In Defense of Stoicism

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Abstract

This article employs Cicero's assault on Stoic philosophy in Pro Murena as a point of departure to engage three critical aspects of Stoicism: indifference to worldly concerns, the sage as an ideal, and Stoic epistemology. It argues that Cicero's analysis fails to clearly distinguish between these elements of Stoic philosophy and, therefore, presents Stoicism in a misleadingly unfavorable light.

Charges of bribery were brought against Lucius Licinius Murena in 62 BCE. Despite entrenched opposition from the popular party, Murena was able to enlist the aid of the famed orator and presiding consul Marcus Tullius Cicero. His prosecutor was the most conservative of senators—Marcus Porcius Cato, famed for his rectitude and his unbending adherence to Stoic philosophy. In order to defend Murena, who was almost certainly guilty, Cicero chose to go on the offensive and discredit his opponent by undermining Stoic philosophy in the eyes of the jury. Cicero portrays Stoicism as follows:

A wise person never allows himself to be influenced... Philosophers are people who, however ugly, remain handsome; even if they are very poor, they are rich; even if they are slaves, they are kings. All sins are equal, so that every misdemeanor is a serious crime... The philosopher has no need to offer conjectures, never regrets what he has done, is never mistaken, never changes his mind.¹

Cicero’s portrayal seems to argue that (1) the Stoics’ commitment to remain indifferent to worldly influence causes them to lack compassion for the circumstances of other people, (2) Stoics are too severe when

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confronted with the indiscretions of others because their theory of justice does not distinguish between severe crimes and minor infractions, and (3) Stoics tend to be absolutist in their convictions and refuse to hear the other side of a situation once they have made up their mind on an issue. By describing Stoicism in this way Cicero was able to paint Cato as an overzealous advocate of the letter of the law, implying that the prosecution brought the case to the court in order to align with philosophical dogma rather than out of concern for the common good. The neglect of Hellenistic philosophy in the modern academy has combined with Cicero's dominating literary personality to allow this attack to go largely unanswered by Stoicism's defenders.

This article will argue that Cicero's speech distorts Stoicism for persuasive purposes and obscures the true tenets of that philosophy. Cicero's critique will be used as a point of departure for discussing three fundamental Stoic doctrines: indifference to worldly concerns, the regulative ideal of the Stoic sage, and Stoic epistemology.

The Origins and Rationale of Stoic Indifference

Cicero argues that the Stoics believe “the wise person never allows himself to be influenced...only fools and triflers show mercy. A real man is not affected by prayers or attempts to placate him.” Here he implies that Stoic autonomy is so rigorous that it dehumanizes its practitioners and prevents them from having compassion for their fellow men. In the context of the trial, he contends that the prosecution is incapable of exercising the “kindness and humanity” that should prevail in the judgment of Murena. The Stoic doctrine that a man should be indifferent to all but his own vice and virtue traces its origins to Socrates and admits of greater complexity than Cicero allows. It will shed light on the matter to trace the development of this doctrine and work out some of the implications that follow from it.

Stoics have a clear position when it comes to externals (those things which are not in the direct control of an individual’s moral purpose or character); they believe them to be matters of indifference, that is, neither good nor evil. This position is best summarized by Diogenes Laretius:
The Stoics say that some things that exist are good, some are bad, and some are neither good nor bad. The good things, then, include the virtues... The bad things include their opposites... neither good nor bad are all those things which neither benefit nor harm.  

The Stoics trace this doctrine back to Socrates. In the Apology, Socrates famously asserts that:

Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way; he could not harm me, for I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse; certainly he may kill me, or perhaps banish or disenfranchise me, which he may and maybe others think to be a great harm, but I do not think so.

The indifference of Socrates to the attacks of the wicked is explained in the extended argument of the Gorgias and culminates in Socrates' final indictment of Callicles:

All the other theories put forward in our long conversation have been refuted and this conclusion alone stands firm, that one should avoid doing wrong with more care than being wronged, and that the supreme object of a man's efforts, in public and in private life, must be the reality rather than the appearance of goodness... Be guided by me then and join me in the pursuit of what, as our argument shows, will secure your happiness both here and hereafter. Let people despise you for a fool and insult you if they will; nay, even if they inflict the last indignity of a blow, take it cheerfully; if you are really a good man devoted to the practice of virtue they can do you no harm.

