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*Reasonable Impressions in Stoicism*¹

TAD BRENNAN

This article offers a contribution to the understanding of the Stoic notion of the *kathêkon*, by exploring the meaning of one of the terms in which its definition is formulated. The *kathêkon* is that which, once done, receives a *eulogos* defense or justification; my purpose is to investigate what is meant here by “*eulogos*”. The conclusion of the article is limited and negative. There are scattered bits of evidence that have led some critics to adopt one particular interpretation of “*eulogos*” in the definition of the *kathêkon*; I hope to show that this evidence does not give any support to what has seemed a tempting line of interpretation. I also offer some positive support for the opposing interpretation.

Here, then, is the question that I shall ask about the definition of the *kathêkon*: does the word “*eulogos*” in this context mean “reasonable” in the sense of conforming to everyday norms of sensible, prudent behavior – the sort of reasonableness that we all can and do attain to with fair regularity – or does it mean something more like “in accordance with right reason”, i.e. conforming to some higher standard, like the rationality of the Sage? Or, to put it a different way, are the *eulogoi* justifications that *kathêkonta* get, justifications that even non-Sages are capable of giving in a reliable and non-accidental way? There is no doubt that non-Sages *perform kathêkonta*, but then they might perform them without being able to *justify* them in the relevant sense, or without being able to do so reliably. Is an action a *kathêkon* so long as it can receive a justification that is reasonable by normal standards, or is some higher standard of justification required?

¹ This article began as a talk delivered to the 1994 meeting of the Southern Association for Ancient Philosophy in Cambridge. I am grateful to that meeting’s organizers, Malcolm Schofield and David Sedley, for their invitation and subsequent hospitality, and to Myles Burnyeat and David Sedley for helpful comments made on the spot. I am also grateful to the editor for his criticisms, which led to a fundamental revision of its written form. And as always, my deepest thanks go to Liz Karns.

1. *The Lax Interpretation, and Some Criticisms of It*

The answer most commonly given to this question, is that the word *eulogos* in the definition of the *kathêkon* does not refer to any elevated standard of right reason, but instead means “reasonable” in the normal, lax, every day sense. And this is sometimes supported by various fragments that seem to attest to the existence in Stoicism of something called a “reasonable impression”, where the theory of the reasonable impression clearly uses the word *eulogos* in the lax sense. As an instance of this view, we might consider Long and Sedley’s comments² on the definition of the *kathêkon*:

It picks out a particular action or activity (E2), the ethical grounding of which, in the case of humans, is ‘reason’ (E2, cf. B1), but not necessarily ‘right’ reason, the foundation of ‘right actions’ (M2). For this fallible sense of ‘reasonable’, cf. 40F.

For assistance in explicating the sense of “reasonable”, we are especially³ directed to LS 40F, which is an anecdote about Sphaerus, a Stoic of the third generation, who studied with Chrysippus under Cleanthes. It reads as follows:

Sphaerus went to Ptolemy Philopator at Alexandria. One day a conversation took place on whether the wise man would opine, and Sphaerus said that he would not. Wishing to refute him, the king ordered wax pomegranates to be placed before him. Sphaerus was deceived and the king cried out that he had given his assent to a false impression. Sphaerus gave him a shrewd answer, saying that his assent was not [to the impression] that they were pomegranates but [to the impression] that it was reasonable that they were pomegranates. He pointed out that the cognitive impression is different from the reasonable one.... The former, i.e. the cognitive impression, is incapable of deceiving, but the reasonable impression can turn out otherwise.

² Long & Sedley 1.365. I do not mean to single them out for special criticism; I take their view to be very common and well diffused.

³ We are also directed to DL 7.108 (LS 59E) in which we are told that *kathêkonta* are those things that “reason chooses” to do (*ho logos hairai poiein*). This phrase and its nominalization “the choosing logos” (*ho hairion logos*) appear at several places in early Stoicism (e.g. SVF 3.378, 384, 459), and later in Epictetus (Diss 1.29.28, 2.2.20, 3.24.40, 3.24.58, Ench. 32), and may have been derived by the Stoics from Platonic antecedents (see e.g. Republic 440b4, 604c7; Philebus 35d6, Parmenides 141d6, Crito 48c7, [Clitophon] 407d8). I cannot pursue the point here, but I am inclined to believe that these passages do require the sense of “right reason”, rather than either any ordinary sense of reasonableness, or the reason in virtue of which human beings are rational animals. If so, this would again constitute evidence against Long and Sedley’s interpretation of the *kathêkon*.

