Pleasure and the Stoic Sage

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Sources and Abbreviations

Throughout this work, I cite several traditional sources for Stoic and Hellenistic texts. Here I have provided a list of the abbreviations I will use to refer to those texts. The References page lists the specific editions from which I have cited.

Fin.  Cicero, De Finibus (On Moral Ends)
NA  Gellius, Noctes Atticae (Attic Nights)
Div. Inst.  Lactantius, Divine Institutes
DL  Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Eminent Philosophers
LS  A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers
Ep.  Seneca, Epistulae (Letters)
Introduction.

The Hellenistic period refers, generally speaking, to the years beginning with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE and ending with the downfall of the Roman Republic, considered as Octavian’s victory at the battle of Actium, in 31 BCE. Philosophy was a Greek activity throughout this period, and at the outset, the works of Plato and Aristotle were the main texts used in philosophical study. However, as the Hellenistic culture came into its own, philosophy came to be dominated by three schools unique to the period: Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism. All of these, having come about after Aristotle, are distinctively Hellenistic, and it was these schools that held primary influence over thought in the Hellenistic world, at least until the revival of Platonism during the first century.¹

Today, in the English-speaking world, the names of these traditions are still familiar, remaining in popular usage as ordinary adjectives. A person who is skeptical is one who doubts and questions; a thing is called Epicurean if it is extravagantly luxurious; a stoic person weathered life’s difficulties without complaint. These terms, while based in fact to some extent, are a bit broadly generalized. The Epicurean school in particular has been done a disservice, given that its founder endorsed a life of traditional virtues (Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* 62) and espoused the slogan “live quietly” (*ibid.*, 16). The Stoics have been oversimplified as well, though perhaps not in a way that can be as quickly remedied as the Epicureans. As with all of these schools,

¹ For an excellent background on the Hellenistic period and its philosophical schools, see the introduction to Long 1986.
the beliefs of the Stoics are far more complex and philosophically nuanced than a single sentence can convey.

However, the opposition between the Epicurean stereotype of indulgence and the Stoic one of sobriety does, to some degree, echo the historical differences between the two schools. The Epicureans held pleasure to be the *summum bonum*, the only intrinsically good thing and, therefore, the one thing in life which people ought to pursue above all else. On the other hand, the Stoics firmly rejected such a view, instead casting virtue as the *summum bonum*. Naturally, these characterizations require some clarification. The virtues in question are the four cardinal Greek virtues, which can also be found in the works of Plato: temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice. They were certainly not absent from Epicurean theory; rather, they were espoused and endorsed as a means to pleasure, in the sense that living a life consistent with these virtues would be pleasurable (Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* 68). The chief difference between the Stoics and the Epicureans lay instead in the goal of a virtuous life. For the Epicureans, it was to create the most pleasurable possible existence. For the Stoics, on the other hand, a virtuous life is its own goal: as virtue is the *summum bonum*, rather than virtue being sought as a means to something else, it is sought purely for its own sake.

The Stoics were eudaimonists, meaning that when they said virtue was good, they meant that it was the chief characteristic of the best human life, and that virtue was all that a person needed in order to fare well in life (Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* 197). The Greek word εὐδαιμονία (*eudaimonia*) is often translated simply as
“happiness,” although alternate translations such as “flourishing” shed some light on the holistic sense of the word: a eudaimon life is characterized not just by moments of joy, but by the sense that the person in question is at all moments living the best life available to her as a human being. The Stoics believed that such a life would be one of virtue because realizing the virtues would constitute making good on a human being’s rational nature, the characteristic that makes human beings unique among all other living things.

Unlike the Epicureans, the Stoics did not give pleasure much of a place in their system of ethics. The emotion of pleasure, along with most other emotions, they sought to avoid, instead venerating an emotionless state called ἀπάθεια (apatheia). Physical pleasure was similarly not valued. To the contrary, in his 1997 article “The Virtue in Self-Interest,” ethicist Michael Slote describes a scenario in which a hypothetical Stoic is being tortured on the rack; he asserts that even in this instance, according to the Stoics, this person is “as well-off as it is possible to be” (Slote 268), so long as he is conducting himself in a manner consistent with virtue.

This assertion, however, is instinctively difficult to accept. How can a person who is crippled by torture be well-off at all? Apart from the pain, surely there are more valuable ways to spend one’s time! After presenting the rack scenario, Slote makes the assessment that “on a Stoic account human well-being is regarded very differently from the way it ordinarily is.” He points out that not only was freedom from physical pain unimportant for the Stoics, but that the sorts of small diversions which most people would consider part of a good life, such as an evening in the company of one’s
friends, are without intrinsic value (Slote 268). What are we to make of these views? Can the Stoics really advance a coherent picture of the good life in which life’s enjoyments are merely distractions, and in which physical pain is acceptable?

These are the questions that I will address in the following pages. It is my contention, first and foremost, that the answer is no – the Stoics could not espouse a theory in which pleasure was totally without value. Furthermore, it is my belief that, in fact, they never did. I will attempt to show that there are several places in Stoic doctrine that do advance pleasure as something desirable, albeit presenting it in uniquely Stoic terms.

My focus will particularly be on Stoic doctrine as it applies to the Stoic Sage, the ideal, most fully developed Stoic agent. The Sage is the paragon of Stoic excellence, a master of the art of living, and becoming one is the goal of Stoic ethics. As A.A. Long describes it: “He knows infallibly what should be done in each situation of life and takes every step to do it at the right time and in the right way” (*Hellenistic Philosophy* 205). It is worth noting that it may in fact be impossible for any ordinary person to become a Sage (Sellars 38). Nevertheless, inasmuch as the Sage represents moral perfection, his case is the most relevant to my analysis of the role of pleasure in Stoic ethics.

I have divided the concept of pleasure into two categories: pleasure as a physical sensation, and pleasure as an emotion. To address the question of physical pleasure, I will examine the doctrine of οἰκείωσις (*oikeiosis*), which states that living things tend toward that which they see as being appropriate to them or belonging to
them, in the interest of their own self-preservation. According to the Stoics, because human beings have the unique capacity for rational thought, they ought to select those things that are befitting of them as rational beings, over and above that which would sustain them in a purely physical sense. To this end, they are to seek the life of virtue and not pleasure, because it is more consistent with the rational mind. However, I will argue that even in light of this, physical preservation is still a prerequisite goal, since the person must be preserved physically if he or she can have any chance of fulfilling his or her potential for rational and virtuous conduct. Therefore, human beings will have to select such possible pleasures as eating and sleeping. It is my intention to determine whether pleasure can be used as an indicator of moral rightness in Stoicism, and to show that the doctrine of οἰκείωσις implies that, at the very least, there are a significant number of instances in which choosing a pleasurable course of action is the morally right thing to do.

To address the question of emotional pleasure, I will look at the relationship between emotional pleasure and χαρά (chara), a sort of delight which, for the Stoics, had virtuous overtones which conventional pleasure lacks. Χαρά was thought to be the enduring emotion experienced by a Stoic Sage once he becomes fully conscious of the fact that he is a Sage. In general, emotion was considered undesirable by the Stoics, except for a few permissible emotions called the εὐπάθειαι (eupatheiai), of which χαρά is one.

To examine the notion of χαρά, I will analyze several arguments which, I believe, raise important and pertinent questions regarding the εὐπάθειαι. One of these
comes from the Christian thinker Lactantius, who argues that the distinction between emotional pleasure and χαρά is tenuous at best. It is Lactantius’ point of view that χαρά is simply another name for pleasure, given solely in order to help the Stoics avoid inconsistency, and that it does not really refer to anything significantly different from conventional ideas of pleasure. I will investigate Lactantius’ claims and examine them for validity. I will argue that there is a significant difference between conventional pleasure and χαρά, and that the reason for the doctrinal division between the two is largely pedagogical.

