STOIC ENLIGHTENMENTS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Stoic ideals infused seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought, not only in the figure of the ascetic sage who grins and bears all, but also in a myriad of other constructions, shaping the way the period imagined ethical, political, linguistic, epistemological, and social reform. My dissertation examines the literary manifestation of Stoicism’s legacy, in particular regarding the institution and danger of autonomy, the foundation and limitation of virtue, the nature of the passions, the difference between good and evil, and the referentiality of language. Alongside the standard satirical responses to the ancient creed’s rigor and rationalism, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry, drama, and prose developed Stoic formulations that made the most demanding of philosophical ideals tenable within the framework of common experience. Instead of serving as hallmarks for hypocrisy, the literary stoics I investigate uphold a brand of stoicism fit for the post-regicidal, post-Protestant Reformation, post-scientific revolutionary world.

My project reveals how writers used Stoicism to determine the viability of philosophical precept and establish ways of compensating for human fallibility. The ambivalent status of the Stoic sage, staged and restaged in countless texts, exemplified the period’s anxiety about measuring up to its ideals, its efforts to discover the plenitude of
natural laws and to live by them. Beginning with Lee’s *Lucius Junius Brutus* and Addison’s *Cato*, the most steadfast of heroes, and ending with Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, the most unaccountable of knaves, the texts I examine articulate a call to be at once more reasonable and more resolute, less inert and less contradictory, at a time when the age-old safeguards of order – the church, the king, and received wisdom – were contested. My readings of Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Richardson’s *Clarissa*, Fielding’s *Amelia*, Johnson’s *Rasselas*, Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, Austen’s *Pride & Prejudice*, and Pope’s *Essay on Man* trace a reconstitution of world harmony made possible through stoic enlightenments.
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The Universality of Abstraction
The Stoic survives in the modern imagination as a calm ascetic, perturbed by nothing. Indeed, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, he was a familiar stock character, who, as Addison’s Cato and Fielding’s Parson Adams demonstrate, was not quite fit for this world. Hence the standard role of a Stoic in eighteenth-century texts is to discover the difficulty of maintaining his tranquility and upholding his ethical standards. His efforts to follow reason’s dictates have prompted critics since R. S. Crane and Henry W. Sams to explain how eighteenth-century figures, real and fictive, inhabited or dismissed Stoic rationality. In such accounts, Stoicism appears to be, more or less, a single, unvarying position, as rigid as the ancient sect could wish for. Yet the circulation of Stoic ideas in modern translations of Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius and in contemporary philosophical texts – including Thomas Stanley’s History of Philosophy, Shaftesbury’s Characteristics, and Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments – reflects the diverse and complex reception of Stoicism in the period. Against the popular conception of the rational Stoic as aloof and able to bear anything, we can set a host of other ways in which eighteenth-century texts registered and developed Stoic ideas in reaction to contemporary disputes about the institution and danger of political autonomy, the foundation and limitation of virtue, the epistemology of the passions, the distinction between good and evil, and the referentiality of language. My dissertation examines Stoic formulations in the poetry, drama, and prose of the period, which made many of the ancient philosophy’s ideals tenable within the framework of common experience. I position familiar figures like Cato and Parson Adams within larger literary movements to advance social, epistemological, and linguistic reforms.
Tracking eighteenth-century redactions of Stoic precepts shows how writers corrected the errors of the age by reconceptualizing the nature and validity of universal precept.

Eighteenth-century literary constructions of political order often identify Stoic heroes from Roman history, Brutus and Cato especially, as model patriots, even though they were leaders of resistance. With the failure of Cromwell’s Commonwealth and the crises of succession that followed, factionalism and the threat of civil war intensified, prompting writers to restage the conditions of political legitimacy. That Nathaniel Lee’s *Lucius Junius Brutus* was quickly banned and then revised five times, while Addison’s *Cato* became a symbol of both Whig and Tory views, attests to the volatility and prominence of heroes whose Stoicism prompts them to sacrifice everything to preserve the liberty of the people. Julie Ellison reads Lee’s play as legitimizing political power through the renunciation of sentiment, juxtaposing the disinterested impartiality of Brutus’ Stoicism with the challenge and final suppression of Titus’ unruly feelings. I argue, in contrast, that these figures do not simply embody an opposition between Stoicism and sentiment, regulation and rebellion. Indeed, sacrificing all feeling to the rigor of law would be tyrannical, because then no one would be free to do what he/she wants. Both Brutus and Titus defend this liberty, the former by ensuring that no one is above the law and the latter by determining the law for himself. The degree to which liberty is nevertheless at odds with government is central to Addison’s play, in which the failure of self-command coincides with the collapse of the republic. Because Rome’s future is turned over to those of Roman character – Juba – rather than those of Roman blood, Ellison proposes, the disinterested and impartial spirit of republican rule becomes detached from place and race. So do the politics of slavery, in my reading. Hence, while Srinivas Aravamudan takes Juba’s Roman disposition to be the foundation of Whig colonialist discourse, I show how Addison’s play demands that self-
government transcend its administrative body and survive the ends of nationalism. Self-government, Addison demonstrates, isn’t compatible with the conquest of others. The principle of liberation needs to be redefined, therefore, not as a question of leadership, but as one of servitude, since both now extend beyond the nation’s borders.

Eighteenth-century ethical debates focused on the foundation and limits of autonomy as well. In particular, moral philosophers feared that the ideal of the virtuous life could be compromised by one’s circumstances. Chapter two tracks the eighteenth-century reception of Epictetus and Seneca’s insistence that circumstances do not matter at all, because virtue is self-sufficient. Novels of sentiment enacted this view by insisting that virtue is its own reward. Nevertheless since virtue is often rewarded materially, as in Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Fielding’s *Amelia*, or only in the hereafter, as in Richardson’s *Clarissa*, critics have read these novels as articulating ways in which virtue is undermined or an other-worldly pursuit. My discussion of virtue’s circumstances focuses on the standards of virtue Goldsmith, Richardson, and Fielding test in order to construct the sustainability of the moral ideal. I explain how Goldsmith overcomes the material and psychological limits of virtue by means of Stoic sociability, which calls for universal sympathy, according to Diogenes Laertius and Cicero. Primrose extends his fellow-feeling to unsympathetic figures, like the vicious inmates of the prison, and works for their benefit without any means. His Stoicism, a far more vigorous fortitude than Marshall Brown attributes to the Vicar, ensures the reformation of those to whom reward, here or hereafter, is denied. My discussion of *Clarissa* considers the degree to which one can be worthy of reward in the hereafter without being self-interested, and thus without subscribing to the theological teaching that what motivates fallen man to virtue in this world is the expectation of reward in the next. Here, too, sympathy motivates virtue, but Clarissa’s efforts to reform
Lovelace also enable him to compromise her, making it difficult to distinguish virtue from vice. To recognize that Clarissa is worthy of reward in this world therefore requires proof of her selflessness, which her death alone provides, since her departure from her father’s house can be construed as evidence both of her moral self-sufficiency and of a desire for material gain. In turning to Amelia, I investigate the relationship between financial self-sufficiency and virtuous reformation. The latter is only secured once virtue is no longer determined by circumstance and Booth has given up all projects of self-interested advancement. His moral progress, in my reading, follows the Stoic formula, constituting a shift in his cognition rather than in his actions.

Certainly, the issue of establishing virtue’s foundation presents an epistemological problem, for good and evil, Hobbes and Locke asserted, are relative, if not arbitrary, denominations. This modern rendition of Epictetus’ and Seneca’s doctrine that moral qualities do not inhere in things themselves, recognizes that things change, whereas our notions of good and evil, like virtue and vice, are universal and constant. Chapter three examines how we arrive at these common conceptions. While critics have examined the choice of life in Johnson’s Rasselas, the path of association in Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey, and the reversal of opinion in Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, I explore the cognitive choices these novels present, tracing the relationship between experience and universal truth. My reading of Rasselas’ departure from the perpetual delight of the Happy Valley to the infinite variety of distress in the world beyond highlights his conviction that everyone has the same idea of the good life. The prince’s final determination to govern a kingdom via principles that are valid everywhere and for everyone follows from this belief, no matter which station in life one chooses. Hence, Stoic epistemology does not fail pedagogically in Johnson’s tale, as Jeffrey Barnouw suggests, but rather maintains a standard that is universally sought.
Sterne’s novel takes up the problem of common conceptions as well in narrating how we can arrive at the same idea irrespective of our experience. Yorick’s tryst with the grisset and his night with the Piedmontese lady prove both his virtue and his vice, depending on how one construes events. I argue that Yorick’s narrative demonstrates that virtue and vice are matters of perspective, so that the way to properly assess experience, rather than experience itself, comes into question. Locke and Shaftesbury echoed Epictetus’ attitude toward experience, which enjoined the suspension of judgment and sanctioned assent only to that which is unquestionably the case. *Pride and Prejudice* explores the epistemology of determining what is unmistakable. Instead of consenting too readily to general opinion, Elizabeth Bennet learns to discern what is self-evident, notwithstanding considerations of circumstance. My investigation of the cognitive basis of assent explains how Austen’s novel reconstructs “truth[s] universally acknowledged” so that knowledge can be indubitable and unchanging, unlike the passions. The process that unites Austen’s heroine with Darcy thus comes to a Stoic, not a sentimental, end: Elizabeth “rather knew that she was happy, than felt herself to be so.”

The eighteenth-century philosophical endeavor to arrive at such moral and epistemological truths achieved its most famous expression in Kant’s categorical imperative but began the century before with Descartes’ development of Stoic rationalism. Charles Taylor explains that Cartesian method derives from the Stoic claim that the world is governed by, indeed the material manifestation of, reason. Alexander Pope’s adaptation of this Stoic legacy in *An Essay on Man* is the focus of chapter four, in which I read his endeavor to make reason define our view of human existence and the natural world as a response to contemporary arguments about empirical science and Deism. While we experience both good and evil within God’s design, Pope argues, in the divine perspective,
“Whatever is, is RIGHT.” In other words, if our reason were like God’s – what Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius claimed for mankind – then we would experience good and evil with indifference. We would not attempt to explain why evil is necessary, but rather recognize that the things we conventionally consider evil, or good, are not so. As such, Pope’s theodicy breaks with his theological precursors by vindicating order itself – “whatever is, is RIGHT” – instead of insisting that good comes of evil. The Stoic’s divine reason is thus Pope’s ideal, in that it recognizes this world as the best of all possible worlds. The reformation that Pope imagines is therefore cognitive, based on what is, not on what is possible.

Pope’s concern – to define what is within reason – evokes and challenges the correspondence between an individual’s experience and his ideas of it that Locke and his successors maintained. My final chapter explores the ways in which Tristram Shandy identifies a rational principle whereby randomness and whim are explicable in terms of abstraction. I propose that the principle of abstraction makes it possible to make associations productive, creating connections that can do anything because they go beyond the limitations of our experience. Abstraction relates our cognition of general ideas to our sense of their physical instantiation. While Arthur H. Cash and Ernest Tuveson have charted the ways in which Lockean association governs Sterne’s hobby-horses, I argue that abstraction is the principle by which narrative assigns meaning to ideas, names, and things. Without abstraction, association would have no significance beyond the connection itself: winding the clock and having sex is only a meaningful association if bodies correspond to ideas. To stabilize and standardize meaning through language was an enterprise many undertook in the period, from Johnson’s Dictionary to Swift’s Laputians, but critics have overlooked the Stoic inspiration for the eighteenth-century impulse to concretize words. I extend Brian Michael
Norton’s recent work on Sterne’s Stoic epistemology by documenting how Stoic logic shaped the period’s theories of rhetoric and language. Locke and Hartley turned to the Stoic theory of universals because it accounted linguistically for the abstraction – in mind and body – between things, ideas, and names, and explained the difference between what could be said and what couldn’t, in physical terms. Sterne’s own development of Stoic abstraction exemplifies the way the ancient philosophy helped writers define the limits of philosophical argument and give substance to those ephemeral concepts the validity of which seems to inhere in their materiality and performance, such as sovereignty, virtue, and universal truth.

The refashioning of Stoicism in eighteenth-century literature reflects the contours of contemporary debate and disorder. The problem of establishing political legitimacy without jeopardizing English liberty occasioned the appropriation of Stoic claims about the autonomy of the subject. And while proponents of benevolence held Stoic sociability to be the foundation of social bonds, moral philosophers and sentimental authors examined the degree to which virtue could be as autarchic as the Stoics held. How to recognize and establish such generalizations as the common good and universal moral law posed an epistemological question that Stoic common conceptions were reconstructed to answer. In each of these developments, the conflict between philosophical ideals and inchoate reality determined the ways in which Stoic doctrines were reconceived. My project reveals how writers used Stoicism to determine the viability of philosophical precept and establish ways of compensating for human fallibility. The ambivalent status of the Stoic sage, whose high standards demanded the reconsideration of what constitutes the best of all possible worlds, embodied the period’s anxiety about measuring up to its ideals.

In what follows, I endeavor to trace the central features of the ancient philosophy as it was received in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in order to explain how Stoic
tenets informed literary endeavors at the time. My aim is not to deny the age its own innovations, or to suggest that the writers I investigate are somehow united in some sort of collective Stoic enterprise. The texts I read cut across genres, not to mention political, ethical, and epistemological orientations, and rightly so; my point is to clarify a legacy that is as divisive as it is multifaceted. As such, my examination is thematic, rather than systematic, in its organization, and the Stoic views I outline are neither exhaustive nor necessarily consistent with one another. To be sure, the Stoics themselves were far from unanimous on any number of fronts, but the range and volume of response composes a part of Enlightenment thought that contributes to our enduring sense of the period’s consistency as neo-classical and an Age of Reason. What’s more, although we have moved away from such periodizations, the schizophrenic character of the time – at once revolutionary and heavily indebted to classical models – remains a critical conundrum, one worth considering in light of the worldview that would seem to breathe its last in the rise of Romanticism with its emphasis on the individual, the spontaneous overflow of feeling, and the sublime.
Chapter I

Self-government in *Brutus* and *Cato*

**Stoic relations**

The written record of Stoic doctrine in the period is unmistakable and remarkable. For although the writings of the earliest Stoics – Zeno, Chrysippus, and Cleanthes – are lost, the works of later Stoics, including Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, as well as the commentaries of Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, and Diogenes Laertius, present broad and nuanced accounts of Stoic tenets. Among Cicero’s works, *De officiis*, *Tusculanae disputationes*, *De natura deorum*, *De fato*, *De legibus*, and *Paradoxa Stoicorum* are concerned mainly with Stoic questions and these texts, along with Seneca’s moral letters, were standard reading at university. They had shaped generations of Stoic reception. But in the seventeenth century, complete editions of Seneca’s letters appeared for the first time, as did Epictetus’ *Discourses* and *Manual* the century after. Other texts were newly available in English: Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* was printed in 1688, reprinted in 1696, and Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* was first published in English in 1634. Elizabeth Carter’s new translation of Epictetus’ works (1758), Jeremy Collier’s edition of the *Meditations* in 1701 (followed by Frances Hutcheson and James Moor’s in 1742), and John Dryden’s rendition of Plutarch’s *Lives* (1683-86), attest to the steady interest in Stoic thought and in Stoic heroes. While the *Meditations* went through twenty-six editions in the seventeenth century and fifty-eight in the eighteenth, editions of Epictetus were almost as numerous.

But Stoicism’s presence was not just a matter of translation. Stoic tenets were neither easily adopted nor rejected wholesale. Their influence, like that of other great
traditions, is as pervasive as it is variegated, and thus composes a narrative no single study can tell. My project here focuses on the ways in which Stoicism endured in fictional forms, refashioning the ideals that Stoicism’s earlier receptors had found so untenable. Eighteenth-century authors followed a critical tradition of considering the ancient philosophy’s strengths and weaknesses that had begun with Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch. Thomas Stanley’s lengthy discussion of Stoicism in his *History of Philosophy* (1655) surveys its defining features regarding ethics, physics, and logic, while Richard Cumberland’s *A Treatise of the Laws of Nature* (1672 in Latin, translated in 1727), Thomas Rutherforth’s *An Essay on the Nature and Obligations of Virtue* (1754), Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), and Adam Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) outline Stoic doctrines in order to correct contemporary misconceptions about the foundations of ethical and political goods. Francis Bragge’s *A Practical Treatise on the Regulation of the Passions* (1708), Ralph Cudworth’s *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (1731) cite Stoic theories of epistemology that gained popularity following Locke’s account of the tabula rasa. The basic tenets of Stoic cosmology could be found in Thomas Creech’s *The Five Books of M. Manilius, Containing a System of the Ancient Astronomy and Astrology* (1697), which shaped Pope’s *Essay on Man* (1733-34). And James Harris’ treatise on rhetoric highlights principles of Stoic logic, which also shaped contemporary debates on the nature of language from Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) to Beattie’s *The Theory of Language* (1788). These treatments of Stoic doctrine will be integral to my investigation of Stoicism’s legacy in later chapters. First, however, I examine the most recognizable instance of Stoicism in the period: the literary representations of the Roman hero, whose heroism, and stems from his refusal to submit to tyranny, even unto death.
Eighteenth-Century Roman Heroes

“But lo! Here is a spectacle worthy of the regard of God as he contemplates his works…a brave man matched against ill-fortune…I say, what nobler sight the Lord of Heaven could find on earth… than the spectacle of Cato, after his cause had already been shattered more than once, nevertheless standing erect amid the ruins of the commonwealth.”¹ This passage from Seneca’s *On Providence* is the epigraph to Joseph Addison’s play, *Cato*, and was quoted in countless other eighteenth-century texts: Henry Fielding’s *Amelia*, Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and Richard Cumberland’s *Treatise on the Laws of Human Nature* just to name a few. It was such a popular passage, because it references a type of hero whose stiff upper lip and willingness to die for his country are not mere posturing, but rather a way of life. Seneca’s sketch represents the prevailing image of the Stoic sage, who is considered noble in his suffering, because he is governed by principles that do not admit of pleasure or pain and thus disregard matters of fortune. In attaining this state, the sage can, as Seneca advocates, retreat from society to live a bare existence away from the trials and tribulations of public life. Or, as Cato exemplifies, the sage may dedicate himself to the public good and defend civil liberty at all costs. While the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw a revival of the Stoic withdrawal from civic life, by the eighteenth century, the Stoic activist had become a political and literary ideal, figuring forth the selfless patriotism that many laid claim to, yet few – if any – possessed.

The two most celebrated Stoic heroes were Lucius Junius Brutus, who established the Roman Republic, and Cato, who defied Caesar in his conquest of Gaul. In political discourse of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Brutus and Cato presented

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¹ *On Providence* 2, 8-9.
models of patriotic resistance. Several social commentators assumed the name, if not the character, of the Stoic heroes. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters* and *The Defense of Liberty against Tyrants* by one “Junius Brutus,” for example, called English citizens to action in protecting the rights and liberties of Englishmen. The patriotic fervor sparked by the heroes was immense, prompting Alexander Pope’s satirical “On a Lady who P—st at the Tragedy of Cato,” for, as he himself had written in the Prologue to the play, “While Cato gives his little senate laws,/ What bosom beats not in his country’s cause?/ Who sees him act, but envies every deed?/ Who hears him groan, and does not wish to bleed?” Yet this craze had its detractors as well; David Hume’s skepticism about the “zeal of patriots” led him to remark that “The virtues and good intentions of CATO and BRUTUS are highly laudable, but, to what purpose did their zeal serve?” Such skepticism in the wake of the Commonwealth was perfectly justified. Much had been done in the name of patriotism, including chopping off Charles’ head, but Parliament, like the king, aimed at securing power, not the common good. In “A Declaration of the Parliament of England, Expressing the Grounds of their late Proceedings, And of Setling the present Government in the way of a Free State (1648), the author concedes that although “every Parliament ought to Act upon their good behavior…few have Acted, but some kinde of force hath at one time or other been upon them; and most of them under the force of Tyrannical Will, and fear of ruine…some under the force of several Factions or Titles to the Crown.” The disinterested commitment to the welfare of the people for which Stoic heroes were renowned was sorely needed in a period of political corruption and factionalism.

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The civil wars had shown that self-government poses a formidable problem in its inception, and also in its performance. It is, after all, one thing to oppose tyranny and commend freedom, but quite another to carry out reform, for self-government involves on the one hand the kind of liberty that implies that one is free to do what one wants, and on the other the kind of restraint required in exercising self-command. Contemporary discussions of popular sovereignty posited the problematic interaction of these two – liberty and restraint – as the foundation of society. Hobbes, perhaps most famously, argued that our inability to govern ourselves is what makes the election of a sovereign necessary, because our natural disposition to act in our own self-interest is without limit. But while the absolute monarchy Hobbes endorsed invited tyranny, the most extreme form of self-government – democracy – smacked of utter chaos, and so the political question of the day became what sort of republic should be instituted. Mediating between Parliament and the people wasn’t easy – especially since factionalism made Parliamentary rule just as volatile and susceptible to influence as the mob. Lee and Addison turned to Roman heroes, I propose, because Brutus’ and Cato’s Stoicism enables them to rise above faction and self-interest, the one in establishing the Roman Republic and the other in defending it. Brutus creates the conditions of self-government in turning power over to the people, rather than keeping it for himself, and then submits himself to the law in sentencing his sons to death for committing treason. The dastardly effects that attend the failures of self-command are the focus of Addison’s *Cato*. In what follows, I chart the way Lee and Addison refashion the Stoic hero

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5 See Philip J. Ayers, *Classical Culture and the Idea of Rome in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 13: “It is the English ruling class’s deep sense of affinity with this Rome and its oligarchic, not its popular, traditions, which give English classicism an entire dimension of meaning absent from any of the contemporary continental classicism until the French Revolution and the assimilation of Roman-republican iconography under the Republic.”
to construct the kind of resistance to tyranny and arbitrary rule that won’t license the misrule of the passions or trade the corruption of one faction for that of another.

All in the Family

The king himself seemed a good candidate for one who transcends party politics, and there were many who argued that an absolute monarchy was the only way to ensure peace and prosperity in the realm. The stability and legitimacy of the government was then an extension of the dynastic stability and legitimacy. But while the issue of royal succession had always been central to English politics, the relationship between the royal line and the king’s authority became, in the seventeenth century, the focus of intense debate. From 1649, with the beheading of Charles I, through 1701, with the Act of Settlement, the source and extent of the king’s power were radically questioned and redefined. The traditional claim of the divine right of kings, according to which the king is God’s representative on earth, lost much of its force when confronted with regicide, illegitimate heirs, and the Exclusion Crisis. Many did believe that the efficacy of government depended on the unquestionable authority of its head, and therefore efforts to shore up royal power did not come from the crown alone. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, considered the power of the king absolute, since the consent of the governed that establishes the sovereign is inherited (a dynastic correlative to the royal family). Any challenge to the king after the institution of the social compact is therefore invalid. Hobbes thus aimed to preclude both a popular revolt and the endless squabbling in Parliament, which, he believed, threatened the stability and consistency necessary for the peace and prosperity of the realm. Robert Filmer shared this view and attempted to strengthen the absolute sovereignty of the king by extending the claim of inheritance to the king’s patrilineal line. Filmer argued that the king inherits his power from
Adam, from whom he descends directly; the king’s sovereignty is absolute because Adam’s was. God’s kingdom, like man’s, is based on patriarchal right. As such, the strength of the king’s position is based on the strength of his patrilineal line. But this, despite Filmer’s efforts to prove otherwise, was by no means unbroken.

Breaks in dynastic succession were, of course, inimical to Filmer’s genealogical argument, which reflected his response to the conflicts between Parliament and Charles I, and later resonated in the debates about who would succeed Charles II. The interruption the Commonwealth and Protectorate represented was, in this view, an evil happily remedied and one that should not in any way be repeated. Yet the arguments for deposing Charles I and for excluding James II both presented themselves as remedying a great evil: the ordinance drawn up in the House of Commons in 1648 saw regicide as liberating England from the grip of a despot. Like Lucius Junius Brutus, who had freed Rome from the tyranny of the last Tarquin king, the House of Commons sought to save England from a king who “hath had a wicked design totally to subvert the ancient and fundamental laws and liberties of this Nation and in their place to introduce an arbitrary and tyrannical government.”

Likewise, those who supported the exclusion of James II claimed that a Roman Catholic king would be no better than a tyrant, since “it is inconsistent with the safety and welfare of this protestant kingdom to be governed by a papist prince.” Clearly there were conditions under which the interruption of royal succession was called for, just as there were circumstances in which the consent of the governed could justifiably be denied.

Arguing that a sovereign with absolute power constituted tyranny, John Locke, among others, claimed that the consent of the governed was not inherited and could be

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7 Exclusion Bill (1679)
withheld. In fact, he proposed, even in those countries where “the Person of the Prince by the Law is Sacred”, “opposition may be made to the illegal Acts…commissioned by him.” Locke points out that “this Doctrine of the lawfulness of resisting all unlawful exercises of his Power, will not upon every slight occasion indanger him, or imbroil the Government,” but only when “he will by actually putting himself into a State of War with his People, dissolve the Government, and leave them to that defence, which belongs to every one in the State of Nature.”

Locke thus rejected the passive obedience that Hobbes and Filmer propose the sovereign is due. But despite Locke’s assurances that resistance need not go so far as to overthrow the prince or the government, the Popish and Rye House Plots, the plan to assassinate William in 1696, and the attempts to put the Pretender on the throne had made clear how far rebellion would go. Moreover, the threat of civil war during the 1710s showed that tensions remained notwithstanding the Bill of Rights and the Act of Settlement. Thus in 1712 Bishop Berkeley reaffirmed the view that “there is an absolute, unlimited non-resistance or passive obedience due to the supreme civil power,” denouncing the notion that “submission to government should be measured and limited by the public good of the society; and that therefore subjects may lawfully resist the supreme authority, in those cases where the public good shall plainly seem to require it.”

Efforts to secure power and stabilize the government were as concerted as they had ever been, such that, four years later, Joseph Addison observed: “[the king] endeavoured to inculcate the same kind of obedience” that was “payed to Roman Emperors,” even though he had not “the same kind of authority.” His subjects, Addison complained, “are made to believe, that passive obedience

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8 *Two Treatises on Government*, II. 402-403.

and non-resistance, unlimited power and indefeasible right, have something of a venerable
and religious meaning in them; whereas in reality they only imply, that a King of Great
Britain has a right to be a Tyrant, and that his subjects are obliged in conscience to be
slaves.”

Addison insisted that the people, like Cato of Utica, are right to defy a despot.

Addison’s enormously successful play, Cato (1713), made the Roman who opposed
Caesar’s efforts to conquer the world a popular hero. Cato had led the most effective and
lasting resistance to Julius Caesar, who had declared himself dictator for life. Up against
Caesar’s vastly superior forces, Cato finally committed suicide so that he would not owe
Caesar anything. Addison was not the first to turn to classical models of resistance to
tyranny when Britain appeared in danger of imitating Rome in politics as well as in literature.
Nathaniel Lee had written a play a generation earlier about Brutus’ overthrow of the Tarquin
dynasty, presenting the founding of the Roman Republic as a political ideal. In order to
safeguard the liberty of the Roman people, Brutus sacrifices the mainstay of traditional
sovereignty – his sons. Thus the stories of Brutus and Cato presented heroic answers to the
question of passive obedience, establishing what is lawful in the abolition of tyranny – that
is, that succession put no one above everyone else (in a position to demand passive
obedience). Instead, everyone ought to feel the force of the law, given a system of laws that
protect, rather than oppress, the people. Such an ideal was compelling because ancient
historians of Rome including Tacitus and Livy had detailed the process by which Roman
liberty had been treacherously subverted, enabling modern political commentators to
identify the fate of Britain with that of Rome. For just as Rome “fell a victim to ambition
and faction, to base and unworthy men, to parricides and traitors,” Trenchard and Gordon
declared, so must “every other nation…run the same fortune, expect the same fatal

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10 Freeholder 51; Freeholder 10 (Monday, January 23, 1716).
catastrophe, who suffer themselves to be debauched with the same vices, and are actuated by the same principles and passions.”

What resistance to absolute monarchical power there was, Lee and Addison recognized, was not the sort to liberate the people from a tyrant, but rather to transfer power to other magistrates and their constituents. As such, resistance itself was not the problem; political ambition and maneuvering undermined party calls for liberty. Thus, William Shippen, in “Faction Display’d” (1704) wonders, “Where is the Noble Roman Spirit fled,/ Which once inspir’d thy ancient Patriots dead?/ Who were above all private Ends, and joy’d,/ When bravely for the publick Weal they dy’d.”

Shippen demonstrates what critics have long recognized that, as John Loftis explains, the early Romans “represented the classic instance of opposition to tyranny, and Lucius Junius Brutus the type of stern and selfless patriot, in whom private emotion was subordinate to considerations of state,” while Cato embodied the commitment to liberty that politicians preached, rather than acted upon: Lord Chesterfield, for instance, sneers at Whig rhetoric when he suggests, “Had all the Roman Patriots been as much Whigs as Cato, Julius Caesar and his Tories would never have had an opportunity to subvert their Libertys” (The Observator, 27 Jan 1711). The subversion of liberty is precisely what Lee’s and Addison’s turn to Stoicism is designed to prevent, Julie Ellison and Srinivas Aravamudan argue. In Ellison’s view, the cost of this Stoic defense, the legitimization of republican law, is sensibility, whereby patriarchy itself is subjected to constitutional principle (36). But in focusing on the opposition between law and sentiment, Ellison fails to see how both

11 Cato’s Letters I, 131. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

12 On the anniversary of Charles I’s beheading, for instance, Addison wrote that the same motives that engineered the Catiline conspiracy – “one of the most flagitious in itself, and described with the most horror by historians” – were the motives which “kindled the present rebellion in his Majesty’s dominions” (Freeholder 12, 222-23).

constitute liberty – feeling is not sacrificed wholesale in the name of the law, but instead establishes self-government in its own terms. Hence, as Aravamudan notes, “moderate Stoical freedom means freedom ‘through’ rather than freedom ‘from’ the constraints that the world imposes” (119). Yet the kind of liberty at stake here is not freedom from constraint, but rather the liberty that can be instituted when the individual and the state are both, as it were, autonomous. One does not encroach upon the other because no one is above the law.

From this premise, Marcus Aurelius explains, the Stoics derived a “conception of a state with one law for all, based upon individual equality and freedom of speech, and of a sovranity which prizes above all things the liberty of the subject” (I.14). It was to this passage in Aurelius’ Meditations that the eighteenth-century political philosopher Adam Ferguson turned in discussing the problem of political corruption. Ferguson asks if it was “in vain, that Antoninus became acquainted with the characters of…Cato…and Brutus? Was it in vain, that he learned to understand the form of a free community, raised on the basis of equality and justice; or of a monarchy, under which the liberties of the subject were held the most sacred object of administration?” No, Ferguson concludes, for Marcus Aurelius thus showed his followers that “Liberty is a right which every individual must be ready to vindicate for himself, and which he who pretends to bestow as a favour, has by that very act in reality denied.”

By placing the determination of liberty in the subject, Ferguson, following the Stoics, constitutes the autonomy of the subject as fundamentally opposed to the autonomy of a leader. The conception of equality presented here was united with stronger statements of social reform put forth by the Levelers, Diggers, and so on, but the notion that a common law constitutes the strength and stability of the nation was widely endorsed. As such, the purpose of laws is not to distribute power between various interests

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so that no one in particular is privileged. Instead laws identify a common good by
distinguishing what is right and wrong for everyone, irrespective of their leader. The Stoic
vision was therefore not a partisan one and would not devolve into tyranny because the
citizen’s autonomy leads, in its most absolute form, neither to lawlessness nor to peremptory
rule, but to suicide.

**Classical versus Christian Models**

Like the Catholic Church, the Church of England denounced suicide because God,
not man, gave and took life, and so the contradiction between Stoic and Christian doctrines
persisted into the seventeenth century. What changed was the political construction of this
conflict. Whereas monarchists used Christianity to establish the legitimacy and authority of
the king, opponents upheld Stoic conceptions of autonomy in defending the rights of
subjects. Pagan models of resistance presented an appealing alternative to Christian
doctrines of providential design and patient submission. For according to Christian tenets,
Trenchard and Gordon note, “we are not at liberty to dispose of our own lives; but are to
wait for the call of heaven to alleviate or end our calamities.” The good Christian questions
neither the order of things nor his fate (after all, God arranges everything for the best). In
fact, he can scarcely be said to have a will of his own, since God is the first cause of
everything and whatever happens fulfills the divine will. And because a Christian owes his
very life to God, he is not at liberty to take it. So he submits to his fate, even when
oppressed by a tyrant, because God ordains it. There are, in this view, no conditions under
which a man may resist his sovereign, tyrant or not.

In contrast to Christians, “the Romans had no other laws to act by, but the natural
dictates of uncorrupted reason,” and so there was no “fair reason, why a Roman… should
prefer a miserable life to an honourable death; should bear vassalage, chains, and tortures of body or mind, when all those evils were to be avoided by doing only that, which, by the course of nature, every man must soon do.”

Epictetus (a slave) and Marcus Aurelius (an emperor) argued that liberty begins and ends with the disposal of one’s life, and death, rather than the license to do what one will. Choosing death is just one way in which the Stoic sage is master of himself. No one, therefore, can impose his will upon a Stoic. As Epictetus declares, “when a tyrant threatens and sends for me; I say…Take my body, take my possessions, take my reputation, take those who are about me,” but when the tyrant says, “Ay but I would command your principles too,” Epictetus responds, “who hath given you that power? How can you conquer the principle of another?” The tyrant cannot conquer the Stoic’s will because, Epictetus reasons, “what conquers itself is not conquered by another.”

This knowledge is what prompts the Stoic to choose death, through which, Epictetus explains, one is “freed at last from…those who are called tyrants,” who “think that they have some power over us because of the paltry body and its possessions.” At least in suicide one departs as one wishes: that is, “as a free man” (III.xxv). It is, therefore, no accident that the plays I examine begin and end with suicides that divide tyranny from liberty: Lucrece’s, giving the Republic life, and Cato’s, marking its death.