⁴ LS 40F, vol. I p.233-234

⁵ DL VII.177, Athenaeus 8.50

⁶ Vol. II. p. 246

Another version of this story, differing in only a few irrelevant particulars – the artefacts are birds instead of pomegranates, and we are told that Sphaerus stretched out his hand to them – appears in Athenaeus, and it is this version that provides us with the final sentence explaining how the cognitive and reasonable impressions differ. I have presented the story as it appears in Long and Sedley⁴, borrowing both their translation and their synthesis of the two versions, which supplements Diogenes with the final explanatory comment from Athenaeus (after the ellipsis).⁵

This anecdote is the best piece of evidence for the existence of something in Stoicism called a reasonable impression or *eulogos phantasia*. There is also one other passage that is of interest in this connection, which Long and Sedley quote in their notes to the second volume⁶. We are told⁷ of something called a “reasonable *axiōma*”⁸, *eulogon axiōma* – and here is what we learn:

A reasonable *axiōma* is one that has the majority of its impulses towards being true, as for instance “I shall be alive tomorrow”.

Given the close correlation between impressions and *axiōmata*, we may assume that reports of the reasonable *axiōma* may be used to enlighten us about the reasonable impression, and vice versa. This connection between the two pieces of evidence was in fact made some time ago; in the Suda’s entry for “*eulogon axiōma*”⁹ the lexicographer quotes the definition of the *eulogon axiōma*, and then illustrates it with the anecdote of the wax pomegranates. The lexicon does not give us any new information beyond the two pieces of evidence we have from Diogenes, but it does give us some support for our juxtaposition of them.

From these various sources, there seems to emerge a roughly coherent picture. The Stoics had a very complicated theory about impressions, which includes an elaborate typology, and one of the types of impression was the reasonable impression. These impressions concern matters that are more likely than not to be true, as for instance my being alive tomorrow, but

⁷ D.L. VII.76 εὐλογον δέ ἐστιν ἀξιωμα τὸ πλείονας ἀφορμὰς ἔχον εἰς τὸ ἀληθὲς εἶναι, οἷον “βιώσσομαι αὐριον.”

⁸ The Stoic *axiōma* is not a proposition; this point has been recognized by several authors (e.g. Michael Frede in *Die Stoische Logik*) and is most fully demonstrated in the first chapter of Susanne Bobzien’s book *Die Stoische Modallogik* (Würzburg, 1986; Epistemata: Reihe Philosophie XXXII). Nevertheless, I shall sometimes use the word “proposition” as a translation of convenience; the differences between *axiōmata* and propositions are fundamental and important, but not relevant to the present investigation.

⁹ Suda Epsilon 3569 1

which may nevertheless turn out to be false. In the typology of impressions, the reasonable seems to be coordinate with the kataleptic, neither subordinated to the other, but both distinct from those impressions assent to which constitutes opinion or *doxa*. And so the availability of reasonable impressions provides another resource for the Stoic who wishes above all to avoid assent to falsehood, and yet sometimes must take positions about matters, as for instance his continued future existence, about which there can be no *katalepsis*.

It should be clear how the theory of the reasonable impression constitutes support for the lax interpretation of “reasonable” in the definition of the *kathêkon*. For the sense in which it was reasonable for Sphaerus to suppose that what was before him were pomegranates, or in which it is reasonable for me to suppose that I shall be alive tomorrow, is presumably the ordinary, everyday sense; nothing fancy or demanding. Indeed it must be completely unlike the Sage’s infallible reason, since it is explicitly fallible. And a theory of reasonable impressions and *axiômata* would surely fit directly into a theory of reasonable justification, since the justification would presumably in some way be constituted by or express a series of impressions and their correlative *axiômata*. So the reasonableness of the justification would stem directly from the reasonableness of the impression – and thus the criterion of the *kathêkon* would be our ordinary, permissive standard of reasonability.

In the next few pages I shall attempt to demonstrate the incoherence of that picture, by looking more closely at the evidence for it; but it seems useful from the outset to have both the evidence itself, and at least a tentative proposal about its import, set before us. Another point of convenience – I shall cut the story about Sphaerus into two parts, between the words in which he tells us what he assented to, and the words, starting with “He pointed out”, in which he explains the principle underlying his assent; and I shall refer to the earlier part as the anecdote proper, and to the later part as the appendix to the anecdote.

The first incoherence in this picture concerns the form of the reasonable *axiôma*. If we assume, as is natural, that a reasonable impression has a reasonable *axiôma* correlated to it, then there is a clear inconsistency between the definition of the reasonable *axiôma*, and the story of Sphaerus. For the example we are given with the definition, namely “I shall be alive tomorrow”, makes no internal reference to its own reasonableness. If it is a reasonable proposition, it is not so because the word “eulogon” appears in it. This is in direct conflict with what Sphaerus says; for he denies that he assented to an impression whose propositional content was “these are pomegranates”, and claims to have assented to something that does make an

internal, explicit reference to its own reasonableness, namely “it is reasonable that these are pomegranates”. Does a reasonable *axiōma* or impression have the form “it is reasonable that p”, or simply the form “p”, where its reasonability is a non-formal matter? The evidence of the anecdote pulls apart from the evidence of the definition.

