

The Coherence of the Stoic Position on Suicide

On the popular conception of what it means to be stoic, it must seem odd that Stoicism ever permits suicide. 'Being stoic' connotes 'toughing it out' and arming oneself with the mental strength to endure extreme circumstances. How could the Stoics sanction what seems like the ultimate act of surrender to such circumstances, the taking of one's own life? The Stoics did not merely sanction it, though; Zeno, Cleanthes, Antipater, and Seneca all put their doctrine to use, by killing themselves. These Stoics were far from frivolous wimps, so they must have believed they had good reason to commit suicide, reason that fit soundly with the rest of what they preached.¹ As we will see, the Stoics did not regard suicide as the mental capitulation we might be tempted to regard it today, but rather as the rational response to very select situations. Insofar as the popular understanding of 'stoic' suggests Stoicism could not permit suicide, it is misleading, for I will argue that this Stoic position is indeed coherent.

What we call suicide here is not something for which any of the Stoics had a word. In both Greek and Latin a phrase was used to indicate voluntary death, "a death that a person both intended and brought about by some action of his own that was aimed, at least proximately, at bringing that death about".² How could it ever be right, on the Stoic theory, for a person to bring such voluntary death upon himself? To use the Stoics' term, how could suicide ever be *kathekon*—the appropriate or befitting action?

1 Rist, 238.

2 Cooper, 10; Griffin, 69.

There seems to be some scholarly disagreement on this question of whether the Stoics can consistently permit suicide. At one end of the spectrum, Cooper explicitly defends the Stoic position: “their view is both coherent and not obviously implausible”.³ Brennan also says “there is nothing inconsistent” with the grounding given for the Stoic position.⁴ Englert, Rist, and Sandbach do not explicitly offer an opinion, but they give no reason to believe they think the Stoic view is incoherent on its own terms. Seidler likewise does not seem to think the Stoic view is incoherent on its own terms, though he does cast doubt on the general “grounding of moral obligation” on the Stoic theory, from a Kantian perspective.⁵ Long and Sedley come closest to passing negative judgment without actually doing so, by saying that in permitting suicide the Stoics occupy a “precarious position”.⁶ At the opposite end of the spectrum from Cooper is Nussbaum, who thinks of the Stoic position on suicide that “in a crucial way it is internally incoherent”.⁷ In what follows, I will argue for the coherence of the Stoic position by responding to Nussbaum's argument for that claim.

Before considering her argument, it will help to rehash briefly the heart of the Stoic ethical doctrine. By 'the heart' I mean the Stoic position on three related concepts: the final end, virtue, and the good and the bad.⁸ For the purposes of this paper, it helps to view the Stoic take on these concepts in the context of Aristotelian ethical theory, so I will begin briefly with that.

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Aristotle is a eudaimonist, which is to say that his ethical theory is grounded in the idea that our final end, the end at which we aim in doing everything we do, is *eudaimonia*—happiness

3 Cooper, 27.

4 Brennan, 41.

5 Seidler, 451 n. 71.

6 Long and Sedley (L&S), 428.

7 Nussbaum, 97.

8 L&S, 58A.

or flourishing. The all-important question he takes his ethical theory to be answering, then, is: what is necessary and sufficient for achieving *eudaimonia*? Aristotle's answer seems to be that to achieve *eudaimonia* we must act virtuously *and* be fortunate enough to enjoy certain external goods. In other words, *eudaimonia* is not open to those merely who behave the proper way in whatever circumstances they find themselves; a certain sort of external prosperity, which is not directly under our control as our behavior is, is also necessary for *eudaimonia*. Aristotle says,

“there are some things the lack of which takes the lustre from happiness—good birth, goodly children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy, and perhaps a man would be still less likely if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death. As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition”.⁹

On Aristotle's view it appears I could be virtuous in everything I do, but because fortune happens not to afford me certain circumstances, I cannot fully flourish as a human being. In this crucial way, the Aristotelian view makes achieving *eudaimonia* contingent upon luck.

The Stoics are also eudaimonists, but they clearly want to depart from this view that *eudaimonia* is dependent upon external circumstances furnished by fortune. The final end for the Stoics is *eudaimonia*, but *eudaimonia* on their view is wholly constituted by virtue. That is, being virtuous is necessary and sufficient for achieving *eudaimonia*. Virtue itself consists in living according to nature,¹⁰ which is to say, in navigating the world of material with which a person is confronted in a way that is consistent with human nature and the nature of the universe.

9 Aristotle, I.8 1099a. I realize that L&S appear not to share my exact interpretation of Aristotle's formula for *eudaimonia*: they refer to the “Aristotelian stipulation that the external goods virtue needs for its exercise are constituents of happiness” (428). That is, I am arguing that for Aristotle *eudaimonia* = virtuous activity + certain external goods, whereas they seem to be implying that *eudaimonia* = virtuous activity, and that certain types of virtuous activity are inaccessible to the person whom fortune does not afford certain circumstances. I think my interpretation, that *eudaimonia* requires certain external circumstances over and above the performance of virtuous activity (leaving aside the question of whether all types of such virtuous activity are accessible to a person not afforded the right circumstances, because its answer does not strictly bear on my claim), is supported by the quotation I use above..