Establishing the limits of self-government, such suicides identified the problem with obeying one’s sovereign as one obeys God: kings are human and can be swayed by passion, so they may demand the impious. Then the utmost resistance is called for, since when “princes exceed their bounds, not contenting themselves with that authority which the almighty and all good God hath given them, but seek to usurp that sovereignty, which he

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15 *Cato’s Letters* No. 56, I, 385.

hath reserved to himself over all men,” they are as “guilty of high treason to [their]
sovereign…as if one of [their] vassals should seize on the rights of [their] crown”, “Brutus”
writes. As such, the claim that kings ought to have absolute power over the lives of their
subjects is to give them divine power, and is, in denying the subject any sovereignty
whatsoever, tantamount to denying him life. To command utter subjection to a divine
representative, Locke argues, amounts to demanding suicide: “a man, not having the Power
of his own life, cannot, by Compact, or his own Consent, enslave himself to any one, nor
put himself under the Absolute…Power of another, to take away his Life, when he pleases,”
since “he that cannot take away his own Life, cannot give another power over it” (284).
Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political constructions of the social contract demanded
that obedience to the head of state be distinguished from obedience to God, and that was
what the House of Commons, in its indictment of Charles I, had done.

But if everyone were like Brutus and Cato, there would be no need for suicide,
because each citizen would assert his or her liberty without encroaching upon that of others
– there would be no threat of tyranny – for as Addison claims in Spectator 287, “This is what
may properly be called Liberty, which exempts one Man from Subjection to another.” Of
course everyone at the turn of the eighteenth century was not a Stoic like Brutus or Cato,
and the government’s various encroachments upon the rights and liberties of Englishmen,
including the establishment of a standing army and the crown’s endeavors to levy taxes
without parliamentary approval, made a viable model of self-government all the more
necessary. Brutus and Cato were thus extolled in part because the one had secured the
liberty of the individual in spite of the encroachments of the state, while the other had

17 Vindiciæ Contra Tyrannos: A Defence of Liberty against Tyrants. Or, Of the lawful power of the Prince over the People, and
of the People over the Prince (1689), 66. This treatise was first published in 1581 and had gone through several
editions before the auspicious 1648 edition, of which the 1689 edition is an exact reproduction.
fought to secure the liberty of the state from the encroachments of an individual. Whigs and Tories alike might endorse such heroics, and indeed they did.

**Bloody Tyranny in *Lucius Junius Brutus***

Nathaniel Lee’s play premiered in December of 1680 and ran for only a short time before being banned by the Lord High Chamberlain. He called it “an Antimonarchical Play…wrote when the Nation was in a Ferment of Whig and Tory, as a Clement to the Former.”¹⁸ The applicability of Brutus’ story to the times was readily acknowledged, but not easily suppressed. Retold in Charles Gildon’s *The Patriot, or the Italian Conspiracy* (1703), Voltaire’s *Brutus* (1730), William Bond’s *The Tuscan Treaty; Or, Tarquin’s Overthrow* (1733), William Duncombe’s *Junius Brutus, a tragedy* (1734), and Hugh Downman’s *Lucius Junius Brutus: Or, The expulsion of the Tarquins: an historical play* (1779), the story remained a vehicle for political commentary.¹⁹ These dramatizations drew on the descriptions of Brutus’ deeds in Plutarch’s *Lives*, Livy’s history of Rome (*Ab Urbe Condita*), Machiavelli’s *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*, Lucan’s history of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey (*Pharsalia*), and Madeleine de Scudéry’s modern romance, *Clelia, A Roman History* (1654-61). These sources depict “the illegal and wicked accession of Tarquinius Superbus to the crown, with his making it, instead of kingly rule, the instrument of insolence and tyranny.”²⁰ Tarquin did not inherit the throne from his father, but became king by having his predecessor, Servius Tullius, and those senators who supported him, killed. Tarquin then repealed the acts the Senate had passed increasing the liberty of the people and devoted Rome’s resources to the

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¹⁸ Charles Gildon, Preface to *The Patriot*, 1703).

¹⁹ The inclusion of Voltaire’s rendition might surprise the reader, but Voltaire wrote much of his play during a visit to England from 1726-29, so the difference in national concerns may be downplayed.

conquest of other territories. Notorious for its licentiousness and favoritism, his reign was exemplified by the debauchery of the aristocratic youth and the biased application of the law.

It was Tarquin’s own son, Sextus, who raped Lucrece, the virtuous wife of a Roman nobleman. Lucrece informs an assembly of her husband’s friends about the rape and kills herself after calling on them to revenge her stolen virtue. Brutus takes this opportunity to oust Tarquin and establish the Republic. Here, as in the events that led to the institution of the British Commonwealth, the dangers the rebellion presented were several. For if Brutus had organized a revolt against an earlier king, Livy proposes, the populace would have “suddenly found themselves… enjoying complete freedom of action, if not full political rights” and “would, no doubt, have set sail on the stormy sea of democratic politics, swayed by the gusts of popular eloquence and quarreling for power with the governing class.” But instead, as in Britain, problems arose within the governing class itself, in which a group of noblemen “had found life under the monarchy very agreeable” because they “had been able to give a freer rein to their appetites and to live the dissolute and irresponsible life of the court.” Livy recounts that “under the new dispensation they missed the freedom to do as they pleased, and began to complain that what might be liberty for others was more like slavery for themselves. A king, they argued, was…a human being, and there was a chance of getting from him what one wanted, rightly or wrongly; under a monarchy there was room for influence and favour,” but “law…was impersonal and inexorable” and “admitted no relaxation or indulgence.” These nobles conspired to kill Brutus and restore Tarquin – a plot that points to the main conflict the institution of self-government presents. The problem here is not that a leader exceeds the bounds of his power and assumes those of

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God; the foundation of the Republic creates an opposition between two concepts of law, one human and one divine. The former can be swayed, while the latter is indifferent, Stoic.

Hence, while Livy, Plutarch, and the rest agree about the events leading up to Brutus sentencing his sons to death for treason, they find Brutus’ indifference in upholding the law – his Stoicism – decisive in determining the nature of his heroism. According to Plutarch, “Brutus…is said not to have turned aside his face, nor allowed the least glance of pity to soften and smooth his aspect of rigour and austerity, but sternly watched his children suffer” (120). Livy, on the other hand, reports that “Throughout the pitiful scene all eyes were on the father’s face, where a father’s anguish was plain to see” (113). And in Madeleine de Scudéry’s romance, Brutus first experienced “all that a paternal tenderness might make him feel” and then, seeing his sons all but dead, “resolved…that he had no other course to take, than resolutely to undergo so great an affliction, or to betray a fruitless weakness.” He therefore appeared “insensible, and in a manner cruel to those who are not acquainted with what was within him.”

The nature of Brutus’ self-command in his administration of justice is thus the point of contention. Lee’s sources do not question whether or not Brutus was just, but rather if he is human. Plutarch, for instance, explains that Brutus’ attitude is “open alike to the highest commendation and the strongest censure; for either the greatness of his virtue raised him above the impressions of sorrow, or the extravagance of his misery took away all sense of it; but neither seemed common, or the result of humanity, but either divine or brutish” (120). To replace the absolutism of tyranny with the absolutism of self-government does not appear to liberate so much as denature the citizen. Lee’s adaptation of the Brutus story examines this issue in determining what kind of liberation Brutus’ self-command secures. His sources agreed that as a result of Brutus’ actions, “a free nation,

22 Madeline de Scudéry, Clelia (1678), 281.
governed by annually elected officers of state and subject not to the caprice of individual men, but to the overriding authority of law” was born. But how are the political and sentimental forms of self-government related here? And how do they enable one to rise above the vicissitudes of fortune and, in the eighteenth century, of faction and interest?

Contemporary debate about Brutus’ heroism focused on the issue of what Brutus’ triumph liberated the Roman people from and what it licensed as well. According to Filmer, for instance, the Roman people were ungovernable, leading to an illegitimate overthrow of the government. “Whereas it is said that Tarquin was expelled for the rape committed by his son on Lucrece,” Filmer explains, “it is unjust to condemn the father for the crime of his son. It had been fit to have petitioned the father for the punishment of the offender…. To say the truth, we can find no other cause of the expulsion of Tarquin than the wantonness and licentiousness of the people of Rome.” And Hobbes questions whether or not a republic constitutes the institution of liberty itself, arguing that Brutus can be said to have liberated the Roman people not because “bondage is always joyned to Monarchy,” but rather because the abuse of government “makes the alteration be termed Liberty.” Both Filmer and Hobbes challenge the equation of monarchy with tyranny, and hence the association of a commonwealth with liberty. Self-government, after all, can be practiced under a monarch, and so the question was in the eighteenth century, as it was for Plutarch and Livy, what does the rhetoric of liberty legitimate, in opposition to the divine foundation of monarchical rule?

Lee took up this question, as did Gildon, Voltaire, Bond, Duncombe, and Downman after him. The problems with the traditional argument – that blood legitimizes monarchy –

23 Livy, 107. See also the first two sentences of Tacitus’ Annals.


25 Horae Subsecivia, Observations and Discourses (1620), 228-29.
sets the stage for his examination of the conditions of self-government. In what follows, I argue that the autonomy of the individual and of the state requires that neither be determined by blood, but rather asserted through law. As such, the parallels between the play and its historical context do not simply follow bloodlines. Richard Brown notes that both Titus and Tiberius can be aligned with the Duke of Monmouth, while the fact that “Lee is surely not advocating an English revolution through which a new Brutus might come to power” suggests that Brutus’ relationship to Cromwell, and Tarquin’s to Charles II, is more complex than one of blood equivalence. Thus, Brown proposes, “Lee’s prescription for England goes beyond the issue of monarchy-versus-republic, to invoke a strenuous moral ideal which was not embodied by either Charles or his Whiggish opponents.”

Lee’s play presents the conditions and limitations of liberty as defining, not inherent in, a form of government.

The problems attending a government based on blood relationships are already at work when the play begins. Brutus’ son, Titus, is about to marry Teraminta, Tarquin’s illegitimate daughter. The lovers exchange vows even though, in the opening lines of the play, their blood appears to determine their fate – to divide, rather than unite, them. For Teraminta “is the blood of Tarquin;/ The basest too,” so she fears that Titus will betray her. And Brutus demands exactly that, arguing that it doesn’t matter if Teraminta is “chastely good, most sweetly framed,/ Without the smallest tincture of her father” (II.321-22), since “any of his [Tarquin’s] blood; if it be his” has a “natural contagion in it” (I.217; 218). Titus argues against such determinism and constructs another genealogy for

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Teraminta: “Thou art the blood of heav’n,/ …/ No seed of Tarquin” (I.42-44). But even the most divine ancestry does not guarantee legitimacy: Titus may be the son of “that awful, godlike, and commanding Brutus” (I, 245), but the threat of tyranny is no less on his side than on Teraminta’s. Titus’ “hereditary virtue” (I, 261) does not make it easy for him to renounce Teraminta. His hesitation thus prompts Brutus to question his son’s parentage:

“Either resolve to part with Teraminta/ …/ Or shake hands with me, part, and be accursed;/ Make me believe thy mother played me false,/ And, in my absence, stamped thee with a Tarquin” (II, 354-58). The same genealogical argument Titus offers to assert Teraminta’s honor can be used to challenge his own. Hence, if Titus wants to save Teraminta, he must sacrifice his own claim to virtue, for according to the dictates of blood, the daughter must be like her father – illegitimate – and the son like his father – stoically putting aside his own concerns in order to secure the liberty of his country.

Lee’s play acknowledges the rhetorical force of this position in that Titus agrees to give up Teraminta and consents not to consummate the marriage, as Brutus commands. As such, their marriage is purely legal, presenting a virtuous counterpart to the unlawful union between Sextus Tarquin (the king’s son) and Lucrece. For while the rape reproduces the father’s affairs (most notably the liaison that produced Teraminta), if Titus and Teraminta do not have children, then Tarquin’s illegitimacy will reproduce itself no further. The succession of tyranny will end. Yet these measures only aid in the overthrow of an illegitimate government; they do not ensure the institution of liberty. Indeed, by using a genealogical argument to persuade Titus, Brutus becomes, as it were, a tyrant, since he makes Titus obey him – the patriarch – rather than allowing his son to follow his own will – to be free. Thus Lee shows the kind of liberty that a republic grants: not the freedom to do whatever one wants, which, philosophers following Hobbes had defined as liberty, but
instead the liberty to consent or dissent.\textsuperscript{28} It is therefore appropriate that the turning point of the politics in the play coincides with the rape. Right when Lucrece swears that she was “not consenting once in thought” (I.394) to Sextus’ advances, the families in attendance swear to overthrow Tarquin. Lucrece’s dissent is aligned with theirs. So although they are bound by blood (the families are, in fact, related, and they swear on the blood-stained sword with which Lucrece kills herself), the force of Rome’s resistance to tyranny is consensual, not genealogical.

If what initially stands in the way of self-government is the argument of blood, what makes self-government possible is the consent of the governed. For although Brutus endeavors to direct his son’s will, Titus’ consent is what makes his father’s decree binding. Nevertheless, consent to Brutus’ commands is not universal. His other son, Tiberius, among others, plots to restore the king, because under Tarquin, he enjoyed the liberty to do as he pleased. In Tiberius’ view, “A king is one/ To whom you may complain when you are wronged” and “The throne lies open in your way for justice,” allowing “room for favor, and for benefit,” so that the fate of “friends and enemies” may be determined “Without recourse to…litigious laws,/ Laws that are cruel, deaf, inexorable.” They dictate that “if you should exceed the bounds of order,/ There is no pardon” (II.9-19). Whereas a republic requires self-government, the tyranny Tiberius designs to reinstate enables him to exceed the bounds of order without repercussions. It is this liberty (or anarchy if you will) that poses the greatest threat to society, since Tiberius is no more loyal to Tarquin than to Brutus; his own ambition is what concerns him. Such men, monarchists argued, are the constituents of the populace – the many-headed hydra – which needs an absolutist ruler to maintain any kind of order. Indeed, many feared, they are the rebels who would overthrow the monarchy and

plunge the country into chaos. J. M. Armistead and Victoria Hayne argue that Lee’s play is a cautionary tale about the dangers of mob rule and consenting, too readily, to the rhetoric of liberty.²⁹

Yet the government that follows Tarquin’s overthrow is not one of faction and self-interest. Rather, Lee depicts the Roman people, from the foundation of the republic, as governed by justice. Once Tarquin is ousted, they are rallied by Vinditius, a plebian whom critics often identify with Titus Oates, the informer in the Popish Plot, and Vinditius does inform Brutus of Tiberius’ plan to restore the king. More importantly, however, Vinditius identifies himself as “a true commonwealth’s man” who “do[es] not naturally love kings, though they be good; for why should any one man have more power than the people?” After all, he demands, “What can he do for the people that the people can’t do for themselves?” (II.40-45). Vinditius calls on the people to govern themselves, to ensure that no one is above the law. And that is what they do to Fabritius, the pimp who arranges Sextus Tarquin’s exploits. The citizens lay hold of him and at Vinditius’ prompt – “as we are great, let us be just” (II.82) – they hear Fabritius’ crimes and then hang him. Vinditius rejoices, for “this is law, right, and justice; this is the people’s law,” far “better than the arbitrary power of kings” (II.120-22). Rather than demonstrating the alarming violence of the people, as Armistead reads this scene, I suggest that the mob’s actions demonstrate the just application of the law.³⁰ Trenchard and Gordon point out the necessity of such proceedings, noting that “to this spirit of jealously and revenge, was formerly the Roman commonwealth beholden for the long preservation of its liberty…For if any crimes against


the publick may be committed with impunity, men will be tempted to commit the greatest of all; I mean, that of making themselves masters of the state; and where liberty ends in servitude, it is owing to this neglect” (No. 2). In order to be free, the Roman people must see to it themselves that justice is done. Government, then, is the determination of policy not behind closed doors as “[the king] and his portentous council please” (II.185), but rather in public.

The difference between tyranny and the Republic is thus appropriately presented as a public, rather than a private, affair. In place of a government that “Invad[ed] fundamental right and justice,/ Breaking the ancient customs, statutes, laws,/ With positive power and arbitrary lust” (II.179-85), Brutus explains, the populace constitutes a government in which there is

- no change of laws, nor breach of privilege,
- No desperate factions gaping for rebellion,
- No hopes of pardon for assassinates,
- No rash advancements of the base or stranger,
- For luxury, for wit, or glorious vice:
- But on the contrary, a balanced trade,
- Patriots encouraged, manufactors cherished,
- Vagabonds, walkers, drones, and swarming braces,
- The froth of states, scummed from the commonwealth,
- Idleness banished, all excess repressed,
- And riots checked by sumptuary laws. (V.ii.49-59)

Rome’s laws do not change – they are simply applied impartially and are therefore the source of order, not privilege. Hence the revolt does not end in chaos, nor does the order established redefine right and wrong. Instead, self-government is instituted. Rule by the people, therefore, need not be feared, since, Brutus maintains, “‘tis very rarely seen/ That a free people should desire the hurt/ Of common liberty” (III.ii.40-41). In fact, Hayne argues, Lee’s depiction of the mob’s reaction to Brutus’ oratory is meant to warn the public from being carried away by Whig oratory. She points out that whereas everyone else is ineffectual
at persuasion, Brutus is infallible. Thus, she proposes, Lee employs the rhetorical strategies of the Whigs to expose the dangers of republican rhetoric. What makes the mob’s willingness to follow Brutus’ lead so remarkable is the effort and debate involved when Brutus endeavors to govern his sons. Indeed, Titus and Tiberius present a far greater threat to the republic than the mob.

So Lee portrays Titus’ treachery, when he is reunited with Teraminta, neither as a family problem – a son’s disobedience to his father’s commands – nor as a the failure of patriarchal tyranny per se. Titus’ failure is one of self-government – exactly the sort that makes tyranny so dangerous. He puts his own cares above all else and no longer “bound and obedient” (I.282), declares himself “free as he that dares be foremost” (III.iii.153). What prompts this reversal is the plot to restore Tarquin to power: Tiberius and Tarquin’s wife send Teraminta to Titus to solicit his support in restoring the king. At first, Titus refuses, but then consents in order to save Teraminta, as he did when Brutus demands he renounce her. Rather than uphold the liberty of the Roman people, Titus capitulates to the force of love, and thus fails where Brutus succeeds. For when Brutus discovers that his sons are mixed up in the plot to reinstate Tarquin, he does not hesitate to sentence Titus and Tiberius to death. No amount of pressure diverts him from administering justice. And Brutus is right, Trenchard and Gordon insist. Consider “Caesar [who] thought that he might do what he had seen Marius and Sulla do before him, and so enslaved his country: Whereas, had they been hanged, he would, perhaps, never have attempted it” (No. 2). Justice is what “show[s] the difference betwixt the sway/ Of partial tyrants and of a freeborn people” (V.ii.43-44) – what prevents history from repeating itself – a bloody succession.

To pardon his sons would have made Brutus a tyrant, for only under tyranny can one act against the interests of the people with impunity. In particular, it is crucial that he convict Titus, whose crime appears slight enough to incite many to interpose on his behalf. All Titus has done, after all, is consent, unwillingly, to the king and Tiberius’ scheme. He has not actually done anything to aid the conspirators. Titus appears to be the virtuous son caught at the wrong time in the wrong place. Yet his crime strikes the very foundation of the republic if not at any particular magistrate. Because consent is what establishes the authority of the republic – what legitimates its laws – Titus’ consent to help Tarquin suffices to make him an enemy of the people. Brutus must condemn both of his sons equally, even though doing so provokes his family to label him a tyrant: Tiberius addresses him as “Thou more tyrannical than any Tarquin” (V.i.116) and invites Brutus to “Perfect thy justice, as thou, tyrant, call’st it” (V.i.125). Sempronia, his wife, commands that he “hold thy bloody hand, tyrannic Brutus” (V.ii.133), and Teraminta wails, “Ah, thou inhuman tyrant!” (V.ii.156), before stabbing herself to join Titus in death. But Brutus is not a tyrant. He is stoic.

It is indeed Brutus’ stoicism – the fact that he will not be moved in the impartial administration of justice – that offends his family and awes his friends. He is “no more a man;/ He is not cast in the same common mold,/ His spirit moves not with our springs and wards” (V.8-10). But it is the law, not Brutus, that condemns his sons. The law is absolute here and therefore seems tyrannical, whereas Brutus, in fact, is moved; he loves Titus, and the events that show Brutus to be more godlike than human unman him in the sentimental sense of the word as well. Brutus may be “no more a man” when he watches his sons die, but he is equally unmanned when he confronts Titus: “By these unmanly tears, these earthquakes here,/ These sighs that twitch the very strings of life,” he tells Titus, “Think that
no other cause on earth could move me/ To tremble thus, to sob, or shed a tear,/ Nor
shake my solid virtue from her point/ But Titus’ death” (IV.549-54). None of this
unmanliness – either of passion or of inhumanity – undermines justice in the Republic,
because Brutus and Titus are man enough – Stoic enough – to accept their fates. They resist
tyrants, not lawful decrees. So Brutus submits to the dictates of the law and, Laura Brown
observes, “reaches a height not only of stoical republican heroism but also…of pathos,” for
the scene which “establishes forever through his transcendent example the justice, liberty,
prosperity, and imperial power of Rome is also the scene in which he becomes an object of
pity.”

This contradiction between politics and sentiment prompts Julie Ellison to claim
that “In republican discourse, sensibility and stoicism line up on the same side, bound by the
voluntary sacrifice of one to the other.” Brutus’ unmanly moment does follow this logic,
but the point is to show when the force of justice is felt – that is, when the laws which secure
liberty have been broken.

To set up laws which are stronger than blood (and the force of the passions) is, after
all, the point of forming a republic from a ruined kingdom. What does it mean, then, to
govern oneself in a country regulated by laws, since, it would appear, one does not have
much of a choice. “So fixed [is] thy death,” Brutus tells Titus, “that ’tis not in the power/
Of gods or men to save thee from the axe” (IV.516-17). In Titus’ case, as in others, the
characters seem to have little agency. Events tend to be directed by “Fate, or the will of
heav’n, call’t what you please” that “mars the best designs that prudence lays” and “brings
events about perhaps to mock/ At human reach, and sport with expectation” (IV.280, 282-
84). Here Brutus laments to Valerius that he was unable to prevent Titus’ doom.


33 Julie Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1999), 36.
Demanding that Titus renounce Teraminta amounted, of course, to denying Titus any agency. Hence, ironically, Titus’ decision to sleep with her both asserts his autonomy and fulfills what “the very hand of Jove/ Moving the dreadful wheels of this affair” has decreed to “whirl [him], like a machine, to [his] fate” (IV.509-11). In other words, Titus chooses exactly what is fated to happen. And he is not the only character to do so. At the beginning of the play, upon hearing of Lucrece’s rape, Brutus foretells his plot to the courtiers who will be driven away: “Tomorrow Tullia goes to the camp, and I being master of the household have command to sweep the court of all its furniture and send it packing to the wars” (I.179-181). Brutus then tells the Roman people that he sees a flaming dragon that vomits lightning over the capitol and whose head bears Tarquin’s name. “The gods,” Brutus reports, “have struck it down,” a portent that means, Vinditius explains, that “the gods shall swinge [the king]” (I.325, 329). This they do, but only because Brutus chooses to incite rebellion.

Prophecies, omens, and premonitions thus come true in Lee’s play, but as proof of human agency, not divine providence.

So for Titus to maintain that autonomy is possible, proposing that he and Teraminta “laugh at fate” (II.58), “hurl th[eir] fortune headlong at the stars” (III.ii.79), and “Browbeat the fates and say they are [our] slaves” (IV. 25), is not the height of tragic irony. Indeed, Titus creates the conditions for autonomy first by choosing not to obey his father and then by choosing death. He “call[s] the powers of heav’n to witness” that he ‘die[s] with joy to honor Brutus,/ To make [his] justice famous through the world/ And fix the liberty of Rome forever” (IV.478-82). His death accomplishes as much, but not simply by showing that no one is above the law. In addition, Titus’ death stops succession, since with he and his brother dead, their father, “god Brutus, father of [his] country!” (III.i.38), cannot be the founder of a republic and of a royal dynasty. In other words, Titus separates the fate of the
republic from the fate of the kingdom. For the preservation of liberty depends on stopping succession, and succession through blood in particular. Blood is the source of rebellion, not legitimacy, in the play, so it is important that the model of self-government that emerges is not one that follows patriarchy or the passions. Both lead to “emotional excess” – in Brutus and Titus respectively – but this “does not lead to a divergent line of action,” John Loftis remarks. What makes this unity between politics and sentiment possible is the way the decrees of law and the determinations of the will converge, most spectacularly in Titus’ actual death. While Brutus demands that Titus be whipped and then decapitated, Titus insists on his sovereignty in dying, as in living, and convinces Valerius to run him through with a sword before the axeman has a chance to carry out Brutus’ sentence. Like Cato, who kills himself rather than submit to Caesar, Titus insists on determining his own fate and thereby saves the autonomy of the individual within the dictates of the law. He also saves sentiment, in that he is not governed by his father’s feeling; sentiment need not be overpowering. Lee thus transfers political autonomy from the governing body to the subject. He rejects what J. Peter Verdurmen calls “the programmatic political role” of Restoration affective tragedy and Restoration government alike, which opposed “authority figures” to “sufferers” and commended those “who were capable of imposing their wills on others, capable of acting autonomously.”

Lucius Junius Brutus shows that to act autonomously is not a matter of imposing one’s will on others, of acting like a tyrannical king. Autonomy requires rising above the dictates of blood and giving the law to oneself, even if that means choosing a Stoic death.

34 Introduction, Lucius Junius Brutus, xxiii.

Addison’s *Cato* and the End of Liberty

Quid ergo Libertas sine Catone?
Non magis quàm Cato sine Libertate

Cato, of course, chooses a Stoic death rather than submit to Caesar’s rule, and so although Addison’s play does not begin with a literal rape that foregrounds the political import of consent, the issue of resistance and the question of how sovereignty can extend beyond the limits of consent are central. Indeed Addison’s consideration of the conditions for self-government reaches back to the very origins of Rome. Syphax, a traitor on Cato’s side, tries to convince Juba, the prince of Numidia, to support Caesar, arguing that the ideal of Rome that Juba reveres was corrupt from its inception: “This dread of nations, this almighty Rome,/ That comprehends in her wide empire’s bounds/ All under heaven was founded on a rape” (II.v.45-47). Syphax points out that Caesar’s initiative follows the Roman tradition of conquest that began with the rape of the Sabine women. To be Roman is then to conquer, not to exercise self-command, and to give the law to others, not to give it to oneself. Syphax has every reason to think so: he is a Numidian, one of Rome’s conquered peoples. Syphax thus contradicts what Juba, like everyone else, identifies with being Roman: that is, stoically putting aside one’s own concerns for the sake of one’s country. In sacrificing himself and refusing to partake of rest, food, and drink before those in his command, Cato demonstrates, according to Syphax, not a model of self-government, but rather “pride, rank pride, and haughtiness of soul:/ I think the Romans call it stoicism” (I.iv.83-84). Syphax proposes that to be a Stoic is to think oneself above everyone and everything, above Caesar even, when clearly Caesar will triumph (as he has done throughout Europe) and Cato, at best, would be “the second of mankind” (II.ii.23) – these are, literally,

36 “What, therefore, is Liberty without Cato? No more than Cato without liberty,” Valerius Maximus 4.2.4, quoted in *Cato’s Letters* #15.
the terms Caesar offers him. Yet being “the second of mankind” is a fate that everyone would share in a world governed by Caesar. And indeed, the description of suffering that marks Cato’s Stoicism becomes a general descriptor in the course of the play, which determines how self-government can survive all manner of affliction.

Cato, of course, does not survive, and so it is fitting that the opening scene does not catalog Cato’s trials or his virtues, as one might expect. Instead, the first instance of hardship is that of Portius and Marcus, Cato’s sons, who love the same woman, Lucia. They are thus caught in an amorous civil war that parallels the political conflict, wherein both sons demonstrate their Roman nature. While Portius’ “steady temper…/ Can look on guilt, rebellion, fraud, and Caesar,/ In the calm lights of mild philosophy,” Marcus “forgets his sleep…loathes his food,” and finds that “youth, and health, and war, are joyless to him” (III.i.38-39). Both seem to be Stoic sufferers, for while Portius retains the spirit of Cato’s stern resistance, Marcus maintains his father’s disregard for bodily comforts. And they are not the only ones to follow Cato’s lead. In Juba’s exchange with Syphax, the latter maintains that a Numidian can be just as “bent against himself” as a Roman, “Renouncing sleep, and rest, and food, and ease” (I.iv.53-54) like Cato. Juba retorts that the virtues Syphax lists are bodily, whereas “A Roman soul is bent on higher views:/ To civilize the rude, unpolished world,/ And lay it under the restraint of laws” (I.iv.30-32). Since for Juba, the spirit of Roman law is that of self-government, bodily pain, like pleasure, doesn’t really matter. The point is that the body itself – his own, included – need not stand in the way of autonomy. Numidia may be conquered and put under Caesar’s command, but those who follow Cato will defend republican law – that is, the institution of self-government. Thus Syphax is right – a Numidian can be like a Roman, for it is Juba who comes closest to embodying Cato’s philosophy, irrespective of his African heritage. Juba’s selflessness is unmistakable, in that
he does not assume the Numidian throne, he fights for the rights and liberties of those Caesar threatens, and he withstands Syphax’s endeavors to corrupt him. But to be Roman is not necessarily to be like Cato. At the advent of the Roman Empire, to be Roman was no longer strictly a genealogical or geographical denomination – the Social War between Rome and her Italian allies over the question of Roman citizenship was still in living memory – and there certainly had been and still were Romans, like Caesar, who conquered others and built empires. Hence the ambiguity remains, despite Juba’s confidence, and the difficulty of establishing what it means to be Roman, and to “play a Roman’s part” as Cato enjoins, is reflected in the problem of determining who Cato’s followers are. For although Cato’s camp at Utica is the setting of the entire play, everyone there is not on his side.

The difficulty of ascertaining who follows Cato presents the problem of the Civil War itself, which is determining what kind of Rome (and Roman) would prevail. Which side represents the people’s interests? Here the choice is not as clear as it was with Brutus, for Cato, like Caesar, is a commander of men, and, like Caesar, he represents the interests of the people. So far, they appear to be on the same side. Cato’s opposition to Caesar was, moreover, not an expression of widespread disillusionment with regal absolutism; he was opposing a supposedly democratic party led by politicians and generals including Caesar who sought the support of the Roman people in order to diminish the authority of the Senate. In other words, there was no obvious tyrant or liberator. In the eighteenth century, Caesar was often heralded as a hero. One anonymous writer declaimed against the “ingratitude of the Romans to Julius Caesar” who with “his extraordinary Virtues and personal Courage was the only Person that was capable of putting an end to Consular government” (2). Addison even acknowledges Caesar’s appeal: one senator announces that “The virtues of humanity are Caesar’s” (IV.iv.34), to which Cato responds: “Curse on his virtues! they’ve undone his
country. Such popular humanity is treason" (IV.iv.35-36). Caesar has made his cause
Rome’s cause, and so rather than showing how Caesar represents the interests of the people,
Addison shows how the people represent Caesar. First Syphax and Sempronius, then the
emissary, and then the soldiers espouse Caesar’s cause, but by the end of the play, it is clear
that while Cato’s virtues enable everyone to be a Roman like himself, Caesar’s virtues ensure
that no one can be a Roman like he – i.e. Rome’s dictator. Everyone will not be like Cato in
his resistance; they will be like him in servitude, “second of mankind.” Thus Adam
Ferguson condemns Caesar who “by espousing the cause of [the people], made his way to
usurpation and tyranny” (130), while Cato “stood distinguished in his age…and was raised
above his opponents, as much by the justness of his understanding…as he was by the manly
fortitude and disinterestedness with which he strove to baffle the designs of a[nn]… ambition,
that was operating to the ruin of mankind” (130). Addison and Hume nevertheless quote
and admire Salust’s comparison of Caesar’s and Cato’s characters, the former of which is
“made up of Good-nature,” while the latter is “rather awful than amiable.” Whose side to
take was as dicey a topic in the eighteenth century as it had been at Utica. Addison’s play
stages this controversy by showing how porous the division between Cato’s side and
Caesar’s side is. Everyone is fighting for Rome.

Patriotic zeal is therefore not the problem. Instead, what determines the fall of the
Republic is the failure of self-government, both political and emotional. These two converge
in Caesar, whose military campaign manipulates popular feeling in order to establish a
dictatorship. But Caesar does not triumph because of plebian support or even as a result of
military might. Self-government has already failed at the beginning of the play when Portius,
after prophesizing his father’s defeat, finds that he must bolster Marcus’ confidence in Cato

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37 Spectator 169. See also Treatise on Human Nature, ch. 81.
and in being Stoic: Marcus is despairing of success in war and in love, when Portius enjoins him to “Put forth thy utmost strength, work every nerve,/ And call up all thy father in thy soul:/ To quell the tyrant Love, and guard thy heart” (I.i.63-65). This discussion is echoed a few scenes later in a conversation between Portia, Cato’s daughter, and Lucia, the woman his sons love. Lucia, torn between Portius and Marcus, complains of the “tender passions” that “oppress [her] heart” (I.iv.21, 23). And the rest – Portius, Marcia, and Juba – all falter and declare their hearts’ desire right when they feel that everything is lost. In other words, their self-command fails when they meet with misfortune and affliction in love, not war, highlighting the significance of capitulation, rather than brute force, in both. Amorous plots thus serve as a foil for the political plot that brings about the collapse of the Republic, for the tyranny of the passions can undermine self-government as much as any despot.

The political plot that unfolds at the same time is a conspiracy between Syphax and Sempronius, who lead a mutiny against Cato. When Cato confronts the mutineers, rather than flee or draw his sword, he turns to them and demands to know why they consented to fight under his command in the first place: “Do you confess ‘twas not a zeal for Rome,/ Nor love of liberty, nor thirst of honour,/ Drew you thus far; but hopes to share the spoil/ Of conquered towns and plundered provinces?/ Fired with such motives you do well to join/ With Cato’s foes, and follow Caesar’s banners” (III.v.7-12). Cato’s response draws attention to the difference between being on his side and following Caesar – he positions himself as one of the soldiers, not as their leader, for self-government makes leadership at most a geographical position – he was “the first to explore the untrodden path” or “the last in all [the] host that thirsted” (III.v.28,33), not the first of mankind. The contest between Caesar and Cato is therefore not one of leadership; Cato does not endeavor to lead anyone. But the soldiers, in mutinying, are treating him as an unjust ruler; they are proceeding as if
they had a Caesar, not a Cato, in their camp, and empire, not sovereignty, as their cause. And so Cato does exactly what he tells Caesar that he must do in order to restore the Republic: Cato submits himself to the justice of the people: “Behold my bosom naked to your swords,/ And let the man that’s injured strike the blow” (III.v.16-17). No one strikes because the soldiers realize, with us, exactly what it means to be like Cato and to die for one’s countrymen. He surrenders his own life and concerns to those of the people.

