

## INSTRUMENTS AND IMPEDIMENTS

### A Senecan-Aristotelian debate on the activation of the virtues

My starting point is a notoriously ambiguous chapter in Aristotle. It's well known that in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10, Aristotle rejects the view that virtuous activity is sufficient all by itself for happiness. Instead he asserts that while *eudaimonia* does consist in a life of virtuous activity, certain external goods, things like health, wealth, and freedom from pain, are also necessary in some sense. But in what sense? The text leaves room for interpretation: whether Aristotle means that such things are *components* of the best human life, such that happiness is incomplete without them, or whether they are *instrumentally* necessary for the best life – what we need to use to perform virtuous activities in the best way; and there are further questions about each of these possibilities.

In this paper I am not seeking to provide an answer to what Aristotle meant. My interest is rather in the interpretive space defined by that ambiguity, and in what happened next in ancient philosophy within that interpretive space. I explore a series of texts in which the so-called Peripatetic philosophers, responding to Aristotle, give their accounts of the relation between happiness and external goods – and the Stoics, represented by Seneca, give their version, responding to the Peripatetics.

The star player is what I call the *activation argument*. Some Peripatetics hold, picking up on certain things in Aristotle, that virtue is not sufficient for happiness because virtue can't be activated—can't give rise to any virtuous activities—without having some external goods. Stoics on their side insist that virtue can be activated regardless of circumstances. A debate develops.

Not everything we might like to know about the history of that debate is accessible in the record. There is some history one can piece together; resources for that are listed on the back of the handout. For today, though, my interests are primarily conceptual. My point is that reading the Stoic assertions against their Aristotelian background reveals what they have to give up in order to maintain the Sufficiency Thesis in its strongest form. We watch how the controversy produces a variety of interesting and persuasive arguments, but also how it lays bare some of the tensions within the Stoics' strictly intentionalist theory of action.

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So here we go with a brief review of the Aristotle chapter, which you will find on page 1 of the handout in [T1]. Aristotle says of the virtuous person that ...

while small strokes of good or ill fortune clearly will not influence his life, many great strokes of good fortune will make it more blessed, since in themselves they naturally add adornment to it, and his use of them proves to be fine and excellent. Conversely, if they are great misfortunes, they oppress and spoil his blessedness, since they involve pain and impede many activities.<sup>1</sup>

The person affected by such great evils will still behave well—“what is fine shines through”—and this is tremendously important to Aristotle: “it is activities that control life.” So long as one doesn’t engage in base actions, one cannot become miserable. But adversity does still make some kind of difference:

For a truly good and intelligent person ... will bear strokes of fortune suitably, and from his resources at any time will do the finest actions he can, just as a good general will make the best use of his forces in war, and a good shoemaker will produce the finest shoe he can from the hides given him, and similarly for all other craftsmen. If this is so, then the happy person could never become miserable. Still, he will not be blessed either, if he falls into misfortunes as bad as Priam’s.

Clearly, then, Aristotle does *not* subscribe to the view that activating one’s virtues as best one can in times of adversity is sufficient for the best human life. The question for the interpreter is what is his basis for rejecting it.

One could give priority to his language about *using* one’s fortunes and having them as “resources” for doing fine actions. One will then take him to mean that externals matter because we need them in order to be able to put our virtues into action. His main argument is then that regardless whether external goods are good in their own right, the reason they’re needed for *eudaimonia* is that without them, one can’t engage in the virtuous activities that constitute *eudaimonia*. They are *instrumentally* necessary for the *activation* of the virtues. This view of externals is also suggested by Aristotle’s craft analogies: the good person uses what comes to