10 Stobaeus tidily sums this much up in L&S 63A.

That person is virtuous who navigates the proper course in the proper way, by willing the appropriate actions (*ta kathekonta*) from a firm mental disposition. In the Stoics' terms, to navigate properly through the world of material is to select wisely among 'the indifferents'. The material of the world is termed 'indifferent' to distinguish it from what is truly good, from what truly produces *eudaimonia*—virtue. As Epictetus puts it concisely, “the good are the virtues and everything that shares in them, and the evil vices and what shares in vice; and everything that lies between these, such as riches, health, life, death, pleasure or pain is indifferent”.¹¹ All this will be explored in more depth below, but it is worth emphasizing the Stoics' difference from the Aristotelian theory before proceeding to Nussbaum's argument against the Stoic position on suicide.

External enjoyments like wealth, health, and friendship are referred to as 'indifferents' because they are not good or bad in themselves. Without knowing anything else about a person's situation but that he is very wealthy, healthy, or has many friends, we can say nothing about how close or far he is from achieving *eudaimonia*. That *eudaimonia* for the Stoics comes from making the right decision from the right state of mind seems to imply that the barriers to *eudaimonia* in a human life are internal.¹² Gone is the harsh Aristotelian truth that some people are just natural slaves by birth, others hideous, and so on, and therefore disqualified right out of the starting gate. By identifying *eudaimonia* solely with virtue, a firm mental disposition when acting according to nature, the Stoics relocate the source of *eudaimonia* to be within a human

11 Epictetus, 2.19.13. By 'everything that shares in them' I take Epictetus to mean the virtuous person. This interpretation, I think, is supported by this quotation from Sextus Empiricus: “(1) The Stoics, sticking fast to the common conceptions so to speak, define the good as follows: 'Good is benefit or not other than benefit', meaning by 'benefit' virtue and virtuous action, and by 'not other than benefit' the virtuous man and his friend” (L&S 60G).

12 Though I will argue in what follows that ultimately the Stoics do hold there to be certain external impediments to *eudaimonia*.

being's mental control and in principle make it a live possibility for every person.¹³

Although the source of *eudaimonia* is thus relocated to the inner quality of virtue, however, there are important questions still to be answered about what relation a person's external circumstances ultimately have to his achieving *eudaimonia*. Achieving *eudaimonia* is a matter of being virtuous, of living in accordance with nature from the proper mindset, but just what, if anything in particular, is the external equipment that one needs to be virtuous? How, if achieving *eudaimonia* is essentially a matter of having the right internal state and all the external features of the world by which a person finds himself surrounded are indifferents, could there ever be a situation in which the appropriate action for a person is suicide? As a capitulation to external circumstances, does not the act of suicide in fact treat those circumstances as bads that *matter*, rather than as the indifferents the Stoics claim they are? If *eudaimonia* is about mental action, isn't one always capable of mental action, regardless of the circumstances in which one finds oneself? Nussbaum's argument against the Stoic position runs along these lines, but I will argue that her argument misinterprets the relationship between *eudaimonia* and the indifferents, a relationship in the preceding questions that I have deliberately kept vague to outline the problem in question.

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Nussbaum's thesis, again, is that “in a crucial way” Stoic doctrine, by sanctioning suicide, is “internally incoherent”.¹⁴ Her aim seems to be to show that the position the Stoics take on external circumstances, as those relate to the achievement of *eudaimonia*, rules out the

¹³ I say 'in principle' because in practice almost no one will become a 'wise man' or Sage, the virtuous person who acts according to nature from a firm disposition. (Only one of the Stoics, Cleanthes, was even reputed to be a Sage. (Nussbaum, 101).) This is because the bar to be a Sage is set so high. The Sage never makes a mistake, as it were; he always chooses the action in accordance with nature, without any sort of extended deliberation or self-doubt. The experience and wherewithal necessary to attain such surety will elude almost everyone.

¹⁴ Nussbaum, 97.

possibility of suicide in the situations in which they claim it is appropriate. These situations in which the Stoics permit suicide are of three types: (I) when it is performed on behalf of one's friends or country, (II) when one faces a compromising indifferents-situation, and (III) when it is done to avoid being forced to perform immoral or shameful acts, in order to preserve one's dignity.¹⁵ Much more will be said about these types of situations below, but it is enough for understanding Nussbaum's argument to see the general claims she has in her sights. If I can show that it is consistent with Stoic doctrine to permit suicide in each of these types of situations, the Stoic doctrine will have been shown to be coherent.

Nussbaum starts from the premise that virtue is necessary and sufficient for *eudaimonia*. What exactly do the Stoics hold virtue to be? She does not explore this explicitly. While she makes passing reference to “the will of Zeus” and “what the universe requires” in the rest of her article, she never discusses the notion of living according to nature.¹⁶ This, I think, is the initial misstep in her argument, as it constrains her understanding of the relationship between the indifferents and *eudaimonia*. She construes the Stoics' idea that virtue is necessary and sufficient for *eudaimonia* as justifying the following view: “what we must absolutely avoid doing, if we are to be faithful to the spirit of the Stoic conception, is to attach to the indifferents either any intrinsic worth or any value as necessary conditions of *eudaimonia*”.¹⁷ If she has successfully established this claim, the evidence for which I explore later, there is a straightforward path to the conclusion that the Stoics cannot coherently permit suicide.