The Stoics’ ethical system is based on an account of human nature. If there is truth in this account, it ought to hold true for people as we are today. I will conclude by comparing Stoic beliefs with current theories on instinct and human happiness, and examine informally how Stoic ethics can be applied to people today.
Chapter One: Οἰκείωσις

Every system of ethics prescribes a method for determining which actions are the right ones. For the eudaimon Stoics, the right actions for human beings are those that best align with our nature, and further, those that best align with the place of humanity in the greater universe. The Stoic Sage, as a morally perfect person, has a flawless understanding of his role in the universe and never fails to correctly determine how best to act in any given situation. His ability to do this comes from his having perfected a natural-born capacity to recognize the appropriate action, and the Stoics called that important capacity οἰκείωσις (oikeiosis). This concept, as we will discuss, raises issues, leaving places in which pleasure might seem to fit comfortably as an indicator of moral rightness. The object of this chapter will be to examine these and ultimately argue that, at least, an understanding of physical pleasure is necessary for becoming a Sage, and that physical pleasure can be used in a significant number of cases as a reliable way to determine right actions without contradicting anything in Stoic doctrine. In order to do this, it is important that we first come to a solid understanding of what the word οἰκείωσις means.

In English language translations and discussions about Stoicism, there is not a consensus on what single word would best reflect the way in which the Stoics used “οἰκείωσις.” Hence authors choose different words: A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley (1987) use the term “appropriation;” Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson (1997) render it as “congeniality;” Julia Annas gives “familiarization” (Annas, On Moral Ends 69, footnote 1). It might be most illuminating to seek an understanding of this term by
using a definition, or perhaps description, that comes from the time period during which it was actually used. Hence I will present not one but three such definitions. Considering all of them in turn, I will construct a clear picture of just what it is to which the term refers.

First, here is the overview offered by the doxographer Diogenes Laertius:

An animal’s first impulse, say the Stoics, is to self-preservation, because nature from the outset endears it to itself, as Chrysippus affirms in the first book of his work *On Ends*: his words are, ‘The dearest thing to every animal is its own constitution and its consciousness thereof’; for it was not likely that nature should estrange the living thing from itself or that she should leave the creature she has made without either estrangement from or affection for its own constitution. We are forced then to conclude that nature in constituting the animal made it near and dear to itself; for so it comes to repel all that is injurious and give free access to all that is serviceable or akin to it. (*DL* 7.85)

This next description comes from Seneca’s Letter CXXI, and is in several parts:

Nature brings forth her offspring, she does not toss them aside. And because the most reliable form of protection comes from what is closest, each one is entrusted to itself. And so, as I said in earlier letters, young animals, even those just born from their mother or freshly hatched, immediately recognize what is threatening to them and avoid deadly dangers. (18)

… as soon as each animal is attached to its own safety it also pursues what will help it and fears what will harm it. Its impulses toward what is useful are natural, as are its avoidances of the opposite. Whatever nature taught occurs without any thinking to prescribe it and without any deliberation. (21)

And it isn’t surprising that the things without which an animal’s birth would be pointless are born along with the animal. Nature has bestowed on animals this primary tool for survival, attachment to and love for oneself. They could not have been kept safe unless they wanted to be—not that this alone would have done them any good, but rather
without it nothing else would have done them any good either. You won’t find contempt for itself in any animal, <nor> even neglect of itself. Even mute and stupid beasts, sluggish in every other respect, are skilled at staying alive. You will notice that those which are useless to others do not let themselves down. (24)

The third definition is that given by Cicero in the third book of his *De Finibus*:

Every animal, as soon as it is born (this is where one should start), is concerned with itself, and takes care to preserve itself. It favours its constitution and whatever preserves its constitution, whereas it recoils from its destruction and whatever appears to promote its destruction … it is self-love which provides the primary motivation. (3.16)

It is immediately obvious that the main idea running through these passages is self-preservation; they each give an account explaining the means by which living things remain living. From the picture presented here, οἰκείωσις seems to be the tendency within a conscious agent to select those things that will sustain it and avoid those things that will damage it. All three writers describe a sort of self-love, an affinity on the part of an animal toward itself that causes it to make the correct selections. Furthermore, Diogenes and Seneca both explain, and Cicero implies, that the requisite knowledge for such pursuits is something with which the animal is born.

This latter point is important to note in order to understand where οἰκείωσις fits into the Stoics’ overall ethical scheme, and why following its directives is considered to be morally right. Animals are born with a predisposition to look after themselves; to be precise, the tendency toward self-preservation is granted by “Nature,” which we can safely assume refers to the same entity referred to on other occasions as “Zeus” or “God” (Sellars 91) – that is, the deity, the universe itself, described by A.A. Long as
“That which holds the world together … a supreme rational being, God, who directs all events for purposes which are necessarily good” (*Hellenistic Philosophy* 148).  

When the word “God” is used in Stoicism, what it refers to is “a *philosophical* God” (Sellars 92, emphasis in original) who bears only some resemblance to the Judeo-Christian God familiar to us today. For at least the majority of the Stoics, the cosmos itself was a living thing (“It is a living thing in the sense of an animate substance,” *DL* 7.143). It is this that they mean with the words “God” (or “Zeus”) and “Nature,” which they appear to treat as identical for the most part (Sellars 93). Despite these important distinctions, like the Judeo-Christian God, Nature according to Stoicism was a good force. The doctrine of *oikêíôσις* is at the center of Stoic ethics because it is, as John Sellars notes, the Nature-given, concrete grounds upon which agents judge something to be “good” or “bad” (108), and formulate conclusions about what to do in response to those judgments. *Oikêíôσις* is Nature’s way of helping an animal see how it is supposed to live, and as such it is morally right to adhere to it.

Additionally, it is worthwhile to mention that the goal of endurance was held by all entities in the Stoic universe, not just animals. As David Konstan notes in his article “Stoics and Epicureans on the Nature of Man,” the Stoics had a materialist conception of the universe wherein all things, including human souls, were subject to the possibility of material destruction. He writes, “What allowed any object to endure in the same state, and hence to be a good example of its kind, was the ability of its constituent material to maintain itself against disintegrating blows from without” (28).

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2 For the remainder of this work, I will refer to Nature in this Stoic sense by capitalizing the word. Instances in which the word is not capitalized refer simply to its conventional English meaning.
The phrase “a good example of its kind” is illuminating; a thing is doing well in a moral sense if it preserves itself. This helps to explain the cardinal importance of οἰκείωσις in the good life of an animal – if the animal is to have any sort of good life, it simply must preserve itself as a member of its kind.

So, have we achieved a working understanding of οἰκείωσις? The term refers to the skill which enables an animal to recognize what it needs to do in order to preserve itself and continue living a life that is suitable to it. To give an example from Seneca (Ep. 121.19), a hen rightly does not fear a peacock or a goose, but it flees from a hawk. And the reason why the hen does this is because she is aware that while neither the peacock nor the goose poses a threat to her, the hawk would kill her; the fact that she understands this intuitively is an example of οἰκείωσις. This sense is bestowed by Nature, making it normatively correct that the animal should follow it.

With all this in mind, it becomes easy to see how the doctrine could leave itself open to the objection that it is pleasure-seeking. Each type of animal has a different set of instructions regarding how it is to conduct itself, and what is good for one animal could be bad for another. So a lizard, which stands to gain from direct sunlight, ought to sun itself upon a rock, whereas if a fish were to attempt the same thing, the results would be disastrous. Due to οἰκείωσις, animals have a strong interest in maintaining their lives, and so they naturally select that which will be most useful in that regard. However, it seems necessary that pleasure and pain would play a role in this, for those things which are good for animals – such as eating, sleeping, sunning oneself if one is a lizard, and so forth – are (at least presumably) pleasurable experiences. On the other
hand, things which are bad for an animal, such as starving, physical injury, and drying up if one is a fish, would presumably be unpleasant and certainly sound painful. This poses a major question for the Stoics: wouldn’t οἰκείωσις, then, reduce to simply seeking pleasure as the hallmark of goodness, and avoiding pain – in sum, hedonism?