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<sup>1</sup> I here give the entire segment from 1100b22-1101a8: πολλῶν δὲ γινομένων κατὰ τύχην καὶ διαφερόντων μεγέθει καὶ μικρότητι, τὰ μὲν μικρὰ τῶν εὐτυχημάτων, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τῶν ἀντικειμένων, δῆλον ὡς οὐ ποιεῖ ῥοπήν τῆς ζωῆς, τὰ δὲ μεγάλα καὶ πολλὰ γινόμενα μὲν εὖ μακαριώτερον τὸν βίον ποιήσει (καὶ γὰρ αὐτὰ συνεπικοσμεῖν πέφυκεν, καὶ ἡ χρῆσις αὐτῶν καλὴ καὶ σπουδαία γίνεται), ἀνάπαλιν δὲ συμβαίοντα θλίβει καὶ λυμαίνεται τὸ μακάριον: λύπας τε γὰρ ἐπιφέρει καὶ ἐμποδίζει πολλαῖς ἐνεργείαις. ὁμως δὲ καὶ ἐν τούτοις διαλάμπει τὸ καλόν, ἐπειδὴν φέρη τις εὐκόλως πολλὰς καὶ μεγάλας ἀτυχίας, μὴ δι’ ἀναληθισίαν, ἀλλὰ γεννάδας ὦν καὶ μεγαλόψυχος. εἰ δ’ εἰσὶν αἱ ἐνέργειαι κύριαι τῆς ζωῆς, καθάπερ εἵπομεν, οὐδεὶς ἂν γένοιτο τῶν μακαρίων ἄθλιος: οὐδέποτε γὰρ πράξει τὰ μισητὰ καὶ τὰ φαῦλα. τὸν γὰρ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἔμφορον πάσας οἰόμεθα τὰς τύχας εὐσημιόμως φέρειν καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων ἀεὶ τὰ κάλλιστα πράττειν, καθάπερ καὶ στρατηγὸν ἀγαθὸν τῷ παρόντι στρατοπέδῳ χρῆσθαι πολεμικώτατα καὶ σκυτοτόμον ἐκ τῶν δοθέντων σκυτῶν κάλλιστον ὑπόδημα ποιεῖν: τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους τεχνίτας ἅπαντας. εἰ δ’ οὕτως, ἄθλιος μὲν οὐδέποτε γένοιτ’ ἂν ὁ εὐδαίμων, οὐ μὴν μακαριός γε, ἂν Πριαμικαῖς τύχαις περιπέσῃ.

hand in the same way as “the good general will make the best use of his forces in war, and a good shoemaker will produce the finest shoe he can from the hides given him.” Similarly, one can find it in his claim that great misfortunes spoil one’s blessedness because they “impede many activities.” Again, externals matter in an instrumental way: we can’t be happy in misfortune because we are prevented from activating the good qualities that we have. I’ll refer to this line of argument throughout the paper as the Activation Argument.

A second possible line of interpretation takes Aristotle to mean that external goods are necessary because they are good in their own right, and their opposites are bad in their own right. Support for this interpretation can be derived from his statement that strokes of good fortune make life more blessed “since in themselves they naturally add adornment to it”; and on the negative side, from the remark that external evils spoil blessedness “since they involve pain.” Aristotle’s argument now comes out this way: that the best human life needs to include all the significant goods there are, and to be free of all significant evils, but strokes of fortune can be significant goods or evils. Even if you have the kind of goods that consist in virtuous activities, your life will still be deficient if you lack this other sort of goods. In brief, happiness is a mixed package, in which external goods figure as constituents or components. I’ll call this the Components Argument.

There is also a variant of the Components interpretation that derives from the last two sentences of T1. (“If this is so, then the happy person could never become miserable. Still, he will not be blessed either, if he falls into misfortunes as bad as Priam’s.”) As many people have pointed out, there are two ways to read the last sentence. If we assume that “blessed” (*makarios*) is synonymous with “happy” (*eudaimōn*) in the preceding sentence, then Aristotle says that a virtuous person who falls into great misfortunes is neither happy nor miserable—he’s in some intermediate state. But if you think that *makarios* is a stronger term than *eudaimōn*, a supreme form of happiness as it were, then Aristotle says that the virtuous person who suffers misfortune is happy, but does not rise to the level of blessedness. If you read it that way, Aristotle turns out to have said that virtuous action does suffice for a happy life, but that the external goods must be added to bring that life to the highest possible degree of happiness. They are, as it were, the icing on the cake. I’ll call this the Degrees of Happiness interpretation.

This interpretation has only a small role to play in the paper, but before we move it to the back burner, let's note why it has to be identified as a components view rather than an activation view. As we've seen, the activation argument depends on the assumption that one can't engage in virtuous activities unless one is suitably furnished with external goods. On this Degrees of Happiness view, we don't need externals for that reason – virtuous activities occur regardless of circumstances. The reason we need externals is to bring us beyond the happiness by virtuous living up to a further degree of blessedness. The two views aren't compatible: if externals are instrumentally necessary for virtuous action, then you can't get even the lesser degree of happiness without them.