Self-government cannot, however, be commanded, and thus Rome falls apart because “the people was corrupted,” as Ferguson observes, not “for want of eminent men” (211). The irony of the historical moment is that the Republic succumbs to the force of empire when it is the Romans themselves who become slaves. Slaves, of course, have no sovereignty, and it is the language of slavery and servitude that takes over the play. This discourse is as ominous as that portending Cato’s death, most notably when the Senate is debating how to greet Caesar, and Sempronius wonders “can a Roman senate long debate/Which of the two to choose, slavery or death!” (II.i.24-25), whereupon Cato concludes, “‘Twill never be too late/ To sue for chains and own a conqueror./…let us draw [Rome’s] term of freedom out/ In its full length, and spin it to the last,/ So shall we gain still one day’s liberty;/ And let me perish, but in Cato’s judgment,/ A day, an hour, of virtuous liberty/ Is worth a whole eternity in bondage” (II.i.92-100). And so just as the number of Cato’s followers at first appears to include everyone, the number of slaves to Caesar’s cause appears, by the end of the play, to exclude no one. But Cato.

Because Cato’s death is at his own hand, he is, to the end, “master of himself” (V.ii.13). And this is no paltry accomplishment, because so many endeavor to save him. Caesar himself sends an emissary to establish the terms of Cato’s preservation. Cato responds that if Caesar would “save Cato? Bid him spare his country” (II.ii.7-8) and
demands Caesar’s unconditional surrender. The emissary—a turncoat senator—is astonished and declares, “A style like this becomes a conqueror” (II.ii.38). Indeed it does, but a particular kind of conqueror—one that conquers himself for his country, rather than conquering his country for himself. Thus Cato tells the emissary, “a style like this becomes a Roman” (II.ii.39) and establishes once and for all what a Roman is: a Roman is not a slave. Both Cato and Caesar are thus Romans, but while Cato’s liberty is freedom from subjection, Caesar’s is the liberty to do as he pleases. Cato’s suicide demonstrates his resentment of the freedom Caesar takes, for when Lucius, a senator, encourages Cato to “pity…mankind, submit to Caesar,/ And reconcile thy mighty soul to life” (IV.iv.27-28), and when Portius endeavors to wrest Cato’s sword from him, Cato replies with indignation: “Wouldst thou betray me? wouldst thou give me up/ A slave, a captive, into Caesar’s hands?” (V.ii.8-9). To be Cato, after all, is to “Disdain a life which [Caesar] has power to offer” (II.ii.9-10). His death ensures that he will be free, for if we recall Addison’s definition, “This is what may properly be called Liberty, which exempts one Man from Subjection to another” (167-68), and only death can do that in Caesar’s Rome.

Cato’s declaration that a Roman is free highlights the conflict between conquering the self and conquering the other. Caesar might argue, like the Europeans did in their colonial exploits, that his Rome has “higher views:/ To civilize the rude, unpolished world,/ And lay it under the restraint of laws” (I.iv.30-32), but these laws are not self-imposed, as Brutus’ sentence was for Titus, and so Caesar’s conquest institutes tyranny. Within such a Rome, Juba, not Cato, will oppose Caesar, because Juba is the ideal subject. He does not care to conquer the world: “What though Numidia add her conquered towns/ And provinces to swell the victor’s triumph!/ Juba will never at his fate repine;/ Let Caesar have the world” (IV.iii.94-97). Juba may be like Cato, but he is, finally, not Roman. So Cato turns the future
of Roman resistance to Juba, instead of to his own son, Portius, because Juba can embody a new political ideal from the standpoint of subjection. He can establish a model of resistance that is not born from what Rome was or ought to be, but rather a model of self-government for the citizen of the world, who is, if not Caesar’s subject, not Roman. The end of the play thus shows that the problem the Roman Empire, like Britain, faced was not the problem of determining a leader and his legitimacy – that is simply a matter of the consent of the governed. The issue at hand is legitimizing resistance when the consent of the governed is a given, that is, in a state of servitude. After all, servitude is the precondition of liberation.

Fittingly it is Juba who asks Syphax, “Why dost thou cast out such ungenerous terms/ Against the lords and sovereigns of the world?/ Dost thou not see mankind fall down before them?” (I.iv11-13). In other words, what is the cause for resistance? Juba’s seemingly naïve question draws attention to the fact that Cato is already resisting one who would be lord and sovereign of the world, so why does Syphax champion the Numidian, and not Cato’s, cause? The problem with following Cato, Syphax suggests, is that he exemplifies the “Roman polish, and…smooth behaviour,/ That render man…tractable and tame”, “disguise our passions”, “set our looks at variance with our thoughts”, “In short…change us into other creatures,/ Than what our nature and the gods designed us” (I.iv.41-48). Syphax’s complaint is standard anti-Stoic cant that suggests Stoics are more or less than human, but he also points to the problem of how a conquered people can resist playing the Roman part, if they cannot resist Rome’s leader. Is suicide the only alternative to being conquered? The opposition between Juba and Syphax suggests as much, since historically Juba continues to resist Caesar, until he is defeated and takes his own life rather than surrender. But joining forces with Caesar, as Syphax does, will not save one’s autonomy; Caesar will be dictator.
Syphax, however, does not even make it to the conqueror’s side; Marcus kills him before he gets through the gate.

The only other chance for resistance presented in the play takes the form of an alliance with Pompey’s son, whose father, like Juba’s, died opposing Caesar. Just as Cato lies dying, Portius announces that emissaries from Spain have arrived, offering assistance. This last hope has prompted such critics as Jorge Bastos da Silva to regard Cato’s suicide as “a signally misplaced gesture of self-sacrifice,” one of the great ironies of the play that undermines Cato’s heroism and demonstrates how futile and inactive Cato’s resistance actually is. Since Cato doesn’t actually do anything in the play but die, Laura Brown argues that the play’s subplots “are…Cato’s action, once removed, and embodied in the active concerns of his spiritual and physical offspring.” But his followers, like Brutus’ sons, don’t carry out his resistance so much as establish its limits in self-sacrifice. Making alliances, therefore, does not present a viable alternative because alliances were what got Rome into trouble in the first place: Cicero had allied himself with Caesar in order to prevent Pompey from attaining too much power, but then Caesar himself joined forces with other generals and set out to conquer Gaul. Such alliances, Cato knows, do not enable one to rise above factions, or maintain self-government. Instead, self-sacrifice enables one to be neither on the side of the conqueror or the conquered.

Resistance requires self-sacrifice of one sort or another in order to be liberating, for, as one seventeenth-century commentator noted regarding the Commonwealth, “Who would not, when he feels oppression…thrust the Oppressor out of his seat? And yet who sees how ready he himself would be, so soon as he hath done it, to seat himself in the same throne of oppression…if he be not hindered by outward force, or (which is better) by an

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Cato does not regard joining forces with Pompey’s heir, or with Juba’s father’s friends, as a viable option because doing so would simply pit one faction against another, whereas what he defends is the Roman people – no faction. To seek allies would make him like Syphax, whose denunciation of Rome, Aravamudan observes, “corresponds rather too well with his own behavior… itself illustrating the dissimulation he decries” (118).

Cato will not act in a way that unites his side with Caesar’s, albeit only tactically. And so Cato is on his own, hindered by both outward force and inward principle, so that his death divides resistance from the opposition of faction and shows self-government to go beyond the question of which side to take. Hence, the eighteenth-century critic John Dennis maintains that Juba should have “defied both Caesar and Cato, and the Romans in general.” Dennis suggests that Juba ought to have united the “Nations between the Tropicks” against Caesar, if he “had been a true Patriot” (2:92). Juba’s cause, Dennis proposes, would then be the cause of the oppressed. And while patriotic zeal reaches its limits in determining the fate of a nation, Juba would represent the interests of people beyond his nation’s borders. The only way for autonomy (of subject and government) to be preserved is for self-government to extend beyond questions of nationhood, to distinguish the citizen of the world, not the Roman from the non-Roman.

If that were the case, then no one would feel oppressed, because no one would encroach upon another’s liberty. The government of the world would be conducted insensibly, and everyone really would be like Cato. Removing Cato from the tragedy, therefore, does, as Laura Brown contends, preserve Addison’s “consistent, infallible, and theoretically emotionless protagonist” as the hero, so that even if he is “reserved, remote, and even unfeeling… [nevertheless] his story [will] … produce the sympathetic emotional...

39 Isaac Penington, “The Right, Liberty and Safety of the People” (1651), 453.
response that proves the corresponding moral magnanimity of the audience” (156). In other words, the audience is put in the position of feeling that he is oppressed, even if Cato is not conquered. It is this sensitivity to oppression that Addison draws out in his audience and “reconciles Stoic virtue with moral form” as Brown proposes. Addison’s play, she concludes, thus “reflects contemporary concerns with the validity of Stoical ideals… represent[ing] the first major effort of a sentimental age to incorporate the Stoic hero into an anti-Stoic sensibility” (ibid). In foregrounding the difference between Cato and the audience, the play makes the latter sensible that they are oppressed, that their consent should not be a given, and that their patriotic zeal can serve a purpose: it can be liberating.

Addison’s Cato, like Lee’s Brutus, does not make the audience aim at insensibility. Instead, the plays offer a model of how to rise above iniquity by insisting on a common law to which everyone, including the king, is beholden. Self-sacrifice need not entail suicide, and the alliance made here is an alliance in sentiment, through which subjects can join forces without subjection. The alliance Cato makes possible is one between the audience and Juba, one that fights for autonomy beyond the Stoic’s death.

Hence the version of the Stoic hero Addison and Lee developed was not one who repudiated feeling per se, but rather one who redefined the scope of patriotic zeal. What Brutus and Cato reject is the sway of faction and the injustice of passion. The self-government they exemplify secures the rights and liberty of everyone, without exception. This equality, which dies politically with the Republic and emotionally whenever self-government gives way to bias, is antithetical to faction and self-interest. How to treat everyone equally is not just a political problem the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries faced. It has ethical implications, which I consider in the next chapter.
Conclusion

My readings of Stoicism’s influence on Lee’s *Brutus* and Addison’s *Cato* have sought to explain how the idea of self-government, which began as a concept applicable to the individual and his/her conduct, becomes, by the end of the eighteenth century, a political model at work in both the American and French Revolutions. In so doing, I am not suggesting that self-government was a Stoic invention that Restoration writers remanufactured, but rather to emphasize how the call for self-government that gained volume in the period was not just an echo of democratic values. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “self-government” was indeed a construct of the period; the first citation of the word, meaning “self-control” or “self-command” is from Isaac Watts, who in 1734 declared, “Self-government is an eternal duty.” By the end of the century, Thomas Jefferson would use the word to indicate an “Administration by a people or state of its own affairs without external direction or interference,” by insisting that particular “rights [be] reserved to their (the American States) own self-government.”

In the period following the civil wars and the collapse of the Commonwealth, the concept of self-government had to be redefined, and it was, thereby remaking the Stoic ideal to fit the concerns of the age and present a solution to the problem of a legitimate and stable government, one that would unite the people, rather than depend upon corrupt alliances. Certainly not everyone endorsed the model, but writers, both Whig and Tory, had to contend with it in order to justify their actions and allegiances. Richard Steele, for example, compares the characters of Cato, Caesar, and Brutus in *The Christian Hero*, showing the failure of their philosophy in times of crisis. He then celebrates the heroism of Saint Paul, among the early Christians, and William III, among British rulers. Yet his description of the latter is, from beginning to end, drawn from the Stoic ideal:
All the Circumstances of the Illustrious Life of our Prince seem to have Conspir’d to make him the Check and Bridle of Tyranny, for his Mind has been strengthen’d and confirm’d by one continued Struggle, and Heav’n has Educated him by Adversity to a quick Sense of the Distresses and Miseries of Mankind, which he was born to Redress: In just Scorn of the trivial Glories and light Ostentations of Power, that Glorious Instrument of Providence, moves like that, in a steadly, calm and silent Course, Independent either of Applause or of Calumny, which renders him, if not in a Political, yet in a Moral, a Philosophick, an Heroick, and in a Christian Sense, an absolute Monarch: Who satisfied with this unchangeable, just and ample Glory, must needs turn all his Regards from himself, to the Service of others; for he begins his Enterprizes with his own share in the Success of’em, for Integrity bears in its self its Reward, nor can that which depends not on Event ever know Disappointment. (The Christian Hero, 86-87)

The ethical implications of political self-government are already present here, in Steele’s claim that “Integrity bears in its self its Reward” – a Stoic creed that eighteenth-century philosophers and authors rehabilitated and made into a literary model.

Incorporating an ethics of disinterest into an ideal of autonomy and self-government isn’t that difficult: if one exercises self-command it is relatively easy to be selfless. Far more challenging was the project of showing how such an ascetic hero would reach out to others, including those with no connection to him, to sympathize with anyone regardless of condition. In other words, how could one make a Cato into a man of feeling?
Stoic Constructions of Virtue in *The Vicar of Wakefield, Clarissa, & Amelia*

The true Stoic, Hume informs us, “looks…with compassion, on the errors of mistaken mortals” and does not “always preserve himself in…philosophical indifference, and rest contented with lamenting the miseries of mankind without ever employing himself for their relief.” Nor does he “constantly indulge [in that] severe wisdom, which, by pretending to elevate him above human accidents, does in reality harden his heart, and render him careless of the interests of mankind, and of society.” The Stoic “feels too strongly the charm of the social affections ever to counteract so sweet, so natural, so virtuous a propensity. Even when, bathed in tears, he laments the miseries of the human race, of his country, of his friends, and unable to give succour, can only relieve them by compassion…so engaging are the sentiments of humanity, that they brighten up the very face of sorrow.”

Perhaps surprisingly, Hume’s portrait of the Stoic resembles eighteenth-century characterizations of the man of feeling: “What can be more nobly human than to have a tender sentimental feeling of our own and other’s misfortunes? This degree of sensibility every man ought to wish to have for his own sake, as it disposes him to, and renders him more capable of practising all the virtues that promote his own welfare and happiness.”

In R. S. Crane’s seminal essay “Suggestions toward a Genealogy of the ‘Man of Feeling’,” he locates the origins of eighteenth-century sentimentalism in the seventeenth-

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1 “The Stoic,” 150-51. Of course there were plenty of depictions of the Stoic’s indifference to external things as preventing him from feeling such compassion: “He that regards none so much as to be afraid of losing them, must live for ever without the gentle pleasures of sympathy and confidence,” Samuel Johnson writes, “he must feel no melting fondness, no warmth of benevolence,” *Rambler* 47, p. 256.

century rejection of Stoic indifference. Crane quotes an anonymous writer from 1755 who questions “whether those are properly men, who never weep upon any occasion. They may pretend to be as heroical as they please, and pride themselves in a stoical insensibility; but this will never pass for virtue with the true judges of human nature. What can be more nobly human than to have a tender sentimental feeling of our own and other’s [sic] misfortunes?” (206). Critics ever since have traced the anti-Stoic features in eighteenth-century theories of sentiment.\(^3\) The Stoics, to be sure, were renowned for positing the extirpation of the passions as essential to the virtuous life, while proponents of sensibility, Crane argues, identified “virtue with acts of benevolence and still more with feelings of universal good-will which inspire and accompany these acts” (206). He cites the eighteenth-century moral philosopher David Fordyce, who claimed that the man of feeling’s benevolence prompts him to “shar[e] in the Joys of others by Rebound,” regarding the good of others as his own. Fordyce admits that such “friendly Sympathy with others subjects [the man of feeling] to some Pains which the hard-hearted Wretch does not feel” (205), but without sympathy, he would not be moved to virtuous action. Stoicism and sensibility thus seem antithetical, and critics have generally treated them as such, for although Crane’s analysis has provoked further investigation, not many have questioned the period’s antipathy to the Stoic creed.\(^4\) My aim here is to offer a more positive account of the relationship between Stoic and sentimental ethics and to show how the Stoic construction of virtue in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) constitutes a rigorous and, more importantly, a practical and sustainable social ideal.

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While literary historians have turned their attention to the broader scope of Stoicism’s legacy in eighteenth-century literature, few have challenged Crane’s account of sensibility’s response to Stoic doctrines on the passions. Julie Ellison, notably, suggests that “in republican discourse, sensibility and stoicism line up on the same side,” and Brian Michael Norton points out that “the values of affective sentiment and Stoic impassiveness were in no way incompatible in eighteenth-century thought.” My contribution to this field of inquiry begins with an eighteenth-century articulation of the tension between Stoic and sentimental ethics, a passage from Samuel Johnson that highlights the opposition, and affinity, between them. This discussion leads me to reform the conception of sensibility’s antipathy to Stoicism that Crane inaugurated and such recent critics as G. J. Barker-Benfield have confirmed. In turning to The Vicar of Wakefield, I show how Goldsmith holds virtue to Stoic standards.

In Rambler 99, Johnson examines a point on which Stoic, sentimental, and even Christian, doctrines converge: “To love all men is our duty.” He immediately distinguishes the sentimental and Christian prescription from the Stoic by asserting what this duty consists in: “a general habit of benevolence, and readiness of occasional kindness” – the defining characteristic of such renowned men of feeling as Laurence Sterne’s Yorick and Henry Mackenzie’s Harley. Johnson extends the range of this duty no further because, he

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proposes, “to love all equally is impossible; at least impossible without the extinction of those passions which now produce all our pains and pleasures…and the suppression of all our hopes and fears in apathy and indifference” (166). Only a Stoic, Johnson thinks, could love everyone equally – an impractical ideal because it requires a degree of impartiality and indifference that human nature precludes. As such, his distinction between the sentimental and Stoic positions does not oppose them so much as present the one as a less extreme, more realistic version of the other. The man of feeling is selflessly disposed to sympathy and kindness as occasion warrants, while the Stoic’s sense of duty applies in every circumstance, requiring the inhuman temperament of sympathizing no more with one person than with another. Indeed, Marcus Aurelius’ dictum, to “Love mankind,” entails treating everyone “with Benevolence and Justice, according to the natural Law of Fellowship.” This latter construction of virtue is too rigorous, Johnson contends, for “Of all our countrymen which do we love most, those whom we know, or those whom we know not? And of those whom we know which do we cherish most, our friends or our enemies? And of our friends, which are the dearest to us, those who are related to us, or those who are not?” Even if we were capable of such equipoise, our “affections, not compressed into a narrower compass, would vanish like elemental fire, in boundless evaporation” (166). Such affections would benefit no one.

Johnson’s incredulity seems to fit into the tradition of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century anti-Stoicism that has become commonplace. Yet his complaint reveals the actual nature of Stoicism’s excessiveness: in prescribing that one love all equally, the Stoics were not eradicating emotion per se so much as countermanding the dictates of self-interest, which would have one be prudent and limit the degree to which one assists others. With his

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undifferentiating, all-encompassing affection, the danger the Stoic sage faced, Johnson suggests, is that his benevolence would be rendered insubstantial and, indeed, equivalent to apathy, or not helping at all. As such, the Stoic sage encounters a difficulty analogous to that the man of feeling faces when his means are insufficient to aid everyone to whom his goodwill extends. Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) and Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771), for instance, present their heroes in such a predicament, for although Harley and Yorick seem capable of universal sympathy, the paucity of their fortunes constrains their benevolence. Even with a more reasonable conception of one’s duty, sentimentalism still faced the problem of how to sustain virtue.

**The Stoic Inheritance**

Although Stoic benevolence seemed the least supportable model, it was also the most exacting and therefore presented a social ideal that informed many eighteenth-century conceptions of disinterest. As my reading of *The Vicar of Wakefield* will demonstrate, Goldsmith draws on Stoic constructions of virtue to make disinterested benevolence sustainable. To Goldsmith and others, the same tenets that rendered the Stoic model impractical also constituted its appeal, because the Stoics, in advocating boundless, impartial sympathy, offered the strongest opposition to theories of self-interest. In response to such doctrines as those advanced by Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville, who argued for the primacy of self-interest and its reconciliation with virtue, many eighteenth-century moral philosophers emphasized the disinterested nature of moral affection as the Stoics construed it. For example, Francis Hutcheson, who translated Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, describes the Stoic virtue when he declares “the calm, stable, universal good-will to all, or the most

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\(^{10}\) For the Stoic account of self-interest and its influence in eighteenth-century philosophy, see Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 57–90.
extensive benevolence” as “that disposition…which is most excellent.” And when Adam Smith directs us to acquire the perspective of an impartial spectator, he recommends the equanimity of a Stoic sage.11 This is not to say that their ethics endorsed Stoic views without qualification, but rather to consider briefly how theorists of sentiment positioned themselves vis-à-vis the ancient philosophy’s virtuous ideal. Smith, who examines Stoicism at length in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), calls it a “most artificial and refined education…which can correct the inequalities of our…feelings,” but he promotes “the poets and romance writers, who best paint the refinements and delicacies of love and friendship,” including “Racine and Voltaire; Richardson, Maurivaux, and Riccoboni,” as “much better instructors than Zeno, Chrysippus, or Epictetus,” because the former more successfully overcome our self-interest and inspire sympathy for those with whom we have neither connection nor acquaintance.

The Stoics, Smith acknowledges, are after all right to contend that “All men, even those at the greatest distance, are…entitled to our good wishes, and,” he adds, “our good wishes we naturally give them.” Yet we are “little interested…in the fortune of those…who are…very remote from us” in geography or experience. From these “our interests are altogether separated and detached…so that there is neither connexion nor competition between them;” hence, “we do not always think it so necessary to restrain either our…anxiety about our own affairs, or our…indifference about those of other men.” In such cases, loving all equally seems pointless. Even if we were impartial, “to what purpose should we trouble ourselves about the world in a moon,” since our lack of “acquaintance or

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connexion” prevents our actions from being of “any… advantage to them.” Smith locates the limits of sympathy, and its benefits, at the limit of our acquaintance and connections: how can we really concern ourselves about anyone who is entirely unknown to us, let alone with equal consideration as those who are near and dear? In order to realize the Stoic ideal, it seems, one needs to be acquainted with or connected to everyone.

Hutcheson drew on the Stoic account of the interconnectedness of humankind to argue nothing less. Pointing to such instances in which the “Understanding and Affections in Children…make them appear moral Agents,” Hutcheson followed Cicero’s description of the Stoic view, which identifies a parent’s concern for his offspring as the starting point of our natural sociability, and proposed, “may not this be a Foundation of weaker degrees of Love where there is no preceding tie of Parentage and extend it to all Mankind?” In fact, Hutcheson suggested, “had we any Notions of rational Agents, capable of moral Affections, in the most distant Planets, our good Wishes would still extend to them.” This love, to be sure, is weaker than our concern for individuals, but the difference, in Hutcheson’s analysis, is one of reference: our love for all mankind entails the “consideration of the most extensive system,” not anyone in particular. Only if “we…refer all our calm particular kind affections to the general extensive benevolence” do we approach the disinterest of universal sympathy. The Stoics themselves had begun with the individual’s concern for another and extended this fellow-feeling to all of mankind so that we might, Smith explains, “view ourselves not in the light in which our own selfish passions are apt to place us, but in the

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12 Smith, 135-40.


light in which any other citizen of the world would view us” (140-41). They envisioned the actual process of extension in terms of ever-widening circles, an image that Alexander Pope invokes in his discussion of how to overcome self-interest, how the “human soul/ Must rise from Individual to the Whole,”

As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;  
The centre mov’d, a circle strait succeeds,  
Another still, and still another spreads,  
Friend, parent, neighbour, first it will embrace,  
His country next, and next all human race”

are encompassed by the individual’s sympathy.15 The center is “mov’d,” so that virtue’s frame of reference is not the self, but rather “all human race.” It was this shift – away from self-interest – that would make our ties to others benevolent.

Such bonds were altogether different from those of commerce and society, as Hobbes and Mandeville had theorized them. These were aimed at individual profit, not universal sympathy, and so in adopting the principles that constituted the Stoic ideal of virtue, and rejecting self-interest, such eighteenth-century philosophers as Adam Ferguson endeavored to reform society along Stoic lines: Ferguson claims, citing Epictetus for confirmation, that “A person of an affectionate mind, possessed of a maxim, That he himself, as an individual, is no more than a part of the whole that demands his regard, has found, in that principle, a sufficient foundation for all the virtues…for an equal contempt of danger or pain, that come to stop his pursuits of public good,”16 And the natural law theorist Richard Cumberland praises the Stoics for asserting that, “As a Citizen of the

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World, and a part of the whole, Man is oblig’d to have no private Self-Interest, or Advantage;” he “should have no Motions nor desire any Thing, but with respect to the whole; to direct his whole Endeavour to the common Good, and to abstain from the contrary.”¹⁷ This kind of public service belongs to the tradition of civic humanism, and James P. Carson points out that Goldsmith endorses a “classical republicanism in which the autonomous citizen demonstrate[s] his virtue.”¹⁸ But the Stoic model does not require any means – including property – for virtuous activity, and so disinterest becomes an ideal that all citizens, no matter what their station in life, can demonstrate.¹⁹

Indeed, the Stoics maintained that virtue is self-sufficient, since virtue is an end in itself. Seneca explains, in Thomas Lodge’s 1614 translation: “Thou art...deceived when thou askest me, what that is for which I require Vertue: for thou seest for somewhat that is above the chiepest. Thou askest mee what I pretend from Vertue? her selfe: for nothing is better, she is the reward of her selfe.”²⁰ Virtue is thus autonomous to a degree that foregrounds the problem of its sustainability, not only because one must love and assist everyone with impartiality, but also because one has no other aims, not even the material goods that seem so necessary to maintaining one’s ability to help others and are essential for self-preservation. The degree to which such an extravagant ethics might work was a point of great contention, and it was an issue which sentimental fiction, from Samuel Richardson’s


²⁰ Seneca, The Works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, both morall and naturall containing (1614), 617. See also Epictetus, All the Works of Epictetus, which are now extant, trans. Elizabeth Carter (1758), 319.
Pamela (1740) to Mackenzie’s The Man of Feeling, took up. For many writers held “That there is an intrinsic… excellency in moral goodness…and that, till conscience is stifled by repeated guilt, we feel an obligation to prefer and follow [it]…in all cases…and generally receive outward advantages, from doing so,” as Elizabeth Carter reasons in the introduction to her 1758 translation of Epictetus. These “are positions which no thinking person can contradict, but it doth not follow…that in such a mixture as mankind [moral goodness] is its own sufficient reward.”

Goldsmith, like Johnson, shared her admiration for, and reservations about, the Stoic view.

Goldsmith’s library contained several compendia of Greek and Roman philosophy, in addition to Thomas Stanley’s History of Philosophy (1655-60), the collected works of Cicero, and those of Seneca. His knowledge of Stoic precepts was extensive, and his interest in the problem of Stoic benevolence already evinced in a piece he wrote for the Royal Magazine seven years before composing The Vicar of Wakefield. “The Proceedings of Providence vindicated. An Eastern Tale” (1759) examines the Stoic ideal in the character of Asem, who retreats from society because, having generously given his wealth away to those in need, he is disappointed that no one repays his benevolence when he is destitute. In other words, Asem learns that virtue is its own reward. One day, while contemplating suicide, he is magically transported to a society in which “Nothing less than universal benevolence is…practiced.” The citizens are thus “absolutely without vice” and “never do wrong.” But because they “have only just sufficient to support themselves,” they can relieve no one, not even infirm wretches “in the most deplorable distress.” Like Asem, they are without the means to aid others. Moreover, because their undistinguishing sympathy prevents the inhabitants from

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21 Epictetus, xvi-xvii.
fearing or befriending anyone in particular, they are unsociable and ignorant. Asem returns
to his own world convinced that the “Ingratitude, contempt, and hatred” from which he
suffered was divinely ordained to teach him his duty in a society in which virtue is its own
reward. He therefore “applie[s] himself to commerce” and lives happily ever after.\textsuperscript{22} Self-
interest appears necessary for virtue to function at all, for the universal sympathy at work in
the imaginary realm Asem visits is as apathetic and unavailing as Johnson suspected Stoic
benevolence would be. Yet the reality of Asem’s society is hardly preferable, for it seems
that virtue is delimited by material concerns and therefore any claim to disinterest is
unsustainable. This impression is standard for critics of sentimental fiction that professes, in
one way or another, that virtue is its own reward.

Readers and critics have long recognized that the Stoic insistence that virtue is its
own reward plays a role of some significance in eighteenth-century British literature, but they
have been uncertain about what to make of it. Often enough it is the negative exemplars –
the ironization of Stoic fortitude evident in such literary Stoics as Parson Adams in Henry
Fielding’s \textit{Joseph Andrews} (1742) and the philosopher in Johnson’s \textit{Rasselas} (1759) – that
dominate the modern view, and indicate the unsustainability of the Stoic ideal. Like many
other contemporary works, Goldsmith’s novel presents an ethics of benevolence that
separates virtue from those circumstances that might determine or delimit it. This
separation underscores the problem of sustaining virtue, which is often presented as the
vigilance of one’s incorruptibility. Such fortitude is portrayed, in \textit{Pamela} most famously, as
virtuous passivity, and in \textit{Joseph Andrews}, as steadfast simplicity. Goldsmith’s achievement, by
contrast, is to make virtue active in procuring the common good without compromising its
disinterest – an account of Stoic benevolence at work.

65; 61; 65; 66.
Christianity or Stoicism?

My argument that virtue’s triumph in Goldsmith’s novel is Stoic is perhaps surprising given the fact that virtue is materially rewarded, as in other sentimental texts including Richardson’s *Pamela* and Fielding’s *Amelia* (1751). Critics have therefore been skeptical about the claim that virtue is its own reward in these works. Of course the novels do not present materialistic concerns as virtue’s motivation; nevertheless, as Lien Chi Altangi notes in Goldsmith’s *The Citizen of the World*, poetic justice dictates that virtue be rewarded, and vice punished. This convention seems at odds with the notion that virtue is not determined by material or external conditions. Indeed critics have argued that Richardson’s subtitle, “virtue rewarded,” refers as much to Pamela’s material as to her moral success, and her rise in station and in wealth have been targeted, ever since Fielding’s *Shamela* (1741), as exemplifying the complicity between virtue and self-interest. In short, virtue is limited by the concerns of the material world. This problem is central to Goldsmith’s novel, which invokes a Christian disregard for things of this world and, therefore, manages to save virtue by giving its reward the guise of divine providence. For only by regarding the Vicar’s affluence at the end of the novel as part of God’s design, it would seem, does the novel resolve the contradiction between Primrose declaring one moment, “I am now raised above this world, and all the pleasures it can produce” (159) and his joyous prosperity a few pages later.


In any other light, material rewards appear to challenge the entire Stoic model: such rewards imply not only that the virtuous protagonist acts out of self-interest, but also that virtue is not the only, or the greatest, good. This conflict is just one reason critics have found it difficult to imagine that sentimental authors took Stoic tenets seriously. Regarding the vulnerability of Parson Adams’ fortitude, for example, Homer Goldberg concludes that “the particular doctrines of rational stoicism, submission to providence, and reliance on grace that Adams has drawn from his reading of classical philosophy and Christian scripture are contravened by his own impulsive humanity.” And since Adams’ good-natured sensibility is typical of sentimental fiction, sensibility does seem to oppose Stoicism, as Crane suggests. The Christian frame of virtue and its reward in The Vicar of Wakefield would sharpen this opposition, then, by aligning Christianity with sensibility against Stoicism. Marshall Brown’s characterization of the Vicar’s “passive submissiveness” as very different from the “muscular fortitude” of a Stoic like Seneca supports such a reading. Yet Primrose, like Adams, is often regarded as ironizing the claims of disinterest, universal benevolence, and virtue being its own reward. In other words, the sense that material reward is incompatible with virtue makes even the Christian piety of a vicar seem suspect.

Thomas Preston overstates the case only slightly when he notes that critics tend to present “[Primrose] as a pious fraud who is really a money-conscious, fortune-hunting materialist, practicing benevolence as a good business investment and treating his children as ‘annuities for old age.’” However, Preston points out, the language of self-interested


materialism the Vicar uses does not undermine his virtue; it rather positions him within the
discourse of Christianity. The novel, therefore, depicts “the Christian’s ‘progress of the soul’
to interior detachment from the world, a progress through which the Vicar …stands out as
‘majestic in adversity’.”\(^\text{27}\) David Durant argues likewise that *The Vicar of Wakefield* is not a
sentimental novel that “embarrasses us by rewarding morality with the material goods which
morality transcends.” Rather “the same disjunction” between morality and materialism that
“undercuts the endings of so many sentimental novels” enables Goldsmith to show that
“adherence to Divine standards allows only immaterial rewards; adherence to worldly
standards brings only material joy.”\(^\text{28}\) In countering the view that Primrose is a mercenary
opportunist, critics thus tend to align the novel with contemporary religious texts that
appealed to one’s self-interest in presenting the attractions of the virtuous life. This view is
consistent with the Vicar’s profession, to be sure, but it divides the motivation from the
demonstration of virtue.

The most telling scene in this regard occurs toward the end of the novel when the
Vicar addresses the inmates of the prison in which he is thrown. He informs them that
while the Devil “has given you nothing here” and “will give you nothing that’s good
hereafter” (145) if the prisoners become virtuous, their bliss in the next world “shall be
unutterable, and still, to crown all, unending” (163). Here, as in the sermons of John
Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury, “the great Incitements and Arguments to Piety, are
the…fear of Punishment, and hopes of Pardon and Rewards.”\(^\text{29}\) Faced with the unavoidable

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\(^\text{27}\) Thomas R. Preston, “The Uses of Adversity: Worldly Detachment and Heavenly Treasure in *The Vicar of

\(^\text{28}\) David Durant, “*The Vicar of Wakefield* and the Sentimental Novel,” *SEL* 17 (1977), 491; 484.

\(^\text{29}\) John Tillotson, *Several discourses upon the attributes of God* (1699), 296.
punishment of earthly justice, the prisoners might well view “every act of virtue,” as “an ingredient into reward,” as the seventeenth-century divine Jeremy Taylor enjoins, and “in every action reflect upon the end; and…what [they] propound to [themselves] for a reward” in the afterlife, since no amount of virtue in prison will overturn their sentences. Happily, divine justice guarantees virtue its due, if not in this world, then in the next, so that even “the sick, the naked, the houseless, the heavy-laden, and the prisoner” (161) can look forward to reward. Certainly the Vicar, who suffers from all these conditions by the end of the novel, is consoled by the prospect of divine justice, and his final indifference to worldly goods has prompted Martin Battestin and James Lehmann, among others, to argue that The Vicar of Wakefield is a version of the Job story, not one of virtue compromised. Christian patience is, from this perspective, what sustains virtue.

