wise use’ could be described as ‘wise control.’ (1996, 28-29). Cf. M. Frede (2001, 89).

VI. *A Typical Case of Refinement*

Let me turn to the second objection which might be raised against my interpretation. Perhaps I have emphasised the continuity between the pre-conception and the conception of the good too much. Granted, according to both the preconception and the conception the good benefits. But do the sources not suggest that, nevertheless, coming to call virtue ‘good’ is like using ‘good’ for the first time with a proper understanding of what the term actually means? Is the scientific concept of the good thus not more of a new concept than I have presented it as being?

According to Cicero, we acquire the conception of the good by analogy (*collatio rationis*).³⁶ The mind ‘climbs up’ by means of analogy from the things which are in accordance with nature (i.e., things of value, like health or wealth). However, at the point when we actually acquire the concept of the good, something other than analogy is in play: we *perceive* the good, and name it ‘good’ not by comparison with other things, but *by its own specific power*.³⁷ When we eat honey for the first time, we perceive its sweetness, but not by comparison with other sweet things that we have tasted earlier. Rather, it is the honey’s specific sweetness which we perceive and which makes us call it ‘sweet’. Similarly, we ‘perceive’ the actual good—virtue—as good through the way in which it, independently from other things that we formerly regarded as good, appears to us (Cicero, *De fin.* 3.33-4 = SVF 3.72 = LS 60D).

What interests us now is the moment of acquiring the conception of the good. According to Cicero, it *does* have an element of acquiring a whole new concept. When calling virtue good, we do not compare it to things which are less good, or good in a qualified sense. Only virtue is good, and when we for the first time actually experience virtue, this ‘hits us’. The fact that we have the preconception of the good as benefit does not mean that we are actually acquainted with anything good or anything beneficial.

³⁶ Seneca too ascribes an important role to analogy (*Ep.* 120.4). I am not discussing *Letter* 120, since I take Seneca to be concerned with a *different* issue from the one that Cicero discusses. As Inwood emphasizes, the letter is written with the assumption that we (not being sages) *already have the notion of the good* (2005, 284).

³⁷ In Cicero’s account, this latter aspect sounds as if it involved a *perception* of the good. However, we need to be careful to not confuse this idea with a Platonic notion of ‘seeing the Form of the Good.’ Plutarch preserves a quote from Chrysippus on how good and bad things are perceptible: what we perceive is the condition of someone’s soul; we can perceive whether someone is wise or courageous, etc. (*On Stoic self-contradictions* 1042E-F = LS 60R = SVF 3.85).

This might seem to be a peculiar feature of the preconception of the good. How can there be a relationship of Refinement between the preconception of X and the scientific concept of X, when acquiring the scientific concept makes us realize that we used to be deeply misguided about what X is? I am suggesting that there can be such a relation. Let us first consider other evaluative notions. When we, for example, learn the notion ‘caring’ through interaction with our family, and thus acquire a preconception of ‘caring’, this does not involve encountering a single instance of caringness. In the end, only wise persons and gods are caring, and even very good parents are not (unless they are wise).³⁸ Acquiring the concept ‘caring’ thus is like acquiring the concept ‘good’. Even though there is a preconception of caring, which is the criterion of truth for the scientific concept of caring, we really do not understand what it is to be caring until we have the scientific concept.

But what about other concepts, say, concepts of natural entities? Recall my example of the concept ‘human being’. Again, we see the same kind of change. Full knowledge of what human beings are can only be achieved as part of the overall achievement of wisdom. When one understands nature as a whole, one’s concept of a human being will change quite drastically (and this would be true for all natural beings). Rather than consider them as natural beings with certain features, one would come to see them *as certain kinds of parts* of a large living being.

As I suggest, every case of Refinement which eventually arrives at a scientific concept that is, in some loose sense, basic to our way of seeing the world—i.e., at a concept which is part of the overall knowledge of the sage—will involve this kind of drastic change. A full understanding of nature involves seeing things really quite differently from how any lesser grasp makes them appear. The good is no exception; the same is true for all evaluative and normative concepts, as well as all concepts of natural entities. Nevertheless, these are cases in which the preconception of X functions as a criterion of truth for the conception of X.

The relationship between the preconception of the good and the concept of the good is thus, on my interpretation, a case of Refinement. The conception of the good relates back to the preconception of the good, rather than to some set of *other* preconceptions. The preconception of the good, rather than another set of preconceptions, captures what it is that the theory must, most immediately, be in agreement with. Like in other cases of Refinement, the progress that must be made in order to arrive at the scien-

³⁸ I am grateful to John Cooper for discussing these issues with me; the example came up in conversation.

tific conception of the good is very significant, and involves deep changes in our ways of thinking about things. In order to begin our inquiry, we need an explicit statement of the content of our preconception of the good, and this means, a certain kind of definition. The definition of the good as benefit tells us what we naturally take the good to be, and accordingly tells us that our theory of the good must meet the criterion of portraying the good as benefit. As radical as the transition to wisdom may be, once we get there, our theory of the good will no longer strike us as revisionist. Rather, it will seem like the most natural theory to hold.

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