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Now let's look at how these three lines of interpretation play themselves out in the subsequent Aristotelian tradition. All three were vigorous players. Apparently the philosophers that were labeled collectively "Peripatetics" did not have any single party line on Aristotle's case against sufficiency was to be upheld. Indeed, there seem to have been some sharp disagreements among them.<sup>2</sup>

Some took a straight Components approach. Cicero regularly attributes this approach to Theophrastus (notably in *De Finibus* 5); and it's also associated with the name of Critolaus, who was head of the school in the second century B.C.E.<sup>3</sup> The view has also had a formative influence on the compendium of Peripatetic ethics called "Doxography C," which is often attributed to Augustus' court philosopher Arius (or Arius Didymus). You'll find an excerpt in **T2**, which says that "Eagerness to secure health and desire for pleasure and clinging to life are because **these** are in accordance with nature and objects of choice on their own account *and goods*."<sup>4</sup> Which is to say that they are goods capable of contributing to the highest good.

The Degrees of Happiness variant is best known as the position of Antiochus of Ascalon, that is first defended and then criticized by Cicero in *De Finibus* 5 and *Tusculan Disputations* 5.

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<sup>2</sup> For the history of the school see especially Moraux 1973, Gottschalk 1987, White 2002; Inwood 2002 and 2014; Hahn 2007; Sharples 2007 and 2010; Nielsen 2012; Szaif 2012. Gill 2012 gives an overview of the interaction with Roman philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Critolaus' position is helpfully explicated in Hahn 2007 and in Inwood 2014, 54-57.

<sup>4</sup> Translations for Doxography C and other Peripatetic sources are from Sharples 2010, which also provides an invaluable commentary.

But it may be quite a bit older than Antiochus. Antiochus himself attributed it to the Old Academy, people like Xenocrates and Speusippus, and the same attribution appears in Seneca without any mention of Antiochus.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, other Peripatetics rejected the components view and instead insisted quite strongly on the Activation argument. A clear statement of that argument is found in another Stobaeon doxography, known as “Doxography A.” The nameless author there criticizes Critolaus and his followers for saying that the bodily and external goods “complete”—that is, are constitutive of – the end: instead, they play a role in the activation of virtue—they are things that virtue *uses*.

For not all good things are part of the end; bodily goods are not, nor are those derived from outside, but the activities of virtue in the soul alone. So it would have been better to say, instead of ‘completed’, ‘activated’, so that it might be apparent that virtue uses <these things>.

The argument also figures in a commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aspasius (T4).

Aspasius is especially interested in Aristotle’s craft analogies, giving emphasis to the implements needed by the craftsman:

Happiness needs external goods not as parts or as things that complete it but as instruments, just as flute-playing needs instruments for its own end, in order to achieve its particular end. For it is impossible, <Aristotle> says, to do noble things without provision; it is not possible to practice medicine if one is not provided with medical instruments and drugs. Then he reckons up the external goods, at the same time showing how virtue uses them as instruments for happiness.<sup>6</sup>

[For reasons of time I’ll skip T5; it is quite similar in thought to the Aspasius passage.]<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle’s negative language of “impediments” also appears in the Peripatetic tradition.

It too shows up in Doxography C (T6), where one definition of happiness is given as ‘the unimpeded use of virtue among things in accordance with nature’. Perhaps in the same vein,

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<sup>5</sup> Annas (1993, 420-23) presents this reading as an innovation by Antiochus, but Antiochus might just as well have drawn it from an earlier tradition of interpretation. Seneca speaks of the *veteres Academici* in *Ep.* 71.18 and of Xenocrates and Speusippus in *Ep.* 85.18, both times in reference to the position just described; and see also *Ep.* 92.14-16, discussed below. Seneca never mentions Antiochus in any of his writings.

<sup>6</sup> Aspasius, *On Aristotle’s Ethics* 24.3-9.