It is Primrose’s unswerving faith in divine justice, after all, that enables him to bear his misfortunes like Job. These comprise much of the novel, at the end of which, from his bed of straw, Primrose delivers a sermon on the equal dealings of providence, prompting critics to focus on the Vicar’s fortitude, instead of his ambition, as the ethical center of the novel. For both Brown and Durant, this fortitude is manifest in Primrose’s submissive passivity. Durant remarks, “the Vicar is so quick to prove his acceptance of fate that he continually ignores more practical expedients which would obviate the need for submission by avoiding the catastrophes in the first place.” But his fortitude depends on the Christian realization that this world doesn’t matter, so anything else would compromise his virtue.


32 Durant, 482.
Christian patience thus prompts the passivity Brown mistakenly identifies as Stoic when he observes, “Primrose has a morality…a small-minded stoicism that preaches ataraxia on earth as a prelude to epicurean bliss in heaven.” In Brown’s analysis, “Primrose…quotes…Seneca’s *De Providentia*, with no recognition of the gulf separating his passive submissiveness with the Roman’s muscular fortitude,” but the Vicar’s ordeals traverse this gulf.33

Consider the two occasions when the Vicar forgets his passive submissiveness. The first occurs when Ned Thornhill runs off with Primrose’s daughter, Olivia. When Primrose curses Ned, Moses, the Vicar’s son, demands, “is this your fortitude?” (91). Next, when George, the eldest son, arrives at the prison in chains and destined for the hangman’s noose, Primrose is incensed, whereupon George asks, “Where, Sir, is your fortitude?” (158). In both instances, the Vicar is disposed to action out of concern for another. He declares, “Yes, he [Ned] shall see I have fortitude! Bring me my pistols” (91). This vicar is hardly apathetic, and his outrage is less the spontaneous feeling of a Parson Adams or Johnson’s Philosopher than the recognition that the equal dealings of providence, although a comfort, do not redress the wrongs of, or constitute justice in, this world. Primrose loses his patience under circumstances that present an active concern for others as a just alternative to Christian passivity: in the first instance, he sets off to recover Olivia and in the second, he supplies the letter that explains George’s guilt. While the Job story focuses on divine dispensation, Goldsmith’s novel supplements the Christian paradigm with a model of justice in this world, wherein virtue’s activity is directed by the concern for others, not by attention to one’s salvation.

I am not suggesting that Goldsmith prefers Stoicism to Christianity, but rather that his novel upholds the justice of Stoic sociability as a this-worldly counterpart to Christianity’s

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33 Brown, 173.
other-worldly judgments. Instead of joining a “small-minded stoicism” with “epicurean bliss,” as Brown argues, *The Vicar of Wakefield* connects “the timeless immediacy of events” with “the timeless eternity of judgments” by showing how justice here can correspond to justice in the hereafter. Nevertheless, divine providence does not become an explanation for injustice in the world; the unfolding of events does not explain “why men should…feel pain, why our wretchedness should be requisite in the formation of universal felicity” (160). Justice here may determine reward and punishment, but these are not manifestations of divine judgment. Instead, Goldsmith focuses on what constitutes the common good irrespective of the hereafter. He therefore makes Seneca’s assertion that “the greatest object in the universe…is a good man struggling with adversity” the foundation of justice in this world, insisting that “a greater [object]…is the good man that comes to relieve [adversity]” (167). The good man who relieves another without regard for his own interest is just, notwithstanding God’s design.

**Virtue’s Limits and the Problem of Reward**

When the novel opens, Primrose is in a position to be such a good man, because his fortune of fourteen thousand pounds enables him to confer the profits of his living “to the orphans and widows of the clergy in our diocese.” However, misfortune quickly ensures the limitation of virtue’s means: his fortune is lost and he can no longer afford to feel “a secret pleasure in doing my duty without reward” (21). Material needs thus appear to circumscribe virtue in a way that limits it and the good it can do, for Primrose’s virtue consists, like Job’s, in doing without. He enjoins his family to “conform to [their] humble situation,” and

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34 Brown, 171.

35 See Seneca’s *De Providentia* 2.8-9.
“without repining, give up those splendours with which numbers are wretched,” to “give up all pretensions to gentility…and… draw upon content for the deficiencies of fortune” (26). In many respects, he aims to be just like the parishioners in his new living, who are “equal strangers to opulence and poverty” and, with “simplicity of manners, and frugal…habit[s]…scarce kn[ow] that temperance [i]s a virtue” (31-32). Primrose succeeds, inasmuch as his family, even in straitened circumstances, participates in many of the same “moral or rural amusements” (18) they had in Wakefield. What signals the limitation of virtue then is not the family’s income, but rather the diminishment of the family itself.

Whereas in Wakefield, the Vicar extended his good-will to familial relations “even to the fortieth remove” so that “never was the family of Wakefield known to turn the traveler or the poor dependant out of doors” (19), in his new cure, their visitors are limited to a precious few: farmer Flamborough, the blind piper, and Burchell (33). The claims of an extended family no longer regulate the Primroses’ activities, and the family fails to fulfill the Stoic ideal, extending their benevolence to all, right when their chief worry is self-sufficiency and such extravagant virtue appears unsustainable.

That virtue survives the loss of fortune is established in Burchell’s narrative. He tells the Vicar what appears to be an account of virtue’s mismanagement couched in terms of the Stoic ideal, which would have one extend one’s good-will equally to all. Burchell relates how he had “los[t] a regard for private interest in universal sympathy. He loved all mankind; for fortune prevented him from knowing that there were rascals….Thus disposed to relieve…he found numbers disposed to solicit: his profusions began to impair his fortune, but not his good-nature” until, “no longer able to satisfy every request that was made him, instead of money he gave promises” (29) which he could not fulfill. Such a model of virtuous action seems to be compromised in two respects: first, one assists the vicious as well as the
virtuous, and second, that assistance, as with Primrose, is limited by material need. But means only restrict the good one can do if they determine one’s virtuous activity. Otherwise, means of any sort are unnecessary, as Hume famously declared: “Virtue in rags is still virtue, and the love, which it procures, attends a man into a dungeon or desert, where the virtue can no longer be exerted in action, and is lost to all the world.” So Burchell’s virtue survives, because he does not allow his penury to justify passivity, but rather persists in his concern for others. His mediation, not his fortune, comprises Burchell’s virtuous activity in the novel. This, of course, helps both the vicious and the virtuous, and rightly so, since the consideration of everyone’s welfare does not distinguish between the two. In fact, Burchell only discovers at the very end of the novel how villainous Ned is, and his virtue suffers not a bit for it.

Instead, the Primroses’ virtue suffers. For once they are settled in their new home, the Squire makes their acquaintance and proceeds to help them with a desire for “no other reward but the pleasure of having served my friend” (123). Thus appearing to delight in selfless benevolence, Ned threatens the family’s virtue not through his assistance, but rather by claiming to adhere to an ethics in which virtue is its own reward. Under these pretenses, the Squire offers the family an alliance that will add to their connections and, more importantly, their prominence. Because the Vicar finds himself in a situation in which extending his family and improving its situation appear to be the same endeavor, he is easily misled into believing Ned has the family’s welfare in view. Primrose therefore endeavors to raise the family above “the scrubs” (58) around them and encourages the family’s connections with their social betters out of self-interest. He departs from his former virtue,

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forgetting his earlier declaration that “aspiring beggary is wretchedness itself” (25-26). Here is a crisis of virtue far more decisive than virtue’s wealth or poverty, for virtue is most endangered not when Olivia elopes with the Squire or when Primrose is brought, severely burned and virtually penniless, to jail. Virtue is lost when the Primrose family makes the love of others a self-interested project.

**The Benefits of Moral Reform**

In these endeavors, however, the Primrose family have little success, since their “art…is opposed with still greater” (81). Self-interest, it turns out, is more difficult to sustain than virtue, for when the family’s attempts to raise funds at the local fair miscarry and a fire burns their belongings, Primrose is thrown into debtor’s prison. The Vicar’s lesson is clear: virtue may not require any means, but self-interest is arrested without any funds. So when the officers of justice arrive and his family asks him to placate Ned in order to avoid imprisonment, Primrose demands, “Why will you thus attempt to persuade me to the thing that is not right!” (139). Acting in his own interest is no longer indistinguishable from extending his family, and as soon as Ned’s intentions are clear, so are those of virtue: “let us hold to the right, and wherever we are thrown, we can still retire to a charming apartment, when we can look round our own hearts with intrepidity and with pleasure!” (148).

Primrose reforms and declares that virtue is as good in a prison as anywhere else. Indeed, he realizes, virtue cannot be improved or surpassed, for it has no limits, even behind bars. Here Primrose finally has occasion for virtuous activity in a situation, as Burchell experienced, in which one has no means. The Vicar easily withstands this test, not by recovering his fortune, but by recognizing that the prisoners, “however fallen, are still men, and that is a very good title to my affections” (144). It is therefore his “duty…to attempt to reclaim
them” (145). That Primrose is virtuous for its own sake is quickly established: Jenkinson, his fellow prisoner, “laughed heartily” at the Vicar’s plan to reform the prisoners, while his family expresses “universal disapprobation” (148). Nevertheless Primrose proceeds, noting that “no other motive but [the prisoners’] welfare could induce me to this; that I was their fellow prisoner, and now got nothing by preaching” (145). He extends his concern from his family to those with whom he has neither acquaintance nor connection, treating them just as he treats his wife and children.

Acquaintance and connection are easily established, beginning with Jenkinson, a villain responsible for many of the Vicar’s losses. Imprisoned for forgery, Jenkinson is, like Primrose, without any means to help himself. When the latter is incarcerated, Jenkinson offers his assistance, noting that “you are allowed here nothing but straw, and your apartment is very large and cold. However you seem to be something of a gentleman, and as I have been one myself in my time, part of my bed-cloaths are heartily at your service” (142). The connection Jenkinson makes is not one of Christian repentance, whereby he atones for past wrongs in the hope of forgiveness. He doesn’t even recognize Primrose as a victim of his former crimes, and besides, Primrose appears to be in no position to do Jenkinson any service. He helps Primrose because the Vicar, like himself, is a gentleman at the end of his tether; their common condition – what belongs to both of them even when they have nothing – prompts Jenkinson’s assistance. It is Jenkinson’s virtue then, not his vice, that Primrose notes: “your kindness in offering me assistance, when you could expect no return, shall be repaid with my endeavours to soften or totally suppress…[the] evidence” (142) against him. Rather than confirm their villainy, Primrose prompts the inmates to be virtuous. Virtue’s plot is thus to develop virtue in others – its means and end are the same
(after all, the benefits of reformation are not dictated by one’s assets), and virtue becomes its own reward.

Now, as in Wakefield, Primrose is doing his duty without reward, but his virtue appears in a different light. Here his means do not enable him to be virtuous. In prison himself, Primrose extends his benevolence to those who have no hope of reward (they are, of course, being punished) and whose experience, rather than piety, reveals the good they have in common. For the prospect of divine justice in the hereafter has been as effective in making the prisoners virtuous as the prospect of legal punishment here. In order to reform the prisoners, then, Primrose must show them what is, in fact, good and what is just in this world, where they are cut off from the benefit of the next.

Addressing the prisoners in a room “common to both felons and debtors” (141), the Vicar suggests that they all have a common good: to reform and, instead of participating in the commercial world by cheating and stealing from others, to engage in the honest industry that will repair the bonds connecting them to society. For the problem with prisons, Primrose explains, is that they “find or make men guilty…[They] enclose wretches for the commission of one crime, and return them, if returned alive, fitted for the perpetration of thousands.” Instead of providing “places… where the accused might be attended by such as could give them repentance if guilty, or new motives to virtue if innocent” (149), the prison system cuts criminals off from the operations of society that promote the common good. Primrose suggests that if society took the good of the criminals, rather than their punishment, into account in protecting the public welfare, the prisoners would reform. So he sets those that “chose to work at cutting pegs for tobacconists and shoemakers,” whereby “each earned something every day…sufficient to maintain him” (149). Survival thus does not depend on self-interest, but is born of other-concern. The system of reward and
punishment he institutes is based on the prisoners’ conduct, not their profit, and reflects the social, not the individual, good. Hence even in a “dungeon or desart,” as Hume put it, virtue can be gained, not “lost to all the world.”

With this reformation, Primrose criticizes “the very laws” of society, which “contribute to the accumulation of wealth” (101), instead of goodness, by mistaking the good of society and securing individual interest, rather than ensuring the benefit of all. Indeed the larger reformation the novel calls for beyond the walls of the prison is for laws that promote the common good, in keeping with natural bonds. Like the people in a state of nature, the prisoners are brought “from their native ferocity into friendship and obedience,” (149) but Primrose reforms the social compact within the framework of Stoic sociability whereby the justice done reflects the value of social bonds, not the merit of the individual.

The virtuous society with which the novel ends is thus composed via the disinterested extension of affinal ties, rather than through the creation of strict paragons of goodness. George’s unselfish union with Arabella Wilmot is the ideal put forth, not George himself, who, Brown notes, seems to be rewarded for no “virtues beyond good looks.”37 In this respect, Sophia’s marriage to Burchell is exemplary as well. Even Olivia’s and Ned’s nuptials do good, for they ensure the Squire’s reformation: he “resides in quality of companion at a relation's house…[where] they make no stranger of him. His time is pretty much taken up in keeping his relation, who is a little melancholy, in spirits” (183). As such, he is “not entirely forsaken” and is supplied with “a bare competence…to support the wants of life, but not its follies” (180). Ned is not cut off from society and sustenance like a criminal, for sociability, not self-interest, ensures everyone’s wellbeing.

37 Brown, 173.
And so everyone – not just the Vicar – benefits. Such was the Stoic description of the good produced by virtuous action, which, Cicero notes, belongs to no one in particular, but is held “in common” and sustains the “mutual Society, Endearment and Connections…amongst Mankind.” Primrose and Jenkinson, whose efforts (without material means) bring about this conclusion, share the good of reformation with everyone else, and even the prisoners partake of the “provisions distributed in great quantities among the populace” (181). The end of the novel is thus not the sort in which the virtuous are rewarded and the vicious punished – a narrative demonstration of Christian providence that determines the merit of the individual – for in this world, justice is not individual, but social.

The Economy of Stoic Sociability

Virtue is not compromised, then, even if benefit takes several, even material, forms because reward – including the restoration of Primrose’s wealth and the five hundred pounds Burchell gives Jenkinson – is only an extension of virtue’s benefits and motivates nothing. That is to say, financial matters do not regulate or limit the circulation of other-concern. So when Carson argues that the failure of sentimental ideals in the novel is a failure of Stoicism, he misconstrues the problem. Carson proposes that “the family fails to realize the republican ideals of liberty, austerity, virtue, and disinterested decision-making deriving from extensive views… because Goldsmith’s sentimentalism, itself inseparable from a new commercial world, is inconsistent with the stoical virtues of such Roman republicans as Lucius Junius Brutus and Cato.” Yet virtue, as I have demonstrated, does not triumph by

38 Cicero, 167.
being cut off or by cutting others off from commercial affairs. The honest life that the Vicar endeavors to lead in the country, where he and his parishioners are “Remote from polite society,” is no longer sustainable in the 1760s. By that time, the impact of commercial enterprise extended far beyond London, and everyone’s welfare, as Primrose’s experience demonstrates, depended on the marketplace in one way or another. To suggest, then, that “The novel…presents Primrose’s successful attempt to become a republican lawgiver…in the more securely isolated microcosm of the prison” is to ignore the way the Vicar reconnects the prisoners to the good of society, and the fact that Goldsmith’s sentimentalism acquires the rigor of “stoical virtue” in order to redeem social bonds. He therefore does not “look nostalgically back to a pre-commercial nation,” as Carson suggests, but rather to a society, and an ethics, not predicated on self-interest, so that everyone benefits from the commercial economy. 40 In other words, Goldsmith shows that the aim of profiting at the expense of another corrupts any social exchange, be it the sale of a horse at a fair or deceiving a woman to obtain her fortune. Hence he rejects self-interest as the proper foundation of society and of commerce.

Goldsmith calls for the kind of legislation and regulation that ensures justice in business and in marriage, rather than individual profit. His opposition to Hardwick’s Marriage Act (1754) stemmed, after all, from his belief that it made sure that the rich would marry the rich, and the poor would become even more so. Such laws threaten the basis of society and commerce, because they discourage industry: while indicting the marriage act in The Citizen of the World, Goldsmith explains that “Great wealth in the possession of one stagnates, and extreme poverty with another keeps him in unambitious indigence,” whereas

40 Carson, 177; 178.
“the moderately rich are generally active, not too far removed from poverty to fear its calamities, nor too near extreme wealth to slacken the nerve of labour.”\textsuperscript{41} The economy of self-interest encourages the accumulation of wealth, whereby, Primrose laments, “the natural ties that bind the rich and poor together are broken,” for the rich “employ the superfluity of [their] fortune…in making dependants,” and “each very opulent man generally gathers round him a circle of the poorest of the people” (101) – a very different circle of connected citizens than that the Stoics envisioned. The economy of benevolence, on the other hand, promotes labor for all.

Primrose demonstrates that internal industry is the necessary corrective, for in order to benefit others, one must extend one’s efforts beyond the aim of providing for oneself. Industry, not means, thus establishes the limits of benevolence, as in “The Proceedings of Providence vindicated.” The problem there, as in Goldsmith’s novel, appears to be one of means rather than self-interest, because in the pre-commercial state Asem visits, everyone practices universal benevolence. But the people work only for themselves, when working for others, rather than wealth per se, is what constitutes the public good. Indeed, industry is what sustains the benevolence of forgetting “private interest in universal sympathy,” as Burchell and Asem do. Effort, to be sure, is what prevents the Stoic sage from falling into the apathetic passivity that his famous indifference would seem to produce. So for Burchell to work for the benefit of others (as when he harvests the hay with the Primroses) and for Asem to apply himself to commerce, extending his circle of friends, shows the virtue of a commercial economy.\textsuperscript{42} It can promote everyone’s welfare, equally. As such, the achievement of the Stoic ideal in Goldsmith’s novel is not that everyone learns to love

\textsuperscript{41} Goldsmith, \textit{Works} II: 301.

\textsuperscript{42} Goldsmith, \textit{Works} III: 66.
everyone to the same degree. Sophia’s disinterest, for instance, does not prompt her to
overcome her preference for Burchell and consider marrying Jenkinson. Rather, Goldsmith
makes the extension of sympathy render self-interest futile, stagnant, and without credit. It
is self-interest, not universal sympathy, that helps no one and accomplishes nothing in The
Vicar of Wakefield, while benevolence, in its most extreme, industrious form, provides for
everyone.

Determinations of Worth

The tension between commercial industry and the claim of disinterest remained a
thorny issue, in part because the sentimental project of making social bonds beneficial
emerged at the same time as the capitalist ethos that Max Weber has famously theorized as
the Protestant ethic. How, after all, can one discern the difference between working for
one’s own interest and working for the common good, when the labor itself is the same?
Intent isn’t visible, and the claim, ‘I would do much if only I had the means’, was all too
often a morally bankrupt position: consider, for instance, when John Dashwood in Austen’s
Sense and Sensibility endeavors to fulfill his father’s intention to “do something for his sisters.”
At first, Dashwood “meditated with himself to increase the fortunes of his sisters by the
present of a thousand pounds a piece,” but upon discussing the matter with his wife, who
reminds him that they might sorely miss the three thousand pounds, he concludes that “the
assistance [his father] thought of…was only such as might be reasonably expected…such as
looking out for a comfortable small house for them, helping them to move their things, and
sending them presents of fish and game.” Indeed, his wife declares, “I am convinced within
myself that your father had no idea of your giving them any money at all.”

Sense and Sensibility, 9.
Dashwoods’ industry for the benefit of others is far from virtuous. Similarly, the man who consistently fails to aid others in Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* is no better: “those masters who promise the most perform the least.”

So what good are intentions then? And if virtuous actions are, first and foremost, disinterested, what could serve to substantiate the claim of disinterest?

Dying for the sake of virtue, that is sacrificing oneself like Cato rather than compromise for the sake of saving oneself, certainly proves one’s commitment; however such a *modus operandi* appears self-defeating. How does dying save virtue in any satisfactory sense? This degree of selflessness, although heroic, is clearly problematic. How can virtue constitute a way of life, infallible no less, if it is unsustainable on the most basic level? As Samuel Clarke reasons in his *Obligations of Natural Religion*, “though Virtue is unquestionably worthy to be chosen for its own sake, even without any apprehension of Reward; yet it does not follow that it is therefore entirely self-sufficient, and able to support a Man under all kinds of sufferings, and even Death itself, for its sake; without any prospect of future recompense.”

In other words, even if virtue doesn’t have any self-interested views, what if its efforts are futile? Can virtue become unsupportable?

If we demand virtue’s benefit in the here and now rather than in the hereafter would suffice, then eighteenth-century moralists need look no farther than Calvin’s doctrine of the elect, which posited as much. One’s success in life demonstrated the “good” of one’s intentions, in as much as the efforts of those who strove to secure the means to benefit others might well be construed as disinterested. Hence, according to Weber, Calvinism provided a “consciousness of…being visibly blessed by [God]” that enabled “the bourgeois business man…[to] follow his pecuniary interests as he would and feel that he was fulfilling a

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duty in doing so…assurred that the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence.”45 One might work equally for the benefit of oneself and others, and yet some would prosper more, as God saw fit. No model of virtue would be needed to complement Christianity’s call to piety since reward and punishment are, in Calvin’s view, meted out in this world no less than in the next. To be sure, deciphering the difference between selfish and selfless labor became a moot point, since God’s judgment was manifest in how well, or how poorly, one fared in life. Disinterest might not be perceptible, but success certainly is. The only way Pamela’s virtue becomes recognizable in Richardson’s novel is, after all, through her material reward here, not hereafter. Whatever proof one might furnish for virtue’s disinterest, in such a providential view, is no less indicative of self-interest.

Dissatisfaction with this attitude arose not only because it made self-interest morally acceptable but also because, as Samuel Richardson observes, “We find, that (in the _dispensations_ of _PROVIDENCE_) good and evil happen alike to ALL MEN on this side of the grave.”46 Success indicates neither virtue nor vice, and while there may be an unequal distribution of wealth and possessions, there is a much more even allocation of fortune and misfortune, happiness and misery. One’s fate doesn’t separate the virtuous from the vicious.47 Rejecting Calvin’s doctrine of the elect does not, however, solve the problem of determining merit, which the ambivalent status of industry made necessary. Certainly those

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46 Clarissa, 1496.

47 Indeed, the prospect of getting what one deserves, here or hereafter, does not inspire virtue. Certainly Clarissa’s disinterest does not depend on her grandfather’s will, and getting what one deserves causes problems, as in the revenge James Jr demands of Lovelace, the revenge Morden exacts, and so on.
who are the most industrious are not therefore the most virtuous, and if virtue is really limited in its circumstances, then how industrious can it be?

Of course, circumstances change, and so if one is always vigilant in virtue’s cause, in every situation, then one’s good intention becomes legible through the consistency of one’s efforts. Good and evil might happen alike to everyone, but only those who are virtuous will comport themselves accordingly no matter what befalls them. In particular, one’s virtue will be apparent on occasions in which one’s individual good must be sacrificed to the common good. Success, then, becomes a matter not of material assets, but rather of consistency in conduct. Consistency of conduct was a goal emphasized in eighteenth-century religious teachings from the Pietists to the Methodists, but the neo-Stoical tradition that arose with such sixteenth- and seventeenth-century philosophers as Lipsius, Du Vair, and Charron established a Stoic counterpart to standard Christian constancy.\footnote{Justus Lipsius, \textit{Two Books of Constancy}, translated by Sir John Stradling (1594), Guillaume Du Vair, \textit{The True Way to Vertue and Happinesse} (London, 1623) and \textit{The Morall Philosophy of the Stoicks}, translated by Charles Cotton (London, 1667), Pierre Charron, \textit{De la sagesse} (1604, translated into English in 1612 by Samson Lennard).} Its heroes included Cato of Utica and Seneca, whose constancy ensured the complete purity of virtue. After all, if virtue is the ultimate good, and one recognizes it as such, then one will not deviate from it.

This criterion is quite distinct from the Christian version in that Christianity allows for a person to repent his/her misconduct and thus recover his/her spiritual rectitude. In fact, so long as one confessed one’s sins before dying, one could even be saved without an outward act of goodness. The promise of last-minute conversions did not condone the sort of unfettered self-interest that Hobbes and Mandeville diagnosed, but it certainly allowed for such behavior. The eighteenth century’s worries about such Christian atonement can be seen in Richardson’s \textit{Clarissa}, wherein Lovelace promises to one day reform and repent for his sins – an event he perpetually postpones – and permitted all sorts of dalliances along the
way, as Mrs. Slipslop from Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* maintains: “She was a Maiden Gentlewoman of about Forty-five years of Age, who having made a small Slip in her Youth had continued a good Maid ever since,” and so, having “arrived at an Age when she thought she might indulge herself in any Liberties with a Man, without the danger of bringing a third Person into the World to betray them”, “she imagined, that by so long a Self-denial, she had not only made amends for the small Slip of her Youth above hinted at: but had likewise laid up a Quantity of Merit to excuse any future Failings. In a word, she resolved to give a loose to her amorous Inclinations, and pay off the Debt of Pleasure which she found she owed herself, as fast as possible.”49 Clearly such penance was not the stuff of which virtue is made.

The Stoic account allows for no such hoarding up, or spending, of virtue as if it were wealth. As Thomas Rutherforth explains, Stoic virtue is disinterested and thus aims at nothing beyond itself: “since the good, which they [the Stoics] would demonstrate to be contained in the very notion of virtue…pleases and gives joy to us…esteeming virtue for its own sake, or because it is virtue, is but endeavoring to obtain the greatest or the only good, because it is the greatest or the only good.”50 The appreciation of virtue, therefore, requires the apprehension of it as the only good – not only in the sense of disregarding wealth, social status, etc., but also by adhering to it, without exception. That is to say, virtue must be unmixed (one cannot very well be disinterested sometimes and sometimes not if one regards virtue as the only good). Virtue will not slip or be corrupted in any way. Maintaining one’s purity is of the utmost importance in a host of eighteenth-century texts from *Pamela* to *Caleb Williams*. Virtue’s strength, moreover, cannot inhere in its fortuitous lack of distress, its


ascetic withdrawal from the world and its cares, or its complete resignation to every evil
since what then does its industry consist of? Time and again it is the fate of heroines in
literature of the period to be tested — their fates must prove that they are pure, that their
virtue is strong in its own right, especially since the efforts of women must be rather difficult
to see at a time when women could not be industrious within commercial society to the
same degree a man might be.

Virtue’s trial is more easily conceived than executed, however, for the question of
what constituted proof of absolute virtue was by no means incontrovertible. James
Thompson, among others, has identified various factors that made merit a social construct in
the eighteenth century. He remarks, “from Pamela to Amelia to Evelina to Emma, the
question each narrative explores is what makes the heroine worthy, suitable, valuable?”
The answers that critics have offered — from family to gender to education — have shown
how complex such determinations were. My focus, in reading Richardson’s Clarissa, is the
consideration of virtue’s unmixed character, the composition of a life devoted to benevolent
action without fail. Such an account requires proof of disinterest, which neither her actions
nor her fate provide. Richardson’s novel, I propose, shows that actions themselves do not
distinguish the virtuous from the vicious. In fact, the conflicts that arise in Clarissa stem
from the fact that the virtuous and the vicious may perform the same actions, and these may
even fulfill one’s civic duty inasmuch as they establish social bonds and/or benefit others.

31 James Thompson, “Patterns of Property and Possession in Fielding’s Fiction,” in Eighteenth-Century Fiction 3
(1990), 23, 21, 22.

32 See, for example, Corinne Harol, Enlightened Virginity in Eighteenth-Century Literature (New York, NY: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2006); Eric Rothstein, Gleaning Modernity: Earlier Eighteenth-Century Literature and the Modernizing Process
(Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2007); Gerard A. Barker, “The Complacent Paragon: Exemplary
Characterization in Richardson,” SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 1969 Summer 9(3) 503-19; Alison
Conway, “Fielding’s Amelia and the Aesthetics of Virtue,” Eighteenth-Century Fiction 1995 October 8(1) 35-50; David
Blewett (ed.), Passion and Virtue: Essays on the Novels of Samuel Richardson (Toronto, ON: University of
Toronto Press, 2001); Elsie Michie, “Austen’s Powers: Engaging with Adam Smith in Debates about Wealth
What then does constancy consist of? In both the Christian and the Stoic view, it is doing one’s duty, and yet that is not the same thing.

Cicero explains that according to the Stoics, “A Duty...is of that nature, as to be number’d among Things neither Good nor Evil” (161). They claimed as much because in daily life, there are many activities the wise man and the fool have in common: both get married, maintain some sort of household, and so on. Many eighteenth-century disquisitions on virtue, including Shaftesbury’s An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit, are indebted to the Stoic characterization of fulfilling one’s duty: if “a creature be accidentally induced to do good, as he might be upon the same terms induced to do ill, he is no more a good creature for this good he executes than a man is the more an honest or good man either for pleading a just cause or fighting in a good one for the sake merely of his fee or stipend” (171). The distinction Shaftesbury makes here draws attention to the status of doing what one’s post or position calls for and virtuous action, which is neither accidental nor contingent upon reward or punishment. The virtuous man must have good intentions, no matter what his duty dictates. Hence, Samuel Pufendorf explains in The Whole Duty of Man, According to the Law of Nature, “What we mean here by the Word Duty, is, That Action of a Man, which is regularly order’d according to some prescrib’d Law, which he is oblig’d to obey,” whereas the Stoics, he recounts, held that “There are some duties of a kind that their very nature requires that they be left entirely free, like those of beneficence, which is no longer beneficence, from the moment when for some purposes coercion is involved.”

The Christian notion of performing one’s duty is obeying the commandments, which hold in all instances – the law is constant, dividing good behavior from bad. As such, one’s

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motives are irrelevant, whence those “Instances of Benevolence, Humanity, or other Social Virtue” might well be “practise[d],” as Bernard Mandeville argued, “from no better Principle than Vain-glory.” What’s more, so long as one fulfills one’s duty, one need not do anything else for the sake of others, no matter what the common good calls for. In response, much moral philosophy of the period advanced a virtue ethics, as Alistair MacIntyre and Stephen Darwall have attested, in order to compensate for such shortcomings. Indeed, the problem that Clarissa presents out the outset is that of construing the moral significance, and therefore the merit, involved in fulfilling one’s duty. My investigation of the recognition of virtue in Clarissa therefore begins with the problem of duty.

**Clarissa’s Duty**

The reputation for virtue Clarissa has at the opening of the novel is one that she has acquired by dint of dutiful behavior, both to her family and to the poor in the neighborhood, for Clarissa’s goodwill prompts her to fulfill her familial obligations as well as to provide relief to the needy. She upholds the Stoic model of virtue, regarding “the world…[as] one great family” and her “relationship” to every other as a connection to be “remembered” (62). In doing so, Clarissa has lived no life of pious asceticism; her will has been the general will, indistinguishable from her father’s and mother’s, even her uncles’, a confluence made possible by the fact that the general good of the family, conceived howsoever large or small, has demanded no great sacrifice from anyone. It is only when her friends insist that Clarissa marry Mr. Solmes for the benefit of everyone – “the general good of [the] whole family was to be promoted by my obedience” (109) – that anything of worth must be surrendered. For instead of calling upon her industry, the family’s welfare requires that Clarissa sacrifice

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herself. Doing so would fulfill her familial duty and appear to demonstrate her disinterest, her virtue, because she would renounce her own worldly happiness for the good of others: “what obligations shall I lay upon them all! –And that only by doing an act of duty so suitable to my character and manner of thinking – if indeed I am the generous, as well as dutiful creature, as I have hitherto made them believe I am” (81). To deny them would surely be self-interested, yet Clarissa’s consent is also a far cry from virtuous industry.

When they find her resistant, the Harlowes suggest that Clarissa has forgotten her obligations to them: “If you can comply, remember it is your duty to comply” (179). And of course Clarissa is quite conscious of her duty: “I am convinced that whether or not the parent do his duty by the child, the child cannot be exempted from doing hers to him” (235). Her refusal to obey thus appears to be the moment of Clarissa’s downfall, not only because it leads to the clandestine correspondence and the fateful meeting with Lovelace, but also because it appears self-interested. However, she isn’t valuing her own worldly happiness over her family’s, or even the eternal bliss she might enjoy in the hereafter. Obeying her family’s edict and marrying Solmes is inconsistent with her virtue, as are her family’s motives in promoting the alliance. For the first time, dutiful action becomes separated from virtuous action. And the rewards held out to her – much like the estate she inherits from her grandfather – render her disinterestedness as dubious as any of her interactions with Lovelace, the man against whom her entire family is united. One way or another, then, disinterested motives become coupled with interested ones, either through Clarissa’s marriage to Solmes, or through her association with Lovelace. Separating disinterest from interest, virtue from vice, becomes the work of the novel.

The family’s view that Clarissa has suddenly become self-interested reflects the problem with maintaining one’s disinterest without being willing to sacrifice one’s interest.
This is indeed the problem that becoming virtuous because of the threat of punishment or the promise of reward creates for the Christian sinner. Such virtue, like Clarissa’s obedience, would not be virtuous in the Stoic estimation. The alternatives Clarissa offers – to renounce her grandfather’s estate or to remain single for the rest of her life – would secure the family’s welfare by ensuring that her grandfather’s property would remain in the family, and so if promoting the general good were enough, Clarissa could only be regarded as virtuous. She is willing, after all, to sacrifice her interest for the common good. But the Harlowes have more extensive views and aim at increasing the family property. In rejecting her proposals, they consequently disregard the virtue underlying them and attack her for having ulterior motives, clearly a sign of self-interest. This attack, far from a misconstruction of an isolated, extreme incident, reinterprets Clarissa’s past conduct accordingly; she was always trying to outgrandfather her siblings. Clarissa’s response, although asserting her disinterest, is inadequate because it cannot account for her present refusal: “If I did oblige, I was happy in it: I looked for no further reward: my mind is above art, from the dirty motives you mention” (194). Judging merely from motive, differentiating between virtue and vice is quite difficult, because Lovelace’s efforts can be construed, on the one hand, as attempts to save her virtue, and on the other, as a threat to it. Lovelace’s motives become no easier to read even once she has fled with him. His cousin, for instance, explains that “He is none of those that are governed by interest. He is too proud for that” (1048). He, like Clarissa, would never marry with motives of social or pecuniary aggrandizement.