If Socrates' arguments are taken seriously, then bodily harm, poverty, shame, and anything else that is not directly related to a man's character cannot hinder him in fulfilling his moral purpose and living a happy life. The Cynics were the first of the Socratic schools to take this aspect of the Socratic paradigm to heart, and it is through them that the Stoics trace their relationship to Socrates.

Antisthenes, the founder of the Cynic school, studied under Socrates along with Plato but emphasized very different aspects of Socratic teaching. Cynics focused chiefly on Socratic ethics rather than epistemology and metaphysics. This led them to adopt rigorous asceticism and applied ethics as the keys to living excellently. Epictetus,
Stoicism’s most influential proponent in the Roman Empire, viewed the Cynics as a sort of living testimony to virtuous happiness, proof that “god has sent us to show that it is indeed possible” to live a happy life bereft of worldly prosperity.  

Though they admire them, the Stoics argue that Cynic asceticism is too extreme. In shunning wealth, honor, etc. Cynics place a negative value on them. This is inconsistent with the teaching of Socrates, who held them to be, as in the *Gorgias*, things “intermediate and neutral” that acquire moral value through their proper or improper use. For Stoics, externals should neither be shunned nor sought, but accepted as they come. Epictetus gets at this point in the *Enchiridion* when he says, “For this is your duty, to act well the part that is given to you; but to select the part belongs to another.” Cynics, by cutting themselves off from civilized life, refused to accept the roles required of them in human society. To the Stoic way of thinking, the Cynics are like actors in a drama who take the play so seriously that they refuse to play the part assigned to them because they scorn costumes and scripted dialog as ostentatious. They fail to realize that these things have no real value one way or another except insofar as they are used in the production. By obsessing over props and scenery, the Stoics argue, Cynics miss the larger production and fail to play their role fully. In this light, Stoicism’s doctrine of indifference to externals is seen to be a restoration of the initial Socratic position on the relationship of the philosopher to worldly concerns.

The leading figures of Stoicism were, as Stanford Professor A. A. Long aptly puts it, “interpreters and embodiments of the Socratic paradigm.” Instead of focusing on the intellectualism of Socrates, the Stoics, like the Cynics, are chiefly interested in Socrates as “a new kind of hero, a living embodiment of philosophical power, a figure whose appeal to the Hellenistic world consisted in self-mastery.” The Stoics conceived of indifference to outside influences as a prerequisite to achieving self-mastery and the freedom of choice necessary to live a virtuous life. The Stoic writings are filled with injunctions to this effect, from the extensive discussion of slavery, freedom, and externals in the first part of the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus, to Seneca’s reminder that “Liberty is not to be had gratis; if she be worth much to us, all
things else have little value.” The Stoics allow for the possibility of total freedom from evil by denying, along with Socrates, that evil can happen to them against their will. If good and evil rest entirely within choices between virtue and vice, it follows that the manifold things not subject to personal agency are not, from a first person viewpoint, evil or good. Conversely, if virtue is the only good and can be had at any time by choosing rightly, then man is free at any time to have the good if he can master the atavisms of his nature that tempt him into error. While Cicero rightly notes that Stoics strive to move beyond the influence of base emotions, he fails to mention that their reason for doing so is to ensure that they treat other people in a just and humane way that is separate from the passions of the moment.

**How Stoics Reconcile Indifference with Worldliness**

Cicero’s critique seems to be that the Stoic is unwilling to take part in the necessary grit of day-to-day life; he uses an improper metric of value and cannot see that the good life requires man to value things beyond virtue. The Stoic reply to Cicero rests on the position that indifference to externals and involvement in the world are not mutually exclusive. Chrysippus makes the decidedly non-anchoritic argument that “they are mad, who make no account of riches, health, freedom from pain, and integrity of the body, nor take any care to attain them.” The commitment to indifference is in obvious tension with the Stoic contention that it is reasonable to take account of day-to-day concerns. Cicero’s assault rests on this tension snapping the thread of Stoic logic into incoherence.