<sup>7</sup> [longer version:] Quite similar is a passage from another part of Doxography C. Again, this doxography appears to be a compendium of Peripatetic views: in T2 it gave us a strong components view, now in T5 we get a strong activation view. Here “the involvement of material things does not make happiness depart from pure nobility”; such things are needed only as “necessary conditions for the activity.” Again we have the craft analogies: fine actions are like flute-playing or doctoring, “altogether a matter of skill,” even if they also make use of “instruments.” τὴν δ’ εὐδαιμονίαν ἐκ τῶν καλῶν γίνεσθαι καὶ προηγουμένων πράξεων. διὸ καὶ δι’ ὅλων εἶναι καλήν, καθάπερ καὶ τὴν ἐν τοῖς αὐλοῖς ἐνέργειαν δι’ ὅλων ἔντεχνον. Οὐ γὰρ ἐκβιβάζειν τὴν παράληψιν τῶν ὑλικῶν τῆς εἰλοκρινείας τοῦ καλοῦ τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν, ὡς οὐδὲ τὴν τῆς ἰατρικῆς ἔντεχνον δι’ ὅλων ἐνέργειαν τὴν τῶν ὀργάνων χρῆσιν. Πᾶσαν μὲν γὰρ πράξιν ἐνέργειαν εἶναι τινα ψυχῆς. ... Τὰ γὰρ ὧν ἄνευ πράττειν ὀπίσθον ἀδύνατον, μέρη τῆς ἐνεργείας λέγειν οὐκ ὀρθόν. Τὸ μὲν γὰρ μέρος ἐπινοεῖσθαι κατὰ τὸ συμπληρωτικόν εἶναι τοῦ ὅλου, τὰ δ’ ὧν οὐκ ἄνευ κατὰ τὸ ποιητικόν, τῷ φέρειν καὶ συνεργεῖν εἰς τὸ τέλος.

there were some especially austere Peripatetics who limited themselves to “freedom from distress” as the one thing over and above virtuous activity that is needed for happiness. I’m thinking of Diodorus of Tyre, and possibly also Hieronymus of Rhodes; their signature term is ἀσκλησία. The point I take it is that virtuous activity is always possible unless you are in severe pain or distress; pain or distress thus function as impediments.<sup>8</sup>

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Now, about these activation arguments: they do have some intuitive appeal. They give a way to incorporate externals into the account of happiness without getting into the issue of whether they are intrinsically good or bad for us. If we grant their premise about the instrumental necessity of (some amount of) external goods, they make a compelling case for why a virtuous person, *qua* virtuous, should seek to acquire such goods or to avoid their opposites. With that said, however, this assault on the sufficiency thesis is itself open to question on several fronts.

First, the argument hasn’t specified *in what sense* externals are instrumental to the activation of the virtues. There are several different senses of instrumentality that might be invoked.

The one suggested by the craft analogies is that externals are instrumental in the same way as a flute is instrumental to playing the flute or a scalpel to performing an appendectomy. That is, as *implements*, an implement being whatever has just those properties that are needed to perform the task. This account of instrumentality makes a strong case for the necessity of the instrument: a flute doesn’t just make flute-playing easier, it makes it *possible*. There is nothing else one can use to make that incision *except* a scalpel—if something had the requisite properties, it would just *be* a scalpel. Alternatively, they might be instrumental to the task in the way that materials are necessary. The hides used by the shoemaker will eventually form the substance of the shoe, and again they seem like necessary conditions—you have to make the shoe out of something, and that material needs to have certain properties specific to the product. There is still

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<sup>8</sup> Both Diodorus of Tyre and Hieronymus of Rhodes emphasized ἀσκλησία to the exclusion of the positive external goods. Diodorus *adiungit ad honestatem vacuitatem doloris* (Cic., *Fin.* 5.14), making happiness consist in “living trouble-free and honorably” (ἀσκλητίως καὶ καλῶς ζῆν, Clement *Strom* 2.21.127). Hieronymus, a contemporary of Arcesilas and Chrysippus, is sometimes represented as a hedonist because of the association of his name with ἀσκλησία alone. However Hieronymus also denied that pleasure is intrinsically choiceworthy (Cic., *Fin.* 2.9). See further White 2002 and 2004.

not much opening for fungibility: you could say that anything that has enough of the properties of cowhide that you can make a shoe out of it, just is a new sort of cowhide. Either way, if we accept the analogy, the activation argument is in a strong position.

