The Stoics say that there are many virtues, although each virtue entails all the others; sometimes they give lists of what these virtues are, or rather of the generic virtues that include all specific virtuous dispositions. Sometimes they give the conventional list, "prudence, temperance, courage, justice" (Stobaeus II, 60 Wachsmuth-Hense); but two sources (Diogenes Laertius VII, 92 and the prologue to the pseudo-Plutarchan Placita) say the Stoics think there are three virtues, logic, physics, and ethics; and Cicero De Finibus III, 72-3 confirms that the Stoics list dialectic and physics as virtues, alongside the familiar moral virtues. It seems strange to us to count physics as a virtue. The Stoics, like the Platonic Socrates, thought that virtues were arts or sciences;¹ this may seem strange already, but we can understand it by saying that whoever knows the good will desire it and choose it, so that knowledge of the good will be a virtue and will motivate action. This may explain why some knowledge is a virtue, but it will not explain why physics is a virtue, since physics is not a knowledge of the good (and no ancient philosopher said it was). Nor are the Stoics using the word "virtue" so

¹ According to Stobaeus (II, 58) not all virtues are arts or sciences; but the traditional four virtues, φρόνησις and courage and temperance and justice, all are. The Stoics distinguish the broad class of arts from the narrower class of sciences (which only the sage can have), but all of these virtues are sciences as well as arts. An art or science is always a state of the soul (more exactly, it is the ruling part of the soul disposed in a certain way); the Stoics (unlike the Platonists, with their very different ontology), never consider a science "objectively" as a collection of theorems apart from a knower (sciences are ὑπήρξε, while theorems are λέξεις). I abbreviate DL = Diogenes Laertius, AM = Sextus Adversus Mathematicos, SVF = Stoicorum Veterrum Fragmenta (ed. von Arnim), DND = Cicero De Natura Deorum, TD = Cicero Tusculanae Disputationes, DSR = Plutarch De Stoicorum Repugnantiss, DCN = Plutarch De Communibus Notitiis adversus Stoicos, PHP = Galen De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis, DG = Doxographi Graeci (ed. Diels).
loosely that any excellence, including the theoretical sciences, would be a virtue: on the contrary, “some arts are theoretical but not practical, like geometry and astronomy; some are practical but not theoretical, like carpentry and metalworking and other so-called banausic arts; but virtue is both theoretical and practical” (SVF III, 202 [Philo]). So if physics is a virtue it must be somehow a practical art, capable of motivating action, even though it is not a knowledge of the good.

In this paper I will try to show how the Stoics were led to say that physics was a virtue, and I will do my best to make this thesis intelligible. Explaining this thesis will lead me into a great deal of Stoic philosophy, and explaining it more fully would lead me into even more; I would like to suggest that reflection on this problem was in fact one major source of Stoic philosophy. For the conception of physics as a virtue is not simply a paradoxical corollary of Stoicism: it is presupposed in the most basic theses of the Stoic school. This is clear if we think about the τέλος-formulae ascribed to the successive heads of the school. Zeno said that the goal of human life was to live ὀμολογομενός, consistently; Cleanthes, not disagreeing but supplementing the formula, said that the goal was to live ὀμολογομενός τῇ φύσει, consistently with nature (once the longer formula is ascribed to Zeno himself); and Chrysippus, explaining Cleanthes’ meaning, said that the goal was to live κατ’ ἐμπειρίαν τῶν φύσεων συμβαινόντων, in accordance with experience of what happens by nature, where this ἐμπειρία can only be the science of physics (Stobaeus II, 75-6, cp. DL VII, 87, De Finibus IV, 14).

Reflection on these τέλος-formulae will show us how central the conception of physics as a virtue was to Stoic ethics. Since living ὀμολογομενός τῇ φύσει is the same as living κατ’ ἐμπειρίαν τῶν φύσεων συμβαινόντων, it is something only rational beings can do, and so it must mean more than just living “naturally”: Gisela Striker paraphrases it as “consciously adapting one’s life to the order of universal nature” (Striker 1986, 187). Striker calls this Stoic conception of the goal of human life “a rather strange suggestion, far removed from the traditional competitors virtue, pleasure, or fame” (Striker 1991, 5); but a little reflection shows that it is a specification of, and an attempt to resolve problems in, the Platonic and Aristotelian conception of the τέλος as a life according to virtue. Living ὀμολογομενός τῇ φύσει is a special way of living ὀμολογομενός, consistently, as opposed to μαχομενός, inconsistently; and living ὀμολογομενός will be the same as living according to virtue, since the Stoics define virtue as διάθεσις