It appears that during the time of Stoicism, this idea, that animals seek pleasure as a guide to self-sustenance, was known, perhaps from Epicurus (who “[took] it as an obvious fact that … all living things pursue pleasure and avoid pain” (Long, _Hellenistic Philosophy_ 62). The view was familiar to the Stoics and as a result Diogenes Laertius includes a formulation of a Stoic response to it in his discussion of οἰκείωσις. That response runs as follows:

As for the assertion made by some people that pleasure is the object to which the first impulse of animals is directed, it is shown by the Stoics to be false. For pleasure, if it is really felt, they declare to be a by-product, which never comes until nature by itself has sought and found the means suitable to the animal’s existence or constitution; it is an aftermath comparable to the condition of animals thriving and plants in full bloom. (DL 7.85-6)

According to this passage, pleasure itself is not what an animal seeks, but is rather an accident of a rightly lived life – if indeed it even occurs at all, which Diogenes throws into doubt in the second sentence. Assuming that it does, by this construal, one could respond to the worry above by saying that the pleasure an animal feels upon doing necessary, beneficial things, such as eating or sleeping, is epiphenomenal: it occurs along with the action, but is not a necessary constituent of the action. The true goal, the _summum bonum_, is still a life lived in accordance with Nature, and the animal’s
its innate drive to live such a life, is still its chief motivation. Pleasure does not replace it.

I would reply, however, that this answer is inadequate on the grounds that the distinction is in practice meaningless. If pleasure always coincides with those actions that accord with the will of the universe, then it does not seem totally unreasonable to say that Nature always wills actions which are pleasurable, or that morally right actions are always pleasurable. One could perhaps even take this a step further and say that because morally right actions are pleasurable, a morally right action is itself a pleasure, as a hearty meal or a nap in the sun is considered a pleasure. All of these statements seem quite unpalatable to the Stoics.

One possible way for the Stoics to answer this concern could be found in, again, Seneca’s letter CXXI. In sections 7 and 8, he addresses a worry like the one raised above; in the formulation to which Seneca replies, the objector argues that animals come to know the optimal use of their bodies by avoiding pain rather than through Nature-given knowledge: “The reason why animals are so dexterous in the use of their limbs is that if they move them unnaturally, they will feel pain. They are compelled to do thus” (emphasis in translation) (Ep. 121.7). In response, Seneca gives as an example a tortoise who finds himself lying on his back, on his shell, rather than standing on his feet. Seneca argues that the tortoise struggles to right himself not because he is in pain, but rather because he can tell that he is not in the position most proper to him: “The tortoise on his back feels no suffering; but he is restless because
he misses his natural condition, and does not cease to shake himself about until he stands once more upon his feet” (Ep. 121.8).

At first blush, this response answers my question about whether morally correct actions and pleasure always occur together, since according to Seneca, this is at least one case in which they do not. This does away with the possibility of equating moral rightness and pleasure. There is some issue here having to do with the fact that we cannot know for certain what the tortoise feels; I would like to contend that he could very well be in physical discomfort, but since we have no way to be certain of that, it is probably better to suspend judgment and even give Seneca the benefit of the doubt that the tortoise physically does not suffer.

On the other hand, I would think that while the tortoise may not be in pain, he is probably quite distressed, aware as he certainly is of the dangers that now may easily befall him. This no longer falls under the realm of physical pain, so Seneca is not wrong, but the tortoise is still suffering in a different sort of way, and that suffering is concurrent with a morally incorrect state of affairs. In the next chapter I will discuss the role of emotional pleasure and pain in Stoic morality in greater detail. For the moment, I shall simply say that Seneca makes a good point, but the matter is not settled.

Furthermore, it does not seem to me that the case of the tortoise requires us to throw out pleasure altogether from the οἰκείωσις of animals. It eliminates the possibility of physical pleasure and moral rightness always occurring together, but perhaps only in exceptional cases. Additionally, as the Stoics were eudaimonists, it is
important to bear in mind that every type of animal has a different sort of life for which it is best suited. Seneca was responding to the objection that animals come to understand the use of their bodies by avoiding pain. One could easily conceive that there are animals for whom the sort of painlessly wrong use of the body does not occur as it does for the tortoise; for example, I could not imagine a horse lying in any position improper to it without pain. Although we cannot say across the board that pleasure is the same as moral rightness in animals, perhaps we may at least say that in general, pleasure is a reliable indicator of what an animal ought to do according to Nature.

So much for nonrational animals; what about human beings? They too are subject to οἰκείωσις, and they too have self-preservation as their first impulse (Sellars 109). Despite the doubt that Diogenes expresses regarding animals, we can obviously be certain that human beings experience pleasure and pain. However, the fact that human beings also possess a rational faculty makes their situation, and what “self-preservation” means to them, significantly different from the case of, say, a tortoise. To be precise, self-preservation for rational beings consists in the preservation of themselves as rational beings, rather than solely as living beings, with the focus being on maintaining their minds and their dignity over and above just the physical body (Sellars 108). This distinction is perhaps most sharply evidenced by the Stoics’ famous belief that suicide was morally defensible in some circumstances. Despite the obvious fact that suicide is the opposite of self-preservation, the Stoics believed that if the choice was between taking one’s own life and living a life that was offensive to one’s
rationality, such as unjust imprisonment, suicide was the better option (Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* 206); indeed, a person with the presence of mind to both make and carry out such a choice would have extraordinary ethical capability, and would be “a candidate for being a Sage” (Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* 206).

In light of this possibility, that destroying oneself could be not only right, but indeed deserving of the highest moral praise, we will need a more fleshed-out understanding of what it means for a human being to live a morally correct life according to Stoic doctrine. A person is to act and preserve herself in a manner in keeping with her rationality, but what does that mean?

One interesting point unique among the Hellenistic schools is the Stoics’ recognition of human development in their ethical theory. This capacity for ethical growth sets humans apart from other, nonrational animals, and as such is necessary for understanding οἰκείωσις as it applies to people. In his *De Finibus*, Cicero[^3] outlines sequential stages of moral development, the last of which is the level of the Sage.

The starting-point, therefore, is that things in accordance with nature are to be adopted for their own sake, and their contraries are likewise to be rejected … With this established, the initial ‘appropriate action’ … is to preserve oneself in one’s natural constitution. The next is to take what is in accordance with nature and reject its opposite. Once this method of selection (and likewise rejection) has been discovered, selection then goes hand in hand with appropriate action. Then such selection becomes continuous, and, finally, stable and in agreement with nature. At this point that which can truly be said to be good first appears and is recognized for what it is.

A human being’s earliest concern is for what is in accordance with nature. But as soon as one has gained some understanding, or rather

[^3]: To be precise, the quoted passages are from an imagined dialogue, written by Cicero, between himself and Marcus Cato, and it is Cato who is explaining and defending the Stoic point of view. Nevertheless, as Cicero is the author, I will attribute these and subsequent quotations to him.
‘conception’ … and sees an order and as it were concordance in the things which one ought to do, one then values that concordance much more highly than those first objects of affection. Hence through learning and reason one concludes that this is the place to find the supreme human good, that good which is to be praised and sought on its own account. (Fin. 3.20-1)

So for the Stoics, the conduct appropriate to a child, who is generally in the first or second developmental stage, is not the same as that appropriate to an adult, who would be in the third or later stages, because the child has not yet developed the adult’s rational capacity, and as such is better served by different pursuits (Long, Hellenistic Philosophy 188). Furthermore, the Stoics believed that as a person matures, the things which were appropriate for her in the initial stages continued to be so, though with modifications (Long, Hellenistic Philosophy 188). The possibility of suicide is an example of this: while self-preservation for a child would probably be directed more towards physical maintenance, self-preservation for a fully rational adult would consist in the preservation of his soul and its integrity. A.A. Long notes that practically no one ever matures to the final stage, and few make it even to the fourth, which serves to explain why immoral conduct is possible, and observable, even in mature human beings (Hellenistic Philosophy 188).