It seems fair to ask, though, how many of the circumstances that are typically listed as external goods can be thought of *either* as implements or as materials. Health, keen eyesight, high social status, and friends are all very useful things, but perhaps not in either of the above senses. They might be more like what I would call ‘facilitators’—things that don’t have the kind of task-specific properties tools have, but do have some generally useful property that will assist in a wide range of tasks. It’s the difference between the key I use to open the back door and the flashlight I use to find the woodpile *and* to get safely up the steps *and* to find the key when I drop it in the snow. Health seems more like the flashlight, a facilitator for all kinds of activities. It would still be instrumental, but in that its properties aren’t specific to any particular task or product, the case is less strong that it is a necessary condition for any of them. The flashlight makes it easier to find the woodpile, but I could probably manage without it. And it seems like this is the sort of account that an Aristotelian should want for the external goods. Otherwise, if everything on the list is a necessary condition, the argument is too ambitious. No one would be able to behave virtuously unless they were healthy *and* physically strong *and* rich *and* had lots of friends. And I don’t think even Theophrastus would have wanted that conclusion.

A second concern is the apparent assumption of these Aristotelians that the circumstances that make possible, or at least promote, the activation of virtue are the very ones that are conventionally regarded as external *goods*, and the ones that impede the activation of virtue are just those that are conventionally regarded as evils. It’s not obvious why one should accept this. Might there not be cases where virtue uses—and *needs* to use – ill health, or poverty, or is hampered in its activities by robust health or corporeal pleasure?<sup>9</sup> Cephalus, in the first book of Plato’s *Republic*, finds that the feebleness of old age makes it easier to be temperate. If Diogenes the Cynic had been a wealthy man, he could not have set the Athenians an example of fortitude in the face of poverty. But if virtue sometimes *needs* adversity in order to do its work, the whole argument falls apart.

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<sup>9</sup> John Cooper suggests that physically good-looking people have extra opportunities to practice the virtue of temperance (Cooper 1999: 296-99). I would have said that people whose homeland is assailed by war have extra opportunities to practice the virtue of courage—but a threatened homeland is *not* an external good.

A third concern is a lack of clarity on what it means for a virtue to be activated. Clearly, one has to *do* something in a virtuous way—but what counts as doing? Does the general need to win the battle in order to have exercised his skill in command? Is the generous person *not* acting with generosity if she gives a small sum from limited resources? Would the mere endeavor to give be enough, even if the check gets lost in the mail? Aristotle is willing to say that adverse circumstances don't prevent virtuous actions – “what is fine shines through” – so perhaps the mere endeavor *is* enough. But if that's the case, then external goods aren't needed for virtuous action to occur, but only for virtuous action to achieve its ends.

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All three of those openings are exploited on behalf of the Stoics, passionate defenders of the Sufficiency Thesis, within the pages of Seneca. I'm going to be presenting for your consideration two extended passages of Seneca where it's possible to trace *both* sides of the discussion.<sup>10</sup> How this material comes into Seneca is its own story, but not something I can go into today. For right now I think it's enough if I remind you that Seneca had many older works at his fingertips, both Stoic books and books from other traditions; that he has in general a very good working understanding of Stoic thought and advocates consistently for it. In both these letters I believe he is working from older sources -- but what matter is the argument itself.

I pick up the conversation with the last segment of Letter 85[T-7]. Like every segment of this peculiar letter, our passage starts with a formal argument propounded by an unnamed Stoic, intended to prove the Stoic line on the value of external goods. This is followed by a Peripatetic refutation, then a rebuttal coming again from the Stoic side. At first, the Stoic argues as follows:

“Whatever is bad does some harm; whatever harms a person makes him worse; pain and poverty do not make a person worse; therefore, they are not bad.”

To this the Peripatetic at first replies that premise 2 is false:

...it is not the case that whatever harms a person also makes him worse. Wind and storm harm the helmsman, but they do not make him worse.

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<sup>10</sup> A likely intermediary for some of the material is Posidonius, in view of passing references in *Ep.* 87.35 and 87.38. The name of Posidonius does not occur in *Ep.* 85, but the manner of presentation, quite different from Seneca's expository style in other letters, carries some weight.



An initial Stoic response plays right into the Peripatetics' hands: wind and storm do make the helmsman worse, not in his skill but in his activities, his *opera*.<sup>11</sup> By that reasoning, says the Peripatetic, the wise person too is made worse, for pain and poverty impede *his* activities. We recognize the "impediments" version of the Activation argument. This now becomes the target for rebuttal.

