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

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

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

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

2 I shall engage in particular with two recent papers: Michael Frede pursues the question of how the Stoics can present a process of coming to acquire the conception of the good as natural (2001). Brad Inwood discusses the Stoic emphasis on experience within the theory of concept-formation, and asks how we can understand the acquisition of the conception of the good in this context (2005).
which according to the Stoics have value, like health, wealth, strength, beauty, life, etc.—really are not good, because only virtue is good. We are tempted to say that what is most prominent about the Stoic theory is, in the words of the ancient discussion, how paradoxical it is. And surely, this is how the Stoics themselves see their theories. They proudly advertise them as paradoxical in a quite literal sense: as against opinion.3

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

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

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

3 For Zeno, see Gnomologia Monac. 196 (Gnomol. Vatic. Ed. Sternb. 295) (= SVF 1.281), for Cleanthes see Arrianus, Epict. Diss. IV 1.173 (= SVF 1.619); see also Cicero, Paradoxa Stoicorum 4.

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

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