Secondly, there is a conflict between the anecdote proper and the appendix to the anecdote. In that appendix, we are told that a reasonable impression can “come out otherwise” (*allōs apobainein*). I take it that the sense in which a reasonable *axiōma* like “I shall be alive tomorrow” can *allōs apobainein* is that it may turn out tomorrow that I am not alive. That is, what it means for an *axiōma*, and derivatively for an impression, to come out or turn out otherwise, is for the corresponding state of affairs not to obtain, for it to be false, – there may be some more to it, but it involves at least that much. Evidence for this interpretation of *allōs apobainein* comes also from the contrast made with the kataleptic impression, which is said to be “*adiapseustos*”. Whether we give this the passive sense of “unfalsifiable” or the active sense “incapable of deceiving”, its opposite will involve falsehood.

But this sits very uncomfortably with the anecdote proper. There, the dialectical situation seems to be as follows: Sphaerus and the king have been discussing Stoic philosophy, and the king attempts a practical refutation of Sphaerus. Sphaerus offers an interpretation of his actions according to which he has not been refuted, and wins that round of the debate. The topic, as often in such anecdotes, is the Sage’s invulnerability to opinion, as this is guaranteed by the existence of kataleptic impressions; the challenge is a variation on the standard Academic argument¹⁰ from *aparallaxia* or indiscernibility. Instead of offering in sequence two eggs, or snakes, or twins, Ptolemy offers some artefacts intended to be indiscernible from genuine fruit. A kataleptic impression should reveal that they are not fruit, and prevent assent to their being fruit; when Sphaerus reaches for the wax pomegranates, he seems to have conceded that this impression arising from what is not fruit is indiscernible from an impression arising from fruit. Thus the need for his clever face-saving explanation.

But there are two grave problems here. First of all, the reasonable impression is contrasted with the kataleptic, so presumably in claiming to have assented to a reasonable one, Sphaerus is conceding that he did not assent to a kataleptic one. If this is so, then he has opined (since any assent to the non-kataleptic is opinion), and so has been refuted despite his clever retort. But it is actually worse than that, for the reasonable impression, as we have

¹⁰ See, e.g., AM VII.409-410

just learned, is one that can come out otherwise, where this means to be false. So now, the dialectic seems to run this way: the king claims that Sphaerus has assented to a false impression, and Sphaerus defends himself by saying that he has assented to a reasonable impression. Oh really, enquires the king? what sort of thing are they? Well, says Sphaerus, they are impressions that, unlike kataleptic ones, can be false – in fact this one was. But that, says the king, is exactly what I claimed: you assented to a false impression. Off with his head.

If Sphaerus is to escape the charge of opining, then he must not be assenting to something that comes out false. And reasonable impressions and *axiômata* “come out otherwise” by being false; so I assume he must not have been assenting to a reasonable impression. Furthermore, reasonable *axiômata* make no internal reference to their own reasonableness, where as what Sphaerus assents to, *hoti eulogon esti tautas rhoas einai*, clearly does. So, again, I assume that he was not assenting to a reasonable impression.

In fact, if Sphaerus wants to escape the charge of opining, then he must show, not merely that he assented to something true, but that he assented to something kataleptic; for assent to the non-kataleptic constitutes opinion, even if it is true. But the appendix says that the kataleptic and the reasonable are different; so I must assume, for this third reason, that Sphaerus was not assenting to a reasonable impression.

There is only one way to make the evidence cohere. We must suppose, contrary to the normal reading of the appendix, that when Sphaerus says that the kataleptic differs from the reasonable, he is claiming to have assented to the kataleptic, and denying that he assented to the reasonable. By saying that the impression to which he assented – “*hoti eulogon esti rhoas autas einai*” – is kataleptic, we leave him unrefuted and so make sense of the anecdote. By saying that the reasonable impression is the one to which he did not assent – “*hoti rhoai eisin*” – we give it the form and fallibility indicated by the definition of the reasonable *axiôma*.

This anecdote, then, does not show us a context in which we ought to assent to reasonable impressions.¹¹ Nor does it show us a way of making use of reasonable impressions in a context in which knowledge is not to be had. Just to the contrary, we must never assent to reasonable impressions.¹²

¹¹ Nor does it give unequivocal evidence of there being such things, since the phrase so translated actually uses a neuter article – *tou eulogou* – rather than the feminine *tês eulogou*.

¹² We must never assent to them qua reasonable; but the same impression may be both reasonable and kataleptic. It may have the majority of its impulses towards being true, by having all of its impulses towards being true (not that this defines the kataleptic). Thus the statement that the reasonable “can come out otherwise” is not true of every reasonable impression.

What we may assent to, however, are certain kataleptic impressions that such and such is reasonable. And we may assent to them exactly because they are impressions to which a Sage's assent would constitute knowledge.

These pieces of evidence thus give us reason to question one influential view of kataleptic impressions, according to which they must be strictly perceptual.¹³ On that view, an impression "that it is reasonable that etc." could never be a kataleptic impression, because it is non-perceptual. If that view were right, then the pieces of evidence we have been considering could never cohere; if they do, and reflect Stoic doctrine, then it is not.