So how does a fully rational adult preserve herself as such? The answer is simple: through pursuit of the sumnum bonum. As John Sellars puts it, the conduct most appropriate to a rational adult is “cultivating virtue, which is also the only thing that properly deserves to be called ‘good’” (120). The word rendered here as “virtue” is in fact a Greek word, aretē, which may also be translated as “excellence.” The idea was that the soul ought to be in an excellent, perfected condition (Sellars 124).
After this stage in the Stoic account of human development, the discussion turns inward, toward the idea of perfecting one’s soul. This concept will be discussed in the next chapter, but for now, we return to the question of physical pleasure. In light of all this new information on what morally right conduct means for human beings, is there any room for physical pleasure to enter the equation for us at all? Perhaps. As I mentioned above, the Stoics believed that there were several stages of human development, and in the earlier of these, the central goal is, as with nonrational animals, self-preservation. If it is the case that the accession to later developmental stages does not eliminate the principles of the earlier ones, then it would follow that physical self-preservation is a prerequisite goal necessary for perfect virtue. This would give physical self-preservation a place of great importance in Stoic ethics, and may indicate that pursuing pleasure is consistent with the *summun bonum* – even more than with animals, we know it to be the case that actions conducive to human self-preservation, such as eating and sleeping, are also generally pleasurable. To address this possibility, let us first examine the nature of Stoic moral development.

As the above-quoted passage describes, a person’s understanding of what is in accordance with Nature becomes refined across the lifespan, beginning with the sort of self-preserving selections characteristic of animals and moving to a thorough understanding of virtue and the selections that tend toward it. Despite the direction of this development, Cicero talks about how right actions for humans are necessarily supportive of our basic οἰκείωσις drives: “What I have called ‘appropriate actions’ originate from nature’s starting-points, and so the former must be directed towards the
latter … all appropriate actions are aimed at our attaining the natural principles” (Fin. 3.22). He clarifies that in spite of this, virtue is still the ultimate good: “[Moral action] too is in accordance with nature and, to a far greater extent than all the earlier objects, stimulates our pursuit” (Fin. 3.22). Cicero uses the example of an archer: the archer’s ultimate goal is to shoot straight, as a given person’s ultimate goal is to reach a Sage-level understanding of virtue, but the archer’s immediate goal is to hit a given target, as a given person must make moral choices in the short term. The whole life ought to tend toward virtue, but any given episode in that life consists in seeking natural principles, including self-preservation. As Julia Annas comments in a footnote, these two goals do not contradict one another (On Moral Ends 72).

How does the suicide directive tie into this? The reader may recall that according to Stoicism, taking one’s own life is sometimes the correct moral choice for human beings, despite its contributing nothing whatsoever to physical self-preservation. A little later on in the third book, Cicero explains: “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” (3.60). It seems that if a person is on a virtuous path – as indeed one would have to be in order to recognize suicide as morally appropriate – then the circumstances of one’s life would have to be seriously troubled in order to contain little enough in accordance with nature to merit suicide. Such a situation, where an extraordinarily virtuous agent found herself in an extraordinarily vicious set of circumstances, would certainly be very rare, and as such we can consider it an
interesting exception, but not a compelling counterpoint – as the Stoics themselves seem to have done. For the majority of cases, self-preservation remains of cardinal importance.

So far, it looks as though pleasure may indeed be characteristic of moral rightness. One thing that could potentially create problems for this theory, however, is the statement with which Cicero closes the passage regarding the archer: “To actually hit the target is, as we say, to be selected but not sought” (*Fin.* 3.22). He is referring to a distinction that the Stoics make in how a person is to prioritize decisions: a person should only *seek* that which is inherently good – that is, virtue (and likewise avoid that which is inherently bad, i.e. vice). Everything else in the universe is without any inherent moral value; as such, the Stoics refer to these entities as “indifferents” and discern no difference between them from a moral point of view (Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* 193). Of course, while virtue is the only true good, some things are more useful or desirable than their alternatives, say physical strength versus disability. They are desirable due to their conduciveness to a virtuous life, but they are not necessary for one. In this sort of case, the Stoics say that the more advantageous option is a “preferred indifferent” – of two things with equivalent moral worth, there may be one that a person would rather have, or that he would select (Sellars 112). And Cicero is saying that self-preservation, along with all that is in keeping with the early stages of human development, is a good choice, but one without intrinsic moral worth.

The reason why this statement potentially raises problems for us is the idea that self-preservation, and consequently pleasure, is not to be sought. If pleasure is a
reliable identifier of moral rightness, then seeking it would be a reliable way to determine moral actions; the fact that Cicero explicitly advises against this indicates that it is not so. There does not appear to be, as I had hoped to show, a directive to seek pleasure via self-preservation embedded in the doctrine of the stages of moral development.

Even so, must we throw out pleasure entirely? Although self-preservation is not to be sought for its own sake, it is still “to be selected;” although a person should not seek it above all else throughout his life, it is safe to say that there would be myriad instances in which choosing something pleasurable is the right thing to do, even from a moral perspective, even if it is not the right thing to do in an overarching sense.

One thing worth bringing up here is that becoming a Sage does not admit of degrees. A person cannot be a Sage in some respect without being a Sage in all respects. A.A. Long compares reaching this perfect moral state to our modern attempts to land on Mars: “the goal is what it is independently of anyone’s achieving it. One can ask questions about whether the efforts in promoting the goal are worthwhile or not irrespective of anything that may result in success” (Hellenistic Philosophy 194). Certainly the goal of a Stoic is to become a Sage, and certainly once a person is a Sage, that person can no longer fail to make the correct moral judgment, because she understands the will of Nature to perfection. But what about everybody else?

According to the Cicero passages quoted above, part of a person’s moral development includes “discovering” how to find those things in accordance with
nature, and reject their opposites (Fin. 3.20). For one who aspires to virtue according to Stoicism, figuring this out likely consists of a bit of trial and error. Perhaps one way such a person could find insight into Nature’s will is by formulating a strong familiarity with their own physical constitution. For this purpose, an understanding of the workings of pleasure and pain upon the body would be essential: what activities cause either of them, what activities remove either of them, and, once these first two are well understood, why. In this way, pursuing pleasure could serve as a valuable part of a person’s moral development, and so here may be, after all, the place where pleasure truly does fit in to Stoic ethics.

Of course, this is not the same as using pleasure as an indicator of moral rightness, and certainly I do not wish to imply that physical pleasure plays any direct part in the summum bonum; I believe that the foregoing discussion has done away with these possibilities. In that sense, I have been unable to prove my original hypothesis. However, I disagree with the idea that physical pleasure has no place in Stoic ethics. On the contrary, pleasure and pain are integral aspects of the human experience, and understanding them seems a necessary step to understanding Nature’s will.
When one hears the word “stoic” today, perhaps the most immediate association that comes to mind is a lack of outward feelings. A stoic person is one who does not get upset over the vicissitudes of fortune. As it turns out, this is a fairly accurate representation of the Stoic Sage: he was not to be perturbed by emotions, rather remaining totally rational in all circumstances. But what do we mean by “rational” here? In order to form an accurate picture of how pleasure as an emotion fits into the Stoic ethical scheme, we must first sketch an outline of the Stoics’ conception of, and attitude toward, the emotions themselves.

For the Stoics, emotions, or πάθη (pathē), were a choice, made freely by a person, which had the power to motivate that person to a morally inadvisable action. The fact that the emotions had this potential to lead a person astray is what caused the Stoics to denounce them. In his book Stoicism, John Sellars describes how emotions come about subsequent to an act of assent on the part of the person: he perceives a circumstance, and assents to a judgment of it. In order to illustrate this, Sellars recounts a passage from Aulus Gellius’ Noctes Atticae, wherein Gellius recalls a sea voyage he took with a Stoic philosopher (115). In the story, the ship runs into a storm, and Gellius is disappointed to discover that the wayfaring philosopher is just as panicked as everybody else, contrary to the unaffected Stoic ideal. In his own defense, the philosopher explains that he is not emotional at all; instead, he is reacting to an impression. He cites a passage from Epictetus, wherein the author explains that the impressions, or representations of the world, which we receive are not under our
control, thus making it reasonable that the wayfaring philosopher would be upset by the threatening storm (NA 19.1.1-21; Sellars 65-6).