Eudaimonia is the final end we human beings aim for; what matters to us, therefore, is

¹⁵ Englert, 70-73.

¹⁶ Nussbaum 101, 104. Granted that her article is a response to Englert's and she therefore wouldn't feel the need to rehash all the core concepts of the Stoic theory, but the fact that she never actually uses any variation on the phrase 'living in accordance with nature' really puzzles me as to how she is reading the Stoics.

¹⁷ Nussbaum 99.

defined by what leads to *eudaimonia*. If the indifferents have neither intrinsic worth nor value as necessary conditions for *eudaimonia*, then the indifferents should not matter to us. But to permit suicide, it would seem, is to permit the indifferents to matter to us in certain situations. By allowing suicide the Stoics seem to be acknowledging that when the external circumstances we find ourselves in place a particularly demanding sort of strain on us (e.g. we are destitute, or our country is in danger, and so on), those circumstances give us reason to capitulate, to 'give in' to the external world. It is as if, Nussbaum seems to think, we mistakenly treat those circumstances as bads that affect our prospects for *eudaimonia*—mistakenly, because “What is important [for *eudaimonia*] is the inner striving: and one can always do that,” whatever one's situation.¹⁸ Suicide “does not show, cannot possibly show, that the world and what happens in it do not matter”.¹⁹ In fact, it shows that the world does matter: “In the very act of deciding for suicide, the Stoic has become as deeply implicated in the world and its evils as the angry person”.²⁰ Because they so allow us to quit the field, Nussbaum thinks, it seems that “in coming to grips with what detachment may be in a world of evils, the Stoics are not willing to go to any extreme to maintain their internal consistency”.²¹ Consistency would seem require that we carry on in the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, in whatever situation we find ourselves, and so the implication is that the Stoics sacrifice that consistency.

If I have successfully illustrated the internal contradiction in Stoicism that Nussbaum thinks she has identified, I have also put in view how she misinterprets the Stoic position. First of all, insofar as the last quotation suggests that the suicide doctrine reflects a difficult struggle in the minds of the Stoic thinkers to reconcile their views on the importance of the external world

18 Nussbaum, 102.

19 Nussbaum, 109.

20 Nussbaum, 109.

21 Nussbaum, 110.

for *eudaimonia* with the permissibility of suicide, Nussbaum is somewhat misleading. It is true that the Stoics are “dedicated to wrestling again and again with the problem of external goods,” but not because they think it has a problematic relationship with their views on suicide.²² Except in the case of Seneca, there is not much reason to see the Stoics as preoccupied with the issue of suicide.²³ That Nussbaum only draws from Seneca, the orthodoxy of whose views on suicide I explore later, in discussing the Stoic position on suicide means she is using a somewhat biased sample.

I believe the Stoics in general had no great concerns about their views on suicide because they believed them to fit soundly with the rest of their theory, and rightly so. To reiterate, Nussbaum seems to think she has identified a contradiction regarding the sense in which external circumstances are not supposed to matter on the Stoic view and the sense in which suicide concedes that they do. She arrives at this contradiction, however, because she fails to explore the Stoic idea that virtue consists in living in accordance with nature, which I will argue dissolves any apparent contradictions in their views. I will argue for the coherence of allowing suicide in the types of situations mentioned above ((I) on behalf of country or friends, (II) when faced with a compromising indifferents-situation, and (III) to avoid being forced to perform shameful acts) by taking them in order.

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What do the Stoics mean by 'living in accordance with nature'? Diogenes Laertius reports,

“living virtuously is equivalent to living in accordance with experience of the

22 Nussbaum, 110.

23 Rist says of the Stoics up through Cicero, “the matter [suicide] is not in the forefront of the philosophical stage” (245).

actual course of nature...for our individual natures are parts of the nature of the whole universe. And this is why the end may be defined as life in accordance with nature, or, in other words, in accordance with our own human nature as well as that of the universe, a life in which we refrain from every action forbidden by the law common to all things, that is to say, the right reason which pervades all things, and is identical with this Zeus, lord and ruler of all that is. And this very thing constitutes the virtue of the happy man and the smooth current of life, when all actions promote the harmony of the spirit dwelling in the individual man with the will of him who orders the universe.”²⁴

It seems that we are supposed to live in accordance with our nature as humans and the nature of the universe, which is to say, to use our reason to live harmoniously with divine reason or the will of Zeus. And just how do we do this? The idea seems to be that man should be a cognizant observer of the world around him, using his reason (*logos*) to align his actions with the divine reason he discerns to be at work in the world. As Epictetus puts it, “God introduced man as a student of himself and his works, and not merely as a student but also as an interpreter of these things”.²⁵

Under consideration first is the proposition that suicide can be appropriate (I) on behalf of one's country or friends. If it can accord with nature to commit suicide in such circumstances, the Stoic doctrine is coherent. That is, if it can accord with nature to commit suicide on behalf of one's country or friends, then suicide will not represent the sort of concession to externals that Nussbaum thinks cannot be allowed by the Stoics. Willing suicide just *would be* the action by which the Sage is virtuous; willing it *would be* the means by which he continues his *eudaimonia*. Suicide would therefore not mean the forsaking of future *eudaimonia* that the Sage could have enjoyed if only he had not killed himself; if he were *not* to will suicide when it was appropriate, when it accorded with nature, he would lose his virtue and cease to enjoy *eudaimonia*.