But this is not the only evidence that the Stoics are committed to the existence of non-perceptual kataleptic impressions.¹⁴ The Sage will never assent to what is non-kataleptic. But the Sage assents to any number of non-perceptual impressions. Some of these are logical, e.g. the impression that conjunctions are false if either of their conjuncts are false. Others have a non-logical but still general character, e.g. the impression that virtue benefits.

Still others involve the ascription, to perceptible particulars, of non-perceptible properties such as being in accordance with nature, being a preferred indifferent, being *oikeion*, and the like. Assent to such impressions will constitute the Sage's selection of, e.g., some food in front of him; his eclectic impulse simply is the belief (or rather knowledge) that this food is a preferred indifferent of such a sort that he should pursue or reach for it. In contrast to other analyses, the Stoics do not hold that action requires two distinct mental acts, one belief and one desire. Instead, a single impulse synthesizes the two, by picking out some particular, perhaps perceptually identified object or action, and predicating of it some general and evaluative character. But even when the object, e.g. this food, is perceptually represented in the impression, the evaluative character will always be non-perceptual.

To suppose that,¹⁵ while the Sage's factual or non-hormetic impressions are all kataleptic, his practical and impulsive ones are not, is to make non-

¹³ See, for instance, Michael Frede's article "Stoics and Sceptics on Clear and Distinct Impressions", p. 159 of *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, and Gisela Striker's article "Sceptical Strategies", p. 71 of *Doubt and Dogmatism*.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Charles Brittain for discussions that helped to solidify my dissatisfaction with the standard view.

¹⁵ cf. Inwood p. 277 fn.106: "As Striker has seen ('Sceptical Strategies', pp. 71-72), no hormetic presentation can be cataleptic." I am not sure whether Striker commits herself to the stance that Inwood attributes to her, but with Inwood's stance at least I am in complete disagreement: all of the Sage's impulses – both selections and *eupatheiai* – are assents to kataleptic and hormetic impressions.

sense of the quarrel with skepticism. The argument from *apraxia* turns on practical impressions; without *katalepsis* there can be no impulse. The view that *katalepsis* is strictly perceptual requires the Stoics to concede that the very assents that constitute the Sage's impulses are given to non-*kataleptic* impressions after all. Such a risible retreat would not have gone unremarked.

Thus we must already countenance *kataleptic* impressions of the form "it is according to nature that..." and the like. The impression "that it is reasonable that..." will be like these in its incorporation of non-perceptual character.

So we must distinguish the sense in which the reasonable is or is not fallible. From the anecdote and definition, it seems that if P is the propositional content of a reasonable impression, then in some cases P can be false, without this impugning the impression's right to be judged reasonable. However, this very judgement is in certain cases an act of *katalepsis*; in these cases, the impression that P is reasonable – which is then a *kataleptic* impression, not¹⁶ a reasonable one – must be of such a sort that the Sage can grant his assent to it, without fear of deception. There is a definite matter of fact about whether P is reasonable, and if it turns out that P is not after all reasonable then the impression that it was cannot have been true, much less *kataleptic*.

We began by asking which standard of reasonableness is at work in the *kathêkon* – the everyday and forensic sense, or something like perfected rationality? Whose reason – the Sage's or the non-Sage's – does the reasonable accord with; whose judgements that something is reasonable are constitutive of its actually being so? The normal reading of the anecdote seems to support the answer that it must be the non-Sage's reason, i.e. the ordinary or lax sense. For the reasonable is fallible, whereas the Sage is infallible.

It should now be clear where this argument equivocates: the fact that the reasonable impression that P may be false but still reasonable does not mean that impressions about what is reasonable are in any way flexible or forgiving. An impression about what is reasonable – the impression that it is reasonable that P – is not itself a reasonable impression. If it is false, it cannot be excused as reasonable despite its falsehood; if it is false, it fails utterly. Thus judgements about what is reasonable are no different from other judgements; it is possible to be wrong about them, and, if one is a Sage, it is possible to be infallibly right about them.

¹⁶ Or at least: not merely a reasonable impression, and not deserving of assent qua reasonable impression. But I do not prejudge the question whether reasonability operators, so to speak, may be iterated.

II. *The Strict Interpretation and Some Support for It*

I have tried to show that the evidence found in Diogenes Laertius does not force us to conclude that the standard of reasonableness is the ordinary standard of non-Sages rather than the right reason of the Sage. For positive help in interpreting the definition of the *kathêkon*, it seems to me more useful to turn to other passages in which *eulogon* or cognates are used.

For instance, there are the definitions of the *eupatheiai*, those curious quasi-emotions possessed only by the wise. Without investigating the theory of the *eupatheiai* in depth, it is clear that the term “reasonable” which occurs in each of their definitions (*boulêsis* being *eulogos orexis*, *eulabeia* being *eulogos ekklisis*, and *khara* being *eulogos eparsis*) can only have the very stringent and demanding sense, for only Sages can have the *eupatheiai*. In our ordinary usage, we suppose that it is perfectly reasonable to feel elated when one recovers from illness, or becomes deliciously wealthy, or receives the acclaim of one’s peers. At the recovery of an ailing relation, we might suppose it unreasonable to feel anything but elation. But of course anyone who felt elated because their child or parent had been saved from death would not be experiencing *khara*, the calm joy that only Sages feel, and so this person’s elation would not be reasonable in the sense specified in the definition¹⁷.