So the initial impression is morally blameless. Emotion comes in during the next step. As Sellars writes, once we have received the impression, we make an assessment about it. That assessment is a free choice, and thus the agent is morally responsible for it (115). Emotion is created when the assessment involves a value judgment: “rather than being faced with the value-neutral impression ‘there is a wave above my head’ we are instead confronted with ‘there is a wave over my head and this is a terrible thing’” (Sellars 115-16, emphasis in original). If the person in this scenario makes the free choice to assent to the judgment that the wave being over his head is terrible, then he will presumably feel an emotion, in this case fear, which will most likely lead him to act rashly.

In this sense, the emotions were a variety of impulse. An emotion constituted a motivation for the person experiencing it to attempt to change her world in some way (Anna,s, Hellenistic 104). To be precise, emotions were excessive impulses, due to the fact that they were in general the product of faulty reasoning rather than right reasoning (Long, Hellenistic Philosophy 176). John Sellars illustrates the progression from an act of assent to an emotion to an amoral action:

… the Stoics held that even emotional responses to seemingly favorable situations should be avoided. It is just as mistaken and potentially damaging to assent to the impression that an external state of affairs is good as it is to the impression that it is bad. First it is simply an error in reasoning; impressions report states of affairs and any ascription of value, whether positive or negative, is an unwarranted
addition. Secondly it claims that an external, that is, an indifferent\(^4\), is good when in fact only virtue is good. Thirdly it is dangerous because it creates a situation in which a change in the external state of affairs could lead to even worse emotions. If we think that a particular event – our numbers coming up in the lottery, say – is good, then we shall be overcome by the emotion of delight, but when we realize that we cannot find our winning ticket, the distress that we shall suffer would be so much worse. So both positive and negative emotions should be avoided. (117-118)

Given the great potential for emotion to lead one astray, in its place, the Stoics endorsed ἀπάθεια (apatheia). This is the root of the modern word “apathy,” but rather than listless indifference, what the Stoics sought was “freedom from emotions” (Sellars 118); their goal was to escape the emotions’ clouding influence, so that nothing would impede their ability to apprehend the right course of action.

What is interesting is that for all their condemnation of the emotions, the Stoics do not, as one might expect, present the Sage as being totally free of affect. Rather than lacking any emotions, the Stage instead enjoys the εὐπάθειαι (eupatheiai), a set of morally acceptable emotions. Unlike the conventional emotions, the εὐπάθειαι do not constitute excessive impulses, but rather describe “the states you will be in if you are attached in the right way to moral value” (Annas, Hellenistic 115); despite the agent feeling these emotions, she is wise enough to know that they are not to be valued above the summum bonum, virtue. There are three εὐπάθειαι, acting as analogues to three of the four basic Stoic emotions (which are fear, desire, pleasure, and distress (Sellars 117)). Diogenes Laertius describes them as follows:

Also they say that there are three emotional states which are good, namely, joy (χαρά, chara), caution (εὐλάβεια, eulabeia) and wishing

\(^4\) Since virtue was the only good thing and vice the only bad, all other things were considered to be of “indifferent” moral value, or morally neutral. See previous chapter, page 23.
(βούλησις, boulesis). Joy, the counterpart of pleasure, is rational elation; caution, the counterpart of fear, rational avoidance; for though the wise man will never feel fear, he will yet use caution. And they make wishing the counterpart of desire (or craving), inasmuch as it is rational appetency. (DL 7.116)

John Sellars explains the lack of a counterpart for distress: “The Sage would only experience distress if faced with a present evil, and the only genuinely bad thing is vice. But as a Sage he is free completely from vice” (119). So the Sage experiences only the three emotions described by Diogenes.

The reader may, with good reason, be scratching his head right now. The Stoics endorse a wholesale rejection of emotions, and then go on to describe the Sage’s emotions? Is it even possible to have a coherent ethics wherein the morally perfect agent has something that is elsewhere denounced? In the above Diogenes passage, the εὐπάθειαι are distinguished by being “rational” – rational elation, rational avoidance, rational appetency – but as John Sellars points out, the addition of this adjective feels a little like begging the question (118): the Stoics could easily bypass the apparent contradiction of the Sage having emotions by simply calling hers “rational.” Furthermore, as Julia Annas notes, the emotions are always rational, in the sense of being reasoned; it is just that they often lack right reason (Hellenistic 105) – and the simple addition of the descriptor “rational” cannot save them from that. At first glance the doctrine seems worthy of dismissal, and there were indeed those commentators who dismissed it.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will turn my focus primarily to χαρά, or rational elation, as a substitute for pleasure. Is χαρά really a wholly separate type of
feeling from emotional pleasure, or is it possible that it is merely a form of emotional pleasure – and consequently, that there is a form of emotional pleasure that is consistent with virtue? To answer this question, I will begin by examining two particular arguments having to do with the doctrine of the εὖπάθεια, which I believe to be the most pertinent and interesting cases I have found regarding them. From analyzing these and their ramifications I will formulate a way to include pleasure in the virtuous life without contradicting Stoic doctrine. Despite the centrality of χαρά, I will continue to consider the other εὖπάθειαι in determining whether an argument justifying them is truly valid, for if it is, it must be so in all three cases.

In his book *Stoicism*, John Sellars sketches a defense of the εὖπάθεια doctrine against the charge of question-begging – i.e., that adding the word “rational” does not change anything. His point mainly rests on the idea of assent to an evaluation of some perceived state of affairs: if the evaluation is correct, he argues, then the assent, and the emotion is “warranted, and so rational” (119). These warranted assessments, then, are the εὖπάθειαι. He takes χαρά as his primary example, positing that it is perfectly coherent that such rational joy would arise from the recognition of a genuine good; since virtue is the only genuine good, then the recognition of virtue would constitute morally acceptable grounds for joy. Additionally, χαρά could not be caused by anything external, since that which is external is always subject to change. Therefore, the perceived state of affairs must be internal. So, Sellars proposes, χαρά “will be the emotion experienced by the Sage when he is fully aware of his own virtue” (119). He
supports his position with a quote from Seneca: “joy is an elation of the soul that trusts the goodness of its possessions” (*Ep. 59.2*).

There is nothing glaringly worrisome in this explanation of χαρά. It makes sense to suppose that the Sage would be pleased if she judged rightly (and indeed, she could not judge wrongly) that she was perfectly virtuous. However, in order to ascertain whether Sellars’ argument makes sense, we will have to examine how it applies to the other εὐπάθειαι.

What about wishing, βούληζις? According to Sellars: “Wishing would be a rational desire for a genuine good, again, virtue” (119). What the author means by wishing for virtue is uncertain. On the one hand, the Sage could be wishing for himself to be virtuous or to grow in virtue, but as he is already morally perfect, this would not make sense. It seems more logical to suppose that he is wishing for another person to become virtuous. This could potentially be problematic since the Sage would be reacting to a state of affairs external to himself: he observes a lack of virtue in the world, and judges that this lack is a bad thing, and decides that the world would be better if it were corrected.

This smacks of the previously discussed issue wherein the emotion represents an unwarranted judgment: just as the wave above the head of Gellius’ philosopher was only subjectively terrible, perhaps the lack of virtue observed by the Sage is only subjectively bad. However, since virtue is the *sumnum bonum*, it is not clear that the presence of it, or the addition of its presence, would ever be anything but good. Furthermore, it does not seem inconsistent with being a Sage for the Sage here to hope
that others will realize and manifest virtue; on the other hand, it does seem inconsistent to think that the Sage could make an incorrect judgment. So Sellars’ conception of βούληςις appears to be acceptable.

There still remains the third emotion: εὐλάβεια, rational avoidance, translated by R.D. Hicks from Diogenes Laertius as “caution.” Sellars’ example of a situation meriting caution is given as follows: “caution would be rational in the face of a genuinely bad future scenario, namely the loss of one’s virtue” (119). But in the preceding description of χαρά, Sellars argued that the emotion was itself only possible because the virtue which the Sage understood himself to have was unchanging, due to its being internal, a defining characteristic of the Sage. The loss of virtue certainly seems to constitute a change, and here we have a contradiction: on the one hand, the Sage’s perfected virtue cannot change, but on the other hand, he fears losing it.

