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Rules and Reasoning in Stoic Ethics

Stoic ethics is often criticized for its impractical rigidity and pointless idealism. Its most prominent feature seems to be its proneness to paradoxical theses, such as claims that all moral errors are equal, that only the wise man is free, and that all human passions should be eliminated rather than moderated. Stoic ethics demands that human beings achieve perfect virtue and act accordingly; the alternative is the complete unhappiness from which all of us suffer. And yet at first sight it appears to offer very little in the way of realistic hope or guidance for people who wish to be happy. It seems to be an abstract and Procrustean dogmatism, which deduces from general principles conclusions which have little bearing on the kind of striving and thinking which normally characterizes ethics. It seems to leave little room for progress in an ethics which (like most others in the ancient world) is centred on the improvement of human character.

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