So too, when Chrysippus¹⁸ listed *eulogistia* among the virtues, he must

¹⁷ The editor has kindly alerted me to the fact that some critics have claimed that *eupatheiai* can have indifferents as their objects. That this cannot be right may be seen by inspecting the definitions of *eupatheiai* in Andronicus (SVF 3.432), some of which make explicit reference to genuine goods and evils (goods, benefit, virtuous actions, and so on), and none of which can be construed to refer to indifferents. It is also refuted by Cicero’s testimony (TD. 4.12-13) that the *eupatheia* of *boulêsis* is directed towards those things that appear good (*ea quae bona videntur*) to a Sage. The Sage never opines; only genuine goods will appear good to him, and so only genuine goods can be the object of *boulêsis*. Finally, the error of supposing that *eupatheiai* can be directed towards indifferents makes nonsense of the lack of a fourth *eupatheia*, where on the correct account it is a trivial corollary of the definitions. There can be no eupathic analogue of pain, because it would have to be a Sage’s knowledge that a genuine evil was present. But the only genuine evil is vice, which can never be present to a Sage, exactly because he is a Sage. For a fuller version of these arguments, see my chapter on the Old Stoic Theory of Emotions in the volume *Hellenistic Theories of the Emotions*, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, ed. forthcoming. But in fact for present purposes we may set aside the question of the objects of *eupatheiai*; all that I need here is the fact that only Sages can have them. That is sufficient to show that the ordinary sense of *eulogon* is not strong enough to satisfy the sense it bears in the definitions of the *eupatheiai*.

¹⁸ SVF 3.264, 268

have had the strict sense of reasonability in mind. For as a virtue – a species of *phronesis*, in this case – it is possessed by all and only Sages. But common-or-garden variety reasonableness is not possessed only by Sages.

Related to this are the verb *eulogistein*, which appears in a definition¹⁹ of the *telos* attributed to Diogenes of Babylon, and the adjective *eulogistos* which Antipater of Tarsus²⁰ employed in describing the good and happiness. These definitions have sometimes been taken to indicate a relaxation of the rigors of the early Stoa. This view presumably supposes that *eulogistein* must refer to the lax sense of reasonableness, and so to a standard we are all capable of attaining without too much effort, and that many of us do attain, and so to a less stringent standard than that of Diogenes' predecessors. But this cannot be right. For there is no evidence anywhere that Diogenes departed from the view that attaining this end was equivalent to being happy, and that being happy was equivalent to being wise. And there is no evidence that Diogenes thought that the death of Chrysippus had been followed by a proliferation of Stoic wise men; rather, he too thought that the Sage was not to be found among his contemporaries. And so, he too must have believed that none of his contemporaries was attaining their end. And so, he must have meant by *eulogistein* something much more stringent than the normal sense. We cannot simply take for granted that *eulogistein* means common-or-garden reasonability, and then argue that Diogenes' end is easily obtained; rather, from the fact that Diogenes' end was no more easily attained than was Sagehood, we must conclude that *eulogistein* entails exactly that; displaying the right reason of the Sage.

It is perhaps also worth considering the phrase "*eu legein*" as it appears in the definition of rhetoric. Whether one opts for the strict or lax interpretation, it is natural to suppose that the definition of the *kathêkon* and the definition of rhetoric may be used to understand one another. The terms *apologismos* and *apologia*²¹ that feature in the definition of the *kathêkon* are also used of speeches made by defendants or officials accounting for their conduct, and are familiar in rhetorical contexts. So it seems quite possible that the Stoics crafted their definition²² of rhetoric – the art of speaking well – at least in part with a view to connecting it to the definition of the

¹⁹ SVF 3. Diogenes 44-46 p.219

²⁰ SVF 3. Antipater 59 p. 253 But since Plutarch is a hostile witness, there must be uncertainty about precise formulations, and in particular about whether what was on offer were definitions of the good and happiness, or comments about the substance (*ousia*) of good and happiness, or comments even further from what Plutarch reports.

²¹ *Apologia* is recorded as a variant for *apologismos* in Stobaeus' definition of the *kathêkon*, SVF 1.230

²² SVF 3.288-293

kathêkon; by speaking well (*eu legein*), rhetoric will be able to produce the kinds of reasonable (*eulogos*) accounts that *kathêkonta* have.

This is consistent with the lax interpretation, in which the standard of reasonability embedded in the definition of the *kathêkon* is like the standard employed in legal assessments of what it is reasonable to do. It may have been just this forensic connection that led Cicero²³ to translate “*eulogon*” in the definition of the *kathêkon* by “*probabilis*”.

But this seems to ignore the fact²⁴ that rhetoric, too, is a virtue, and only the wise are rhetoricians. Unless one has the rationality of the Sage, one cannot have the art of speaking well. If, then, we maintain the connection between *eu legein* and *eulogon* in the respective definitions, we ought to conclude that the standard of reasonableness for the *kathêkon* is the rationality of the Sage.