It is possible that the Sage could be seeking to avoid the loss of his virtue through death. In this case, when he feels εὐλάβεια, he wants to avoid his own destruction, which makes sense and is also consistent with οἰκείωσις. However, I return again to the matter of the emotion needing to be a reaction to an internal, unchanging state of affairs: the threat of death would come from an external source, and therefore it is not clear that the Sage could be certain enough of its approach to merit an emotional response.

What about suicide, the threat of death from oneself? If the source of the threat was internal, then it would be more likely to be a stable situation. However, recall that the Stoics defended suicide in some cases precisely because it was the only way the
agent could endure as a virtuous being (Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* 206). From this it seems that taking one’s own life poses no threat to one’s virtue, so there would be no reason to fear it.

So Sellars’ conception of εὐλάβεια does not seem to work. Consequently, his argument is undermined on all counts: the flaw in εὐλάβεια indicates that the original Stoic doctrine contained an inconsistency. At least on this reading, there is no good reason to believe that the εὐπάθειαι are different from conventional emotions. So Sellars’ argument in defense of the εὐπάθειαι may be dismissed.

One of the earlier commentators to question the εὐπάθειαι was third century Christian apologist Lactantius. In the sixth book of his Divine Institutes, entitled “True Worship,” he devotes an entire section to the εὐπάθειαι; the section is named “Stoics cannot abolish feelings by renaming them.” In this section, as one would suppose, Lactantius argues that the εὐπάθειαι are really just the emotions under different titles, on the grounds that vice, in the form of emotion, is necessary for virtue:

If it is a virtue to restrain and repress oneself in mid impulse to be angry, which they cannot deny, anyone deprived of anger is also deprived of virtue. If it is a virtue to limit physical desire, then anyone without the lust he is trying to control is bound to lack virtue. If it is a virtue to rein in a greed for acquiring someone else’s property, then possession of the virtue is impossible for someone without the emotion whose control depends on having it … So it is that good cannot exist in this life without evil. (*Div. Inst.* 15.5-7)

His point is that the Stoics held the doctrine of the εὐπάθειαι due to an inconsistency in their ethical system: emotions are necessary, for without them man “can neither act nor react” (15.10), so the Stoics made up the εὐπάθειαι to stand in for the conventional emotions and thus compensate for their error. He is particularly critical about the lack
of an analog for pain, indicating that it is a flaw that the philosophers were “willing … to do away with a whole emotion which is actually very important” (15.14). He ends the section by concluding that the Stoics’ argument fails: “what they think should be removed is not removed but merely moderated, since only the names change and the emotions themselves abide … vices cannot be removed, and so they are controlled to a moderate degree” (15.16-17).

At first blush it seems that Lactantius could just be suffering from a shaky understanding of Stoic doctrine. He makes no reference to their idea that perceived states of affairs simply are what they are, indifferent to value judgments, nor does he bring up their belief that virtue is the only thing that can truly be termed good. Lactantius seems to be speaking from a point of view for which the emotions play a natural role; he describes how it is right to grieve when one’s nation or loved ones suffer (15.12), an idea the Stoics would likely have rejected. However, upon closer inspection, he may also have a valid point to make. Does it make sense to conceive of virtue as being able to exist without vice as its counterpart, as, Lactantius believes, the Stoics would like to do? That question lies beyond the scope of this paper, but for the sake of argument, suppose that it does not make sense to conceive of virtue this way; is there at least enough of the conventional emotions in the εὔπαθειαι to serve as a form of vice to which the Sage must act in response in order to act virtuously?

In order for this question to make sense, Lactantius would have to be understanding the εὔπαθειαι as the initial impressions to which the Sage assents; if we read him as referring to the emotion that comes when the choice of assent is made, it
would seem odd to think of a person acting in spite of his own free decision. Because, presumably, the Sage would always assent to a rational impression, she would never do otherwise than follow through on the impulse it provided. So it would in fact be impossible for the Sage to act in spite of the sort of emotion Lactantius is talking about. On this reading, the εὐπάθειαι would be indistinguishable from ordinary impressions, and identical to any impression whose impulse the Sage followed. And thus it seems that Lactantius might very well be right: given the assumption that vice is necessary for virtue, and the correlating assumption that there must be some vice internal to the person in order for him to act virtuously, the εὐπάθειαι become indistinguishable from other, baser emotions.

However, before declaring Lactantius victorious, there is one other consideration. According to Stoic doctrine, the εὐπάθειαι are the only emotions the Sage has. If, as Lactantius’ argument seems to necessitate, the εὐπάθειαι are impressions, then the Sage would only be capable of receiving impressions that were consistent with the εὐπάθειαι. He would necessarily assent to, and act on, every impression he received. This seems incoherent; the Sage’s virtue lies in his ability to tell which impressions merit assent. It appears that Lactantius’ understanding of the doctrine really is inaccurate. Although he presents an initially appealing case against the εὐπάθειαι, this flaw at least calls it into serious question; taking this along with the great assumption initially needed for it to work at all (that virtue cannot exist without vice), I must conclude that Lactantius’ argument that the emotions and the εὐπάθειαι are the same thing is not strong enough.
At this point it is worth mentioning that Lactantius is probably wrong anyway in his assumption that the Stoics viewed virtue and vice as opposite entities. It is likely better to understand them as viewing vice as the absence of virtue; this certainly seems to be more consistent with their views on moral development, discussed in the previous chapter, wherein human beings are more prone to vice when their moral capacities are still juvenile, and grow less and less vicious as they become more and more virtuous. The reader may recall from the previous chapter the case of a tortoise who finds himself lying on his back. The fact that the tortoise, though apparently not in pain, struggles to right himself is, according to Seneca, an example of how οἰκείωσις is not the same as seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. In discussing this scenario, I did not attempt to prove Seneca wrong, but I did posit that the tortoise might be suffering in a mental sense, from fear and anxiety, and that this form of suffering might still be the impetus for the tortoise to turn himself back over. I would like to resume the discussion of this scenario now.

If my hypothesis is correct, then the overturned tortoise feels an unpleasant emotion – presumably distress – and his desire to escape from that emotion forms the impetus for him to get himself back on his feet. Certainly the tortoise’s version of distress would be more rudimentary than its human counterpart, but the process of the tortoise making the decision to right himself otherwise seems quite similar: he perceives that he is on his back, judges (though not consciously in a human sense) that this is a bad state of affairs, and assents to that judgment, resulting in distress. As I mentioned above, Julia Annas points out in her *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* that
emotions constitute a motivation for the one experiencing them to change their world in some way (104). For the tortoise, the distress of being on his back – and therefore without the ability to move, leaving him unable to find food and vulnerable to predators – spurs him to change it. And of course, we can safely assume that distress, even for the tortoise, would be an unpleasant emotion.

The major question raised by this line of thinking is whether animals have anything close enough to human emotions to merit this sort of comparison, even if we allow that the animals’ emotions would be far simpler, the act of assent most likely involuntary. In the first place, would it be a problem if the assent is involuntary? I say no; the animal does not possess the rational faculties to make a voluntary assent, and Stoic ethics nowhere expect him to. If Nature has not granted a given animal the capacity to make and assent to judgments on his perceptions, then it is clearly not required. All that matters is that the animal actually experiences something similar enough to any of the human emotions to make the consequences of that experience relevant to our discussion. How he gets to that experience does not matter.

There is some evidence that the Stoics thought that animals go through a similar process to humans regarding emotions. They were certainly believed to have impulses; several sources make mention of this. From Diogenes: “But when in the case of animals impulse has been superadded, whereby they are enabled to go in quest of their proper aliment, for them, say the Stoics, Nature’s rule is to follow the direction of impulse” (DL VII.86). Additionally, Philo writes in his Allegories of the Laws, “The animal is superior to the non-animal in two respects, impression and impulse …
Impulse, the close relation of impression, is formed by the tonic power of the mind” (LS 53P). Nemesius even grants animals the power to assent to their impressions: “So too animals, as their gift, have assent and impulse” (LS 53O). So certainly, on the way to emotion animals have at least the first two steps: impression and impulse. They may even have the ability to assent to the impression, though that question is not important here. From the presence of these characteristics, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that consequent to them, animals also have some sort of subjective experience, one at least comparable to human emotions.