To reconcile this paradox, the Stoics rely on the doctrine of preferred indifference. Preferred indifference grants that one should strive to be genuinely indifferent to all external things, but, ceteris paribus, human beings naturally prefer some indifferent things to others and are justified in pursuing them so long as they don’t allow them to open the door to desire and vice. The Stoics want to maintain that this preference does not constitute desire in the common sense of the term, but a certain acceptance of the norms and roles that every human being is obliged to abide by in the larger community of
mankind. This balancing act is described by Epictetus and revisited by Vice-Admiral James B. Stockdale, an American war-hero who led the prison underground in the Vietcong’s most infamous torture camp and went on to write extensively on Stoicism’s enduring relevance to the human condition:

Everybody does have to play the game of life. You can’t just walk around saying, “I don’t give a damn about health, or wealth, or whether I’m sent to prison or not.” Epictetus says everybody should play the game of life—that the best play it with “skill, form, speed, and grace.” But like most games, you play it with a ball. Your team devotes all its energies to getting the ball across the line. But after the game, what do you do with the ball? Nobody much cares. It’s not worth anything. The competition, the game, was the thing. The ball was “used” to make the game possible, but it in itself is not of any value.¹⁷

This view is commensurate with the Stoic critique of Cynicism—if externals are really indifferent then it should not matter whether one has wealth, runs a household, or rules a nation—only that one acts virtuously within the context at hand. It would be strange to deny ourselves worldly goods or sever ties of friendship acquired in the pursuit of virtue if they lack the power to affect us one way or another. Moreover, Stoics hold that it is in accord with nature that man prefers certain basic comforts and relationships, as Seneca says, “Our duty is to follow nature, but it is contrary to nature to torture one’s body, to dislike cleanliness and seek filth, or to make use of rough and dirty food.”¹⁸ So long as worldly bounty and social engagement do not cause the philosopher to fall into the cycle of desire that leads to vice, the Stoics accept them as natural accoutrements of the human condition.

Preferred indifference allows a Stoic to engage in normal human life—a prerequisite for displaying most virtues—but to remain, in theory at least, indifferent to the actual results of this engagement. They may have wealth, but they should not hesitate to part with it if honor demands it. Friendships should be cultivated, but companionate loyalty should not be allowed to make us complicit in another’s vice. Through these means the Stoics argue that freedom and virtuous happiness need not be bought at the price of a recognizably human
life. Cicero is incorrect in implying that Stoicism proscribes empathy, rather, it stipulates that it is perfectly natural to empathize with another person’s condition but that those feelings should not be allowed to become so strong that they cause the philosopher to aide and abet rank criminality—for example, flagrant electoral bribery.

The Regulative Ideal of the Stoic Sage

The last two points of Cicero’s critique rest in exploiting the concept of the sage in order to make Stoicism seem both excessively harsh in its treatment of moral failings and stubbornly dogmatic: “All sins are equal, so that every misdemeanor is a serious crime… The philosopher has no need to offer conjectures, never regrets what he has done, is never mistaken, never changes his mind.”19 This characterization conflates a description of a regulative ideal with actual practice.

The Stoic framework of human nature is acutely aware of the vast gulf between what mortal men are generally capable of achieving and what they might achieve in a more perfect world. Tad Brennan, a modern interpreter of Stoicism, explains their position well when he says that, according to the Stoics,

all of us are awash in vice—everyone that was alive in the time of the Stoics, including the Stoics themselves; every historical figure they knew of, including their most revered predecessors such as Socrates and Diogenes the Cynic.20

The Stoics see vice and virtue as fundamental conditions of the soul: on one level individual actions can display virtue or vice, but from a higher vantage point a person is either virtuous or he is not. The truly virtuous man is called the sage, and he is virtuous in all that he does without qualification.21 The vast majority of human beings are not sages. Therefore, on a fundamental level, they are vicious. This isn’t to say that right action is frivolous, on the contrary:

The Stoics did allow that virtue was possible for human beings—it is not an unrealizable ideal, just a very demanding one—and they described what it would be like to make progress towards virtue. They even allowed that some people do make progress. They simply denied that making progress towards virtue was the same thing as
becoming more virtuous or less vicious.\textsuperscript{22} Cicero is right to claim that, in light of the unity of all vices, the Stoics believe that “the man who unnecessarily strangles a cock is as guilty as the man who has strangled his father,”\textsuperscript{23} but only in the limited sense that each action “stems from a vicious state of soul.”\textsuperscript{24} The man who errs slightly and the man who errs greatly are united in the fact that they have yet to attain the state of real and enduring virtue demarcated by sagacity. Stoics would not say that a patricide is somehow deserving of equal punishment to a negligent farmer, but they would agree with Socrates that “if a man goes wrong in any way he must be punished, and the next best thing to being good is to become good by submitting to punishment and paying the penalty for one’s faults.”\textsuperscript{25} Cicero’s argument cleverly, but abusively, combines the Stoic belief in the universal viciousness of the non-sage with the belief that each man deserves correction for every wrong choice to make it seem that they believe all men deserve the same correction for every wrong choice. When viewed in light of the Stoic framework, Cicero’s accusation is based on an easily recognizable straw man created by conflating two distinct positions into a single hybrid contention with which no reasonable person, Stoics included, would have agreed.