Nevertheless, the way her parents present it, the choice between the two suitors is a matter of deciding between virtue and vice: marry Solmes, who intends much good to the entire family, and reject Lovelace, who intends everyone much harm. From the standpoint of universal benevolence, the decision appears to be a no-brainer. Yet the choice is not so
black and white; virtue is not so easily differentiated from vice. Both men, to begin with, are eligible, offering large estates and, in Lovelace’s case, possible admittance to the peerage.

What’s more, if dutiful action were enough to denote a virtuous character, then both Solmes and Lovelace might be looked upon as virtuous, for the one, Mrs. Harlowe declares, “took care to discharge all his obligations to the world and to keep all together,” while the other, Clarissa admits, “is not a spendthrift; [and] owes not obligations to the world” (130).

According to the dictates of Christian doctrine, neither ought to be found wanting in morals. Granted, Solmes may be less generous and Lovelace more profligate than they ought, but then both might be reformed by Clarissa’s influence. Her influence, indeed felt by all, is nevertheless insufficient to convert interested motives to disinterested ones, not only on her family’s part, but also on Lovelace’s, the former governed by greed and the latter by pride, while neither are constrained by considerations of duty. Clarissa, on the other hand, is and, what’s more, she is fully aware that the constitution of a common good can easily render virtue and vice a social construct, a collective good or a collective evil. In other words, her own moral status will be conflated with others’; she will fall to either her parents’ or to Lovelace’s vice. In disentangling her fate from theirs, Clarissa’s harrowing tale reveals that virtue will not fail in its efforts, even when it appears that there is nothing virtuous that one can do, because virtue inheres in one’s motives, rather than in one’s actions. As such, virtue the virtuous heroine will not only fulfill her duty, like a good Christian; she will also do so out of disinterest.

Such virtue is not the Christian variety that might be questioned for being remiss in honoring its parents or for offering to take its own life, which Clarissa does. It is Stoic virtue, by which

he [the sage] is disposed and qualified to act a suitable part in every situation in life. His habitual virtue, failing him in none, will ever prove equal to itself. Whether,
then, he rules as a magistrate, or obeys as a citizen; whether he occupies a place of safety, or of danger; whether he be in affluence, or in want; conversant with pleasure, or with pain; extolled by the voice of the multitude, or depreciated; he will exhibit the same principles, exemplify the same character, which nature and reason have taught him to assume, not in degrees, or mediocrity, but in the full extent of its excellence.

Stoic virtue is well nigh infallible; indeed, it cannot be overcome: “He [the sage] may properly be term’d Invincible, since whatever Fetters may be imposed upon his Body, his Mind never admits of any.” The strength of such a virtue lies in the fact that it operates in one’s every action – it is not limited to generous acts, temperate acts, courageous acts, and so on. Every deed is virtuous because it is done for the right reason: “As there is somewhat that we call the Fitness of Action, this is the same as a perfect Duty…there is likewise such a thing as an imperfect one. Thus, if the honestly giving up of a Deposit is a fitting Action; simply to give up a Deposit is a Duty; for the addition of the Word honestly constitutes the Fitness of the Action.” Both the virtuous and the vicious can, and do, perform their duty, but only the wise man will do so honestly. In fact, Clarissa might even leave her father’s house and appear to shirk her duty, yet do so without corrupting her will because she does so honestly. Clarissa does not fall; her virtue is stoically inviolate.

I am not arguing that Richardson jettisoned the Christian model, but rather that he found it wanting when, in meeting out poetical justice, Christianity tolerated any number of

55 Walter Anderson, 572.

56 The lives of the eminent philosophers (1702), 305, 301.

57 The morals of Cicero, 160-162, 171. See also Sextus Empiricus, who reports that “the Stoics say the virtuous man’s function is not to look after his parents and honour them in other respects but to do this on the basis of prudence. For just as the care of health is common to the doctor and the layman, but caring for health in the medical way is peculiar to the expert, so too the honouring of parents is common to the virtuous and the not virtuous man, but to do this on the basis of prudence is peculiar to the wise man. Consequently he also has expertise in his way of life, the peculiar function of which is to do everything on the basis of the best character” (Adversus mathematicos 11.200-201). Similarly, according to Stobaeus, “They [the Stoics] also say that the wise man does everything well – that is to say, everything that he does: for as we say that the flute-player or the lyre-player does everything well, with the implications ‘everything to do with flute-playing’, and ‘everything to do with lyre-playing’, so the prudent man does everything well, so far as concerns what he does, and not of course also what he does not do” (2.66,14-67,4).
false steps on the way to salvation, so long as one took that salto mortale at the end.\textsuperscript{58} Within such a framework, one might well be entirely self-interested in one’s actions, pursuing one’s own benefit in this world with the single-minded determination of a Hobbesian or a Mandevillian, and then transfer one’s attentions to one’s benefit in the next world, converting with one’s last breath. From this standpoint, the good of pure, unsullied virtue, chosen for its own sake, is never seen (indeed, how could it be, for whoever heard of such a thing?).\textsuperscript{59} And yet, Clarissa cries, “Happy is the man who in time of health and strength sees and reforms the errors of his ways!—But how much more happy he, who has no capital and willful errors to repent of!—How unmixed and sincere must the joys of such a one come to him!” (1493). In other words, happy is the Christian hero who regains paradise, having atoned for his sins, but happier still is the Stoic sage, who does not fail, whose virtue is inviolate. He knows that he has “no capital and willful errors to repent of,” not because he has been successful and gotten what he deserves, but rather because he has pursued virtue, without exception, for its own sake. Epictetus asks, “what then, is it possible, by these Means, to be faultless? Impracticable: but this is possible, to use a constant Endeavour to be faultless. For we shall have cause to be satisfied, if, by never remitting this Attention, we shall be exempt at least from a few Faults.”\textsuperscript{60} The question then, of “how, when motive always remains invisible, can one prove to others that an action is disinterested rather than self-interested?” remains, Scott Paul Gordon notes in his analysis of disinterest in

\textsuperscript{58} Richardson’s familiarity with Stoicism would have been extensive given his correspondence with Elizabeth Carter, who translated Epictetus, and the wide range of books he was familiar with through his printing press.

\textsuperscript{59} Lovelace marvels to Belford that “for virtue, I could not have believed, (excuse me ladies), that there ever was a woman who gave, or could have given, such illustrious, such uniform proofs of it” (1036).

\textsuperscript{60} All the works of Epictetus, 427.
Richardson’s novel.\textsuperscript{61} How can one prove that virtue is not compromised? That it cannot fail?

Whether or not one fulfills one’s duty may not be an indication of intention, but one’s actions, Clarissa is convinced, are decisive: “\textit{Deeds are to be the only evidences of intentions}” (242). Hence, “it is a good rule to \textit{give words the bearing, but to form our judgements of men and things by deeds only}” (293), because words may mislead, whereas actions cannot. It should, therefore, be all too easy to separate virtue from vice, and Clarissa seems to be prudent in judging Lovelace based on his conduct in the nearby village, rather than on the reports she has heard. His kindness to Johnny and Rosebud – giving them one hundred pounds on their nuptials – is far more convincing than any representation of his character her parents, Solmes, or Lovelace himself might offer. After all, Clarissa realizes, “there would hardly be a guilty person in the world, were each \textit{suspected or accused} person to tell his or her own story, and be allowed any degree of credit” (172). Judging from actions is also of a piece with the constitution of a Christian life by adhering to the commandments, which apply no matter what the circumstance. One’s moral status can be self-evident, in as much as certain actions, like suicide, are never the right actions. Yet Clarissa’s circumstances are extraordinary, and it is the Stoic account of virtue that allows for such instances. “When a man has a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is his proper function to remain alive, when he has or foresees a preponderance of their opposites, it is his proper function to depart from life,” Cicero argues. “For it is not virtue which retains \textit{[the wise man]} in life, nor are those without virtue obliged to seek death.”\textsuperscript{62} Just as murder is

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62 Cicero, \textit{On Ends}, 3.60-61, Long & Sedley, 425. L’Estrange’s translation: “it is often the Duty of a wise Man to leave Life, though posses’d of perfect Happiness, if it is proper for him to do it, which Propriety is to be measur’d by the Opportunities he has of liing agreeably to Nature” (163). See also Brucker “A wise man may
excusable in cases of self-defense, so is suicide when there is no other way to save one’s virtue. According to the Stoics, there are no actions that are inherently virtuous or vicious. Clarissa thus learns to recognize there is no hard and fast rule about distinguishing those actions, or duties, that comprise virtue from those that denote vice: “How do different circumstances sanctify or condemn an action!” (398).

Indeed she finds herself the exception to the rule, rather than its confirmation, because her plight brings her to the limits of Christian piety, which would dictate that she obey her father, sacrificing everything that is good here for the hereafter. Christian fortitude would serve her well by instructing her to resign herself to the temporary evil of marrying Solmes, or even falling victim to Lovelace and being raped, with the consolation that her good resides in eternity. But her virtue, if at all intact, will require a better defense than fortitude can supply, in as much as it does not succeed with her parents or with Lovelace in protecting what is dearest in this world and the next. Virtue’s industry is thus not the particular transactions of commercial enterprise or familial aggrandizement but rather consists quite simply in doing everything one does throughout one’s life with disinterested views. This, rather than dispatching one’s duty or establishing social bonds (like marriage) for no better reason than to make the best of one’s circumstances, constitutes a true indication of virtue. There is, therefore, perhaps no greater defense for it than when Clarissa threatens suicide, for her interest in Lovelace is thus manifestly clear; she seeks only to save her honor. As such, the lengths Clarissa goes to does not break with her former conduct, even though it would seem that no good Christian who is conscious of her duty to her Father would offer to commit such an act. Hence the lack of consistency in Clarissa’s

justly and reasonably withdraw from life, whenever he finds it expedient, not only because life and death are among those things which are in their nature indifferent, but also because life may be less consistent with virtue than death” (349).
actions, which makes her virtue questionable, is only apparent, for her motives have remained the same: to avoid doing wrong and pursue virtue for its own sake.

Nevertheless, if consistency of conduct is what makes virtue and vice recognizable, then acting out of character certainly makes themmistakable. As soon as Clarissa disobeys her father and flees with Lovelace, she appears to have fallen, and she even contemplates her fate in this light: “I have, I confess, been guilty of an action which carries with it a rash and undutiful appearance” (411). Similarly, through his generosity to Johnny and Rosebud, Lovelace appears to be reforming. The only way we know how to judge such unusual actions is within the context of their prior and subsequent endeavors; so while Clarissa repeatedly attempts to escape Sinclair’s brothel and resists Lovelace’s attempts to overpower her in all manner of ways, he repeatedly compromises Clarissa’s integrity, be it through lying, improper intimacy, or violence. It is one’s other actions that put the proper gloss on any individual action and instruct us in how to “read” what any character does. The integrity of this gloss, far more than the signposts of “writing to the moment” or third-person omniscience, that provides the “reader” with as close to an objective view – indeed, a view not unlike the divine – of anyone’s moral status. Such a gloss is the only way to appreciate the merit Clarissa evinces throughout her tale of woe, which records her determination to avoid vice and save virtue, not her fall into debauchery: “to all who will know your story, you will be an excellent example of watchfulness, and of that caution and reserve by which a prudent person who has been supposed to be a little misled endeavours to mend her error, and, never once losing sight of her duty, does all in her power to recover the path she has been rather driven out of than chosen to swerve from” (578). There are many ways in which virtue can benefit others, even when one’s industry appears to be futile.
Critics including Gordon have long recognized the impulse in the novel to educate its readers in distinguishing virtue from vice. Gordon proposes that “on the level of plot, Clarissa shows its heroine to be free from motives of self-interest,” and, in addition, “by making readers weep, the novel enables them to disprove the denial of disinterested behavior and to credit the disinterestedness of a character described by those within and without her fiction as a rhetorical monster.”\(^6\) His reading acknowledges the central difficulty of representing virtue, or disinterest – that any account will still be a construction and therefore vulnerable to artifice. This problem, which Thomas Keymer’s announcement, “Self-regard is inherent in the very act of saying ‘I,’” presents in its most extreme form, reflects how dubious any account of one’s actions might be. Clarissa’s explanation for her motives might well be nothing more than the “jingle and affecting period” (1256) of humble repentance and no more virtuous than the plea for a pardon that a criminal on the way to the gallows might tender.\(^6\) As a result, in approaching the question of how to read Clarissa’s letters, critics have focused on her passivity as a way of demonstrating the heroine’s selflessness, no matter in what light she portrays her plight. “Denying ‘motivation’ altogether,” as Gordon argues, enables Richardson to turn to his readers’ judgment.

Educating the reader in how to recognize virtue and vice makes sense if Clarissa’s sincerity is no more certain than Lovelace’s, and all the more if, as Sandra Macpherson proposes, Richardson recognizes the equivocal nature of any representation of intention and composes *Clarissa* in part as “a rejection of appeals, both moral and legal, to the integrity and clarity of motives.”\(^6\) Macpherson contends that Clarissa, too, realizes the “inherent

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\(^6\)Scott Paul Gordon, 477, 483.


weakness of her ‘just say no’ philosophy—to question the reliability of consent and non-consent as indicators of intentionality, and the assumption that intent is what makes an action criminal or legitimate” (107-108). But the rape does not undermine the reliability of consent so much as underscore the necessity of virtue’s defense not being limited to others’ determinations of its will. Lovelace raping Clarissa right when she can do nothing is significant because actions do give the truth, or falsity, to one’s words, and Clarissa’s passivity – her disinterestedness – must not preclude action on her part, in more than one respect. All she can do, once she rejects Solmes, is to reject Lovelace too, and she cannot limit this rejection to linguistic dissent. She must flee, for while she remains with him her virtue is in danger, in report and in fact. What’s more, that Clarissa manages to escape twice establishes the consistency of her conduct; she does not vacillate in her morals, fleeing with Lovelace one minute and fleeing from him the next. Indeed, to the degree that she can, Clarissa is always trying to defend virtue – to separate it from any form of corruption.

Laura Brown thus rightly notes that “Richardson admits no inconsistencies in his moral action.”66 “She is faultless and at fault” then, as Macpherson maintains, only in so far as she acts at all, refusing to just rely on the sanctity of her will. Clarissa is willy nilly the cause of benefit and detriment, because “both good and evil alike happen to men on this side of the grave” no matter what she does. One cannot judge her simply on the consequences of her intentions, even if “an individual is liable even for the unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences of his actions,”67 because consistency clearly cannot depend on one’s life being entirely blameless. Virtue must be as industrious as it can, or it will cease to exist, especially when it appears to have fallen: “A stand must be made by somebody, turn

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67 Macpherson, 109, 112.
round the evil as many as may, or virtue will be lost: *and shall it not be I*, a worthy mind will say, that shall make this stand?” (290). Her undying virtue, no matter what happens to her, is thus her commitment to uphold the good. “Clarissa, [is] not drawn absolutely perfect, but as having something to blame herself for, tho’ not in Intention.”

Any one of her actions, although potentially demonstrative of Clarissa’s inviolate will, cannot be said to constitute her salvation or her destruction since both, constituted over the course of a lifetime, are the industry of every day.

Consider that once Lovelace and Clarissa come together, they can engage in the same actions, under the same conditions: they go to church, have meals, and so on. Only then do their intentions become separable, in as much as we are given both accounts of the same events. Clarissa’s experience in the same situation as Lovelace thus reveals the disparity in their morals, which she articulates when she rejects him once and for all: “God knows my heart, I had no culpable inclinations! – I honoured virtue! – I hated vice! – But I knew not, that you were vice itself!” (892). Clarissa doesn’t make a habit of vice, and this, no less than her intentions, is an indication of the integrity of her intentions: “The destroying of good habits, and the introducing of bad, to the corrupting of the whole heart, is the violation. That her will is not to be corrupted, that her mind is not to be debased, she has hitherto unquestionably proved” (916). All kinds of things happen that we don’t intend, but all that means is that virtue, although infallible, is not omnipotent. It can be prevented or misled from carrying out its purpose, but disinterest doesn’t depend on success.

The Question of Desert

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The justice of the novel is therefore not a determination of success or failure, and Clarissa’s fate doesn’t follow the Christian narrative of fall and repentance. This is not to say that Richardson abandons Christian morality, but rather that he reforms it. Instead of making the promise of salvation the impetus to conversion and atonement, whereby forgiveness becomes a deathbed ritual, Richardson stages forgiveness throughout the novel as an extension of good will that ought to disregard punishment and reward. For while Lovelace repents and asks forgiveness with a view to the latter, Clarissa repents for its own sake and instead of forgiving Lovelace in order to marry him, she does so without any further motive. Indeed her suffering reveals how unworthy Lovelace’s own ordeals are, because he suffers in order to be rewarded, as when he informs Clarissa of the insults he bears from the Harlowes or when he takes the syrup of ipecac, hoping to solicit Clarissa’s regard. In the former instance, she does in fact observe, “I was sorry for the merit this gave him in his own opinion with me: and the more, as some of the affronts he received were too flagrant to be excused” (50). He appears to be a good Christian, turning the other cheek, but here, as elsewhere, Lovelace suffers and forgives nothing without compensation, which he intends to receive from Clarissa, by forgiving him once and for all and marrying him. Her family, by contrast, refuses to forgive their wayward daughter out of a desire to punish her, even when they learn that she is near death. The example Clarissa sets is thus not only one of defending virtue no matter what happens, but also one of forgiveness that demonstrates one’s goodwill to all, even those who have been the agents of much evil, without regard to punishment or reward.

That Clarissa forgives him but refuses to marry him foregrounds the lesson in forgiveness that Richardson’s novel teaches. In each instance when Lovelace encroaches upon Clarissa he asks that she forgive him, and she does, but he takes advantage of Clarissa’s
good will and considers her pardon as a license to further intimacy and outrage. And indeed, because in Christianity the slate can always be wiped clean while one remains in this world, he has no reason to truly repent. What’s more, Lovelace would not even have to act very differently, since he appears to do everything he ought: accompanying her to church and so on. His offenses might well be like hers, a matter of construction; “I besought her pardon. I promised that it should be the study of my whole life to deserve it. My faults, I said, whatever they had been, were rather faults in her apprehension, than in fact’ (835). The difficulty in rendering virtue and vice legible in Richardson’s novel is highlighted by the fact that “there is one common point in which all shall meet, err widely as they may” (566). Everyone can repent and forgive, but the virtue and vice therein can only be seen through the conduct of a lifetime, for time, instead of giving one endless opportunity to repent as in Christianity, enables one to show consistency in virtue – to extend not only benevolence but also forgiveness, compassion, and so on to everyone. This is what Clarissa does with the time that is left her, and this is how virtue can, in time, be expressed in everything one does.

One’s fate can therefore be read as an indication of one’s merit to the extent that poetical justice is at work, and getting what one deserves is not one’s aim in whatever one does, the industry of a lifetime. Richardson offers his rationale in the Postscript: “I cannot think but that the instruction and moral are finer, where a man who is virtuous in the main of his character falls into distress…. Such an example…teaches him [the beholder] not to judge of men’s virtues by their successes” or by their circumstances.69

What finally justifies the fates of Richardson’s heroines is the determination of their merit: justice in Pamela lies in establishing (as Mr. B does) that she has earned her reward, while justice in Clarissa lies in acknowledging that she has not deserved her punishment. But

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69 Postscript VIII, p. 312.
this realization requires, in both instances, that one recognize virtue for what it is, that the reader have the omniscient, godlike view afforded by having access to all of the letters, all of the perspectives possible, including those of outsiders completely unconnected to the events like Ms. Lovick, Mr. & Mrs. Smith. Lovelace’s failure to appreciate virtue for what it is mirrors the Harlowes’ own blindness, in as much as that they both regard Clarissa’s demonstrations of merit in light of their own concerns, their own interest. The Harlowes, for their part, inform Clarissa of all they will do for her if she consents to marry Solmes, while Lovelace declares, “Do I not intend to reward her by marriage, if she stand that proof [of her virtue]?” (519), for Lovelace deserves only such a woman. Poetic justice has nothing to do with such a doctrine of merits.

Lovelace explains that he has throughout his life “hoped by a good action to atone for a bad one,” what Clarissa terms “the doctrine of merits” (698). He proceeds with Clarissa’s trial believing that he might, at any point, make good come of evil. Lovelace’s position on reformation and repentance follow a similar logic; as Belford notes, he and Lovelace are not reckoned completely wicked because they “believe in a future state of rewards and punishments” (502). This belief, rather than inspiring reformation or repentance, prompts him to do good for the wrong reasons; he unites his interest with Rosebud’s and Johnny’s, for example, but only to gain favor with Clarissa and compensate for the reports she would have heard of his past misdeeds. Indeed, Clarissa concludes, “he was instructed, perhaps…to do good and beneficent actions; but not from proper motives,” and so cannot be “uniformly noble, and do […] good for its own sake” (698). Thus the doctrine of merits, not Lovelace’s good intentions, directs his atonement, and Lovelace

70 “I make it my rule whenever I have committed a very capital enormity to do some good by way of atonement, and as I believe I am a pretty deal indebted on that score, I intend before I leave these parts…to join a hundred pounds to Johnny’s aunt’s hundred pounds, to make one innocent couple happy” (163).
sacrifices himself at Morden’s sword, exclaiming, “Let this expiate” (1488). Yet this is no deathbed repentance, but rather an attempt at the sort of reparations in which he has always engaged, being a rake who fulfills his duty. Lovelace thus gets what he deserves only in the sense that all of his efforts are finally for nothing, just as when he ran “great risks; caught great colds; hazarded fevers; sustained the highest indignities; braved the inclemencies of the skies,” while courting Clarissa, and “all for—nothing!” (275). Had Lovelace truly reformed, then he would “not have contented himself with doing praiseworthy things by fits and starts, or, as if relying on the doctrine of merits…but he would have been uniformly noble and done the good for its own sake” (698).

Given the futility of reformation and repentance in the novel, the Christian deeply religious cast to the end of the novel is perhaps surprising, and yet, I suggest, Richardson’s reconciliation of Christian piety with Stoic constancy highlights the way morality inheres in how one acts, rather than what one does. He presents Clarissa’s closing scene in a devout light even though, given the controversial nature of suicide, one might expect Clarissa to die like a Socrates or a Cato. The religious fervor she exhibits does not, however, contradict her earlier Stoicism. Once Clarissa is no longer threatened and endeavors to atone for her sins, she resumes her Christian duty, acknowledging her obligations to those around her now that she has been able to separate virtue from vice for good. Her Stoicism has brought her to the point where she can die like a good Christian. As such, her deathbed scene is meant to highlight the difference between the tenor of Clarissa’s virtue when she offers to commit suicide and that which she displays as she dies. The strength of the former constitutes the peace of the latter, and instead of being concerned with the prospect of reward or punishment, she can look to extending her goodwill from beyond the grave, as she does with the Poor Fund. Her death, in addition, is meant to highlight the difference between the
unchristian ends of the plotters – Sinclair, Tomlinson, etc – and Clarissa’s own unchristian conduct. At their respective deaths, the difference between the measures each has taken with respect to virtue’s wellbeing becomes indisputable.

Given the Christian Stoicism of Clarissa’s final days, it is rather odd that Richardson refers to his heroine’s demise as a reward: “The history, or rather the dramatic narrative of CLARISSA, is formed on this religious plan; and is therefore well justified in deferring to extricate suffering virtue till it meets with the completion of its reward” (1495). That death would be her reward, instead of the promise of bliss in the hereafter, evinces Richardson’s insistence, no matter what Christianity might allow, that Clarissa cannot be said to be virtuous for the sake of reward. After all, surely no Christian would pursue virtue in order to die. His characterization of her death as a reward therefore maintains the integrity of the Stoic construction of virtue within the framework of the Christian life, whereby the prospect of reward or punishment neither bolsters nor impedes virtue, but becomes a matter of a reader’s construction. Clarissa may read her life as deserving of reward because it is virtuous, but no one who does not know her past would think of her death as a reward. Instead, they would read her death as a punishment.

Such a reading is not unreasonable. We, for instance, misread reward and punishment all the time because we misconstrue what is good and bad, regarding success in one’s life pursuits as good and a life of poverty and misfortune as bad. Richardson’s problematization of the legibility of reward and punishment is exemplified in Lovelace’s misreading of Clarissa’s final letter to him, in which she announces that she is “overjoyed with the assurance of a thorough reconciliation through the interposition of a dear blessed friend, whom I always loved and honoured,” and so informs him, “you may in time, possibly, see me at my father’s, at least, if it be not your own fault” (1233). Consequently,
Clarissa’s preparations for death can be read as an attempt to “seek sanctification, that she becomes humble, patient, and resigned in order to earn her reward,” as Gerard Barker proposes, or her actions might be read as of a piece with her conduct before she ever left her father’s house – endeavoring to benefit as many as she possibly can.

Her life thus shows what it really means to sacrifice her worldly happiness for the benefit of others, for she ultimately does, thus carrying out exactly what her family demanded of her at the beginning, yet doing so for the right reasons. Instead of sacrificing herself for their aggrandizement – the wrong good – she dies endeavoring to reform them, and Lovelace as well. Similarly, her suffering is finally no testimony to the fact that she’s taken the wrong step – a Calvinist reading – but rather proof that her virtue is not just a matter of circumstance, a result of living in a situation inimical to vice, but rather proof that Clarissa’s intentions are her own no matter what her circumstances “force” her to do. It is our conviction in her disinterestedness that renders her death so controversial.

The letter that Barker identifies as indicative of Clarissa’s self-interest, wherein her virtue is no longer in question because “the desire to achieve salvation simply lay outside the realm of self-interest, inviolable to suspicion”71 is that in which she declares to her father, posthumously, that “I have the strongest assurances, that the Almighty has accepted my unfeigned repentance, and that by this time you will (as I humbly presume to hope) have been the means of adding One to the number of the Blessed” (VIII, 23). But there never was any question of whether God accepts the repentance of fallen men. The purpose of this letter is to establish Clarissa’s relationship to both of her fathers: they can each be the means by which good can come of her actions. Even Lovelace recognizes the path of mutual benefit: “the God whom you serve requires but repentance and amendment. Imitate Him,

my dearest love, and bless me with the means of reforming a course of life that begins to be hateful to me” (909). Her death gives him the means of reforming by showing him the moral bankruptcy of the doctrine of reward and punishment, which does not inspire rakes to reform, let alone enable Clarissa to recover her own path. The way to redemption is mapped out, instead, through the re-cognition of merit in Richardson’s novel, wherein Clarissa’s Stoicism enables her to take a stand in defense of virtue irrespective of the prospect of reward or punishment. That is to say, Clarissa need only remain stoically constant to safeguard the good, even when her actions become indistinguishable from those of vice.

**Advancement in *Amelia***

The strength of Richardson’s novel – to establish how virtue can be infallible – is also its weakness, for it appears that a single false step, no matter how unwilling, can be irreparable. Even if Clarissa’s circumstances are extraordinary, her archetypal virtue is no less so, and the degree to which virtue survives her death is a matter of our construction. Unfortunately, however, most of us have fallen at one point or another, and so the question of how virtue might be regained – how Clarissa might actually recover her path – deserves a better answer than what legal, poetic, or divine justice might offer, if anyone other than a Clarissa is going to manage to be virtuous. Since neither Clarissa nor Lovelace can be said to have restored their moral status by the end of the novel, the question that lingers is one of reformation. How can one become virtuous, especially if one has slipped? The only exemplar of reformation on offer is Belford, who shifts from a life of sin to one of atonement, but he encounters none of the difficulties or trials that a Primrose, let alone a Clarissa, suffers. What’s more, he has, in Clarissa a spiritual guide that beats all, a guide that cannot help us beyond educating us in how to distinguish virtue from vice.
The predicament, then, that the bulk of humanity finds itself in is determining what one must do to find the right path and pursue virtue out of principle? How can the common man succeed in regaining his innocence, when life presents him with so many opportunities for failure? Novelists of the period were by no means the first to address this issue; the visible signs and significance of reformation had been standard issues for debate in the Church for time immemorial. But within the context of eighteenth-century religious reform movements including George Whitefield’s “Great Awakening,” the rise of Methodism, Pietism, Quakerism and other such “revivals,” the experience and orchestration of reformation through conversion received greater attention than ever before. The dubiousness of one’s motives in asserting newfound faith and the consequences of this faith for virtue’s survival are central to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, Smollett’s *The Adventures of Humphrey Clinker*, and Lewis’ *The Monk*. My examination here focuses on Fielding’s *Amelia* in part because the hero’s reformation hinges on a moment of spiritual conversion that has sparked much critical incredulity and in part because the novel explores a range of stoical views designed to aid the hero in bearing with his circumstances as best as he can, yet without helping him advance.

The conversion in question takes place while Captain Booth is imprisoned, not for the first time, and thus represents no deathbed repentance. But Booth’s plight in jail is no different from elsewhere; Alan Wendt points out that the hope of reward and the fear of punishment have no bearing on Booth’s conduct whatsoever. As such, Wendt argues, Fielding’s novel foregrounds "the limitations of the doctrine of reward and punishment" through its exposure of “the sins committed by the many people in the novel who have only hope and fear for stimuli to right action.”72 Booth is no better, however, and his missteps

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72 145.
are no less serious than others'. What differentiates him from the rest are his intentions, which remain beneficent and amiable, if not entirely blameless. As such, Booth’s conversion does not reflect a transformation in motivation so much as in his state of mind, whereby he is ready to account for himself and his actions, not only to God but to Amelia as well.

The goal in any conversion – be it at one’s deathbed or any such critical moment – is that one not have much to confess or atone for at all. That is to say, one should not have a lot to account for if one has lived as one ought. The show of faith entailed, moreover, is one of repentance, not justification, whereby one demonstrates that one shares the same view of one’s actions as God might have. Isaac Barrow, the theologian whose works Booth reads at the moment of his conversion, presents redemption in terms of how much one has to account for: those who are well-off end up with little by helping others in need (like Dr. Harrison) and those who are poor will also have little to account for if they avoid vice. Spiritual advancement thus does not require much success here below: “Wealth and Prosperity are great Talents, for the Improvement of which we must render a strict Account, so that to whom much is given, from him much shall be required; so that they are, in effect, a Burthen; from which Poverty includes an exemption; for the less we have, the less we have to do, the less we are responsible for; our Burthen is smaller, our Account will be more easie.”

Advancement should be easy, then, because the first chapters of the novel establish that he has hardly a penny to his name and the only slip he has to account for is his dalliance in jail with Miss Mathews, and those circumstances were, like Clarissa’s, rather extraordinary.

The problem Booth encounters with his own advancement, however, is the most practical; atoning for past error and committing himself to a life of virtue might cost him everything he has, since he must engage in some rather dubious transactions in order to

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73 Sermon IV’, Of Contentment, 113.
sufficiently provide for his family. These, of course, are arrested with him every time he winds up in jail, so it is fitting that Booth figures out how to come clean while imprisoned. True penitence, to be sure, is no more guaranteed by a confession than by an institution of correction, but Booth is finally liberated in every way because he decides to “relat[e]... the whole that had pass’d between him and Miss Mathews” in addition to “all that he had done and suffered, to conceal his transgression from her knowledge” (507). In other words, Booth figures out that his corruption, like his advancement, depends on a series of steps, and is the result of time and effort, rather than a single event. He does not endeavor to dilute his guilt, moreover, with rationalizations; instead his confession reveals Booth’s “unworthiness” which had never “appear[ed] to him so mean and contemptible, as at this instant” (508). Learning the lesson of one’s actions need not depend on being rewarded or punished; his conversion is more the result of having struggled with a foolish action, and seeing that his struggles are literally getting him nowhere. When Booth realizes that what he must do is inform Amelia of his indiscretions, instead of continuing in his iniquity, he has no view toward advancement, and thus his disinterest makes his conversion authentic and constitutes the most important squaring of his debts he pursues. After all, he owes her the truth no less than Robinson, the villain whose deceit put the Booth in the position of attempting to advance, financially not morally, in the first place.

I propose that Fielding’s contribution to the period’s fascination with conversion and repentance, exemplified in texts from Defoe’s Moll Flanders to Godwin’s Caleb Williams, is to consider how reformation is life changing, what it actually entails, and therefore, how to recover the path of virtue.⁷⁴ In doing so Fielding sought a path to redemption that did not depend on reward or punishment, that activated one’s disinterest and, as Lyall Powers

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⁷⁴ John Bender has explored the literary enactment of penitence in Imagining the Penitentiary, while R. F. Brissenden’s Virtue in Distress examines the archetypal test of faith.
concurs with Sherburn, thus “reconcil[es] pagan ethics (that is, Stoicism) with Christian principles.” Fielding’s admiration of the ancients is well documented, and his willingness to mix pagan ideals with Christian doctrine can be seen in such figures as Parson Adams; he was convinced that Stoic and Christian models might work together, the one strengthening the other, so that even if one is like Booth and lacks religion, one need not be without the principles that can set one on the path of virtue.

The Source of Vice

If the prospect of eternal judgment isn’t the foundation of virtue in this world, then neither is the legal system, which does more to entrench the ways of vice than reclaim them. Indeed, even those intended to adjudicate between right and wrong, virtue and vice promote virtue’s fall, for when the hero of Fielding’s novel, William Booth, is introduced to the reader, he is also placed before Judge Thrasher. The Judge’s own inability to determine who is good and evil parallels Booth’s; yet the latter’s failure to distinguish virtue from vice as he contemplates his fellow inmates arises out of innocence, rather than self-interest, which directs the Judge’s verdicts. The comparison between Thrasher’s and Booth’s lack of discernment is also revealing in that the Judge’s mistakes are governed by a system of reward and punishment, whereas Booth’s blunders arise from his good nature, a desire to help others regardless of the cost to himself. Recovering the path of virtue requires more than the tendency to want to help others and maintain a positive, if not stoical, mindset in the face of adversity. Indeed, while the opening of the novel establishes that Booth is not self-interested, as with Clarissa, circumstances can compromise his virtue. Is reformation nothing more than a matter of circumstances?