Earlier I proposed that for the Stoics, vice is best understood as the absence of virtue, rather than an entity unto itself. Naturally, questions of virtue do not apply to animals, because they lack the rational faculties necessary for the pursuit thereof. But if vice can be understood as the absence of virtue, maybe it would make sense to understand the tortoise’s distress as an awareness of the absence of the right state of affairs, more than some presence of a wrong one. His desire to turn back over is the result of distress caused by his sensing that a right situation is missing; he has the ability to perceive that there is a lack of moral rightness to him being on his back.

What does all this mean for the εὐπάθειαι? According to my hypothesis, the tortoise can naturally tell, by means of an unpleasant emotion, when he is separated from his proper condition, and it follows that in all likelihood, the same applies to human beings. If vice is the absence of virtue, then does it make sense to understand any emotion other than the εὐπάθειαι as the absence of at least one of them? Perhaps, but only in the sense that any of the conventional πάθη, each being an instance of
improper judgment, constitutes the absence of virtue in some way. What I find interesting is that following this line of thinking, the εὐπάθειαι, being characteristic of the perfectly virtuous Sage, are differentiated from the conventional πάθη by the fact that they are wholly without vice.

Diogenes, in the passage quoted above, describes the εὐπάθειαι as emotional states ("there are three emotional states which are good"), he is apparently using the term "emotional states" to refer to both the positive emotions and the undesirable emotional states he described on the preceding pages; that is, there is at least in some sense a qualitative similarity between the two. He goes on to state that "under the primary [εὐπάθειαι] are classed certain others subordinate to them … under joy, delight, mirth, cheerfulness" (DL 7.116). This is a laundry list of pleasurable emotions. Given that this is what the Sage feels, it is difficult to imagine the actual experience of moral perfection as being anything other than enjoyable, even if it is enjoyable in some different sort of way than conventional pleasure.

In her book Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind, Julia Annas devotes the fifth chapter to the emotions. In a footnote to the section on the εὐπάθειαι, she offhandedly mentions a very interesting idea: "Clearly in eupatheia the pathos element has its everyday neutral meaning, and in apatheia its negative connotations within Stoic theory. But this is easy enough to recognize; the Stoics may be deliberately making the point that only for the wise person is any form of pathos not a bad thing" (114 n. 27). Here she has hit on an idea that could be the solution to all of the problems raised in this chapter: did the Stoics perhaps find pleasure to be inappropriate for the average
person, but in some sense reserved it for the Sage, who, having already achieved
perfect wisdom, would not be led astray by it?

It is generally believed that no actual person who could be called a Stoic Sage
has ever lived, and therefore, anyone who would come into contact with Stoic
teachings is as yet morally imperfect. Perhaps χαρά, along with the other εὐπάθεια, is
simply beyond the scope of the layman’s understanding; realizing this, the writers of
Stoic doctrine advised students to do away with it altogether, rather than risk falling
into hedonism. So their renunciation of pleasure would be conditional, lasting only
until the person was equipped with sufficient virtue to enjoy it without losing himself
to it.

How does this suggestion work with the problems we have discussed? In the
first place, there is John Sellars’ argument. As the reader recalls, the issue lay with
Sellars’ conception of εὐλάβεια as caution against the Sage’s loss of his own virtue, a
possibility which we found problematic. It only made sense against the threat of death;
but death from the Sage’s own hand would only occur in the case that it was the way
for him to preserve his virtue, and death from an external source could not be certain
enough. The problem here seems to arise from Sellars’ need for the situation to which
the Sage reacts to be external and unchanging; in his discussion, one of the conditions
he lists for an emotion to be one of the εὐπάθεια is that “it will reflect an internal state
of affairs and so not be vulnerable to changes of fortune” (119). Yet if the
circumstances are unchanging, the idea of caution itself becomes illogical; there is no
need to use caution if the facts of a situation cannot change. It makes far more sense to
understand εὐλάβεια as simply correct caution regarding an outward set of circumstances – the Sage, who cannot fail to accurately and rationally assess a situation, determines that she ought to act in a reserved, cautious manner; this would presumably only come up in the face of, as Sellars said, a genuine evil, which would be the loss of the Sage’s virtue (or perhaps the virtue of another Sage) through death. If the Sage in question perceives the threat of death, εὐλάβεια is the correct response. This is differentiated from conventional fear by, first of all, the fact that the Sage will have good reason to feel threatened, and second of all, the Sage not letting her εὐλάβεια paralyze or get the better of her the way fear would an average person.

Similarly, βούλησις now fits a bit more comfortably; the Sage simply wishes for virtue to prevail in the world. We can still understand χαρά as the Sage taking delight in the recognition of his own virtue. By understanding the εὑπάθεια a little differently, the problems that Sellars runs into disappear.

What of the worry Lactantius raises? In his case, if vice is understood as an absence of virtue, then, as I supposed above, he has a fundamental flaw in his understanding of Stoic doctrine. Certainly there would still exist non-Sages who exhibited vice, and the Sage’s virtue would contrast with it, but it does not seem contradictory to conceive of a Stoic utopia in which all people were Sages, always behaving, reacting, and reasoning in perfect accordance with Nature’s will. Lactantius seems to understand the word “virtue” in a more Christian sense of acting righteously in spite of temptation. This definition does not apply to the Stoics, for whom virtue
consists in correctly adhering to Nature’s will, which one can do constantly without any obvious contradiction.

So in the end, this understanding of χαρά, and the other εὐπάθειαι, is really quite simple – it is the perfected emotional state of the Sage, whose counterpart, pleasure, laymen are shooed away from lest their imperfect understanding lead them astray. The only difference between this definition and that given to us from the start by the Stoics themselves is the further explanation that the layman ought to avoid the conventional, passionate emotions as much as possible in their daily lives. And this may be the reading most charitable to all viewpoints: the Stoics can usefully and coherently continue to condemn the emotion of pleasure in the vast majority of cases, but their critics, including myself, are correct in pointing out that the Sage feels pleasure – and there is no contradiction.
Conclusions.

At the center of any eudaimonist morality is a statement about universal human nature. It is related to another idea which many ancient Greek thinkers espoused: teleology, the view that everything which exists has a specific purpose or τέλος (telos), and it is toward the end of fulfilling this purpose that each thing is formed. For the Stoics, the source of this τέλος is Nature, and the purpose human beings are meant to fulfill is a life of virtue, the only one consistent with rationality, which is the definitive characteristic of humanity. We have seen that although Stoicism is typically thought of as an austere system of ethics, there is a place for pleasures – physical pleasures are an important part of understanding the Nature-given human body, and emotional pleasures may be experienced by the Sage once he is morally developed enough to enjoy them.

Because the Stoics prescribed their system of ethics based on human nature, it ought to hold true at any time in human history, including the present. As it happens, the Stoics were ahead of their time in several respects; they also believed that no two things, including living things, were exactly alike (Long, Hellenistic Philosophy 161 n. 2). This was borne out in modern science with the discovery of DNA – the biological means, present from birth, of telling living things definitively apart from one another.

What lessons from the pleasures of a Sage can we draw to inform and enrich the way we live today?

To begin with, there seem to be obvious parallels between the οἰκείωσις of nonrational animals and our modern understanding of instinctual impulses. Today we
know that animals, and humans, are driven by impulse to do certain things which contribute to their survival and could not have been learned through experience. For example, baby sea turtles, upon hatching from eggs laid on shore, immediately start moving towards the ocean. There is no parent turtle there to show them that this is what they ought to do, and having just begun life, there is no possible way for these hatchlings to have learned through experience what they ought to do; they simply begin doing it. This is exactly what Seneca describes in Letter CXXI when he talks about how even newborn animals know what is dangerous and what is useful to them (18). We also know that instinct can manifest later in life. For example, experiments have been done on certain types of birds wherein the young birds’ wings were bound until they reached the age at which normal birds of their species were able to fly. When the devices binding the birds’ wings were removed, the birds were able to fly without problem, despite not having been able to practice (Campbell & Reece 1129).