Add to this a general consideration, that the Stoics were from first to last Socratics. In several works, Socrates makes it clear that he envisions a kind of rhetoric different from the recognized profession, one which will make its hearers more virtuous, and so requires a kind of rhetor who is himself virtuous. It will, in fact, bear very little resemblance to what most Greek speakers mean by *rhêtorikê tekhnê*. That the Stoics followed Socrates in this respect is suggested by Cicero’s reaction²⁵ to their treatises on rhetoric, when he says that they are just the thing for people who want to remain silent; clearly he did not find the expected chapters on epanorthosis and hypallage. Such verbal tricks do not belong to the sort of rhetoric that Socrates thought deserved the name; but²⁶ he was willing to be called a rhetor if by this it was meant that he spoke the truth. It is perhaps not irrelevant that the dialogue in which he makes this statement was called his “Apology”, and that Socrates was frequently considered to be as promising a candidate for Sagehood as the recent past could provide. “Speaking well” (*eu legein*) does not mean fancy tricks; it involves telling the truth about the gods, about ethics, and about one’s own conduct, in a philosophically coherent way unmarred by false belief. The wise man alone is capable of this, since he alone knows about god and virtue, and never opines. Speaking well in this way, the Sage will produce justifications of his own actions, like the apology that Socrates produced, which will be “reasonable” by the highest standards that there are. I conclude that the definition of rhetoric gives us further evidence that the standard of reasonableness in the *kathêkon* is the rationality of the Sage.

²³ de Fin. 3.58

²⁴ SVF 3.291, 294

²⁵ de Fin. 4.7

²⁶ Ap. 17b

Now considerations of this sort – drawn from verbal comparisons, and based on the assumption that like words carry like significations – will never fully satisfy a philosophic mind. I believe that they are suggestive, but no more. Let me, then, supplement them with another argument from the impossibility of conflict between *kathêkonta*.

In one and the same circumstance, can two possible but mutually exclusive courses of action ever both be reasonable in the relevant sense, so that to perform either of them would be to perform a *kathêkon*? Certainly in the relaxed sense sanctioned by ordinary usage and by legal doctrine, several divergent courses of action may be reasonable. There might be a range of responses to a situation that were so unreasonable as to be culpable, or so unreasonable as to call into question the competence of the agent. But then there would also be a range of other responses that, while varying in other respects, would still be reasonable in the ordinary sense. It might be that option 1 was the most reasonable, and option 3 was completely unreasonable, but that option 2 was still fully reasonable, even if to a lesser degree than 1. There might even be cases in which several options were all equally reasonable. Cases like this, and judgements like these, seem to be sanctioned by ordinary usage and ordinary intuitions about what is reasonable. If this is the sense of “reasonable” that occurs in the definition of the *kathêkon*, then it should be possible for there to be multiple *kathêkonta* in the same situation, even if the performance of some would preclude the performance of others.

However, a fragment of Chrysippus²⁷ describes the *prokoptôn ep’akron*, the non-Sage on the verge of Sage-hood. Chrysippus does not say of him merely that all of his actions are *kathêkonta*, which would be consistent with his having chosen, in each situation, from a short list of competing options each of which was a *kathêkon*. Rather, Chrysippus says the stronger thing, that he performs all of the *kathêkonta*, *hapanta ta kathêkonta*. And if this were not sufficient to clinch the interpretation, the fragment goes on to say that having performed just those ones, he does not leave any unperformed, *ouden paraleipei*. Now this non-Sage certainly leaves lots of other courses of action unperformed. But he does not leave any *kathêkonta* unperformed. So, I take it, no other course of action was a *kathêkon*. There are no competing duties in Stoicism. If we grant this conclusion, then I take it that we must also grant that the reasonableness of the *kathêkon* is vastly more stringent than our ordinary reasonableness. For surely our ordinary standards of reasonableness are not so strict as to preclude, in every case, all but one option. So the word “*eulogon*” in the definition does not mean reasonable in our everyday sense.

²⁷ SVF III.510

III. Some Consequences of the Strict Interpretation

I have argued that *eulogon* in the definition of the *kathêkon* means something like “in accordance with right reason”, where the standard for right reason is set by the rationality of the Sage. It is a very strong standard indeed. It is such a strong standard, that very little could be done towards attaining it by the mere memorization of lists of action-types, or reflection about what it might seem reasonable (in the lax sense) to do in particular cases. It is not in any sense a weaker or less rigid standard than that to which the Sage’s own actions conform; indeed, whoever performs a *kathêkon* is, at that moment, doing exactly what a Sage would have done in a qualitatively identical situation (although of course with a very different psychic state). If, despite the strength of this standard, it is still the case that many *kathêkonta* are performed, and by many non-Sages, this should not surprise us, or cause us to reconsider the view. The Sage follows nature, without exception or deviation; the rest of us deviate foolishly, and follow, when we do, without stability or understanding. But it is still nature from which we are deviating, or nature that we are following; and it cannot be a source of great surprise that we on occasion do what it is natural to do.