The action that appears to be the inception of Booth’s troubles is, as in Richardson’s novel, one that stems from good intentions: he is incarcerated for coming to the defense of a stranger who was under attack and outnumbered, the kind of selfless action any virtuous person of spirit would undertake. It is true that Booth may not be acting from principle, yet his inability to judge rightly and consistently, combined with his being a man of spirit, occasions his errors. His guilt, from the outset, is the result of his endeavors to make his current situation as pleasant as possible, which appears to the most eligible way of struggling with adversity, rather than repine or despair. To make the best of his plight was, after all, what Booth set about doing upon entering the jail: “as soon...as he was at liberty, and declared free of the place, he summoned his philosophy, of which he had no inconsiderable share, to his assistance, and resolved to make himself as easy as possible under his present circumstances” (I.iii.20). Notwithstanding his admirable frame of mind under such circumstances, Booth falls, rather than advancing in morals, and Fielding spends the novel establishing a form of atonement for his hero that allows for the occasional difficulty in differentiating good and evil and illuminates what recovering the basis of one’s virtue really involves. It is thus Booth’s crime, committed while he is “resolved to make himself as easy as possible under his present circumstances,” that constitutes virtue’s trial, for “to retrieve the ill Consequences of a foolish Conduct, and by struggling manfully with Distress to subdue it,” Fielding’s narrator intones, is “one of the noblest Efforts of...Virtue” (16). Because all of us are human, we might well err, but can we stop ourselves from further error? Booth does struggle manfully with his circumstances and endeavors not to fall, but the conditions of moral error are intertwined with those of financial ruin, and so virtue’s

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76 Making the best of his situation is, the reader soon discovers, at the root of many of his past decisions, which have occasioned more trouble than pleasure. For example, when Booth procures a coach and six for Amelia, his aim is to please her and make her more comfortable; yet his action is regarded as that of a social upstart by the community and results in the family’s loss of their livelihood.
survival becomes a problem of advancement, in transcending the limitations of any and every condition.

Much of the novel is devoted to Booth’s advancement, to be sure, and that is not based on his valor on the battlefield or demonstrated by his attempts to secure his family’s welfare, which are invariably determined and delimited by his condition, the circumstances of his position. Unfortunately, every form of advancement (other than in morals) is not determined by merit, as the family’s friend Reverend Harrison laments in his discussion with a nobleman who might assist in promoting Booth. But the failure of merit to suffice is what Richardson already established; in Fielding’s realism, merit fails because everyone, it turns out, has fallen: Miss Mathews, Mrs. Bennett, Colonel James, and of course Booth. Virtue’s heroic struggles are by no means limited to defending itself from the likes of a Lovelace or the nobleman who seduces Ms. Bennett. Virtue must, on a consistent basis, strive to avoid thinking that the force of circumstances and the vicissitudes of life really limit, in any way, what one can do to advance. The road to advancement has no obvious end, which is why the novel is so concerned with what its fallen characters do, given the danger that “men whose manners have been once thoroughly corrupted, [are apt] to return from any dawn of any amendment, into the dark paths of vice” (XII.viii-ix, vol. II.308). The interpolated stories of Miss Mathews’ and Mrs. Bennett’s experiences thus become analogues for Booth’s own trial, and in following an array of advancements, the novel looks to ways in which advancement is possible when one has neither means nor guide, how virtue, having erred, can recover its path.

The Resources of Virtue
Disinterested views alone do not constitute a guide for living, which the Stoics famously sought to provide: not only does the question of how to improve oneself seem hardly consistent with improving one’s situation, but how can one advance in selflessness? The problem that Richardson’s novel only began to demonstrate is that recovery is no easier than not falling in the first place. Booth has a principle, and a selfless one, as he informs Amelia: “This you may depend on…that your good and happiness are the great objects of all my wishes, and the end I propose in all my actions. This view alone could tempt me to refuse you any thing, or to conceal any thing from you” (250). Yet having such a principle saves Booth no more than it can Clarissa, and he, being far more human, is much more easily bamboozled. So although Booth is selfless in the conditions under which he marries Amelia — “there was…an agreement between myself and Mrs. Harris that I should settle all my Amelia’s fortune on her, except a certain sum, which was to be laid out in my advancement in the army” (92) — he nevertheless aspires to a greater station in life, exemplified in his purchase of a coach and six or other luxuries. Booth needs a better guide to recovery than simply the principle of disinterest, for even a more constant mentor like Dr. Harrison cannot infallibly distinguishing between good and evil. Martin Battestin argues, “The doctrine Fielding opposes to these errors {of impatience with adversity and a lack of faith in providence} is the conventional wisdom of Christian stoicism, deriving ultimately from Cicero and Seneca, for whom virtue was the *ars vivendi*” (618). This art was not in telling the difference between good and evil, which not even a Clarissa could do unerringly. Advancement is ensured through one’s principle of action in doing whatever one does, be it providing for one’s family or endeavoring to help others (which requires the same industry).

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77 Epictetus’ *Enchiridion* (meaning ‘Handbook’) and Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* are noteworthy examples.
Booth’s own failings in this department stem in part from his belief that there is no underlying guiding principle to anyone’s actions, self-interested or otherwise. Instead, Booth believes that people act based on the passion that is uppermost at any given moment. As a result, what is “good” at any given moment can change, whereupon advancement becomes a question of happenstance. One might easily think that there is no way to ensure advancement at all and conclude that conventional guidelines for living are only circumstantially applicable. Critics have thus attributed Booth’s failure to advance to his outlook rather than to Fielding’s indictment of society.78 As Allan Wendt suggests, “Booth has…slid into the error of assuming that because benevolence may appear without the sanction of religion or virtue, the standards imposed by religion and virtue are meaningless.” Yet “if customary standards of virtue have no meaning, why should he hesitate to sacrifice his wife or feel remorse when he is unfaithful to her?” Wendt asks.79 Booth is often able to tell the difference between right and wrong, as he evinces in his honorable insistence on going to Gibraltar, his steadfast refusal to pimp his wife, and his resolution not to play cards – yet these instances indicate nothing more than that he is capable of virtue, for he remains throughout quite capable of vice. Virtue is a matter of circumstance for Booth; the kind of principle he needs is one that quite literally makes the best of any circumstances, so that he can “retrieve the ill consequences of a foolish conduct” no matter what they are.

Retrieving the ill consequences of a foolish conduct is perhaps most difficult from behind bars, where reformation is nevertheless most wanted. The captain’s attempts to “make himself as easy as possible under his present circumstances,” the very crux of


advancement, secures his progress no more successfully than his release from prison. For each time Booth is incarcerated he fails to come to better terms with his situation, whereby his lack of success is epitomized by his repeated imprisonment. Only once he reads Isaac Barrow’s sermons while behind bars for the third time does Booth convert and figure out what he must do: come clean with Amelia about all of his false steps and begin to follow the decree he set himself so long ago, to have his family’s welfare in view in everything he does.

Critics have long inveighed against this conversion, because a few sermons suffice to alter his beliefs when much experience hasn’t brought about the captain’s reformation. Yet Barrow has a great deal to say about making the most of one’s situation: “We are apt, when anything falleth out unpleasant to us, to exclaim against fortune, and to accuse our stars; or to inveigh against the second causes which immediately offend us, ascribing all to their influence…that our judgment is blinded and clouded, or perverted and seduced by ill passions” when “in truth there is not in the world any occurrence merely fortuitous, or fatal (all being guided and wielded by the powerful hand of the All-wise and Almighty God).”

He cites Seneca – “we must settle our wild fancy, and suppress fond conceits; we must bend our stiff and stubborn inclinations; we must repress and restrain wanton desires; we must allay and still tumultuous passions; we must cross our humour and curb our temper.” How does grinning and bearing it like a Stoic enable one to advance?

This is a tricky question, because one might think that enduring whatever fortune brings would improve nothing and simply prolong one’s suffering. To be sure, Booth’s attempts to make the best of his circumstances while in prison don’t liberate him. The doctrine of making the most of one’s circumstances by deciding that everything that has

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80 Sermon V, Of Contentment, in Works, 5th ed (1741) III, 38.

happened was meant to happen and one need only realize that one’s circumstances aren’t really bad appears, like Christian injunctions for patience, to be more of a generalized, hopeful rule than a practicable outlook that is universally applicable. Moreover, while Booth might exert himself regarding his state of mind, he is, time and again, completely ineffective at securing his advancement. As many critics have noted, the most trying moments for Booth, in disposition and social standing, are when he can do nothing at all, either to ensure his advancement or to provide for Amelia and his children. What choice does he have but to grin and bear everything? These moments are when Booth is incarcerated, and seemingly helpless to free himself as much of his debt as he is of his sins. Booth encounters three perspectives on how to regard one’s circumstances. The first position is stoical: Robinson’s view of fate holds that “what is, is; and what must be, must be,” the knowledge of which “renders a wise man superior to every evil which can befall him.” According to Robinson, a wise man will soon bring himself to bear with indifference: for what is, is; and what must be, must be. The knowledge of this, which, simple as it appears, is in truth the height of all philosophy, renders a wise man superior to every evil which can befall him. I hope, sir, no very dreadful accident is the cause of your coming hither; but whatever it was, you may be assured it could not be otherwise: for all things happen by an inevitable fatality; and a man can no more resist the impulse of fate, than a wheel-barrow can the force of its driver. (22)\(^2\)

In other words, Robinson turns to a fatalistic stoical worldview that relieves him of responsibility for his own destiny to the same degree that poverty and destitution would seem to excuse one from being selflessly generous and, as such, virtuous. If forces beyond one’s control arrange everything, however, then nothing one does or doesn’t do makes a difference, and so one cannot escape vice or acquire virtue. Advancement becomes impossible even if one is “not one of those mean wretches who can sit down and lament

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their misfortunes” (44) as Robinson claims to be. Such stoicism, the narrator informs us, “very nearly coincided with [the sentiments] of Mr Booth” (30); thus he does nothing and fails to regain the path of virtue.

Carla Mulford suggests that Booth fails as a Stoic in being “humble before adverse circumstance” (23), because this point of view requires that one “eradicate the passions altogether,” whereas “Booth’s doctrine of the passions implies that Stoic indifference is not only impractical but impossible” (24). Her reasoning is sound: if one does not have an uppermost passion, then one will not act at all and clearly some action is called for since grinning and bearing everything improves nothing. The problem Booth faces is that acting from the uppermost passion (be it courage in defending others or selflessness in generosity or warmth of feeling for Mrs. Mathews) often gets him into trouble and so he continues along his path of light missteps rather than recovering his virtue. But being indifferent to circumstance is not a matter of eradicating the passions; instead, it entails knowing what to do no matter what happens. Indeed, one acts rightly without fail. One need not summon one’s philosophy, since one always has it – an outlook that is at all times uppermost. Knowing what to do when one can ostensibly do nothing (being incarcerated) is what Barrow’s sermons illuminate.

The importance of such knowledge is foregrounded by Booth’s incarceration for a second time, whereupon he encounters another view of fate, again stoical, and this time Booth “entirely agree[s] with the justice of [the] sentiments” expressed. These are founded on “the brevity of life” and “the uncertainty of it,” which leads the Stoic to “look on all those things, which are esteemed the blessings of life, and those which are dreaded as its evils, with such a degree of indifference, that as I should not be elated with possessing the former, so neither am I greatly dejected and depressed by suffering the latter” (349). This
perspective, the Stoic inmate maintains, renders one “superior to all the attacks of fortune” (350) without exception. His philosophy reaches its limit, however, when the bailiff informs him that he will be brought to Newgate a day early, and he protests, exclaiming that he would be “the most miserable man alive” (351) to be sent before his time. The irony that he wouldn’t be alive to be miserable highlights the emptiness of his declarations, as Booth himself recognizes: “however true all this [his sentiments] may be in Theory, I still doubt its Efficacy in Practice” (350). Being indifferent to those things that constitute one’s circumstances – riches, fame, disease, and so on – does not give one the means by which to live. What Booth must learn is that no system will secure his livelihood anymore than any system can save him from death. Advancement involves striving to make one’s virtuous principles a way of life no matter what one’s means or prospects. This is the Stoic outlook that Booth acquires.

**Stoic views**

Seneca, for example, claims, “there can be no Happiness without Constancy, and Prudence… He lives always true, and steady to himself, and whatsoever befalls him, this great Artificer of both Fortunes turns to Advantage.”\(^{83}\) In short, while refusing to complain about his fate, the Stoic sage’s fortitude activates him. Amelia’s own fortitude is precisely the Stoic sort. When she learns that Booth has been arrested again, she goes to Mrs. Atkinson and bewails her fate, but quickly apologizes, explaining, “the suddenness of the occasion is my only excuse; for had I had time to summon my resolution to my assistance, I hope I am mistress of more patience than you have hitherto seen me exert.” She resolves, “instead of weakly and heavily lamenting [her] misfortunes” to “rouse all [her] spirits to

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\(^{83}\) *Seneca’s morals by way of abstract* (1738), 96.
remove them” (320). She goes immediately to the pawn shop and disposes of her own moveable goods, acquiring enough money to provide for her family, exactly what Booth claims is his guiding principle. What’s more, Amelia’s fortitude is demonstrated in her efforts to defend her virtue by refusing to entertain his Lordship once she learns of his intentions. She is vigilant in promoting and protecting her family’s welfare, to the extent that she will make any sacrifice. So although Conway claims that “Unlike Richardson’s heroine, Amelia seems entirely passive in her efforts to achieve moral good” (45), her agency is far more successful in every sense than Booth’s. The captain can only achieve success once he stops pursuing forms of advancement other than recovering from the consequences of his foolish actions.

Conway’s point that “even privately Amelia can effect very little change” and his characterization of Booth’s actions as “so irresponsible as to be immoral” (45) reveals the confluence between Richardson’s and Fielding’s novels. In its examination of how to regain the path of virtue, the latter establishes the nature of virtue’s agency in a world in which encouragements to virtue are often just as misleading as those to vice and when not, are by and large ineffective: Amelia’s excellence does not secure her husband’s reformation any more than Clarissa’s virtue is capable of converting Lovelace. But where Clarissa’s propriety severely limits her ability to save herself, Amelia has nothing – no other form of value – to safeguard or advance, and so Fielding is able to present a heroine whose “virtue could support itself with its own intrinsic worth’ (154). What virtue can do in the world is little, especially when it lacks sufficient means, and yet it is never stymied or overwhelmed, because it will always make the most of its circumstances, if not by endeavoring to live on as

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84 Amelia’s efforts compose an ironic parallel to Booth’s first experience in jail when he disposes of his moveable goods without procuring anything.
little as possible, then by converting those around one to improve their lives. Booth recognizes as much: “O my Amelia, how much are you my superior in every perfection! Why can I not imitate what I so much admire? Why can I not look with your constancy, on those dear little pledges of our loves? All my philosophy is baffled with the thought, that my Amelia’s children are to struggle with a cruel hard unfeeling world, and to buffet those waves of fortune, which have overwhelmed their father” (157). Booth cannot imitate Amelia’s agency in the face of adversity without the underlying virtue that is necessary to make the most of one’s circumstances. Barrows injunctions give Booth the right reasons for acting in the right way; he will be generous out of principle, instead of through passion.

There are other, more successful, “stoics” in the Booths’ acquaintance, who are generous to the Booths and often act in the right way, but for the wrong reasons. These other fallen souls are contending with the consequences of a foolish conduct, but they have not found the right principle of action. Colonel James, whom Booth cites as “sufficient proof of the truth of my doctrine, that all men act entirely from their passions,” does not adhere to any model or guideline, and “can never be supposed to act from any motive of virtue or religion; since he constantly laughs at both; and yet his conduct towards me alone demonstrates a degree of goodness, which perhaps, few of the votaries of either virtue or religion can equal” (108). Colonel James is responsible for the advancement of many officers, and does indeed assist Booth on several occasions. In many respects, he resembles the second Stoic inmate Booth befriends, who advises the captain to put a just value on everything. This outlook is insufficient, nonetheless, since it does not prompt the virtuous fellow feeling that Booth demonstrates regularly, nor does it inspire the virtuous endeavor

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85 Recall the Vicar of Wakefield’s plight.
that Amelia epitomizes. James’ stoicism reveals the necessity of marrying the two – virtuous feeling with virtuous endeavor:

the colonel, tho’ a very generous man, had not the lest grain of tenderness in his disposition. His mind was formed of those firm materials, of which nature formerly hammered out the Stoic, and upon which the sorrows of no man living could make an impression. A man of this temper, who doth not much value danger, will fight for the person he calls his friend; and the man that hath but little value for his money will give it him; but such friendship is never to be absolutely depended on: for whenever the favourite passion interposes with it, it is sure to subside and vanish into air. Whereas, the man, whose tender disposition really feels the miseries of another, will endeavour to relieve them for his own sake; and, in such a mind, friendship will often get the superiority over every other passion. (335)

James is not self-interested or materialistic, but this is not enough to constitute virtue. His generosity fails when James becomes attracted to Amelia and he does everything he can to thwart Booth’s success.

Mrs. James also becomes a foe, rather than a friend, once the colonel calls upon her assistance, for although James’ wife does everything right (what society deems correct), she too lacks the principles of virtue. Mrs. James is “a lady, in whose opinion, as we have hinted before, outward form and ceremony constituted the whole essence of friendship; who valued all her acquaintance alike, as each individual served equally to fill up a place in her visiting roll, and who in reality had not the least concern for the good qualities or well-being of any of them” (205). This outlook is reminiscent of the Stoic model of sympathy, whereby one extends one’s fellow feeling to all equally, yet this outlook lacks any sense of social welfare or personal sacrifice. She is simply doing her duty. Hence, Mrs. James’ philosophy does not secure her virtue and prevent her from engaging in vice, and she agrees to help her husband plot Amelia’s downfall. Social forms can dictate right action, but not inspire or safeguard it. Indeed too much attention to decorum, as Anna Howe informs Clarissa in Richardson’s novel, can limit virtuous action to the point where one can do nothing right.
Recovering the path of virtue is only possible if one knows what one ought to do no matter what anyone’s circumstances or station in life might be.

When Booth is arrested the third time, he is finally activated in the proper way as well, not to try his luck in the army, but to use what he has to live a better life. He reforms and rather than attempt to repair their fortunes, he endeavors “to retrieve the ill Consequences of a foolish Conduct, and by struggling manfully with Distress to subdue it” – that is, “one of the noblest Efforts of...Virtue” (16). Critics have complained that it’s easy for the Booths to epitomize the virtuous life once they, like the Primroses, have the means to live in comfort and security. Yet Fielding’s point about the conditions of virtue extends beyond the question of means and station in life. His depiction of the fate of each of the characters, including Robinson and Amelia’s sister, emphasizes what circumstances can do: “Bad education, bad habits, and bad customs, debauch our nature, and drive it headlong as it were into vice” (IX,v). If Booth had continued in his various and numerous missteps, he too would have been lost to virtue. Maintaining one’s virtue does not depend on being in an easy situation, as cynics reading Amelia, The Vicar of Wakefield, or other such novels of the period in which virtue is rewarded at the end with material abundance. Robinson’s story demonstrates as much for he too benefits from the exposure of Amelia’s sister’s treachery, yet his own easier circumstances do not prevent him from returning to the path of vice.

Booth doesn’t fall into his old habits because his advancement is complete and he no longer exerts himself to improve himself or his own circumstances. There is, in fact, only a need to promote the welfare of everyone he can, which he endeavors to accomplish under Dr Harrison’s guidance. We thus leave Booth as we have seen him before, when he set up as a gentleman farmer, except instead of hankering after a coach and six or other such forms of advancement, Booth comes to terms with his condition and realizes that he wants
nothing. As such, Alan Wendt misconstrues “Booth’s ultimate ‘conversion’” as “the
discovery that all actions have ethical substance, whatever their motivating force” (141), for
Fielding’s hero acts, in most respects, no differently than he did before, nor do we see him
viewing those actions in a new light. Instead, Booth epitomizes the Stoic theory of moral
progress, whereby the virtuous man and the vicious man will often pursue the same actions,
the one for the right reasons and the other for the wrong. Booth’s own assessment, early
on, of the difference between the sage and the ignorant illustrates the nature of his
conversion: “Nothing can differ more widely than wise men and fools in their estimation of
things; but, as both act from their uppermost passion, they both often act alike” (II, 100-
101). In realizing that actions in accordance with principle rather than dominating passion
will enable him to bear anything, the captain recognizes that right reason is infallible, and
thus is able to recover the path of virtue. The suddenness and completeness of Booth’s
conversion is in keeping with the Stoic model, which posits that one is either virtuous or not;
that is to say, virtue does not admit of degree: “living according to Verture; which admitteth
of no degrees of Encrease or Diminution: For as those who are drown’d, are no more able
to breath, tho’ they are nearer the Top of the Water, than those who are at the bottom; so he
who has made some little Progress in Vertue, is no less in Misery than he who has made
none.” Advancement therefore requires no audience, no judge to appreciate one’s efforts
or talents and reward (or punish), and promote or demote one accordingly, for advancement

Cicero explains that, “the Duties… are [not]… the peculiar Properties of the wise alone, but are in common
to all the Race of Man,” and so they may be “practicable by many thro’ the Force of Understanding and the
Progress of Study. But the Duty which [the Stoics] term right or direct, is perfect and finished, and to speak in
[the Stoics’] own Terms, compleat in all Respects; nor can it fall to the lot of any, but a Man absolutely wise.
Now all the Actions… seem to be compleatly perfect; because people in general, have no Notion, how far they
fall short of Perfection: According to the Measure of their Understanding, they think that nothing is wanting.
As we see it often happens, that People who are no Judges, are pleased with Poems, Pictures, and the like, and
praise them for Properties they are void of” (His Offices, London, 1755, 151).

The lives of the eminent philosophers (1702), 301. See also The morals of Cicero, 171.
is the work of individual initiative and may be well nigh imperceptible: “a man…change[s in
a moment], from a state of pure, absolute, and unmixt evil, to the highest degree of Virtue,”
and “can never perceive how he becomes such, but…doubts, whether he in a long time,
partly by adding, and partly by subtracting, attained to a perfect growth of virtue” Booth
thus epitomizes Stoic progress, his conversion the work of a moment, wherein the additions
and subtractions to his fortune and his advancement in life are entirely unaccounted for.

Booth’s conversion seems as unbelievable and contrived as the family’s reversal in
fortune, but the view that one is either good or evil was prominent in the period, and the
captain’s experience in jail is no more sudden or transformative than the conversions for
which the Methodists and Pietists were famous. As Paul C. Davies argues in his examination
of contemporary views on eternal punishment, “the complexities of the moral life are
narrowed down [in the period] to a simple either/or.” This choice is also one that takes
place here and now, rather than at some deferred moment: consider John Scott’s declaration
in *The Christian Life* (1683), “There is as inseparable a Connection between Grace and Glory,
Sin and Hell, as there is between Fire and Heat, Frost and Cold, or any other necessary
Cause and its Effect.” Our experience is not a mixture of virtue and vice until judgment day,
so that in this world our goal should be to figure out how to avoid falling into vice in the
first place. In this respect, Fielding’s solution – to withdraw to the country as so many
virtuous heroes do in sentimental fiction – seems to suggest that one’s circumstances matter
a great deal in safeguarding one’s virtue. Yet there is an important reversal here: by returning

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88 Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Morals by way of abstract* (1704), 186. Compare with Booth’s conjecture that “‘if we regard
this world only, it is the interest of every man to be either perfectly good or completely bad’” (149). See also
Brucker: “he [the wise man] is free from faults” and “he does all things well” (345). “All virtues, being the same
in their origin and end, are mutually related and dependant; so that he who possesses one possesses all. As
there is no medium between a right and a curve line, so there is no mean between virtue and vice; virtue and
vice admit of no degrees, either of excess or defect.” Brucker, 348.

89 “The Debate on Eternal Punishment in Late Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century English Literature,”
*Eighteenth-Century Studies* 4.3, 263.
his hero to the country, Fielding depicts Booth’s fall and recovery there as well as in the city and in jail. In other words, he proves that the family can lead a virtuous life no matter where they find themselves.

This draws attention to the real lesson that Booth learns from his experience, which is not that being a farmer is inherently more virtuous than other professions; instead, as Francis Bacon asserts in his discussion of Epictetus, "we ought to cast up our account, what is in our power and what not; for the one may be dealt with by way of alteration, but the other by way of application only." The captain finds himself in different circumstances, and thereby alters his conduct accordingly – the actions that both a wise man and a fool might share – but his application in the face of things he can neither control or change, as when he is in jail, shows his advancement. Jeffrey Barnouw explains that the sort of application Bacon understands Epictetus endorsing involves “overcom[ing those things beyond our power] by…suffer[ing] and endur[ing them]. This may at first sound 'stoic' in the most traditional sense, but [Bacon's] qualification makes the difference evident.” He argues that

when we speak of suffering, we do not speak of a dull and neglected suffering, but of a wise and industrious suffering, which draweth and contriveth use and advantage out of that which seemeth adverse and contrary; which is that property which we call Accommodating or Applying. Now the wisdom of application resteth principally in the exact and distinct knowledge of the precedent state or disposition unto which we do apply: for we cannot fit a garment, except we first take measure of the body. (334)

Such advancement can happen anywhere, although its effects are most visible from the confines of the jail, where liberation can be broad-ranging and reform not just the individual but really promote the common good through the recognition of what to do in distress, not for oneself but for the benefit of society and its constituents. It is thus crucial that Booth’s

90 333.

91 Barnouw, 316.
liberation is never the result of his own efforts, that his conversion is a group effort. It is the consideration of others – Amelia, his family, and his society – that finally orchestrates the conditions of Booth’s advancement.

His reward accordingly has nothing to do with his conversion as well, but is rather the effect of Amelia’s actions: when she pawns her portrait to supply her family’s wants (clearly disinterested), Robinson recognizes her face and is inspired to atone for his own falsehoods. Fielding’s objective here is to construct a social, not an individual, good, so that the full benefits of penitence can be appreciated, and seen to be selfless. That Robinson soon returns to his criminal ways and Booth returns to the country does not reveal the limitations of such virtuous acts, but rather highlights the important difference between a life of success and a life of virtue. In his final retreat to the country Booth devotes himself to doing right, giving up all further views of advancement. His improvement, therefore, comes about through a shift in cognition rather than in actions. “The dangerous position here approached by Amelia is that taken by the Man of the Hill in Tom Jones; believing men totally unregenerate, he had chosen withdrawal from life, but Booth recognizes that “I am a man myself, and my heart is interested in whatever can befall the rest of mankind” (458). For Fielding, Alan Wendt argues, “an active participation in the affairs of life, with all of the concomitant difficulties, is made a condition of virtue.” Longmire notes that “Fielding does not dwell on the consequences of Booth’s conversion, and such a narrative focus is not really necessary, mainly because Booth is not radically changed by his religious experience” (16). If we are concerned only with reward and punishment, even if we don’t value things of this world, we withdraw too much from the concerns of this life – become passive. Fielding is not suggesting that one regulate one’s life according to Stoic laws, which would work

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92 137.
where English law and Christian law have failed. He is well aware that “There is nothing more difficult than to lay down any fixed and certain rules for happiness” (156), but he also believes we may recover the good of this world.

Conclusion

The most rigorous of the Stoic models to shape eighteenth-century views was the ancient account of virtue, which the sage embodied by being flawless in his conduct and living without regard for anything material – an ideal that met with widespread criticism and ridicule. Nevertheless, the vision of goodness the Stoics put forth was attractive for its systematicity – the way it made all aspects of life a part of the constitution of virtue and foregrounded one’s relationship to the rest of humankind, without recourse to the promise of compensation or retribution. As Thomas Rutherforth observes,

The Noble patron of disinterested benevolence, who starts at every mention of rewards, as if he thought our virtue would be in danger by them, and almost cautions us against being Christians for fear of betraying it...[directs us to] consider ourselves as parts of species or kind, to sympathize with this species, and give way to those common affections, which unite us to it, this he looked upon to be following nature, to be cultivating our real self, or pursuing our true interest. (195, 199)

With its focus on what makes us human and on learning how to pursue what is beyond the limitations of the individual, Stoic principles of morality indicate how to live as a species – as citizens of the world – which fulfills one’s duty within the harmony of world order. As such, no matter where we go and regardless of what we see, universal rules of morality obtain; these laws are not subject to changes in country or custom, but instead account for our humanity. Like nature’s laws, they are written in the world at large, and can be discovered by anyone, anywhere. In other words, experience can teach us how to recognize what is universally valid – the common conceptions that mediate differences of opinion, particularly with respect to what is good and bad.
The ability to arrive at such common ideas is crucial if the model of placing oneself in the position of everyone else is going to affect one’s actions at all. In other words, if sympathizing with others is what enables one to perceive a common good, then what is one actually perceiving? Certainly not the goodness of pineapples or other matters of taste. The construction of common conceptions is the subject of Chapter 3.
Ruling Passions in *A Sentimental Journey*, *Rasselas*, and *Pride & Prejudice*

The difference in the way we view things was central to ethical and epistemological investigations: while Locke pondered why we call disparate things good, Hume examined the qualitative and moral significance of varying judgments of taste. What Locke and Hume among others faced was the problem that there is no universal notion of good and evil because those things that cause us pleasure and pain are constantly changing. That is to say, our passions are as diverse as they are volatile. Indeed, the theory of the ruling passions that Booth espouses throughout much of Fielding’s *Amelia* was, as Tuvia Bloch notes, predominant in the age.¹ Arriving at universal ideas of a common good seemed to require the removal of all personal preference – all of our passions – in favor of an objectivity that only a cold-hearted Stoic might achieve.

The stereotype of the Stoic seemed ideal, yet one would expect his complete insensitivity to render him a rather unreliable, passive defender of virtue or a reliever of distress: consider Fielding’s own characterization of Colonel James, who, “tho’ a very generous man, had not the least grain of tenderness in his disposition. His mind was formed of those firm materials, of which nature formerly hammered out the Stoic, and upon which the sorrows of no man living could make an impression” and thus his “friendship is never to be absolutely depended on: for whenever the favourite passion interposes with it, it is sure to subside and vanish into air” (335). The enduring stereotype of the Stoic as one who does not feel the pain or joys of others, who is therefore unmoved and passive when he ought to

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be motivated to action, appeared in much eighteenth-century fiction, from Fielding’s *Amelia* to Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*. Nevertheless a more accurate characterization of the sage was well known: “the true Stoic,” Hume informs us, “looks…with compassion, on the errors of mistaken mortals” and does not “always preserve himself in…philosophical indifference, and rest contented with lamenting the miseries of mankind without ever employing himself for their relief.” Nor does he “constantly indulge [in that] severe wisdom, which, by pretending to elevate him above human accidents, does in reality harden his heart, and render him careless of the interests of mankind, and of society.” The Stoic “feels too strongly the charm of the social affections ever to counteract so sweet, so natural, so virtuous a propensity. Even when, bathed in tears, he laments the miseries of the human race, of his country, of his friends, and unable to give succour, can only relieve them by compassion…so engaging are the sentiments of humanity, that they brighten up the very face of sorrow.”

Perhaps surprisingly, Hume’s portrait of the Stoic resembles eighteenth-century characterizations of the man of feeling: “What can be more nobly human than to have a tender sentimental feeling of our own and other’s misfortunes? This degree of sensibility every man ought to wish to have for his own sake, as it disposes him to, and renders him more capable of practising all the virtues that promote his own welfare and happiness.” Indeed, “the friend of mankind,” a phrase Shaftesbury first popularized in *The Moralists*

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2 “The Stoic,” 150-51. Of course there were plenty of depictions of the Stoic’s indifference to external things as preventing him from feeling such compassion: “He that regards none so much as to be afraid of losing them, must live for ever without the gentle pleasures of sympathy and confidence,” Samuel Johnson writes, “he must feel no melting fondness, no warmth of benevolence,” *Rambler* 47, p. 256.

(1709), is of Stoic origin. The coexistence of such opposing figures reflects the degree to which the ideal of the Stoic sage in any number of guises shaped the period’s understanding of the nature and function of the passions.

Critics have long recognized this legacy; indeed historians of sentimentalism’s foundations have traditionally emphasized its rejection of Stoicism and Stoic apathy in particular. As R. S. Crane, Henry W. Sams, and others have observed, the Stoic was often seen as the diametrical opposite of the man of feeling, an icon of unfeeling passivity. More recently, Julie Ellison and Adam Potkay have examined the Stoic underpinnings of a wider range of eighteenth-century views on the passions and their government. My intention here is to elucidate the effect that the Stoic’s complex, and often seemingly impractical, approach to the passions had on eighteenth-century narratives of cognition.

Both the stereotype and the more accurate conception acknowledge Stoicism’s historic position that virtue depends on the eradication of the passions. Yet the Stoic’s indifference, in Hume’s account, does not prevent the Stoic from being “the friend of mankind.” He sympathizes with his fellow men inasmuch as he regards their circumstances as if they were his own. The Stoic, however, does not view these circumstances as they do because he recognizes that misfortunes such as poverty and disease are not evils. He laments the miseries of others, because they do not realize as much. Antoine le Grande explains in the Man without Passion: or, The Wise Stoick, “A wise man ought to consider the

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4 Shaftesbury acknowledges the debt to Marcus Aurelius in the Philosophical Regimen. For more on the convergence of the ‘man of feeling’ and Stoic thought, see Frederick Ribble, “Stoicism and Sensibility: Traditions of Morality in Shaftesbury and Other Writers of the Eighteenth Century” (unpublished dissertation).

5 Crane proposes that the genealogy of the “man of feeling” draws on the anti-stoic position of seventeenth-century divines: “Not the Senecan wise man, relieving but not pitying, but the tenderhearted Christian, pitying before he relieves, was the ideal which they preached” (217). See also Henry W. Sams, “Anti-Stoicism in Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England” Studies in Philology, XLI (1944), 65-78.

6 Cato’s Tears, and The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume
Poor for their Relief, and not himself to share in their Calamities; he ought to protect them from oppressions, and not to be inwardly disturbed for them; he ought to endeavour their comfort, and not to be a Partner in their misfortunes.” The Stoic’s attempts to relieve his fellow man involve giving up anything of his own and regulating his actions according to the common good. This principle, rather than the spectacle of need or calamity, directs the Stoic’s benevolence, for “[c]an we not be charitable without being afflicted? And can we not relieve those that are in misery, unless we mingle our Sighs with their Sobs and Groans, and our Cries with their Tears?” In doing so, the Stoic is able to transcend the limits of sympathy that Adam Smith outlined, for “quote.” In contrast, the stereotype presents the Stoic’s lack of compassion as inconsistent with virtuous endeavor. Impetus to good action – limits of reason. The repudiation of Stoic apathy went hand in hand with the claim that reason did not suffice in the determination of what one ought to do.