It is worthy of note that Stoic οἰκείωσις provides a better account for this sort of instinctual process than Epicurean pleasure-seeking; while one could argue that flying in the case of the birds seems like it would be fun and therefore pleasurable, in the sea turtles’ case, dragging themselves over the sand toward the ocean is a strenuous, laborious process, likely no more pleasurable than simply remaining in the sand where they were born – yet they do it all the same.

In the case of rational animals, that is, human beings, the Stoic doctrine of moral development is in fact fairly consistent with developmental psychology as it is understood today. In his book A New Stoicism, Lawrence Becker provides an account
of moral maturation: At the outset, babies pursue what is pleasurable and what satisfies their immediate needs, including the need to eat, sleep, and interact with their parents. As the babies recognize which things satisfy their needs, they grow attached to them and select those things repeatedly (as can be testified to by, for example, any parent whose young child wanted to watch the same movie over and over). Eventually, the child grows beyond the point where the same things still satisfy her, yet she retains an affinity toward them, simply because they were once pleasurable to her.

Meanwhile, the child’s needs and desires become more sophisticated; one thing she comes to seek is knowledge, both for its utility as well as for the satisfaction of her curiosity. In time, the child gains all the knowledge she needs to operate on a daily basis, but knowledge becomes something pursued for its own sake; additionally, her learning is to some degree motivated by societal condemnation of the ignorant and the untruthful. At this stage the child has a solid understanding of right and wrong, and with the knowledge she has amassed, she formulates a sort of plan of “appropriate action” – what she ought and ought not to do. Once this has been reached, the child develops an interest in being moral and virtuous for its own sake (Becker 56-58). Note that this account of moral maturation is not the exact path followed by all people, nor (echoing the Stoics) do all people reach the final stages – not everyone develops a love for knowledge or an interest in morality. Nevertheless, the account is consistent both with modern psychology and with the Stoic belief system.

Today we have a fairly good understanding of how the body works physically. While research goes ever on, we now understand the workings of pleasure and pain so
well that we are frequently able to tell when something that seems painful is actually beneficial to our self-preservation (as sanitizing a wound or resetting a broken bone) and when something that seems pleasurable is actually destructive to us (as when an edema sufferer feels thirsty). Additionally, research has shown what sort of diet and exercise best serve the majority of people in maintaining optimal health and fitness. For the most part, it seems that we have already reached an excellent understanding of what the Stoics might consider our οἰκείωσις as it relates to physical pleasure and pain. Still, every person is different, and familiarity with one’s own physical needs remains important to leading the happiest and most productive life a person can: for example, some people need more sleep than others, and some people can get away with eating less frequently than others. Attentiveness to, and maintenance of, one’s physical constitution is still a worthwhile pursuit.

What of χαρά, rational elation? In modern times, the study of the emotions would fall under the domain of psychology. Until recently, psychology was primarily focused on addressing problems; the idea of studying healthy mental states as a goal unto itself arguably began with the publication of Abraham Maslow’s 1943 paper “A Theory of Human Motivation,” wherein he introduces his now-famous hierarchy of needs. Later, Maslow concluded his 1954 book Motivation and Personality with a section called “Toward a Positive Psychology.” Today, “positive psychology” is the name of the branch of psychology that studies happiness. On Maslow’s hierarchy, which remains influential, the εὐπάθεια would probably align most comfortably with the fifth and highest stage, self-actualization. A person reaches this stage after all other
physiological and social needs are met; when a person is self-actualized, he has the psychological liberty to ruminate on abstract concepts such as morality and the nature of life. The person in this stage maximizes all his latent potential. As Maslow writes, “what a man can be, he must be” (91).

All this calls the Sage to mind; the most obvious parallel is the idea of a person maximizing his potential. The self-actualized person has become all that it is possible for him to be, and the Sage has done the same, perfecting her human capacities for rationality and virtue. There are some points to consider, however; although Maslow recognizes self-actualization as the ideal for all people, he notes that it would also be different for each person. For example, a talented painter may express his self-actualization by mastering and becoming prolific in his art, while a would-be mother may find herself self-actualized by having a healthy, happy child.

On the other hand, for the Stoics, I have discussed how becoming a Sage does not admit of degrees. From this one might think that a person could only be a Sage in one way, quite different from Maslow’s variety of self-actualizations. However, Lawrence Becker does not see it this way:

There is no developmental story we can tell, running from healthy to virtuosic agency, that eliminates the possibility of radical differences among people who equally approximate the ideal. Some may have world-historical ambitions, others not; some may be quickly moved to tears, others never; some may be theoretically inclined and contemplative, others relentlessly practical; some may be artists of the first rank, others merely dilettantes, ascetics and bon vivants, jocks and aesthetes, philosophers and lens grinders. (110)

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5 See chapter 1, page 24.
If he is correct, then it seems easy to conceive of the Sage as a self-actualized person: any given Sage is simply an individual who has mastered the art of living, and thus conducts herself virtuously in her own way. Although no Sages are known to have existed, the Stoics did not conceive of their ideal agent as inhuman. Diogenes explains that the Sage, for all his moral perfection, will still take part in political life, will marry and have children, will maintain his body, and will honor the gods, among other activities (DL 7.121-124). Personal endeavors such as family life and hobbies would be preferred indifferents, and there certainly seems to be room in this given schema for pursuing them.

So there appears to be common ground between our modern understanding of human happiness and the Stoics’ beliefs regarding the best human life. On a practical level, Stoic injunctions against excessive emotions also seem as though they would hold true in modern times. In his 1947 essay “Stoicism and Mental Health,” Bertrand Russell advanced the idea of “stoic self-command” as a worthy goal (Sellars 153). The Stoics were certainly right in their assessment that emotions, when born from an inaccurate understanding of the world, frequently lead to unnecessary and even wasteful acts. While today we might not be receptive to someone advocating for the outright denial of happiness at any point before moral perfection is reached, as the Stoics apparently do with χαρά, it seems that anyone would do well to take a step back and examine the situation in which he finds himself before allowing himself to become overly emotional about it, and certainly before allowing emotion to cloud his
reasoning. So in this, too, the Stoics seem to have made observations faithful to human nature.

One final point which may be interesting to consider is whether or not the place of human beings in the world has changed as our understanding of, and relationship to, the world we live in has become more sophisticated. When a person today considers the phrase “a life lived in accordance with nature,” rather than teleology, what likely comes to mind is some idea of conservation or environmental stewardship. This is certainly not what the Stoics were thinking of; even so, in the millennia that have passed since the Hellenistic period, humanity’s relationship to the planet on which we live has undergone fundamental changes. The development of our rationality, that same rationality which the Stoics believed sets us apart from all other known life, has brought us tremendous accomplishments, undeniably improving life greatly for countless people. Despite this, a great deal of professionals in scientific fields are concerned that our actions are destructive to the environment, meaning that our actions in turn will become destructive to ourselves. In modern-day philosophy programs, courses such as environmental ethics are becoming commonplace.

Can ancient Stoic ἐὐδαιμονία shed any light on this contemporary philosophical issue? What seems to be most clear is that our understanding of self-preservation has expanded to include the other forms of life upon which we rely. In the first world today, our agricultural system has progressed to the point where we directly control the lives of the plants and animals we eat to sustain ourselves; given this relationship, our self-preservation is directly connected to the preservation of

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6 See, for example, *Atmosphere, Climate, and Change* by Graedel and Crutzen (1997).
these other lives. This is, perhaps, an interesting idea when contrasted with the beliefs of the original Stoics, who typically favored an individual-centered, autonomous lifestyle as the ideal (Becker 58). Nevertheless, I suggest that it is compatible both with their advancement of self-preservation and with our more holistic understanding of that concept.

The correspondence between the Stoics’ theory of human nature and that held by modern society is impressive; the questions of pleasure and pain which Stoic ethics raises remain illuminating, not just as a portrait of ourselves, but also as a source of guidance in our actions today. Further research into these subjects would surely shed light on the issues we continue to face as human beings.
References

The following list includes all works mentioned in the text, as well as several recommended sources for further reading.