Two Stoic responses are offered. In one, the craft analogy is rejected altogether, on grounds that virtuous wisdom has no single objective it is required to attain. Seneca's preference, though, is to accept the analogy and argue against the claim that wind and storm impede the helmsman's activities.

In my view neither the skill of the helmsman nor the exercise of that skill is made worse by any storm. The helmsman has not promised you a favorable outcome; he has promised an effort to be of use and a knowledge of how to handle the ship. That knowledge is all the more in evidence when hindered by some blast of fortune.

Wind and storm do prevent the helmsman from reaching his destination, but they do not prevent him from exercising his skill *qua* helmsman; and likewise, poverty and pain may indeed prevent the wise person from helping others, but he will still not be harmed, because his own good is just in his *effort* to help them.<sup>12</sup>

A additional gambit, being played out at the same time, argues that wind and storm actually help the helmsman to exercise his capacity: they make manifest the skill that he previously possessed but was not using.

[S]kill as a helmsman is not impeded by such circumstances; on the contrary, it is made manifest. The same goes for the virtuous agent who is afflicted with poverty or pain:

He is himself, always, in his actions, and in the doing of them he is greatest when opposed by fortune. For it is then that he does the business of wisdom itself, which as we just said is his own good as well as that of others.

Seneca thinks this point is even clearer for the wise person than it is for the helmsman. The helmsman's skill is "all the more in evidence during the storm", but the wise person is actually "greatest" when opposed by fortune.

In the last paragraph of the selection, Seneca adds a claim that the resources needed for virtuous action are completely *fungible*. A virtuous agent who is prevented from helping others in one way might still help them in some other way:

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<sup>11</sup> Ep. 85.31: *Quidam e Stoicis ita adversus hoc respondent: deteriores fieri gubernatorem tempestate ac procella, quia non possit id quod proposuit efficere nec tenere cursum suum; deteriores illum in arte sua non fieri, in opere fieri.*

<sup>12</sup> His "effort to be of use" (*utilem operam*).

By reason of poverty he is prevented from teaching them how one ought to manage affairs of state, yet he does teach them how one ought to manage poverty. All that is needed is *some* form of virtuous activity working within *some* set of circumstances. Since we always have circumstances, there is never an impediment to the exercise of virtue, and happiness is unimpaired. The wise person is free to turn his gaze away from what Seneca calls the “material of virtue” and toward virtue itself,<sup>13</sup> confident of being able to act well in any eventuality.

There is a lot here, but let’s not reflect on these arguments just yet; instead let’s take in the second extended passage [T-8]. This is from Letter 92, also a long defense of the Sufficiency Thesis, but in a different format. Here, Seneca appears to be writing against a Peripatetic doxography, dealing point by point with a whole string of Peripatetic theses: the divided mind, the inclusive notion of the *telos*, the value of longevity.<sup>14</sup> The part we’re interested in starts at section 14. The opponent is speaking and is asserting the Peripatetic view that virtuous wisdom is not sufficient to enable one to attain the highest good.

“The wise person is happy, to be sure; yet he does not attain the supreme good unless he has some natural tools at his disposal.” Not just tools but natural tools, *naturalia instrumenta*: these can only be external goods, with *naturalia* recalling a long Hellenistic tradition on what kinds of objects accord with our nature, and *instrumenta* capturing in a single word the ‘implements’ version of the Activation Argument. But as this Peripatetic speaker continues, his activation idea is conflated the argument I called Degrees of Happiness:

Thus while someone who has virtue cannot be miserable, one who lacks such natural goods as health and an unimpaired physical condition is still not *perfectly* happy. I find this a little odd: as we’ve seen, the activation argument doesn’t combine at all well with the Degrees of Happiness position, and it is the latter position that Seneca is after in this paragraph.

But the activation idea isn’t gone; it comes back in the following paragraph. Seneca has just trotted out the old analogy of the supremacy of virtue to the light of the sun: just as in full daylight a tiny spark illuminates nothing, so in comparison to virtue external advantages add nothing to the *vita beata*. “But,” says the interlocutor, “even the sun has its light blocked by

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<sup>13</sup> Ep. 85.38: *nec materiam eius sed ipsam intueretur*.