24 L&S, 63C.

25 L&S, 63E.

(Although the Sage would never do that, of course, because he is the Sage.) The question is, then, can suicide on behalf of one's country and friends accord with nature?

The Stoics obviously thought so. Diogenes Laertius tells us that the Stoics “say that the wise man [i.e. Sage] will commit a well-reasoned suicide both on behalf of his country and on behalf of his friends,” and since the Sage lives according to nature, such suicide must obviously be in accordance with nature.²⁶ Cicero comes closest to providing an argument *why* such suicide accords with nature:

“The Stoics hold that the world is governed by divine will: it is as it were a city and state shared by men and gods, and each one of us is a part of this world. From this it is a natural consequence that we prefer the common advantage to our own. Laws value the welfare of all above the welfare of individuals. In the same way one who is good and wise, law-abiding and mindful of civic duty, considers the good of all more than that of any particular person including oneself....This explains the fact that someone who dies for the state is praiseworthy, because our country should be dearer to us than ourselves”.²⁷

The idea seems to be that it accords with the constitution of the universe to have concern for others beyond that for oneself, and such concern will occasionally have as a consequence the sacrifice of oneself on behalf of those others.

What about the second type of situation, in which suicide is allowed (II) due to a compromising indifferents-situation? This seems to be the claim at which Nussbaum's argument is really aimed—if *eudaimonia* is constituted by virtue, which is a matter of inner striving, how could one ever be allowed to quit that striving just because one faces a trying situation with respect to the indifferents? The answer to this question is to observe that phrasing it in terms of virtue stops the matter short; virtue is, as Cooper characterizes it, “a purely formal condition”,

26 L&S, 66H.

27 I combined translations from L&S, 57F and Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, 3.64. See also Brennan, 219 for how such suicide would accord with nature.

which is itself achieved by living in accordance with nature.²⁸ The Stoics justify suicide based on one's indifferents-situation when that situation prevents one from living in accordance with nature. We have Epictetus saying, for example, that “If you send me to a place where men cannot live in accordance with nature, I shall depart from this life”.²⁹ The following is the valid Stoic argument that I take to justify such a position and to be coherent with the rest of their doctrine, and which I will argue can be extrapolated from the textual evidence we have:

- (1) The Stoics have a positive specification of what living in accordance with nature in general entails for a human being.
- (2) Certain external circumstances are necessary conditions of being able to pursue that positive, general specification. This is equivalent to saying that certain external circumstances are prohibitive of being able to pursue that positive, general specification.
- (3) If pursuing the positive, general specification is impossible due to one's external circumstances, living according to nature involves using one's reason to realize this fact, and killing oneself as one's final act in accordance with nature.

In what immediately follows I will work through the textual interpretation to establish the steps of this argument. While I will argue that the contradiction Nussbaum asserts dissolves, I will explain how some of the textual evidence we have makes me sympathetic to her interpretation of the Stoic position.

Establishing (1) is absolutely critical to answering the rhetorical questions I have posed on behalf of Nussbaum throughout this paper. If the injunction the Stoics gave were only the vague 'Live in accordance with nature', without any more specific instructions about how living in accordance with nature is done (e.g. by *doing X* or *doing Y*), they could not permit suicide because of a difficult indifferents-situation. In any given situation in which we happened to face trying external circumstances, (say, because we are in crippling pain that prevents us from

28 Cooper, 26.

29 Epictetus, 3.24.101.

moving,) there would be no reason to believe we could not still live according to nature, albeit in some more limited way (relative to the way in which 'normal' people live according to nature) afforded by our limited possibilities for action. If the Stoics did not specify the sorts of action that comprise their conception of living according to nature, we would have no reason to believe it would not be incumbent upon us to cope with whatever situation the universe sends our way and continue to try to *live*, manipulating the material of the world before us in the way that accords with nature (which we presumably learn when we are in that situation). For suicide to be rational because of one's external circumstances, there must be some positive aim that in some way defines living according to nature that is also made impossible by one's external circumstances. At issue, then, is whether or not Stoic ethical theory is built such that it is possible for one's circumstances to determine whether or not one is able to satisfy the demands of the theory. Because she does not explore what living according to nature entails for the Stoics, but rather interprets the injunction to be 'Live virtuously', Nussbaum cannot see how any external circumstances (short of those that eliminate agency, such as death or mental incapacitation) would absolve one from the obligation to be virtuous and therefore permit suicide.

But Stoic ethical theory does make it possible for one's circumstances to determine whether one is able to satisfy its demands, because the Stoics have a positive conception of what living according to nature will involve for a human being. It is my view that this positive conception of living according to nature is quite poorly developed in the Stoic doctrine; I think one cannot avoid the conclusion that the Stoics leave much to be answered about the concrete direction their theory provides. Still, if I can show here that the Stoics *think* they have some

positive, general conception of what it means to live according to nature, that is enough for my project to reconstruct how suicide due to a compromising indifferents-situation is coherent. I submit that in three principle regards the Stoics have something specific to say about what accords with nature.