The fact that the Stoics championed reason as the organizing and harmonizing principle of the world aligned the stereotype of the apathetic Stoic with rationalists such as Henry More and Samuel Clarke and made the Stoic and sentimentalist positions seem, at least on this front, entirely incompatible. But reason and the passions were not as distinct from each other as one might expect. Consider the use of the word “sentiment” in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: the word had always meant a “sensation” or “physical feeling,” but in the latter half of the seventeenth century “sentiment” acquired the meanings of “a mental feeling, an emotion” as well as “an opinion, view” – meanings which, I contend, blur the line between passion and reason. This ambiguity is particularly

7 p. 277. Le Grande’s source is Seneca.

8 Ibid.

9 The sympathetic response the ‘man of feeling’ ought to have is the basis of his virtue; Harley’s benevolence in Henry Mackenzie’s The Man of Feeling is inseparable from his extreme sensibility to what others feel. 
pronounced in Lord Kames’ *Elements of Criticism* (1774), in which he writes, “[e]very thought prompted by passion is termed a sentiment” (I. 451). Adela Pinch narrates a history of the passions that reflects this ambiguity. “In early modern thought,” she observes, “all emotional experience falls under the heading of ‘the passions,’ which are treated…as the essence of volition” and set “in opposition to understanding.” So whereas “seventeenth-century political theorists see the passions as fundamentally destructive and in need of restraint,” in the eighteenth century, “the anti-Hobbesian ‘moral sense’ philosophers rehabilitated the moral and political dimensions of feeling,” and “the writings of the empiricists shifted feeling from the realm of volition to the realm of understanding.”

When the passions are seen as volitional, the attack on Stoic apathy focuses on the Stoic’s passivity: without passions, he would not be moved to act. As one eighteenth-century critic of “Modern Stoicks” put it, “[t]he passions are as much the organs of the soul, as the senses of the body; and they are the hints and motives to action; without them we should be little more than vegetables.” But when the passions are seen as cognitive, the argument against Stoicism becomes difficult to distinguish from Stoicism itself. For if “we are so constituted by Nature, that, as soon as we form the Idea of certain Objects or Events, our Desire or Aversion will arise toward them; and consequently our Affections must…depend upon the Opinions we form,” as Frances Hutcheson proposes, and we “calleth good” whatever we desire or whatever “is apt to cause or increase Pleasure,” as Hobbes and Locke both, in fact, claim, then “the Government of our Passions must…depend much upon our Opinions” and the proper assignment of good and evil.

Similarly, James Harris reports, the Stoics held

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11 *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1732), July 1, No 116.
that “a passion is a vicious and intemperate reasoning, which assumes vehemence and strength from bad and erroneous judgment.”

This misjudgment is a problem not of values, but of epistemology: according to Brucker, “The first impressions from the senses produce in the mind an voluntary emotion; but a wise man afterwards deliberately examines them, that he may know whether the image be true or false, and assents to or rejects them, as the evidence which offers itself to the understanding appears sufficient or insufficient.”

In other words, a passion is kind of reason, an opinion that wrongly identifies goodness or badness in things or events that are, in fact, indifferent, things such as health and poverty.

The passions are cognitive.

Passions (*pathê*) reflect “bad and erroneous judgment” not because the senses fail to accurately perceive things as they are, but because one wrongly attributes goodness or badness to things or events which are, in fact, indifferent, things including wealth and disease. As “vicious and intemperate reasonings,” the passions might be corrected, because

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13 The works of James Harris, Esq (1803), 87. Harris’ source is Plutarch’s *Moralia*, 441d. See also Diogenes Laertius, *The lives of the eminent philosophers*: “Vehement Appetites departing from the Constancy of Nature; are call’d Passions… all Passions arise from Opinion and Judgment” (299).

14 325. See also Cicero, Ac. Q. Liv. and Aulus Gellius l.xix.c.I.

15 Hobbesian desires, J. B. Schneewind argues, “are not propositional in the Stoic way. They are compounds of movement toward or away from something – desire or aversion – with a thought that causes such movements. The endeavor that is the moving part of the desire or aversion is not the same as the thought of the object. Hobbes’ definitions of desires and aversions show how our words assemble the ideas we get from experience of the usual causal connections between movements and the thoughts that cause them. Desire caused by the opinion that you will get what you want is called ‘hope’; aversion together with ‘opinion of hurt from the object’ is fear; ‘covetousness’ is ‘desire of riches’ (*Leviathan* VI.14, 16, 24). A thought may arouse desire or aversion in some people but not others, or in one person at some times but not others” *The Invention of Autonomy*, 85-86). Schneewind emphasizes the volitional aspect of the passions here, but as the definitions he gives from Hobbes demonstrate, the passions are defined in terms of opinions about the good or evil of an object – exactly the Stoic account. For the volitional quality of beliefs about things in Stoicism, see Tad Brennan: “These false beliefs [that health and wealth are good and disease and poverty are bad] – which are also the operative psychological motivations for the agent’s intentional actions – are known to the Stoics as *pathê*, or emotions, one species of impulses” (264).
they are cognitive, rather than purely impulsive or volitional, and one could thereby improve one’s judgment. In their opposition to the passions, the Stoics thus did not prescribe insensitivity. Instead, Epictetus argues, one need only suspend one’s judgment and determine if other impressions refute or confirm one’s opinion: if, for example, I conceive that fame might be more important than anything else one moment and long for anonymity the next, then further consideration is necessary. This vacillation is cognitive in as much as one cannot have two opposing ideas of fame at the same time, and what is true about fame ought to be unchanging. Epictetus portrays this withholding of judgment as intuitive, for “it is the very Nature of the Understanding to agree to truth; to be dissatisfied with Falshood; and to suspend its Belief, in doubtful Cases,” the proof of which is easily ascertained:

“Persuade [pathè] yourself, if you can, that it is now Night. Impossible. Unpersuade [apopathè] yourself, that it is Day. Impossible” (93). Echoes of this analysis can be heard in Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which he adopts Epictetus’ model in his own endorsement of the suspension of judgment: Locke enjoins his reader to “suspend their desires, and stop them from determining their wills to any action, till they have duly and fairly examined the good and evil of it…This we are able to do, and when we have done it, we have done our duty, and all that is in our power.”

16 Shaftesbury, Locke’s teacher, even quotes from Epictetus in his discussion of the imagination, which is the source of false ideas:

“Thus I contend with fancy and opinion, and search the mint and foundery of imagination. For here the appetites and desires are fabricated; hence they derive their privilege and currency. If I can stop the mischief here and prevent false coinage, I am safe. ‘Ideal wait

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16 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II.xxi.§52.
awhile till I have examined thee, whence thou art and to whom thou retainest” (I.207). The scrutiny of one’s ideas, not restraint, diffuses the threat of unruly passions. Indeed, Frances Hutcheson points out, if “we are so constituted by Nature, that, as soon as we form the Idea of certain Objects or Events, our Desire or Aversion will arise toward them; and consequently our Affections must…depend upon the Opinions we form,” then “the Government of our Passions must…depend much upon our Opinions” and the proper assignment of good and evil. Good and evil are not questions of time or taste; they are incontrovertible and unchangeable.

This adoption of the Stoic account of the passions brought about a reassessment of the Stoic’s proverbial loss of self-control, for while the passions were seen as volitional, the common complaint against the “insensibility” the Stoics advocated was an attack on Stoic apathy: without passions, one would not be moved to act. That is to say, one might have the strictest notions of virtue and yet not act on them. But when the passions are seen as cognitive, their regulation disabuses one of false opinions, not the impetus to act. Indeed the scrutiny that Shaftesbury calls for prescribes a rational exercise designed to guide one’s activity – to promote virtuous conduct and prevent those actions based on “vicious and intemperate reasoning.” In positioning feeling at the foundation of moral conduct, sentimental philosophers were thus not advocating the wholesale gratification of every passion. In redeeming the moral capacity of feeling, moral sense philosophers only endorsed the “indulge[nce] of our benevolent affections,” promoting the restraint of the selfish

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17 Shaftesbury paraphrases Epictetus here: “For, just as Socrates used to tell us not to live a life unsubjected to examination, so we ought not to accept a sense-impression unsubjected to examination, but should say, ‘Wait, allow me to see who you are and whence you come’,” Discourses, vol. 2, p. 85.

These benevolent affections are the same we find in the Stoic: Harris explains that “in the character of the virtuous man, [the Stoics] included rational desire, aversion, and exultation; included love and parental affection; friendship, and a general charity or benevolence to all mankind; that they considered it a duty, arising from our very nature, not to neglect the welfare of public society.”

Withholding judgment enables one to choose how and when to act: instead of simply following one’s immediate impulses, one could establish what one ought to do, be it pursue fame or not. Not only did the passions rob one of this choice, they also hurried one from one good to another, rendering any conceptual consistency, let alone free will, impossible. As Mandeville put it, each individual is a combination of passions that “govern him by turns, whether he will or no.” The passions might enable one to act, but they do not allow one to choose how. Locke’s account of suspending the passions identifies the liberty of choice we thus attain as constituting “our duty,” for it alone ensures that we might pursue a common and lasting, rather than an individual and temporary, good. Of course any choice we have presents the problem of a conflict of goods: consider that if what we call good and evil changes as often as our passions do and each of us has particular goods and evils – “the various and contrary choices, that Men make in the World, do not argue, that they do not all pursue Good; but that the same thing is not good to every Man alike,” Locke informs us – then there is no stability or substance to the good. There is, to be sure, no “common Rule

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19 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982, p. 25. See also Shaftesbury: “All moralists, worthy of any name, have recognized the passion[s], though among these the wisest have prescribed restraint, pressed moderation,” *Characteristics*, 354.


21 *Fable of the Bees* I, 39.

22 Ibid.
of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves.” So if the common good is to be anything more than an abstract idea – “universal good, or the interest of the world in general, is a kind of remote philosophical object,” Shaftesbury notes – then they need to establish the conditions of general consent, the foundation of common conceptions.

This agenda emerges in response to the problem of turning universal precept into everyday praxis – a problem that Christianity faced no less than those who endeavored to make a version of Stoicism or sentimentalism, for that matter, work. After all, putting oneself in a sympathetic relation to everyone else does not tell one how to act, neither dictating nor regulating one’s daily actions, any more than knowing the commandments, the catechism, or Newton’s laws would. Yet humankind does tend to share the same sentiments – how we feel, for instance, about our children – and these sentiments go far in governing our conduct, from protecting the young to securing the necessities of life to pursuing happiness. Our common conceptions, it seemed, might be based on our passions and those things that awaken them. My focus here is on the ways in which the two seemingly antithetical, yet ideal, positions of Stoic apathy and sentimental feeling interact, are challenged and reconciled in literary representations of the government of the passions – an ordering of those things we have in common. As Geoffrey Sill notes, “the reformation of the passions was a secure part of the agenda of the novel” and “the confusion that marked…treatises on the passions is replaced in…novels by a remarkably clear-sighted sense of the dangers to which both heroes and heroines were exposed by errors and false opinions.

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23 Locke, 268.

arising from passion, as well as of the equanimity and goodness of heart that alone could vanquish it.”

In this chapter, my readings of Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759), Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) explain how the regulation of the passions is the foundation of general consent. First, however, a bit of the philosophical background to this problem.

The Nature and Representation of Common Conceptions

Reconfiguring the nature of common conceptions was necessary once Francis Bacon and the scientists of his day had established empiricism and the scientific method as the way of arriving at the truth. Scientific truth could be accessed at anytime, anywhere, but this depended on the acuity and veracity of the senses and our ability to process our impressions. To this end, the Stoic account of the senses was useful, not only because they insisted on the accuracy of the senses, but also because they held that we arrive at common conceptions through everyday experience: “When a man is born, the Stoics say, he has the commanding-part of his soul like a sheet of paper ready for writing upon. On this he inscribes each of his conceptions. The first method of inscription is through the senses.” Common conceptions (*koinai ennoiai*) are then those ideas we share with others, ideas that are universal, like that of a triangle or of a man. The Cambridge Platonists incorporated and responded to this Stoic model: Robert Boyle discusses it in *A Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, and Herbert of Cherbury declares in *De veritate*: “the Common Notions must be deemed not so much the outcome of experience as the principles without which we should have no experience at all. Let us have done with the theory that asserts that our mind is a clean

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26 Aetius 4.11.1-4. See also Plutarch, *On common conceptions* 1084F-1085A.
sheet, as though we obtained our capacity for dealing with objects from the objects themselves” (132). The problem with following John Locke, who maintained that experience was the only way we could arrive at common conceptions, was that individual sensation must be so diverse and inconstant as to render the substantiation of any general idea well nigh impossible.

Locke reports that some believe “That there are in the Understanding certain innate Principles; some primary Notions, koinai ennoiai, Characters, as it were stamped upon the Mind of Man, which the Soul receives in its very first Being; and brings into the World with it” (48). However, he argues, there is no evidence of their source: “This Argument, drawn from Universal Consent, has this Misfortune in it, That if it were true in matter of Fact, that there were certain Truths, wherein all mankind agreed, it would not prove them innate, if there can be any other way shewn, how Men may come to that Universal Agreement, in the things they do consent in, which I presume may be done” (49). The emphasis Locke places on experience as the source of our ideas causes a problem in that we wouldn’t know what was evil unless we had some experience of it, thus posing the question of determining the truth of the matter, irrespective of the limitations of experience.

In the Stoic answer, there is a difference between judging individuals and judging universal claims: “Judgment is employed either in determining concerning particular things, or general propositions.” With respect to the former, “we make use of some one of our senses, as a common criterion measure of apprehension, by which we judge whether a thing is, is not; or whether, or not, it exists with certain properties,” whereas when we consider general propositions, “we make use of our pre-conceptions, or universal principles, as
criterion, or measures of judgment.” These criteria are neither innate nor arbitrary: “Even universal principles are originally formed, by experience, from sensible images. All men agree in their common notions or pre-conceptions; disputes only arise concerning the application of these to particular cases” (326). But how do we arrive at such common notions?

Contemporary authors sought to narrate the epistemology of agreement, whereby people might concur on which ideas to accept and which to reject. By attending to how this project shaped the novel’s mission to reform the passions, it becomes clear that eighteenth-century writers renegotiated the way the passions motivate and mislead us. The problem, as Locke puts it, is that “the various and contrary choices, that Men make in the World, do not argue, that they do not all pursue Good; but that the same thing is not good to every Man alike,” whence there is no “common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves.” What happens, then, when we examine “the objects themselves” from varying perspectives, or when we put ourselves in other people’s shoes, if just sympathetically? Do such shifts themselves construct universals? In what follows, I examine the role the passions, experience, and misconceptions play in the novelistic reformation of the passions. My reading of Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas (1759) focuses on how the passions relate to common conceptions – ideas that everyone shares. In turning to Lawrence Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey (1768), I consider the role of experience in arriving at common conceptions. With Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (1813), I then show how misconceptions can be recognized as erroneous, even when they are held in common.

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27 Brucker, 325.
28 Locke, 268.
Happiness in *Rasselas*

Samuel Johnson’s reception of Stoicism is complex, for while he found many of its precepts absurdly idealistic, he also recognized the value of several Stoic viewpoints.\(^{29}\) In the *Rambler*, for instance, he notes that the doctrines of the Stoics are “overthrown by the experience of every hour,” and therefore we can never be indifferent to misfortune, for example, since “infelicity is involved in corporeal nature, and interwoven with our being; all attempts therefore to decline it wholly are useless and vain.” Nevertheless he proposes, “we may very properly inquire how near to this exalted state it is in our power to approach, how far we can exempt ourselves from outward influences and secure to our minds a state of tranquility: for though the boast of absolute independence is ridiculous and in vain, yet a mean flexibility to every impulse, and a patient submission to the tyranny of casual troubles is, below the dignity of that mind, which, however depraved or weakened, boasts its derivation from a celestial original, and hopes for an union with infinite goodness, and unvariable felicity.”\(^{30}\) Johnson’s skepticism regarding the accomplishment of a state of constancy is tempered by which suggestion that we aspire to it as much as possible in the here and now. Indeed he often acknowledges the ideality of Stoic models and laments our inability to fulfill them. Consider, for example, his famous representation of the stoic philosopher in *Rasselas*, which as Gwin Kolb observes, “exposes completely the emptiness of the stoic’s pretensions to lasting happiness.”\(^{31}\) The stoic philosopher’s pretensions, however,

\(^{29}\) In addition to his own extensive reading of Cicero, Seneca, and others who discussed Stoic doctrines at length, Johnson was a close friend of Elizabeth Carter, who translated Epictetus.

\(^{30}\) *Rambler* 6, 30; *Rambler* 32, 175-76.

are based on the same model Rasselas himself employs – that is, a model of government whereby one regulates one’s outlook and activities according to strict laws. Johnson himself was just prescribing the government of the passions in the *Ramblers*.

It is the application of strict laws, Rasselas discovers over and over again, that marks the difference between good government and bad, for any sort of bad government, along with its laws, will be eventually overthrown. Johnson might have dismissed Stoic dicta regarding the sage being eternally happy no matter what his circumstances, yet the vision of governing the passions he puts forth in *Rasselas* is a Stoic one, wherein one withholds one’s judgment in order to ascertain what is really good and bad. This is not to say that he rejected Christian conceptions of good and evil; rather, as Charles Pierce Jr. suggests, Johnson “no longer wanted to know where hope and fear would find their objects but instead how man could control such passions and put them to use in a life of virtue” (325). If anything, Johnson sets out to reconcile the Stoic model with a Christian life; consider Johnson’s assessment of the human condition in *Rambler* 151: “Nature will indeed always operate, human desires will be always ranging; but these motions, though very powerful, are not resistless; nature may be regulated, and desires governed; and to contend with the predominance of successive passions…is the condition upon which we are to pass our time, the time of our preparation for that state which shall put an end to experiment.” *Rasselas* presents the quintessential experiment of life.

Johnson even arranges the philosophical tale as a series of endeavors to apply rules of conduct – to live according to just laws. Sheridan Baker rightly notes that the “recurrent contrast of…actuality against airy imagination is at the center of *Rasselas.*” 32 The failure of

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these endeavors, however, is not brought about by warring passions run riot, as one might expect. In this respect, “Rasselas is not a sexy book,” as Marlene Hansen argues, and does not portray a series of conflicts between love and hate, pride and humility, envy and generosity. Nevertheless one might chart the progress of Johnson’s tale in terms of the passions, as Baker has, whereby Rasselas’ initial retreat into the imagination is succeeded by “Desire,” followed by “Hope,” and leading to “Regret” but, Baker proposes, “this is as far as the mind can go alone” (254). The search for happiness is not an individual, but rather a social, enterprise, and Johnson’s disquisition on the government of individual passions leads, literally, to an examination of regulation within society. Rasselas, I argue, reveals that although “There is no such thing as Happiness…as a State fixed forever in an impregnable, verdant valley” (260), the government of the passions makes happiness possible in any state. This fundamental Stoic tenet hardly constitutes a law by which to regulate society; nevertheless it is the lesson Rasselas learns in venturing out into the real world, beyond the realm of airy imagination. After all, one can only learn through experience those laws that are universally valid, pertaining to the nature of man, rather than accidents in geography or culture. Jeffrey Barnouw identifies Rasselas’ education as Stoic, in that Rasselas becomes a citizen of the world, exposing himself to the conditions of all, and yet his state of mind remains unruffled, indifferent, and therefore indecisive. Barnouw notes that “Detached observation does not lead us know the conditions of men; for that we must experience them, at the very least by participating sympathetically in them,” and yet what does Rasselas actually learn?

33 “Sex and Love, Marriage and Friendship: A Feminist Reading of the Quest for Happiness in Rasselas,” English Studies, 1985, 6, 513.

34 Barnouw, 332.
The prince is at first convinced that happiness “must be something solid and permanent, without fear and without uncertainty” (101), and the Stoics did maintain, Elizabeth Carter reports in her introduction to Epictetus, that the Stoics’ “favourite Doctrine” was “that a wise Man must always be happy” (I, xxv). Such happiness would only be possible, one might think, in a place where “every desire was immediately granted” (74). Indeed, the Happy Valley, where each inhabitant is provided with every reason to be perfectly happy, no matter what that reason might be, is all Rasselas knows. Everyone might have different tastes – one preferring a pear and another prunes – yet because everything is supplied, the difference in goods doesn’t matter. To be sure, Rasselas’ discontent in the Happy Valley is not due to a conflict of goods or the limitations of delight, of which prior princes had complained, “wish[ing] to enlarge their bounds” (75). This corollary between the expansion of pleasure and the expansion of territory calls into question the nature of government and how far it can reach; Rasselas, it turns out, is unhappy not because government in the Happy Valley is narrow in its physical domain, but rather because of its limited psychology. After all, the surfeit of pleasures there leave one with nothing to want and nothing to do – the very state of apathy that the stoic was accused of striving to attain.

Johnson’s point is that satisfying one’s every desire leads to the same problem that extirpating the passions presents – the limits of government. For despite its supply of every imaginable good, the Happy Valley is no beacon of administrative excellence. There is, after all, nothing to regulate. Indeed, one might expect that the Happy Valley would quickly fall into chaos because of the selfish or destructive passions that one might freely indulge; yet “what passions can infest those…who have no rivals? We are in a place where impotence precludes malice, and where all envy is repressed by a community of enjoyments,” (94)

Rasselas laments. Only in his imagined adventures does “his benevolence always terminat[e]
his projects in the relief of distress, the detection of fraud, the defeat of oppression, and the diffusion of happiness” (79). Within the confines of the Happy Valley, where there are only ‘goods’, there is no reason to do evil, and therefore neither virtue nor vice have any real significance; government serves no purpose at all. Having a choice, not between goods, but rather between good and evil, enables one to govern oneself in beneficial, virtuous ways, to improve the welfare of others, and thus to recognize what really constitutes happiness.

Rasselas is not alone in his discontent. “I know not one of all your attendants who does not lament the hour when he entered this retreat” (94). The profusion of goods in the valley does not create general happiness, in so far as no ‘good’ unites the people. “There may be community…of material possessions,” Imlac explains, “but there can never be community of love or esteem’ (94). All that brings the people together is the desire to be happy – a condition that is valid for mankind in general. With every want supplied, the inhabitants of the Happy Valley are left with nothing to desire, and since “some desire is necessary to keep life in motion,” (86) they are entirely passive, cognitively and volitionally. As Rasselas notes, “I know not what I want;” whereas “if I had any known want, I should have a certain wish; that wish would excite endeavor” (77). All innovation and variety thus originates from the applicants who delight the populace in order to be admitted into the Happy Valley, rather than from the inhabitants themselves. This passivity is most pronounced in Rasselas’ failure to satisfy desire: “He often sat before tables covered with luxury, and forgot to taste the dainties that were placed before him” (75). Rasselas’ reevaluation of the goods on offer in the Happy Valley begins with the realization that he must withhold his judgment and not choose any of them if he is going to figure out what is really good and what really will make him happy.
Rasselas is chasing an imaginary villain, literally and physically pursuing evil, when he discovers that the mountain surrounding the valley “is the fatal obstacle that hinders at once the enjoyment of pleasure and the exercise of virtue” (79). The mountain, which establishes the boundary of goods and desires within the Happy Valley, is what prevents him from applying the precepts he learns from his teachers, because these constitute a system of regulation that reflects the benefits of government, to which no one in the Happy Valley has any access. By contrast, the world outside the walls, he has been told, consists of nothing but “regions of calamity, where discord was always raging, and where man preyed upon man” (75) – a place in need of government. What Rasselas seeks in venturing beyond the mountain, then, is a form of government that doesn’t do away with all choice (by extirpating the passions or by satisfying one’s every whim), but rather constitutes the principles of virtue, the execution of which promotes general happiness.

The prince’s examination of diverse stations and modes of life reveals the difficulty in instituting such government. In addition to widespread disagreement about what is good and which way of life composes true happiness, Rasselas realizes that the choice of life isn’t a question of deciding between a variety of goods, as in the Happy Valley, but rather a choice that tests the veracity of one’s conceptions. One might have an idea of something that will make one happy, such as the life of a hermit, but only the experience of such a life – its enactment – will establish the correspondence between idea and reality. Imlac observes, “There is no man whose imagination does not sometimes predominate over his reason…whose ideas will come and go at his command. No man will be found in whose mind airy notions do not sometimes tyrannize” (141). Knowledge doesn’t dictate one’s choice, and people often choose that which they know to be evil, or in direct contradiction to their good. Knowing what will improve life, likewise, does not remove the difficulty of
choice. For example, when Rasselas turns to “a man eminent for his knowledge of the mechanic powers” (81) to help him escape, he declares that the engineer’s skill “ought to be exerted for universal good” (83). But the engineer only agrees to build a flying machine on the condition of secrecy, claiming that “if men were all virtuous…I should with great alacrity teach them all to fly. But what would be the security of the good if the bad could at pleasure invade them from the sky?” (83).

The practicality of universal good is central to the kind of government that Rasselas envisions: “I have frequently endeavored to image the possibility of a perfect government by which all wrong should be restrained, all vice reformed, and all the subjects preserved in tranquility and innocence. This thought produced innumerable schemes of reformation, and dictated many useful regulations and salutary edicts” (142). Even after hearing Imlac’s story, Rasselas is “not yet willing…to suppose that happiness is so parsimoniously distributed to mortals” that “[h]uman life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed” (93). His determination with respect to the good is such that his description of what his life would be outside the valley is much like the life he leads within it: “if I had the choice of life, I should be able to fill every day with pleasure. I would injure no man, and should provoke no resentment: I would relieve every distress…I would choose my friends among the wise, and my wife among the virtuous” (93). This is what everyone generally strives to do. They just don’t succeed.

Rasselas’ narrative examines their failures in order to show that nothing ensures lasting happiness, because everything changes, like the weather. Instead, happiness depends on the government of the passions, which Johnson portrays in the only scenes of passion on offer in the tale: when the stoic philosopher mourns the loss of his daughter and when Nekayah mourns the loss of Pekuah. Pierce argues that such episodes “emphasiz[e] the
degree to which human life is subject to bad luck, accidents, and forces beyond our control” (333), but they also establish the domain of laws.

Throughout much of the tale, laws are more theoretical than anything, because they were unnecessary in the Happy Valley and the precepts Rasselas encounters after escaping are ineffective. Nevertheless, the prince constantly asserts the sovereignty of laws, as when Imlac tells him of those who hurt others “without any advantage to themselves but that of rejoicing in the superiority of their own knowledge” (87). He is flummoxed and does not believe that the conflict of interests out there is even worse than in the state of nature about which he has heard, i.e. where the limited quantity of goods makes one man’s good another man’s evil, and one man’s gain another’s loss. “Is there such depravity in man as that he should injure another without benefit to himself?” (87), he asks. Imlac’s explanation, that “pride…will please itself with very mean advantages; and envy feels not its own happiness but when it may be compared with the misery of others” (88) reveals how warring passions can make the pursuit of happiness a detriment, not a goal, to a society, regardless of one’s station or one’s choice of life. If the passions are governed, whereby people withhold their judgment so that they may realize a common good, then the laws they live by will protect and promote everyone’s interests, even if people are drawn now and again to that which is pernicious or combative. Johnson’s tale, I argue, identifies the need and significance of such government, for life would improve even in the Happy Valley, where every desire is gratified, if its inhabitants had a better idea of what really constitutes happiness.

Likewise, Rasselas cannot understand “why…Imlac’s] father desire[d] the increase of his wealth, when it was already greater than he durst discover or enjoy” (85), or why the engineer would not want to share the art of flying with everyone.
In such a society, laws would apply everywhere, and in adjudicating between right and wrong, they would transcend our individual ideas of things and how we feel about them. They would mediate between conflicting positions and promote a happiness that is mutually beneficial. Hence Rasselas’ investigation is not meant to instruct us in extirpating the passions or devaluing others, but rather to expose the inconstancy and arbitrary nature of one’s “choice of life.” Instead of decrees about becoming a teacher or a governor or any other profession, which Nekayah, Rasselas, and Pekuah compose, “let us have some fair precepts, and short sentences concerning every Passion,” Du Vair proposes, for as Seneca notes, “Precepts are of great weight, and a few useful ones…do more towards a happy Life, than whole Volumes of Cautions which we know not where to find; these…Precepts…are the Rules by which we ought to square our Lives.”

We need laws the enactment of which does not change with every whim or circumstance, because only then will we be pursuing a more lasting good.

Rasselas’ knowledge of such principles derives from his education in the Happy Valley, where he used laws to distinguish the possible from the impossible, the believable from the unbelievable, and the just from the unjust. Thus he reminds the engineer who is constructing the flying machine of the law of gravity and the reduction of oxygen at high altitudes. And when Imlac tells Rasselas about governmental injustice, the prince cannot believe that the law could fail to secure the common good, concluding, “surely…my father must be negligent of his charge…. Does he not know that kings are accountable for injustice permitted as well as done? If I were emperor, not the meanest of my subjects should be oppressed with impunity” (85). Imlac’s response points out the limitations of law: “no form of government has been yet discovered by which cruelty can be wholly

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36 The moral philosophy of the Stoics, 27; Letters, 443.
prevented…. The vigilance of the supreme magistrate may do much, but much will still remain undone. He can never know all the crimes that are committed, and can seldom punish all that he knows” (85). “This,” the prince replies, “I do not understand” (85) – how can the knowledge of wrong not lead to its condemnation, or laws made for the common good not secure it? How can cognition not lead to volition? Rasselas does not see how such contradictions can be possible and interjects, “I am unwilling to doubt thy veracity, yet inconsistencies cannot both be true” (85-86). Laws, in other words, can be valid even if they are not always enacted. They would, after all, leave one with no choice in life at all if they could not be broken.

What Rasselas is looking for, then, in his survey of the world is the condition most conducive to the just establishment and execution of law: “There can be no pleasure…equal to that of feeling at once the joy of thousands all made happy by wise administration” (110). This desire directs how he perceives the scene of life in Cairo, where it seems that happiness is common to every walk of life: “all appeared to him equally happy. Wherever he went he met gaiety and kindness…. He began to believe that the world overflowed with universal plenty, and that nothing was withheld either from want or merit; that every hand showered liberality, and every heart melted with benevolence.” Such an abundance of goods, as in the Happy Valley, requires neither the delineation nor the application of the principles of right living and so “for some time he thought choice needless” (100). He continues to suspend judgment because closer examination of each condition reveals that even when one makes one’s selection, “nothing is concluded” (153). Lasting happiness, it turns out, depends on a more detailed inspection.

Ironically, he first turns to those “young men” who have made pleasing themselves a way of life, a principle: “I will join myself to the young men, whose only business is to gratify
their desires, and whose time is all spent in a succession of enjoyments” (101). Because this way of life is by choice, Rasselas does not recognize its similarity to life in the Happy Valley, and his disgust with it results not from the similarity, but rather from their inconsistency: “they laughed at order and at law, but the frown of power dejected, and the eye of wisdom abashed them” (102). The prince learns his lesson and looks to those who do not base their lives on the principle of ungoverned passion. These present ways of governing the passions, be it withdrawing from all sources of desire like the hermit or never knowing anything more than the most basic, natural existence, like the shepherds. The first, nonetheless, is a Stoic like Fielding’s Parson Adams.37 The prince listens to “a sage raised above the rest, who discoursed with great energy on the government of the passions” and maintains that “when fancy, the parent of passion, usurps the dominion of the mind, nothing ensues but the natural effect of unlawful government” (102-103). The effect of the government of the passions, the sage argues, is happiness, as one could see in “heroes immovable by pain or pleasure, who looked with indifference on those modes or accidents to which the vulgar give the names of good and evil.” He instructs his listeners to “lay aside their prejudices, and arm themselves against the shafts of malice or misfortune by invulnerable patience, concluding, that this state only was happiness, and that this happiness was in everyone’s power” (103). When Rasselas later finds the philosopher despairing over the loss of his daughter, he marvels that the sage “can reason so forcibly without feeling the cogency of his own arguments” (103). This conventional poke at the impossibility of regulating the passions so

completely that one is never ruffled shows the futility of basing happiness on the particular
collection of one’s society, just as no particular choice of life will guarantee happiness
either.

The vagaries and vicissitudes of life that Rasselas encounters, again and again,
suggest that a life led in accordance to nature and nature’s laws might enable one to weather
the storms of experience. After all, such an outlook would involve accepting the inevitability
of disease, death, and other apparent misfortunes. Rasselas rejoices, then, when he meets a
philosopher who declares that

[t]he way to be happy is to live according to nature, in obedience to that universal
and unalterable law with which every heart is originally impressed; which is not
written on it by precept but engraven by destiny, not instilled by education but
infused at our nativity. He that lives according to nature will suffer nothing from the
delusions of hope or importunities of desire: he will receive and reject with equability
of temper; and act or suffer as the reason of things shall alternately prescribe. (109)

What it means to live according to nature, however, the prince cannot discern, and the
philosopher’s explanations obscure more than they clarify: “this was one of the sages whom
he should understand less as he heard him longer” (109). The philosopher’s ideas, alas,
don’t correspond to experience, and precepts regarding a common good need to be realistic
or else they will never hold.

Rasselas’ subsequent association with the astronomer, who lives according to nature
by executing all that he legislates in regulating the weather, reveals that what is good for one
situation is often not good for another. Johnson appears to challenge the idea that there are

38 Compare what the philosopher says with the Stoic formulation: according to the first, “To live according to
nature is to act always with due regard to the fitness arising from the relations and qualities of causes and
effects; to concur with the great and unchangeable scheme of universal felicity; to cooperate with the general
disposition and tendency of the present system of things” (109); according to the second, Stobaeus reports,
“living in agreement’ meant ‘living in accordance with a single harmonious principle’ because those who live in
conflict are unhappy,” and “It is agreement with nature’s will, or observation of the natural order, that provides
laws by which one might live and constitute a common good, especially when he says that “the end…which at present calls forth our efforts will be found, when it is once gained, to be only one of the means to some remoter end.”

Our inability to be constant in our desires or to be satisfied, to which _The Vanity of Human Wishes_ attests as well, suggests that Johnson ultimately rejects the Stoic view that happiness is simply a matter of withholding judgment about external things, which we cannot control, in order to recognize what really is good – a life of virtue. Nevertheless the Stoic theory of the passions enables Johnson to portray the choice of life as different for everyone and, at the same time, hold on to the idea of the good as the same for everyone, affording principles by which to live in any station.