<sup>14</sup> The single-mindedness with which 92 attacks Peripatetic ethics has not generally been recognized. I make the case in Graver f/c, which reads the letter together with Peripatetic doxography ‘C’.

certain things.” That is to say, even virtue can be hindered from activation by external impediments like pain or poverty. Seneca responds by developing the analogy:

[T]he sun is unimpaired, even when it is obstructed; and even if there is something in between that stops us from seeing it, it is still at work and still proceeding on its round. Every time it shines out between the clouds, it is no smaller or slower than when the sky is quite clear. And so with virtue: it is not diminished at all by whatever is external to its agency. The virtuous person can always endeavor to act virtuously, and on Seneca’s view, effort is all that matters for evaluation:

...nothing is subtracted from virtue by things that stand in its way; it is not diminished, but is simply less illuminating.

Seneca thus distinguishes between an impediment, that would prevent one from the activity, and a “mere obstruction,”<sup>15</sup> that prevents the activity from being observed. Where the Peripatetic had claimed that the wise person who is afflicted with serious misfortunes *is* virtuous but cannot *activate* his virtue, Seneca insists that virtue in these cases *is* being activated, just in an unobservable way.

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If we wanted to spend more time, there are other texts we could look at. Letters 85 and 92 are both much longer than the parts I’ve given you, and these are only two of three big Senecan letters devoted specifically to arguments against the Peripatetic position on sufficiency.<sup>16</sup> But we have enough to bring out what is really at issue in this conversation between the schools.

Aristotle’s claim had been, at least in part, that a life of virtuous activity has to be something more than a life of *deciding to do* virtuous actions. My readiness to be, let’s say, kind, can’t by itself supply everything that goes into a kind action – I need various advantages that aren’t part of my kindness, like resources to be kind with, or strength to perform whatever specific act my kindness suggests to me. Not only is the mere disposition not enough; the mere endeavor is also not enough: I also need to make some difference to my friend. But the ability to make that difference is to some extent beyond my control, and for that reason (though perhaps also for other reasons), Aristotle finds he has to include external goods in his account of *eudaimonia*.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ep.* 92.71 : *multum interest utrum aliquid obstet tantum an inpediat.*

<sup>16</sup> The third is Letter 87. There is highly relevant material also in Letter 66, one of the longest letters in the collection.

But that view on the activation of virtue is exactly what Stoic ethics wants to resist. Stoics accept Aristotle's distinction between capacities and activities, but they don't want to talk about virtuous activity in a way that makes that activity depend on anything besides virtue itself. There are things you need in order to *become* virtuous, and there are conditions that must be met if you are to *remain* virtuous—you can lose virtue if your mental capacities are impaired.<sup>17</sup> But if you *are* virtuous, you are always able to behave as suits your character. Strokes of fortune ought not to enhance or impair that ability. Otherwise goodness would sometimes fail through its own fault in ways that matter to itself; and that seems logically impossible. Hence Seneca's effort to refute the activation argument has strong philosophical motivations from within Stoic thought.

In the passages we've looked at, we've seen him break down the Peripatetic argument by going after the 'implements' notion of instrumentality, with its strong implication of necessity. He tries to move the discussion to a place where the virtuous agent will can activate her virtue regardless of circumstances. He thus replaces the idea the tool, that needs to have particular properties in order to be usable, with a more fungible, in fact completely fungible, notion of a general-purpose "material of virtue." Unlike the cowhide used by Aristotle's shoemaker, this material consists in all the circumstances of our lives: the virtuous person uses whatever circumstances that come to hand, and something will always be to hand. This "material" needs to have just one property in order to make it usable: it needs to be identifiable as either in accordance with our nature or contrary to it, so that the agent can apply some rational criteria for action. That's pointed out in a good fragment of Chrysippus [T9]: it's accordance with nature that supplies virtue with a basis for selecting among indifferents in an intelligent way.<sup>18</sup> But as long as one can act in some way, there is no need at all for fortune to supply the virtuous agent with external goods rather than evils. Seneca even flirts with the possibility that adverse circumstances are *more* conducive to virtuous action than prosperity is—which does not work philosophically, for several reasons, but does show the strength of his resistance to the Peripatetic premise.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> E.g. drunkenness and *melancholia*, i.e. mental illness (D.L. 7.127); also drowsiness, lethargy, and the influence of certain medications: Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Categories* 102a, *CAG* 402.22-26, *SVF* 3.238.