Our conclusion about the meaning of “*eulogos*” was supported by considerations about the possibility of conflict between *kathêkonta*. The impossibility of such conflict entails that there can never be conflicting duties in Stoicism; any apparent conflict must be illusory. And this should have a direct effect on how we understand the typical lists²⁸ and enumerations of *kathêkonta*. Although they present us with lists of action-types, clearly we must understand them as claims about instances of these types, not about the types themselves. For types are not the sorts of things that could ever receive the justifications mentioned in the definition of the *kathêkon*. Those justifications are applied to things that have been done (*prakhthenta*), and this must mean token actions. One could never say about the type of honoring one’s parents, that it was a thing that had been done.

But then there is the further question, whether the claim being made is that every instance of honoring one’s parents is a *kathêkon*, or simply that some of them are. It might seem as though this is the distinction between those action-types that are said to be “conditional” (*peristatika*) and those that are said to be “unconditional” (*aneu peristaseôs*). But whatever this distinction is, it is not a distinction between action-types, all of whose tokens are *kathêkonta*, and action-types only some of whose tokens are *kathêkonta*, or are *kathêkonta* only in special circumstances. For as exam-

²⁸ e.g. DL 7.180-109

ples of these categories we are given types whose instances must conflict in particular circumstances – e.g., taking care of one’s health and maiming oneself. Now suppose some circumstance, doubtless unusual, in which it is *kathêkon* for me to maim myself in some respect. It is not possible for me simultaneously to take care of my health in that respect; there is a physical conflict between the performance of these two actions. But that shows that taking care of my health on that occasion cannot be *kathêkon*, for there can never be a conflict of that type between *kathêkonta*. If it is nevertheless true that taking care of my health is a *kathêkon* “unconditionally”, then this must mean something other than that it is *kathêkon* in every circumstance, or without exception.

In fact, we are separately told²⁹ what action-type is always *kathêkon*, in every circumstance and without exception. It is the action-type – if we may so call it – of living according to virtue. There is no more substantive, specific description that can be given; anything that actually specified actions in familiar, observable or substantive terms – returning deposits, standing one’s ground in battle, and so on – will sometimes be *kathêkon*, and sometimes not *kathêkon*.

And so I take it that all of the type-descriptions are mentioned as being merely illustrative, as giving us an idea of what it is for something to be *kathêkon*. And the difference between conditional and unconditional ones, I suspect, has to do with the way that they illustrate what it is to be a *kathêkon*. In the first case, the mere mention of the action-type helps us to get an idea of what a *kathêkon* is, whereas in the second case we get an idea only

²⁹ DL 7.109. But I should note that there is another way of interpreting the claim that only one action-type is always *kathêkon*. This would be to take the “always” not as ranging over instances, but literally over times. So, it might be the case that honoring one’s parents is always a *kathêkon* in the sense that every instance of it is a *kathêkon*, but it would not always be *kathêkon* in the sense that it is not *kathêkon* at every time. On those occasions when it is a relevant possibility, it is *kathêkon*, and there are no occasions on which it is a relevant possibility but is not then *kathêkon*. Still, it would not always be a relevant possibility. Or to put it differently, it might be that it is incumbent upon me to honor my parents when the occasion arises, and on those occasions, there is no other conflicting action that can trump my duty to honor my parents – it is *kathêkon* without exception. But that would not mean that it is incumbent upon me, twenty four hours a day, to be continually honoring my parents; there are other things that I ought to do at other times, when I am not busy honoring my parents, and thus my performance of those other actions does not cause any conflict with my honoring my parents. The only thing that it is incumbent upon me to do continually, twenty four hours a day (or at least during waking hours) is to live virtuously; the “always” would then be literally temporal. If that is right, then there might be some substantive action-types that are *kathêkon* without exception. But the terminology of “without circumstance” still would not indicate that distinction, for the reasons given above.

after we have been told some longer story (e.g. the tale of Mucius Scaevola) about the circumstances in which an instance of injuring oneself might be *kathêkon*. It is a long road from gaining a sense of the sorts of things that tend to be *kathêkon*, to being able to see in each circumstance the unique activity that is in fact *kathêkon*. Ordinary considerations of what is reasonable in the ordinary sense take us only a short distance in this direction; and this is a further reason for thinking that *eulogos* in the definition does not mean “reasonable”.

Another argument may lead us to the same conclusion. It is clear that there is a connection in two steps between three things: what is preferred or according to nature, what is *kathêkon*, and what is katorthotic. The Sage performs *katorthômata* by performing *kathêkonta* in his sagacious way, and these will by and large be directed at what is preferred or according to nature. But it is also clear that the connection between the extremes is defeasible; some of the Sage’s *katorthômata* are not directed at what is preferred, and may even be directed at what is dispreferred, e.g. poverty or death. On which side of the middle term does the weak link occur, between the *katorthôma* and the *kathêkon*, or between the *kathêkon* and the preferred?