Seneca tells us that “it is observation and mutual comparison of repeated actions which has assembled” the Stoic conception of what accords with nature.³⁰ The first sort of behavior for human beings that such experience shows accords with nature is the physical maintenance of oneself. Cicero says that the first appropriate action (*kathekon*) is “to preserve oneself in one's natural constitution”.³¹ Stobaeus reports that the Stoics have a conception of 'primary things in accordance with nature', such as “health, strength, well functioning sense organs, and the like”.³² The rationale for that label is that as animals, we have basic needs we are naturally disposed to attend to, and thus such concern over our bodily functioning accords with our nature.³³ Later in *On Moral Ends*, Cicero reports a somewhat longer list, including “the sound condition and preservation of all one's parts, health, satisfactory senses, freedom from pain, strength, beauty and the like”.³⁴ The implication is quite clear: a human being who lives according to nature will tend to his constitution and maintain his physical shape. Looking forward, then, to the extent that an external circumstance like debilitating pain prevents one from being able to tend to oneself and live according to nature in this way, we can begin to see how the Stoics might see suicide as rational in such cases.

The second regard in which the Stoics seem to have a positive conception of what living

30 L&S, 60E.

31 L&S, 59D.

32 L&S, 58C.

33 L&S, 357.

34 L&S, 64G.

according to nature entails is in social involvement and concern. The most salient element of this notion is the Stoic idea of *oikeiosis*, that a sort of familiarization with those around oneself and expansion of one's sphere of concern accords with nature.³⁵ The idea is that one ought actively to integrate the interests and concerns of others into one's deliberations, most notably illustrated by Hierocles' concentric-circles example.³⁶ It was in fact this sort of other-regarding consideration that was at work in allowing suicide on behalf of one's country or friends. Such concern for the welfare of others is also reinforced in discussion of the demands of justice. We have Chrysippus' foot-race example, though the exhortation is negative (i.e. 'Don't shove others in the foot-race'), and we also have Cicero's claim in *On Duties* (3.21) that:

“For one human being to deprive another in order to increase their welfare at the cost of the other person's welfare is more contrary to nature than death, poverty, pain, or any other things that can happen to one's body or one's external possessions”.³⁷

In Cicero's words here we have quite clearly the indication that living in line with the demands of justice is more important for living according to nature than is avoiding death or rectifying one's poverty. On this view, then, we can imagine the extraordinary scenario of a someone very destitute who voluntarily brings death upon himself, because satisfying the demands of justice constrains his ability to secure the necessities of life. This preeminence of the demands of justice seems to suggest the sense, as Brennan says, that “the social life of human beings is 'most according to nature’”.³⁸ This importance of human beings' social nature is consistent with Cicero's statement seen previously that the Sage will be mindful of civic duty, which he also complements with the following:

35 Brennan, 154.

36 L&S, 57G. It was precisely such considerations that were at work in permitting suicide in the first type of situation above, on behalf of one's country or friends.

37 Brennan, 206-7.

38 Brennan, 207.

“since we observe that humans are born to protect and defend one another, it is consistent with human nature for the wise person to want to take part in the business of government, and, in living by nature, to take a spouse and to wish to have children. Not even sexual passion, so long as it is pure, is considered to be incompatible with being wise....Stoics consider that friendship should [also] be cultivated, since it falls under the category of what is helpful.”³⁹

Plutarch reports that even Chryssipus said, “the wise man will make public speeches and engage in politics”.⁴⁰ All this is to suggest the importance of satisfying man's social nature in living in accordance with nature, and to bring to mind the possibility that one's ability to satisfy that social nature could be compromised by one's external circumstances.

The final regard in which I think the Stoics have a positive conception of how to live according to nature is related to the second and is the role one envisions for one's life. Cicero, drawing on Panaetius' discussion of the four *personae* or roles, urges that “each person should firmly hold on to those characteristics of his which are not vicious but peculiar to himself,” so that while “we do nothing in opposition to human nature in general,” we also “follow our own [individual] nature”.⁴¹ The idea seems to be that an individual should cultivate his abilities and work to realize his potential; “Above all we must decide who and what sort of people we want to be, and what kind of life we want to lead; and this is the most difficult question of all”.⁴² Epictetus gives similar counsel in reference to one's title, and Stobaeus reports on the Stoic conception of different types of preferable lives.⁴³ It is not necessary to quote them at length—what is important, though, is to see that the Stoics seem to have this view that a human being should take up some occupation, or see his life as having some defined function, in his community. If, because of compromising external circumstances, such as that one is starving to

39 Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, 3.68, 70.

40 L&S, 66B.

41 L&S, 66E. Discussion of Panaetius from L&S, 427.

42 L&S, 66E.

43 L&S, 59Q.

death, crippled and in chronic pain, or foresees such disability, one can no longer continue to live according to nature in this regard (and, it would follow, in the two previous regards as well), suicide starts to look like a plausible response, given the centrality of living according to nature for the Stoics.