<sup>18</sup> Chrysippus again, in Plut., *Comm. Not.* 1069e [=LS 59A]: πότεν οὖν ἄρξωμαι, καὶ τίνα λάβω τοῦ καθήκοντος ἀρχῆν καὶ ὕλην τῆς ἀρετῆς, ἀφείς τὴν φύσιν καὶ τὸ κατὰ φύσιν; "What starting point shall I adopt for appropriate action and for the material of virtue if I leave out nature and what accords with nature?"

<sup>19</sup> We saw this move in Letter 85, when Seneca says the virtuous agent "is greatest when opposed by fortune." A more extreme version appears at the end of Letter 66, where Seneca insists that it could be desirable to be like

Finally, to the most fundamental Stoic move, which is to push the Aristotelian back to the wall on what counts as activation. In Seneca's world, the helmsman who steers properly but goes down with the ship has used his skill; the sun behind the clouds shines as brilliantly as ever—and by analogy, the virtuous agent who has to contend with adversity fully activates her virtues, even if she fails to achieve her ends and even if her action never becomes known. These arguments accord very well with the Stoics' very precise account of moral responsibility that locates everything that matters about an action right at the moment of assent to impulsive impressions. To act *is* also to move oneself in some way—a signal does move from the central directive faculty to the limbs<sup>20</sup>—but the excellence of the action doesn't depend on the result. Some will remember that Chrysippus preferred a definition of walking that eliminated mention of the feet.<sup>21</sup> Willingness is *everything*.

And here's my point. Yes, there are good reasons why a philosopher might want to think about action the way the Stoics do, just at the point of inception. But that insistence doesn't come for free. If no consideration need be given to how the impulse-to-act plays itself out in its surroundings, then we will sometimes be talking about an agent who brings about no change in the world and whose endeavor to do so is undetectable. And in those cases, it's not entirely convincing to say that person is *acting* as opposed to just being ready to act. The very idea of activating a capacity is one of putting it into effect in some way, and that *has* to mean having an

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Mucius Scaevola and have one's right hand roasted over the coals in an act of patriotism. The problem with this is that a Stoic ought not to allow that what he calls the dispreferred indifferents contribute to virtuous action any more than preferred indifferents do. He should say—and Seneca does say at length elsewhere—that all virtuous actions are equal in value, regardless of the circumstances in which they are performed. Moreover, when it comes down to choosing among the indifferents, the Stoics are quite clear that human beings *should* pursue the things that accord with our nature: our physical needs, the needs of our families and communities, even comfort and financial security. Of course pursuit and avoidance are to be governed by reason, and of course the good resides not in the objects themselves but in the manner of selection. But without that alignment to the kinds of objects human beings naturally need, the basis for rational selection will disappear. (In Stoic terminology “selection” (ἐκλογή) is impulse directed toward a preferred or dispreferred indifferent as such (Stobaeus 2.7.7g, 84-85W; Cic., *Fin.* 3.20). Note that *si electio detur* implies that one will sometimes not be able to rationally choose preferred indifferents.) And the argument could be defused in any case by pointing out the distinction between circumstances that actually *facilitate*, or even *make possible*, the exercise of a virtue, and those that merely provide an opportunity. Consider for instance the virtue of courage, whose scope is regularly specified as ‘things that are frightening’. It might be alleged that the rabid dog or the deadly virus is instrumental to the exercise of courage, but not everyone will allow this. You could say that the deadly virus gives me an opportunity to use my courage, but that the things that facilitate or even make possible my courageous response are other features of the situation—my rational nature, my physical strength, the friend by my side and so on.

<sup>20</sup> For the terminology of the “impulsive impression” and the “movement of psyche toward something” see Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.7.9, 86W; 2.7.9b, 88W.

<sup>21</sup> In a controversy with Cleanthes: Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 113.23; see also Inwood 1985, 50-51.

impact on the world as it is. So the situation does have to allow for the world's receiving that impact. We might not need to have all the resources the Peripatetics are claiming, but we do need the situation to be conducive in certain ways. So Seneca's suggestion that the sage might act "invisibly, just like the hidden sun" seems to me problematic at a very deep level. Virtuous activities disappear, back into virtuous dispositions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Versions of this paper were given at the University of California at Berkeley in 2016, at the University of Pittsburgh in 2015, at Yale University in 2013, and at Rutgers University in 2013. I would like to thank those who participated in those discussions for a number of pointed comments which have contributed materially to the present version.

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