One view severs the katorthotic from the *kathêkon*, while binding the *kathêkon* tightly to the preferred or natural; many actions in a given situation may be *kathêkonta*, so long as they are directed at the preferred or natural, but only one will be the Sage’s *katorthôma*. So being natural will be sufficient for being *kathêkon*, but being a *kathêkon* action will not be sufficient for being the katorthotic action. And this fits with the view that what makes *kathêkonta* reasonable are reflections of a relatively undemanding, rule-of-thumb sort.

I have been arguing, however, that the break occurs on the other side; the fact that an action is *kathêkon* is sufficient to make it a *katorthôma* (when sagaciously performed), since there is only one *kathêkon* action in any circumstance, namely the one that the Sage would perform. But this means that the right relation to the natural, the preferred and their like cannot be sufficient to make an action a *kathêkon*. And so, many actions that are reasonable by the every day standard, will not be reasonable by the standard of the *kathêkon*. As an instance of this, we may consider the cases in which suicide is *kathêkon*. It is then called a “reasonable departure” – *eulogos exagôgê*. I do not deny that considerations of preferred indifferents are central to the Sage’s decision to kill himself – they are central to all virtuous action, as Diogenes of Babylon makes explicit. But there is no evidence that death itself becomes a preferred indifferent or according to nature on those occasions when it is reasonable. Rather, death remains dispreferred and

contrary to nature, even though pursuing it in this case is in accordance with reason.

This affects how we reconstruct the Sage's last ruminations. He does not think "It is reasonable to try to preserve one's life and health, and staying alive and preserving one's health are both *kathêkonta*, but in this circumstance another action, the *katorthôma*, takes precedence over those *kathêkonta*, reasonable as they may be." He thinks, rather, "Life is according to nature, and death is contrary to it; and health is a preferred indifferent and injury a dispreferred one. Nevertheless, the only reasonable thing to do in this situation, and the only *kathêkon* thing to do, is to kill myself." And thus he sets about performing his final *katorthôma*. Again, the standard of the reasonable is the Sage's standard, nothing less.

If this conclusion is right, it also gives us further insight into Arcesilaus' use of the "reasonable", i.e. *eulogon*, as a practical criterion (AM VII.158). Arcesilaus argued that those who suspended judgement about everything could still be happy, so long as they regulated their actions by the standard of the reasonable. For happiness comes through wisdom, and wisdom lies in *katorthômata*, and a *katorthôma* is that which, once done, gets a reasonable justification; so one may be happy merely by attending to what is reasonable.

It has been clear for some time, I take it, that Arcesilaus is toying with doctrines from Stoic ethics in his typically witty and brilliant way. It may be less clear, however, where Arcesilaus is being faithful to Stoic sources, and where he is perverting them. One perversion is obvious; the standard of "reasonable justification" may be sufficient for a *kathêkon*, but it is certainly not sufficient for a *katorthôma*. The soul of someone performing a *katorthôma* has certain features which the soul of someone performing a mere *kathêkon*³⁰ lacks – stability, knowledge, perfect rationality, and so on – and it is these very features that connect the first, but not the second, to the Stoic notion of wisdom and happiness. Arcesilaus has not even reproduced the letter, much less the spirit, of the original theory; no Stoic, then, need feel pinched by this parody. But the second liberty which Arcesilaus takes is concealed by verbal conformity; he has used the same word that appeared in the definition of the *kathêkon*, but in a very different sense. In advocating adherence to the *eulogon*, Arcesilaus must mean by "reasonable" something other than what the Stoics meant. He will most likely have meant something like the sort of unmethodical, undogmatic adherence to the customs of ordinary life that Sextus Empiricus later espoused – what the man in the

³⁰ A *kathêkon* considered merely as such, that is; I do not deny that all *katorthômata* are also *kathêkonta* generically.

street, or its ancient equivalent “*ho bios*”, will judge to be reasonable. This is not altogether clear. But it is clear that he will not have been referring to a standard of rationality embodied in the ideal Sage. For, among other things, Arcesilaus is urging a practice that is consistent with universal suspension, even about, e.g., the principles of ethics and the providence of god, and the Sage does not suspend judgement on these matters. So Arcesilaus has switched from using *eulogon* in the strict sense in which it appears in the definition, to using it in the permissive sense of “reasonable”; and for this reason, too, no Stoic should feel driven by his arguments to accept an unacceptable conclusion. For if we re-instate the rigorous notion, i.e. of right rationality, then the Stoic may agree that attending to what is *eulogon* is sufficient for happiness; only a Sage attends to what, in this sense, is *eulogon*, and only a Sage is happy.

Similar revisions would have to be made in other areas, if it could be shown that the strict interpretation of *eulogon* was undeniably the right one. Here I can only suggest some of those revisions, and suggest why I am inclined towards the strict interpretation. The main point of this article has been to undermine the evidential value of a few fragments that have been used to support the opposed view; even should that attempt succeed, much of a positive nature remains to do.

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