Indeed, it is a plausible, rational response for the Stoics because of steps (2) and (3) in the argument above. It should be clear enough from my comments in the preceding three paragraphs how, simply as a matter of logistics, certain external circumstances could prohibit one from being able to live according to nature. I have consistently referred to debilitating pain and the like because those are the sorts of indifferents-situations cited by commentators as examples of when the Stoics permit suicide. Diogenes Laertius finishes the sentence quoted earlier about the Sage committing suicide on behalf of his country or friends by adding, “and if he falls victim to unduly severe pain or mutilation or incurable illness”.⁴⁴ It is obviously important that the ailment be severe and crippling, so as to destroy one's prospects of living according to nature; catching a cold is not enough.⁴⁵ Other commentators list five reasons given by the Stoics for suicide, three of which are relevant here and reinforce the examples I have used: “(3) when beset by mental deterioration in old age or (4) incurable, debilitating disease; [and] (5) when extreme poverty

44 L&S, 66H.

45 Though this should not be taken to undermine the legitimacy of Zeno's suicide after stubbing his toe or Cleanthes' suicide after getting inflamed gums. I have left out of my argument for coherence the Stoic view that proper timing was to be indicated by a divine signal, but Zeno and Cleanthes must have taken those minor afflictions to herald invalidity to come. I have left the divine signal aspect of the doctrine out because it has not strictly been necessary to make the doctrine coherent. The notion has its roots in Plato's *Phaedo*, and the Stoic position is that being in any of the three types of situations discussed in this paper could be the divine signal indicating the appropriateness of suicide (Englert, 74). Insofar as the Stoics see it as natural for human beings to try to interpret the will of Zeus, the idea that at certain times suicide is divinely sanctioned certainly makes the Stoic position coherent, given that the objective is to live according to nature, but it is hardly the *strongest* coherent case that can be made on behalf of the Stoics. That is why I have tried to make sense of their position without recourse to the notion of a divine signal, that is, without this sort of *deus ex machina* that “makes every man his own priest” (Rist, 243).

prevents one from supplying one's basic needs".⁴⁶ While it may be clear how such circumstances could prevent one from living according to nature on the positive conception I have discussed, I must still argue that the Stoics had this view, of certain indifferents (i.e. external circumstances) as necessary conditions for living according to nature, in mind.

Nussbaum, it will be remembered, explicitly *denied* that the indifferents have either "intrinsic worth or any value as necessary conditions" for *eudaimonia*, but I think she is quite mistaken on the latter account. There is a potentially large ambiguity in the term 'indifferents' which it is necessary to clear up. If by 'the indifferents' Nussbaum were to mean the sort of Aristotelian set of circumstances commonly taken to indicate living well, such as good personal health, wealth, and good reputation, I would agree that the Stoics do not intend those 'external goods' to be necessary conditions for *eudaimonia*. It is no contradiction to this, however, to say that *not* having exceptionally bad personal health and *not* being destitute are necessary conditions for *eudaimonia*, for being able to live according to nature; and that is exactly the sense in which I think the Stoics appear to hold external circumstances to be necessary conditions. However, Nussbaum apparently does not mean by 'the indifferents' or 'externals' the set of Aristotelian circumstances; by those terms she means "Items that are not fully under the control of the agent," which means her referents are precisely represented by what I have called 'external circumstances' throughout this paper.⁴⁷ On this sense of 'indifferents', then, I think she is not justified in drawing the conclusion that the Stoics do not make the indifferents necessary conditions for the achievement of *eudaimonia*.

The one quotation she uses to defend her claim is not, I think, authoritative; she quotes

⁴⁶ Cooper 36, n. 20. The other two reasons are those covered here elsewhere: on behalf of country or friends, or to avoid a disgrace. These five reasons also track the reasons-for-leaving-a-dinner-party analogy of SVF 3.768.

⁴⁷ Nussbaum, 97-8.

Cicero from *On Moral Ends* (3.50) saying that “externals are 'things that have no power for living happily or wretchedly’”.⁴⁸ That quotation would seem to serve her purpose, given the connotations of instrumental use that 'power' has. Indeed, Annas' alternate translation (“those items which have no bearing on whether one lives happily or miserably”) seems to suit her claim even more.⁴⁹ I believe Cicero's language is not as precise as it might be, though; I think he means to say that possessing certain indifferents is not constitutive of *eudaimonia*, rather than that the indifferents do not function at all as necessary conditions for it. That is my belief because we have much evidence to suggest the Stoics *did* view external circumstances as necessary conditions for *eudaimonia*. Stobaeus clarifies the sense of the term 'indifferent' in the following way:

“they say, that even if we call bodily and external things indifferent, we are saying they are indifferent relative to a well-shaped life (in which living happily consists) but *not of course relative to being in accordance with nature* or to impulse and repulsion”.⁵⁰

This quite clearly shows that the Stoics mean indifferent in a subtle, distinct way: things are termed 'indifferent' in order to distinguish their possession as neither good nor bad and therefore not constitutive of *eudaimonia* (living happily), though they are not indifferent with regard to their conduciveness to allowing one to live in accordance with nature. We also have Epictetus saying of Zeus that, “When he no longer provides what is necessary, he sounds the recall, he opens the door, and says to you, 'Come'. Where to? To nothing fearful, but to that from which you came”.⁵¹ The important point to observe from Epictetus' statement is that he clearly thinks there are things *necessary* for living in accordance with nature, the lack of which gives reason to

48 Nussbaum, 99.

49 Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, 3.50.

