

Aristotle's statements concerning external goods in *Nic. Eth.* 1.10 gave the impetus to a range of interpretations among later Peripatetics, including one key argument that appeals to the need for virtue to be *activated* in the world. Stoics, maintaining the sufficiency of virtue for *eudaimonia*, seek to refute this argument, with some success. The discussion that ensues is of interest in that it brings out certain tensions within the Stoic theory of action.

Background items:

- **Happiness (*eudaimonia*):** the best life for a human being, on both a subjective and an objective evaluation (*not* merely a feeling of enjoyment)
- **External goods:** things that are regarded by most people as worth pursuing, but that are not part of one's moral character. These may be either bodily characteristics like health, good looks, and strength, or external circumstances like wealth, reputation, friends, and the welfare of one's country. (In a Stoic context, these same items are called "preferred indifferents.")
- **Capacity:** a condition or trait that enables one to behave in a certain way; e.g. the ability to swim. The virtues are capacities to act courageously, generously, temperately, etc.
- **Activities:** the events in which one behaves according to one's capacity; e.g. swims across the pool. A courageous action is the activity of, or activates, the virtue of courage.
- **Sufficiency Thesis:** Anyone who lives a life of virtuous activity is also happy; i.e., is in possession of the highest human good.

T1: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10, 1100b22-1101a8 (Irwin trans.)

However, many events are matters of fortune, and some are smaller, some greater. Hence, **while small strokes of good or ill fortune clearly will not influence his [sc. a good person's] 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.**

And yet, even here **what is fine shines through**, when he bears many severe misfortunes with good temper, not because he feels no distress, but because he is noble and magnanimous.

And since **it is activities that control life**, as we said, no blessed person could ever become miserable, since he will never do hateful and base actions. **For a truly good and intelligent person, we suppose, 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 (*eudaimōn*) person could never become miserable. Still, he will not be blessed (*makarios*) either, if he falls into misfortunes as bad as Priam's.**

Some possible interpretations:

1. **Activation:** In addition to virtue, some share in the external goods is also necessary for happiness, because unless one has them, one cannot engage in virtuous activities.
2. **Components:** In addition to virtue, some share in the external goods is also necessary for happiness, because such things are good or bad for us in their own right, as being in accordance with our nature or contrary to it.
 - Note also a variant appealing to **degrees of happiness**: external goods are not necessary for happiness (*eudaimonia*), but are necessary for "blessedness" (*makariotēs*).

“Components” interpretation in Peripatetic texts

T2: ‘Doxography C’ (= Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.7.13-26), section 13 (118W), tr. Sharples

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**. Conversely rejecting and avoiding illness and pain and destruction are because these are contrary to nature and objects of avoidance on their own account and evils...

“Activation” interpretation in Peripatetic texts

T3: ‘Doxography A’ (= Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.7.3b, p. 46 Wachsmuth)

By the younger Peripatetics from <the school of> Critolaus <the end is said to be> ‘what is completed from all the goods’—that is, from the three kinds <of goods>, but this is wrong. 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>.

T4: *Aspasius, On Aristotle’s Ethics 2.4.3-9*, tr. Sharples

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.

T5: ‘Doxography C’, section 15 (p. 129-30 Wachsmuth)

Happiness comes from noble and primary actions. For this reason it is altogether noble, just as flute-playing is altogether a matter of skill. For **the involvement of material things does not make happiness depart from pure nobility, just as the use of instruments <does not alter> the activity of medicine <from being> altogether a matter of skill**. For every action is some activity of the soul. It is not right to say that those things without which something cannot be done are parts of the activity. For a part is conceived of as completing the whole, but necessary conditions (τὰ οὐκ ἄνευ) <are conceived of> as productive, by contributing and assisting towards the end.

T6: ‘Doxography C’, section 16 (p. 130 Wachsmuth)

Happiness is ‘the primary employment of complete virtue in a complete life’ or ‘the activity of a complete life in accordance with virtue’ or **‘the unimpeded use of virtue amid things in accordance with nature’** (χρησιν ἀρετῆς ἐν τοῖς κατὰ φύσιν ἀνεμπόδιστον).

Some concerns about the activation argument

1. In what sense can externals be thought of as *instrumental* to the exercise of the virtues, or as *impeding* it? Are we to think of them as *implements* or *materials*, or only as *facilitators*? In the case of impediments, are we to think of them as rendering the activity impossible, or only as making it more difficult?
2. Is there any basis for the assumption that the various kinds of instruments required for the activation of virtue are always external *goods*, while the impediments are external *evils*?
3. What does it mean to say that a virtue is *activated*? Must the action achieve its ends? By what standard? Does the virtuous endeavor need to be observable in any way?