Cicero’s three contentions concerning epistemology, that the philosopher “has no need to offer conjectures... is never mistaken, never changes his mind,” employ a similar tactic. In Stoic epistemology all data that comes by way of the senses, and even the imagination, are impressions. It is within the power of every human being to assent to the impressions they receive, refrain from assenting, or deny the impressions altogether and hold the reverse position.\textsuperscript{26} The basic unit of Stoic understanding is true belief, which is a weak assent to an impression.\textsuperscript{27} Weakly assenting to an impression means that the non-sage has accepted an impression under certain conditions, but would alter his assent under some other condition (e.g. under torture or if the assent were shown to be irrational—anything that would cause him to recant). For all non-sages this is the horizon of possible understanding. The sage is a special case in that he has the ability to know something as well as believe it. The sage does this by strongly assenting to a
A kataleptic impression is an impression “with a sort of guarantee… if you are having this impression then things are really as the impression says they are.” When a sage strongly assents to a kataleptic impression he recognizes truth and holds fast to it in a way that “cannot be reversed or overturned by any amount of rational questioning, no matter how Skillfully conducted, or by any amount of emotional or psychological pressure.” Quite importantly, the reason for this tenacity is that the sage is correct in his knowledge of the truth.

The Stoic sage would not recant or be mistaken in his knowledge because Stoic epistemology defines knowledge in such a way as to make either circumstance impossible. Moreover, the sage will not offer conjecture about something that he is not certain he knows because he abides by the Socratic dictum that “Every form of pandering, whether to oneself or to others, whether to large groups or to small, is to be shunned; oratory is to be employed only in the service of right,” and will not risk misleading others by persuading them that wrong is right, even out of ignorance. A non-sage practitioner of Stoic philosophy is not the same as the sage. He will mistakenly give assent to false impressions and reverse his position when he is shown his error. His every word will be a conjecture because no matter how true his belief is he will never really know anything. As Seneca says: “It is folly to say, ‘What I have said must remain fixed.’ There is no disgrace in having our opinions change with the circumstances.” To pervert this complex epistemology into the claim ‘Stoics never admit they are wrong’ is disingenuous and does not accurately reflect the Stoic system.

Conclusion

By taking Stoic positions out of context and deliberately misrepresenting them Cicero was able to weaken Cato’s credibility and win his case—but this does not mean that his arguments were sound. Viewed in light of the actual doctrines of the Stoics, Cicero seems to have won a classic oratorical victory wherein “an ignorant person is more convincing than the expert before an equally ignorant audience.” Though one would be hard-pressed to claim that Cicero
was ignorant of Stoicism, it is fairly clear that the circumstances of the trial prompted him to pander to the jury and play on their ignorance and prejudice in order to facilitate a guilty man’s acquittal. The verdict of Plutarch on the character of Cato provides the final vindication of the man and his philosophy and, through example, shows what argument can only intimate: “though he were terrible and severe as to matters of justice, in the senate, and at the bar, yet after the thing was over his manner to all men was perfectly friendly and humane.”

Notes
3 Cicero, op. cit., p. 143.
6 Ibid. 119.
11 Plato, op. cit., p. 467.
14 Ibid, 7.
16 Holland, op. cit., p. 127.
17 James B. Stockdale, “Stockdale on Stoicism II: Master of My Fate,” (Center
18 Holland, op. cit., p. 126.
19 Cicero, op. cit., 143
20 Brennan, op. cit., p. 36.
21 Brennan, op. cit., p. 36-37.
22 Ibid, p. 36.
23 Cicero, op. cit., p. 143.
25 Plato, *Gorgias*, p. 527
26 Brennan, op. cit., p. 60.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid, p. 68.
29 Ibid, p. 69.
30 It is fairly clear that the notion of a kataleptic impression was created in
order to illustrate a larger theoretical point and does not correspond to
a particular category of impression that is readily translatable into the
parlance of common experience. Like obscenity, one knows it when one
sees it, but is otherwise hard pressed to describe it in detail.
31 Plato, *Gorgias*, p. 527
32 Holland, op. cit., p. 133.
33 Plato, *Gorgias*, p. 459
34 Plutarch, Internet Classics Archive, trans. John Dryden, “Cato the
Younger.”