50 L&S, 58C, emphasis mine.

51 Epictetus, 3.13.14. This again brings up the notion of the divine call (see note 45).

depart.⁵² Just after the quotation Nussbaum cites to make her case, even, Cicero refers to the primary things in accordance and contrary to nature as “like the material substrate of wisdom”.⁵³ Though that quotation does not by itself prove that the Stoics viewed the indifferents as necessary conditions for *eudaimonia*, it is certainly suggestive that that is the case and consistent with the other quotations I have cited to make my case. Indeed, though this is a pedantic point, insofar as simply *being alive* is necessary to achieve *eudaimonia*, it is clear that the indifferents must serve as necessary conditions for it. Nussbaum's claim that the Stoics do not view the indifferents as necessary conditions for *eudaimonia*, crucial for supporting her claim that ““What is important is the inner striving: and one can always do that,” must, I think, be rejected.

To make my case as strong as possible, I want to deal with two quotations Nussbaum might cite in response to my argument. The first is the famous Cicero quote purporting to represent the Stoic doctrine on suicide:

“It is the appropriate action to live when most of what one has is in accordance with nature. When the opposite is the case, or is envisaged to be so, then the appropriate action is to depart from life”.⁵⁴

This would appear to reduce the suicide question to a matter of mere possession of externals that accord with nature, and to forget the whole component of actively trying to *live* according to nature. It seems to fail to address why one should not strive to make one's situation 'more' in accordance with nature, but instead simply sanctions giving up on the basis of some opaque calculus. As a result, Nussbaum might ask, doesn't it clearly show that the Stoic position is incoherent? I certainly do not want to have to defend the strict implications of Cicero's words here. I think the concerns raised are sound, and I can see why Nussbaum might see the Stoic

52 Long also translates 'what is necessary' as “the necessities” (Long, *Epictetus*, 206).

53 Brennan, 183.

54 Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, 3.60.

view as internally troubled if she were to focus on this quotation. I think the solution, though, is to disown Cicero as a spokesman for the Stoics here. I have tried to show that there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Stoics had a conception of what a life according to nature involved, and that this life could be made impossible by certain external circumstances. This is an instance in which my case is not helped by the exact wording of the all the evidence we have on the subject.

The other quotation I could imagine Nussbaum might try to respond with is Diogenes Laertius', "it is possible to be happy even without these [i.e. "wealth, reputation, health, strength, and the like"] though the manner of using them is constitutive of happiness or unhappiness".⁵⁵ Diogenes might seem to be saying that one can achieve *eudaimonia* without the indifferents that I have elsewhere said the Stoics view as necessary conditions for it. The apparent difficulty here, though, is again a matter of the ambiguity of the term 'indifferents'. Diogenes is clearly referring to what I have called the Aristotelian set of external circumstances that might be thought to be required for *eudaimonia*, and dispelling that notion in explaining the Stoic theory. It is in no way contradictory, though, to hold (as I am arguing) that certain external circumstances, such as not suffering immobilizing pain, are necessary for being able to live according to nature, as the Stoics conceive of it. In *that* sense, then, it is not possible to be happy (i.e. achieve *eudaimonia*) without 'the indifferents'.

How to justify step (3) in my argument, that when one can't live according to nature because of a compromising set of indifferents, living according to nature involves recognizing this fact and committing suicide? The notion of a divine signal and the Stoic doctrine on fate can certainly can play a role here, to indicate that suicide is the appropriate action by which the Sage

⁵⁵ L&S, 58B.

lives according to nature, but I again do not think it is necessary to appeal to them. It is important to remember the primacy attached to living in accordance with nature. Being virtuous, i.e. living according to nature from a firm mental disposition, is all that is good and all that is necessary and sufficient for *eudaimonia*. This has as a consequence that all else, including life and death, are indifferent—neither good nor bad. If the Sage cannot live according to nature as he ought to, then, he has no reason to remain. Rather, insofar as not living in accordance with nature means one lives in a way that is *contrary* to nature, the only way to avoid continuing to live contrary to nature is to commit suicide. In committing suicide, the Sage will at least be living in accordance with man's rational nature insofar as it teaches that living according to nature is all that matters and death is merely an indifferent, and not something to shy away from.⁵⁶

Finally, what about the third type of situation in which the Stoics condone suicide: (III) to avoid being forced to perform immoral or shameful acts? It is not immediately clear why being forced to perform such acts would be contrary to nature, nor is it clear with whom this position originated. From the early and middle Stoics, we have some suggestion of the position explicitly appearing later. Sextus Empiricus, reporting on the position of Aristo, says the following:

“For if healthy men had to serve a tyrant and be destroyed for this reason, while the sick had to be released from the service and, therewith also, from destruction, the wise man would rather choose sickness in this circumstance than health”.⁵⁷

This quotation seems to suggest that there is something contrary to nature about subservience to a tyrant, although it does not imply that suicide is permissible to avoid such a situation. Seneca, purporting to represent the words of Panaetius, says “What concerns you and me, who are still a

⁵⁶ On man's rational nature, see L&S 57A. This idea of suicide as treating death as the indifferent that it really is from Brennan, 41.