T7: Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 85.30-39

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.

One might say, “The premise you offer 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.”

31 Some of the Stoics respond to this objection as follows: Wind and storm do make the helmsman worse, since he cannot achieve what he set out to do, that is, to hold his course. He is not made worse as concerns his skill, but he is made worse as concerns his activity.

To this the Peripatetic replies, “By that reasoning, even the wise person is made worse by poverty, pain, and everything else of that sort; for such things will impede his activities, even though they do not take away his virtue.”*

32 The objection would be right if it were not for a disanalogy between the helmsman’s situation and that of the wise person. The latter’s aim in life is not merely to complete the particular task he is attempting but to act rightly in all things; the helmsman’s aim is merely to conduct the ship into harbor. The skills are subordinates and must deliver on what they promise to do; wisdom is the sovereign and director. The skills serve life; wisdom rules it.

33 But I think we ought to respond in a different way. 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.** Anyone who can say, “Never this ship, Neptune, except upright!”* has satisfied the requirements of his skill. What the storm impedes is not the helmsman’s activity but only the outcome.

34 “What do you mean? Isn’t the helmsman harmed by the gale that prevents him from reaching the harbor, makes his endeavors pointless, and either drives him back out to sea or knocks over the mast and so arrests his progress?” He is not harmed as a helmsman but only as one traveling by sea. Otherwise he is not a helmsman at all, for **skill as a helmsman is not impeded by such circumstances; on the contrary, it is made manifest (*magis apparet*).** As the saying goes, “In fair weather anyone can be a helmsman.” The events you speak of are detrimental to the voyage, not to the helmsman as such. **35** The helmsman plays two roles. One is in common with everyone who embarks on the same ship: he too is a passenger. The other is his own role: he is the helmsman. The storm harms him in his role as passenger, not in his role as a helmsman.

36 Then again, the skill of a helmsman is a good belonging to another: it pertains to his passengers, just as a doctor’s skill is a good pertaining to his patients. By contrast, the skill of the wise person is a shared good: it belongs both to those he lives with and to himself. Thus even supposing that the helmsman is harmed when the service he promised to do for others is hindered by the storm, **37** the wise person is still not harmed by the storms of life—poverty, pain, and the rest. For not all his works are hindered but only those that pertain to others. **He is himself, always, in his actions, and in the doing of them he is greatest (*maximus*) 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.

38 Besides, he is not prevented from helping others just because he is constrained by circumstances. **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.** His work extends through the whole of his life. Thus no chance event precludes the wise man’s activity, for what prevents him from other activities is now the very object of his efforts. He is well suited for either eventuality: prosperity he governs, adversity he vanquishes. **39** I repeat: his endeavor was to manifest his virtue both in prosperity and in adversity, keeping his gaze fixed **on virtue itself and not on the material of virtue.** For that reason, he is undeterred by poverty or pain or

anything else that causes untrained minds to turn and run away.

T8: Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 92.14-18

“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. 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.” 15 You are granting the point that seems harder to believe when you admit that someone suffering very great and continuous pain is not only not miserable but even happy; yet you balk at the easier point, that such a person is perfectly happy. But if virtue has the power to prevent someone from being miserable, it will be easier for it to make him perfectly happy, since the distance from happy to perfectly happy is less than that from miserable to happy. Surely the thing that can snatch one out of disasters and situate one among the happy has the further power to make up the difference and make one perfectly happy? Does it give up just as it is reaching the summit? 16 Life includes advantages and disadvantages, both of them outside our control. If the good man is not miserable even though he is laden with every disadvantage, how is he not perfectly happy if he lacks some advantages? Just as the weight of disadvantages does not reduce him to misery, so the absence of advantages does not remove him from perfect happiness; he is as perfectly happy without advantages as he is free from misery under the weight of disadvantages. Otherwise, if the good belonging to him can be diminished it can be snatched away from him altogether. 17 As I was saying a bit ago, a spark makes no contribution to the light of the sun; for the sun’s brightness obscures anything that might shine in its absence.

“But even the sun has its light blocked by certain things.” Yet the 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. There is a lot of difference between an impediment and a mere obstruction (*multum interest utrum aliquid obstet tantum an impediat*). 18 In the same way, nothing is subtracted from virtue by things that stand in its way; it is not diminished but is simply less illuminating. It may not strike us with equal brilliance, but in itself it is the same and deploys its force invisibly, just like the hidden sun (*more solis obscuri in occulto vim suam exercet*). Thus disasters, losses, and unfair treatment have no more power against virtue than a cloud can exert against the sun.

T9: Chrysippus *apud* Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 1069e [=LS 59A], my trans.

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?

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