⁵⁷ L&S, 58F.

great distance from the wise man, is to ensure that we do not fall into a state of affairs which is disturbed, powerless, subservient to another and worthless to oneself". Again we see the idea that subservience to another is to be avoided. Englert speculates that the doctrine on suicide to preserve one's dignity originated out of Panaetius' theory discussed earlier, of the *personae* or roles, and refers to Cicero's discussion of the theory in *On Duties*.⁵⁸ For that reason, Englert does not see Seneca's allowance of suicide for such reasons as an innovation in Stoic doctrine.⁵⁹ Rist, by contrast, makes the case that Seneca does depart significantly from his predecessors in exalting suicide as the ultimate expression of a person's freedom and a way to maintain dignity, and for that reason permits it quite liberally.⁶⁰ Griffin rejects Rist's interpretation, claiming that Seneca gives a "faithful reflection" of earlier Stoic doctrine on suicide, though I think her response on some points is unconvincing.⁶¹

I do not pretend, though, to have enough familiarity with the texts to have any contribution to this debate about Seneca's orthodoxy. Certainly at times Seneca seems to condone suicide rather flippantly:

- "It makes no difference at what point you stop. Stop whenever you choose".⁶²
- "Accordingly, the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can....He always reflects concerning the quality, and not the quantity, of his life. As soon as there are many events in his life that give him trouble and disturb his peace of mind, he sets himself free."⁶³
- "We shall show them that in every servitude a road lies open to liberty....Wherever you look, there is an end to your troubles. Do you see that precipice? That way you can descend to liberty. Do you see that sea, that river, that well? Liberty sits there in the depths. Do you see that tree, stunted, blighted, barren? Liberty hangs

58 Englert, 72.

59 Englert, 76-77. He cites as an example Seneca's *Epistle* 77.14-15, in which Seneca seems to condone the suicide of the Spartan slave-boy who bashed his head against the wall rather than carry a chamber-pot. Griffin (1992, 382) also refers to *Epistle* 14.2 as another example.

60 Rist, 246ff.

61 Griffin, *Seneca*, 373.

62 Seneca, *Epistle* 77.20. Cooper, 36 note 22 translates this as "stop living whenever you want"

63 Seneca, *Epistle* 70.4.

from its branches. Do you see your throat, your gullet, your heart? They are escape routes from slavery. Are the exits I show you too difficult, requiring too much courage and strength? Do you ask what is the straight road to liberty? Any vein in your body.”⁶⁴

Epictetus also seems to work with the Panaetian idea of *personae*:

“This is what I mean be respect for one's true character;...'Come now, Epictetus, shave off your beard.' - If I am a philosopher, I answer, I will not shave it off. - 'Then I will have you beheaded.' - If it will do you any good, behead me,”⁶⁵

but to play rather loose with the doctrine of his predecessors, at other times:

“Has someone made the house smoky? If the smoke is not excessive, stay; if it is, go out. For you must always remember and hold fast to this, that the door is open....Do not be more cowardly than children, but just as they say, when the game no longer pleases them, 'I will play no more', you too, when things seem that way to you, should merely say, 'I will play no more', and so depart; but if you stay, stop moaning.”⁶⁶

To the extent that the allowance of suicide in order to avoid shameful acts derives from Panaetius' positive conception of what living according to nature entails, which we saw earlier, I think it is coherent, because of the argument I laid out regarding suicide in compromising indifferents-situations. To the extent that Seneca and Epictetus expanded the doctrine of earlier Stoics and permit suicide rather liberally (in these quotations, it seems, almost whenever the protagonist feels like it), I will not try to defend them against Nussbaum's charges. My point, though, is that the Stoic doctrine *can* be coherent; as with the Cicero quotation earlier, we have some statements that do not seem to stand up to scrupulous comparison with those of other Stoics, but I do not think they are enough to dismiss the Stoic position as inconsistent on its own terms.

* * *

64 Seneca, *On Anger* 3.15. From Nussbaum, 107-8.

65 Epictetus, 1.2.28-29.

66 Epictetus, 1.24.18-20.

To summarize the ground I have covered in this paper, my aim has been to defend the Stoic position on suicide from Nussbaum's charge of incoherence. I have tried to show that suicide can be the appropriate action in the three types of situations mentioned by the Stoics, because of the understanding the Stoics have that a human being's charge is to live according to nature, both his own as a human and divine. The Stoic position does not strike me as an attempt to smuggle in a consideration of the external world that is inconsistent with their dismissal of it elsewhere, but rather reflects an honest, if not always the most explicit and careful, application of their principles, with what perhaps seem to us startling results. Nussbaum's interpretation of what being "faithful to the spirit of the Stoic conception" of indifferents involves, I think, is quite mistaken. In working with the texts to make the Stoic doctrine coherent I have passed over a few notable facets of the Stoic position that I did not find necessary to discuss, including the notion of a divine signal heralding the timeliness of suicide, the question of whom the doctrine permits to commit suicide (*Sages and fools?*), and the notion emphasized by Seneca of suicide as an expression of freedom. Even leaving those intriguing questions unexplored, I think we can see the Stoic position for what it is: a conception, quite foreign I think from the contemporary perspective, but also in my view peculiarly estimable, of what it means to live rationally and of the value of human life. I cannot distill that conception better than Seidler:

“suicide represented to the Stoics a proper means of insuring a distinctively human presence in the world. Moreover, the liberty, rationality, and autonomy that are the foundations of human dignity were interpreted by them in functional or operational terms, which implied that the foundations could be lost at some points in life due to changes in various internal and external circumstances. In other words, human dignity...resides in a specific sort of human action whose normative preeminence demands that all other things, including physical life, be sacrificed for its sake”.⁶⁷

67 Seidler, 438.

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