There is no conclusion, then, not because Rasselas never makes a choice, but because the way of life on offer in Johnson’s novel requires that one suspend one’s judgment in order to determine a common good – in order to determine good laws, constitutive of a virtuous life. This project is exactly what Rasselas sets out to do, and does.

Johnson is not more specific about Rasselas’ final situation in Abyssinia because that, like how many inhabitants he should rule, is indifferent (neither good nor bad), and the novel, as Imlac explains about the poet’s art, is meant to present a general idea – principles that apply everywhere.

In response to Nekayah, who points out to Rasselas that “we are

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39 Rambler 47, 253.

40 In this respect, the Stoic ideal is by no means incommensurate with Christian doctrines, and as Carey McIntosh notes, “In general, then, Johnson draws on Stoic doctrine and attitudes for weapons against pain and for techniques of self-control. In the course of a life radically wretched, however, it happened not infrequently that these weapons and techniques failed him, and he was faced with the inadequacy of such merely human resources. It is at this point, spiritually with his back to the wall, that Johnson resigns all humanism, Stoic included, and turns to the consolations of the Christian religion” (“Johnson’s Debate with Stoicism,” _ELH_ 33.3. Sept. 1966, 333).

41 Compare Rasselas’ musings on the size of his kingdom with Rousseau’s portrait of the ideal republic in “To the Republic of Geneva” in _A Discourse on Inequality_: “a society of which the dimensions were limited by the extent of human faculties, that is to say, by the possibility of being well governed; a society where everyone was equal to his job so that no one was obliged to commit to others the functions which belonged to him; a state
not now inquiring for the world but for ourselves,” Rasselas declares, “the good of the whole…is the same with the good of all its parts” (117). The prince’s journey arrives at the common good, a general idea granted, but it is not his intention to number the streaks of the tulip – to get so specific that the common good he portrays is only appreciable as such at a given place and time. Happiness cannot be secured in particulars. It is realizing the general nature of happiness – that “this…may be true of others, since it is true of me” (101) – that enables Rasselas to envision a government that establishes general consent. His experience finally incorporates everyone’s, demonstrating the point that Charles Pierce Jr identifies as central to Johnson’s agenda: “Johnson recognized more fully than he ever had before the extent to which all men in all times had expressed the same hopes and had experienced the same disappointments.” But where Pierce argues that Johnson “intended to dramatize that the travelers had at last realized that there was no single choice of life that could be made to satisfy any of them. The nature of desire made such happiness impossible” (335), I suggest that Rasselas is not drawn by one passion or another, but by the aim of government itself. Indeed, he is quite aware that “he who would fix his condition upon incontestable reasons of preference, must live and die inquiring and deliberating” (chap 16), for inquiry and deliberation are the source of all government, the basis by which one makes the right choices about which laws to institute and how to conduct oneself. There is no more conclusive choice at the end, then, because making a selection would involve following a passion, and

where, every individual being acquainted with every other, neither the dark manoeuvres of vice nor the modesty of virtue was concealed from public gaze and judgement,” trans. Maurice Cranston (1984), 57.


the moral of Johnson’s tale is that all stations in life are, more or less, equally capable of ensuring happiness and so no more particular decision is necessary to find happiness.44

Johnson had explored this predicament earlier in The Vanity of Human Wishes, his revision of Juvenal’s stoic exhortation to virtue, and by having Rasselas pursue the key to constancy – an unperturbed state of mind – he was adding to a long tradition of philosophy informed by the Stoic ideal.45 Johnson was well aware of this heritage, as Kolb and others have observed. Yet his portrayal of Rasselas’ experience is not meant to objectify our perspective, as Barnouw suggests, and therefore expose the laws that direct what people pursue and suffer.46 Instead, Johnson asserts the limitations of human agency in the pursuit of happiness so that we realize the degree to which the choices we have made need not govern our state of mind. We can choose a lasting happiness no more than a man can direct the weather. We may predict, with greater or lesser accuracy, what will procure happiness in any given circumstances, yet because happiness depends on how we regard our lot in life, we can only pursue it (and nothing else) by governing the passions, because these are what alter how we look at things. As Du Vair declares, "let us have some fair precepts, and short sentences concerning every Passion . . . and stop . . . the first precipitate motions of the Soul,

44 The choice of life thus becomes exemplary of the philosophical paradox of Buridan’s donkey, which dates back to Aristotle, yet was current in the eighteenth century through Spinoza’s Ethics. According to the paradox, the donkey is placed equidistant from two equally desirable piles of straw and therefore, if he were motivated solely by reason, the donkey would die of starvation, because he would have no reason to choose one over the other and actually go eat it.


46 “Rasselas has taken the 'hap' out of 'happy'. For that reason, nothing ever really happens to him. He remains external even to events that supposedly involve him; they do not touch him. He has found a psychological equivalent of the cliche of 'stoic' indifference. That is also why what he observes and contemplates never has any life in it for him. Risk and trial and the possibility of disappointment are intrinsic to experience. By his attitude Rasselas deprives himself from the outset of the possibility of learning from experience” (Barnouw 332).
that would storm it” and Seneca maintains, "Precepts are of great weight, and a few useful ones...do more towards a happy Life, than whole Volumes of Cautions which we know not whereto find; these... Precepts are the Rules by which we ought to square our Lives." The lesson to be learned from experience is what to make of it.

**The Experience of *A Sentimental Journey***

In contrast to Johnson’s narrative of the process by which we make our choice of life, much sentimental fiction depicts the choices we make everyday, tracking the path of the passions. One might easily find the wayward route of Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* antithetical to Johnson’s lawlike procession. To be sure, as Leo Braudy observes, “the sentimental novel opposes intuition to rationality; disjuncture, episode, and effusion to continuity and plot; artlessness and sincerity to art and literary calculation; and emotional to verbal communication.” However, Sterne’s project, I propose, is informed by the same shift in the period’s understanding of the passions from volitional to cognitive as well.

Yorick travels the road of their intersection, for the sequence of emotions in *A Sentimental Journey* registers his sense of his situation and plots his course. The most exemplary instance of this correspondence is the scene of warring passions that has received the most critical attention: Yorick’s encounter with the Franciscan monk Lorenzo when he first arrives in Calais. This episode is conventionally regarded as highlighting the contradiction between sentimental and economic interests and the ultimate complicity of the former with the latter. The trade in goods – sentiment for alms – is seen as indicative of the

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47 L’Estrange, Seneca’s *Morals by way of abstract*, 119.

sentimentalism’s moral bankruptcy. Yet the scene does not present the trade as one of equivalence. Instead, it is one of supersession, whereby the failure to be equal to the situation at hand produces a conflict of the passions – a conflict of goods.

Yorick’s departure for France, where “they order…this matter better” (27), is, after all, prompted by the government, and revolution, of the passions. He arrives only to recall that he has no passport, and this is especially problematic because France and England are at war. In short, he is not equal to his circumstances on every level, and so the scene that ensues appropriately documents the potential (en)treaty between them. When the monk enters the room “to beg something for his convent,” Yorick declares that “[n]o man cares to have his virtues the sport of contingencies – or one man may be generous, as another man is puissant – sed non quo ad hanc – or be it as it may – for there is no regular reasoning upon the ebbs and flows of our humours; they may depend upon the same causes, for aught I know, which influence the tides themselves.” Hence, “the moment I cast my eyes upon him, I was predetermined not to give him a single sous” (29). Yorick then delivers a lecture, enumerating the needy who cannot help themselves, whereupon the monk “gave a cordial wave with his head as if to say, No doubt there is misery enough in every corner of the world” (31). What this scene points out, within the framework of my investigation, is the conflict that results when one is ruled by the passions: one is benevolent one minute and

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Yorick is not in conflict as much with the monk here as he is with himself. Yorick’s and Father Lorenzo’s positions present the contradictions the passions produce regarding the question of benefit: Sterne’s hero shows that when the passions put one at odds with oneself, fellow-feeling cannot regulate one’s conduct. Instead, the passions make one particular and Yorick, distinguishing specific forms of misery, finds the lame, the blind, the aged, the infirm, and his countrymen in greater want of his assistance than the monk. The monk, for his part, is without passion: having renounced the objects of desire in this world and “so tempered to bear and forebear!” (83), Father Lorenzo thus shows that the recognition of the worthlessness of material possessions conflicts with the petition of the common good when benefit is limited to the material, and especially the financial. The monk personifies the petition of a common good. Yet a conflict in passions prevents him and Yorick from seeing eye-to-eye, just as much as the limitation of one’s experience, whereby the spectacle of need fails to prompt generosity because the person who might assist another has never felt need. My argument here is that Sterne aims to bring the passions into harmony, beyond the limitations of experience.

To this end, Martin Battestin rightly contends that for Sterne, one passion, “if properly understood and cultivated, could lead us out of the prison of the self: this was

50 As Yorick puts it: “Base passion! said I, turning myself about, as a man naturally does upon a sudden reverse of sentiment – base, ungentle passion! thy hand is against every man, and every man’s hand is against thee” (39).

51 So although a treaty isn’t needed for Yorick to travel into France (the conflict of national interests Yorick alludes to), Yorick has to make a treaty with himself: “I was at peace with the world before, and this finished the treaty with myself” (28). This treaty, which he makes just before the monk enters, is of course undone by the monk’s entreaty.

52 This description of the monk quotes Epictetus’ famous dictum in his Discourses, ch. 8.
sexual desire.’ The profusion of innuendo in Sterne’s novella serves to interest us more intimately in the narrative, as many have noted, but also to demonstrate how different ideas – the good and the bad, the pure and the dirty, the temporary and the eternal – may be reconciled. As such, Yorick will narrate one thing and means several, at times progressing in two opposing motions simultaneously, such as those of innocence and corruption. That is to say, one can experience sex and piety in the same gesture. This ambiguity both facilitates and forestalls Yorick’s journey, since the passions follow their own course, irrespective of what he or his acquaintances have in mind. Consider the intercourse Yorick has with the Madame de L+. Before he proposes that they travel together, the passions – not the proposal or the story of her life Madame was going to tell, whereby they would actually share experiences – are given voice:

Every dirty passion, and bad propensity in my nature, took the alarm… It will oblige you to have a third horse, said AVARICE, which will put twenty livres out of your pocket. – You know not who she is, said CAUTION – or what scrapes the affair may draw you into, whispered COWARDICE – Depend upon it, Yorick! said DISCRETION, ‘twill be said you went off with a mistress, and came by assignation to Calais for that purpose – You can never after, cried HYPOCRISY aloud, shew your face in the world – or rise, quoth MEANNESS, in the church, or be anything in it, said PRIDE, but a lousy prebendary. (45-46)

The passions do not articulate what Yorick might have in mind; instead, they warn him about what the engagement will cost him, most especially in terms of the idea the world will have of it. What is remarkable about this impassioned sequence is that the passions identify about what other people think and differentiate what Yorick knows from what he doesn’t. Their path, moreover, prevents Yorick from doing anything – the lady walks away while he is on his sentimental journey.

His narrative is thus distinguished from those of other sentimental journeys not in his itinerary, but in his way of proceeding; Yorick announces that he does not choose the path of the stereotypical Stoic, who “traveled straight on, looking neither to his right hand or his left, lest Love or Pity should seduce his out of his road,” or the way of the passions, whereby which “every object” is “discoloured or distorted” and “an account of them…’twas nothing but the account of…miserable feelings” (51-52). Instead, his path is one of intercourse – the paths between people, the paths that build connections between them. He isn’t going to France to see the countryside or the landmarks, but to get to know the people. Finding his way, I suggest, is what enables Yorick to get beyond the limitations of his own passions and access others’ and awake passions in others. Arthur Hill Cash has argued that “the general fault of Yorick…is this: he fails to govern himself. There is nothing wrong in his having strong affections, but he is wrong in easily giving himself up to their rule,” but he doesn’t really let the passions rule – he’d get into a lot more trouble if he did. Instead, Yorick shows us what happens when one follows them and also shows us that one need do nothing and still connect with others. The danger is not posed by the passions but rather in being closed off.

It is La Fleur who puts Yorick on the path of good government. Yorick hires him despite the fact that he is no good as a servant (he can only play the fife and make spatterdashes), but finds him the ideal travel companion:

he was a faithful, affectionate, simple soul as ever trudged after the heels of a philosopher; and notwithstanding his talents…which, though very good in themselves, happened to be of no great service to me, yet was I hourly recompenced by the festivity of his temper – it supplied all defects – I had a constant resource in his looks in all difficulties and distresses of my own – I was going to have added, of his too; but La Fleur was out of the reach of everything; for whether ‘twas hunger or

thirst, or cold or nakedness, or watchings, or whatever stripes of ill luck La Fleur met with in our journeyings, there was no index in his physiognomy to point them out by – he was eternally the same; …how much I owe to the complexional philosophy of this poor fellow, for shaming me into one of a better kind. (56)

The sort of government necessary for Yorick to travel in peace is the direction of a Stoic, one who started out “with serving for a few years; at the end of which, having satisfied the sentiment, and found, moreover, that the honour of beating a drum was likely to be its own reward…he retired à ses terres, and lived comme il plaisoit à Dieu – that is to say, upon nothing” (54-55). Traveling the path of the passions with a Stoic attendant won’t cost or earn Yorick anything, for he will be equal to every set of circumstances and have nothing to show for his encounters but sentiment.

This approach to his journey reconfigures the language of loss and gain – central to the conventional reading of Sterne’s sentimental economy – so that it corresponds to the rise and fall of one’s assessment of a situation. In other words, I suggest, the passions become signifiers of value that allow people to exchange and reassess viewpoints. For example, when La Fleur loses his bidet (which is followed by the loss of an ass and then the loss of Yorick’s temper), Yorickcatalogues the French words to assess the evil of the situation and finds his heart “wrung with pity and fellow-feeling” and calls out, “Grant me, O ye powers, which touch the tongue with eloquence in distress! – whatever is my cast, Grant me but decent words to exclaim in, and I will give my nature way. – But as these were not to be had in France, I resolved to take every evil just as it befell me without any exclamation at all” (62). The value of each loss equated with the other, with the upshot that this shared experience constitutes a meeting of minds. What’s more, the conjunction of Stoic outlook with that of Sterne’s man of feeling results in the reevaluation of the loss as a source of benefit.
In fact, we don’t hear of evil throughout the novel that isn’t resolved into good: the situations of Father Lorenzo, the Chevalier, and the Marquis d’E**** all eventually turn around. Even the owner of the dead ass is distressed because he fears he could have treated the beast better, not because he regards the death as an evil. Sights of woe, etc. become the source of good, and connect one with others – this is how they can be turned around, merrily, as is the Shandy way. Consider Yorick’s approach to his incarceration in the Bastille: “as for the Bastile! the terror is in the word–Make the most of it you can…the Bastile is but another word for a tower–and a tower is but another word for a house you can’t get out of” and continues until he concludes “the Bastile is not an evil to be despised–but strip it of its towers–fill up the fosse–unbarricade the doors–call it simply a confinement, and suppose ‘tis some tyrant of a distemper–and not a man which holds you in it–the evil vanishes, and you bear the other half without complaint” (95-96). Granted, Sterne satirizes the Stoics by highlighting the cognitive effort involved in regarding the evil of the Bastille as purely mental – an erroneous opinion – but no one is more conscious than Sterne that the pleasure (or pain) of a situation is determined by what one makes of it.

There are, after all, numerous instances of incarceration, the most famous of which is perhaps the starling that is imprisoned in a birdcage and chirps to everyone, “I cannot get out.” To be captured in *A Sentimental Journey* presents the reality of winding up behind bars, as Yorick envisions his fate because he has no passport, but it also addresses the problem with being closed off to others. While the starling travels around Europe, much like Sterne’s hero, and encounters a broad spectrum of society, making its perspective known – “I cannot get out” – prompts no one to redress this wrong. To be sure, Sterne’s readers have been educated to regard such captivity as no great evil, for although the starling is not free to pursue its every whim and fly where it will, it is not rendered immobile. Remaining
unmoved by another’s plight, however, does preclude the kinds of connections that Yorick discovers are fundamental to the workings of society, across national borders and beyond the decrees of social decorum. I propose, therefore, that Sterne’s point in following the path of the starling is to show his readers that becoming interested in the affairs of others is no license to the passions to run riot, and thus a shortcut to social chaos. While Yorick’s journey might be a little disorderly, he is by no means ungovernable.

As such, the Stoic and sentimental views of the passions are much closer than one might expect. Yorick remarks that “everything has two handles,” but these are not opposite, as we witness in the scene with Madame de R****’s fille de chambre, whereby the parson’s assessment of the situation is either Stoic or sentimental in its double entendre:

The Conquest

Yes – and then – Ye whose clay cold heads and lukewarm hearts can argue down or mask your passions, tell me, what trespass is it that man should have them? or how his spirit stands answerable to the father of spirits, but for his conduct under them? If nature has so wove her web of kindness, that some threads of love and desire are entangled with the piece, must the whole web be rent in drawing them out? – Whip me such stoics, great governor of nature! …whatever is my situation – let me feel the movements which rise out of it, and which belong to me as a man, and if I govern them as a good one, I will trust the issues to thy justice….As I finished my address, I raised the fair fille de chambre up by the hand, and led her out of the room…locked the door and put the key into my pocket – and then – the victory being quite decisive – and not till then, I pressed my lips to her cheek. (118)

The question of what “the conquest” refers to – the passions or the fille de chambre – is one that demonstrates how close the Stoic and sentimental narratives are. What I want to emphasize here is the fact that the government of the passions in Sterne’s novel takes the Stoic form, not in the extirpation of all feeling, but rather in changing one’s opinion about a thing and reevaluation it such that one takes into consideration how others regard it. Yorick’s description of the scene is therefore indifferent: it can go either way. In this
respect, Yorick does not need to control his language, as Jonathan Lamb argues, or the ideas that stem forth accordingly. If Sterne’s hero “want[ed] only its virtuous sense to be understood,” then his utterance would depict the scene in greater detail, rather than focusing on its reception. His silence on the matter is not “because God does not grant him some alternative decent words,” but instead acknowledges no utterance can be definitive – his audience will conceive what they will. In Joseph Chadwick’s analysis, Sterne “abandons the attempt to define exactly what feeling Yorick is expressing,” to “reassert the priority of affective, as opposed to intellective, communication.” Yorick’s narrative reflects a world in which everyone else’s viewpoint has as much of an effect as his own. The stereotypical apathy and passivity of the Stoic is thus impossible; no one can do nothing.

Not surprisingly, the end of Yorick’s “quiet journey of the heart in pursuit of NATURE, and these affections which arise out of her, which make us love each other – and the world, better than we do” (109), is a situation in which doing nothing becomes impossible. When Yorick reaches out his hand “by way of asseveration” and gets “the fille de chambre’s — “ (148), his grasp of the situation can be regarded as an infraction of the treaty which he and the Piedmontese lady had just made, after they had “turned it [their situation] every way, and debated and considered it in all kinds of lights” (147). Or his motion can be construed, along with the fille de chambre’s intervention, as a defense of the treaty. Needless to say, the consideration of the other’s plight got them into bed; what follows represents the danger of getting out, of acting without being aware of what others – one’s bedfellows if you will – are doing. One’s agency is always delimited by one’s context; as Yorick points out, “I am governed by circumstances – I cannot govern them” (103), and

55 Lamb, 294.

so in connecting one’s situation with others, the government of the passions affords one more space to maneuver. To be sure, Yorick’s sentimental excursions, fragments, and digressions enable a common view – a general idea – to be constructed anytime, anywhere.

What one acquires traveling, then, is not material – not the objects of the passions – but the mediation of the passions: “Le Pour et le Contre se trouvent en chaque nation… nothing but the knowing it is so can emancipate one half of the world from the prepossessions which it holds against the other – that the advantage of travel, as it regarded the sc&avoir vivre [a way of life] was by seeing a great deal both of men and manners; it taught us mutual toleration…[which] taught us mutual love” (84-85). Even the reader is given the opportunity to fulfill his part: when Yorick and the Piedmontese lady must negotiate getting undressed and into bed, he informs us, “there was but one way of doing it, and that I leave to the reader to devise” (148). The difference between purity and profligacy here is no less material than the opposition between pleasure and pain. Both “handles” constitute the connection between Yorick and others, be it the Piedmontese lady or Maria or the prisoners of the Bastille. Thus governed, the passions whisk us beyond the limits of experience: In Paris, Yorick recounts, “I was of every man’s opinion I met” (136). They “afford us the capacity to feel beyond ourselves,” as James Chandler contends, so that we can realize our common good:57 “I could wish…to spy the nakedness of their [the French] hearts, and through the different disguises of customs, climates, and religion, find out what is good in them to fashion my own by” (108). By following the Stoic direction of the passions, Yorick finds his way to common conceptions.

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Misconceptions in *Pride and Prejudice*

Verbal and gestural ambiguity enables the perspectives that proliferate in *A Sentimental Journey* to avoid conflict with one another. Yet common conceptions need not depend on the fitfulness of communication to be consistent and universally accessible. Indeed they ought not, for common conceptions should correspond to reality and therein, the truth. This, I argue, is Jane Austen’s concern in *Pride and Prejudice*, where the abundance of viewpoints does not ensure that anyone grasps the truth. In examining how common conceptions shape our lives, Austen shows how they can be mistaken. Doing so is not a Stoic enterprise, but Austen does draw on the Stoic characterization of common conceptions, a characterization that transcends the debate about whether or not they are innate. The Stoic account of common conceptions dispatches with any confusion arising from the inconstancy and variety of experience, by holding to be true only that which is a cognitive impression, an impression that commands assent, that one cannot help but recognize as the truth. Cicero outlines the Stoic view in his writing on laws and on rhetoric, but it was readily available to Austen through contemporary debates on innate ideas and discussions within Johnson’s circle. That her own access to Stoic common conceptions was filtered and reinvented is fitting, for the problem of mediated reports is central to her treatment of universal truths.

The epistemology at work in Austen’s novels has received much critical scrutiny given the central role that obtaining and transmitting knowledge plays. From epistolary concerns to issues of free indirect discourse to the workings of the imagination, *Pride and Prejudice* certainly invites its reader to question perspective and investigate the source and certainty of one’s impressions. Many have suggested that Austen’s project is to educate the reader and to expose the limitations of any view. In what follows, I argue that Austen
examines the degree to which the truth is accessible – a social truth, if you will, of the sort the natural scientists of the age were after – given the confines of one’s position. Felicia Bonaparte marvels that when “Austen enters the great debate on epistemological questions raging at that very moment between the empiricists and the rationalists… she sets out to chart a path that will make the reading of texts, of the word or of the world, not an utter impossibility. For…Austen knows that human existence requires some approximation of truth.”58 Certainly the upshot of the scientific revolution, which privileged unmediated experience of any phenomenon, had repercussions for social truths. As such, objects in a laboratory need not be approached any differently from those, for instance, in a ballroom, where everyone should know that when men are scarce and ladies plentiful, every gentleman ought to procure a partner. This, Austen knew, was the general form of social truths – propositions about what is to be done based on an assessment of what is the case. Social propositions demands as careful examination as any proposition of the senses.

The Stoics treated impressions – the cognitive information that any object presents – as propositional, inviting assent. Their account of how we apprehend the world was available to Austen through Samuel Johnson’s circle of friends including Elizabeth Carter, who translated Epictetus, as well as through contemporary translations of Cicero. The former exhorted us to examine our impressions before assenting to them, while the latter reported that the Stoics went so far as to “deny that any body besides a wise Man has any Knowledge. Zeno…explain’d this. For when he stretched his Hand out wide open; there, said he, is an Object; he then contracted his Fingers a little; there, said he, is Assent; and when he had clenched his Fist, he calle’d that Comprehension…. But when he applied his left Hand

to his right Fist, and squeeze’d it very hard, that he said was Science.”

Grasping what is at hand, then, can ascertain the truth, but maintaining it constitutes science. That science and the systematic examination of the natural world might lead to certainty, rather than skepticism and relativism, was the hope of many, including Dr. Johnson, who famously kicked a rock to disprove Berkeley’s idealism. Austen herself is careful to differentiate appearance from fact in Pride and Prejudice; her method is to show that impressions are propositional, requiring assent or denial, rather than unchallenging acceptance. In other words, proposals of marriage are the work of many other proposals, each of which can be mistaken. As Gordon Hirsch observes, “although she [Elizabeth Bennet] presents herself finally as a rationalist, committed to a corrective satiric vision, she is psychologically astute enough to know that the process of deciding what is ‘real’, ‘true’ and ‘rational’ may have its unconscious and defensive determinants.”

What needs to be made known are not simply the facts of income and relations but also one’s feelings, as Jane’s experience with Bingley demonstrates. Hiding her feelings causes just as much epistemological confusion as Darcy’s failure to publicize Wickham’s perfidy. When Elizabeth declares that “One has got all the Goodness, and the other all the appearance of it” (229), she could be attributing the goodness and the appearance of it to either, depending on where in the novel we are. As a result, Elizabeth’s increasing use of her own methods of detection, instead of relying on the community, which “steps forward,

59 The morals of Cicero (London, 1744), 431-32. See also Bruckner: When only the image [an impression made upon some parts of the brain] is perceived by itself, the thing is apprehensible. Where it is acknowledged and approved as the image of some real thing, the impression is called Apprehension, katelepsis, because the object is apprehended by the mind, as a body is grasped by the hand. Such apprehension, if it will bear the examination of reason, is knowledge; if it will not bear this examination, it is Misapprehension. The senses, corrected by reason, give a faithful report: not by affording a perfect apprehension of the entire nature of things, but by leaving no room to doubt of their reality” (323-24).

through a kind of disembodied collective consciousness, to engage in acts of observation and judgment,” is “not...an exercise of freedom, but...an effort to achieve freedom.”

Establishing cognitive freedom from social misconstructions is at the heart of Austen’s novel, because only then can one assent to a proposal knowing what is really the case. William Deresiewicz explains that “without the countercheck of induction, of fresh observation and reconsideration, conjecture crowns itself as certainty (‘must be’), and beliefs once accepted harden into ‘universal truths’” (505), whereas “no wealth of observation suffices to prove a general truth” (506). The process by which Elizabeth’s views and those of her community are corrected shapes the plot of Austen’s novel, then, for assent to and denial of proposals is the name of the game when “it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (51).

The narrator’s irony already tips us off that general opinions may not always be right, even wrong more often than not. Here one’s meaning in what one says becomes well nigh irrelevant; as K. St John Damstra notes, “Austen carefully shows how gossip may originate out of an innocent comment.” What is missing throughout the novel, by contrast, is the incontrovertible truth. Consider the general notion of an accomplished woman that Miss Bingley puts forth: “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word [accomplished]; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expression.” Darcy responds, “All this she must possess” and “she

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62 If the good is cognitive, so is evil. “[T]he case with those who embrace error,” Primrose explains in Goldsmith’s The Vicar of Wakefield, is that “vice does not lie in assenting to the proofs they see, but in being blind to many of the proofs that offer. So that, though our erroneous opinions be involuntary when formed, yet as we have been willfully corrupt, or very negligent in forming them, we deserve punishment for our vice, or contempt for our folly” (62).

must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (85), making the notion all the more impractical. Elizabeth’s retort, “I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any,” for “I never saw such a woman” (85), acknowledges the disparity between universal ideas and individual experience.

That general opinion in *Pride and Prejudice* invariably takes the form of faulty determinations emphasizes the significance of the unmistakable. Recognizing what is unmistakable, moreover, requires no recourse to those truths universally accepted, since one is seeing for oneself, one has evidence, not hearsay. As Diogenes Laertius observes, “since many things are comprehended and perceiv’d by the Senses, there’s a necessity of Assent, for the Soul is oblig’d to joyn issue with evident things, as much as the Stone is to go downwards” and the mind will assent to what is true, for “Truth is the Enunciative Science of all true things. True is a thing impress’d on the Mind by that which is; and that in such a manner as cannot be from that which is not.”64 What serves as incontrovertible evidence in Austen’s novel, surprisingly, is the display of emotion: the government of passion may enable one to access other’s feelings, but the material effect of this concern is what differentiates opinion from universal truth. In other words, one must act on one’s concern for others in order for that connection to be perceptible to all. One must unite volition with cognition.

Indeed the proposals Darcy makes chart this union, for although the truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife applies to him no less than to Bingley, his initial proposal is presented as much against his will. His subsequent proposal, by contrast, comes after he has acted in support of

64 *The lives of the eminent philosophers*, 289.
the Bennet family – evidence of his concern – prompting a reevaluation in Elizabeth. Darcy and Elizabeth’s regard for one another thus shifts from the mistakable to the unmistakable, joining the volitional with the cognitive. Whereas his first offer is the result of warring passions, his second demonstrates his sense of the common good. At first, Darcy proposes to Elizabeth in spite of “his sense of her inferiority – of its being a degradation – of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination.” Thus Darcy begins, “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you”; he “concluded with representing to her the strength of that attachment which, in spite of all his endeavours, he had found impossible to conquer; and with expressing the hope that it would now be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand” (221). Like Sterne’s ambiguous encounters, Darcy’s first proposal, Elizabeth remarks, can be taken as much as a compliment as an insult. In other words, his meaning is in no way unmistakable and thus hardly elicits consent.

This ambiguity echoes Darcy’s mistaken reception in Hertfordshire when he first arrives with Bingley and is found to be proud and unsocial, rather than shy and uncomfortable. It also mirrors the confusion Elizabeth finds herself in the more she gets to know Darcy. Encountering him at Rosings and in Pemberley enables Elizabeth to revise her estimation of Darcy: “she certainly did not hate him,” but felt “respect”, “esteem,” and “gratitude” (284-85). This shift in Elizabeth’s feelings reflects the process by which her opinion of him departs from everyone else’s assessment. That she must literally depart from Hertfordshire in order for this to happen is appropriate, for Darcy, too, must absent himself from Elizabeth’s neighborhood for anyone to question their assumptions about his character. It is his “eager[ness] to preserve the acquaintance,” his “soliciting the good opinion of her friends” and being “bent on making her known to his sister” (285) beyond
the purview of everything and everyone known to her that makes his attentions more acceptable. So although “the respect created by the conviction of his valuable qualities” is “at first unwillingly admitted” (284), those actions whereby Darcy admits, “I thought only of you” (375) – actions which make their common good unmistakable – prompt consent.

Yet propositions that unmistakably make the common good known are more substantial than the universal truths that govern one’s assessment of individuals and things. Assent to such propositions is both cognitive and volitional, which is why the transformation in Darcy unites the two: “As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit…to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world” (377). In other words, Darcy’s knowledge of what is right does not govern his passions – how he views those outside the confines of his society – and therefore his conduct is unacceptable. Once he takes others into consideration, he begins to acknowledge and improve his relationships even to those who are rather unsavory, like Wickham.

Elizabeth experiences a shift in perspective that joins the cognitive and volitional as well: when she first discovers her feelings for Darcy, she does not find herself in danger of a partiality, as with Wickham, but rather the shift in her feelings is examined and found unmistakable, much like the process by which Epictetus questions his impressions: “If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth’s change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of what is often described as arising on a first

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65 Hence Darcy’s fault, as much as pride or prejudice, is lack of sympathy, and Elizabeth’s accusation – “You thought me devoid of every proper feeling” (376) – is what prompts Darcy’s transformation.
Her acceptance of Darcy’s proposal is thus stoical, rather than sentimental: “Elizabeth, agitated and confused, rather knew that she was happy, than felt herself to be so” (381). Compare this psychological account with Elizabeth’s perturbation when Wickham departs from Hertfordshire on the eve of the Netherfield ball: “she found, what has been sometimes found before, that an event to which she had looked forward with impatient desire, did not in taking place, bring all the satisfaction she had promised herself. It was consequently necessary to name some other period for the commencement of actual felicity; to have some other point on which her wishes and hopes might be fixed” (237). The rational frame of mind with which she regards her impending nuptials does not mean that she doesn’t feel; Elizabeth is “agitated,” and even “confused,” but neither alters her assessment of the good, whereas the deferral of happiness she experiences at the ball relocates the good, in a way reminiscent of life in Rasselas’ Happy Valley.

That proposals themselves do not necessarily constitute the common good can be seen in those Mr. Collins makes. Charlotte Lucas accepts his offer of marriage to a large extent because she doesn’t have much of a choice. In a society with truths universally accepted such as every woman, especially those of limited means, must marry, assenting to proposals is mandatory, not optional. Yet all proposals are not good ones, if not as a result of being unwilling (as was the case with Darcy’s initial offer) then because they do not promote the common good. Proposals must be examined, like scientists investigate the natural world, to establish their constitution. This is why, I argue, Elizabeth and Darcy must not only reconsider their estimations of each other, but also reevaluate their relationships to others, including members of their own families. For although “Austen formulates the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy as a dialogue in which their contact with one
another compels them to question their respective judgments through deep self-evaluation as well as reconsider their motives and actions until they are able to recognize in each other the ideal partner,” as Claudia Martin suggests, *Pride and Prejudice* is more broadly about uniting people for the benefit of all. This is why we do not blame Charlotte for marrying Mr. Collins and we think that Lydia and Wickham rather deserve one another. And as for Darcy and Elizabeth: their marriage is appropriately reconceived not in terms of Darcy stooping or Elizabeth aspiring, but rather as an ideal of mutual benefit: “It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance,” a union that could “teach…the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was” (325). Such a model is certainly necessary in a society in which general opinion is often wrong about the good and the bad, “where nothing is in question but the desire of being well married” (22) rather than happiness and improvement.

Happily the insight of these individuals – so unpopular in their thinking – eventually works to reform public opinion. So although for much of the novel, “Mr Darcy was condemned as the worst of men” (176), and Wickham had “the general approbation of the neighbourhood” (235), Elizabeth is able to assure her father that he, along with the rest of the community, “do[es] not know what he really is” (384). Similarly they revise their evaluation of Wickham: once he elopes with Lydia, “Everybody declared that he was the wickedest young man in the world” (310). Many of the other assessments of character on offer – of Lady Catherine or even Mr. Collins – reveal the poor judgment society displays in

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determining who is good and what are good connections: “what is the difference in matrimonial affairs,” Elizabeth asks, “between the mercenary and the prudent motive? Where does discretion end, and avarice begin?” (188).67 As far as Mrs. Bennet is concerned, any connection will do – to a gentleman or to a rake – and Mr. Bennet’s final declaration, that “I admire all my three sons-in-law highly….Wickham, perhaps, is my favourite” (386), should not be dismissed entirely as irony. Even if there are ideal marriages like Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s, those are the exception, rather than the rule, and neither Mrs Bennet nor anyone else is disabused of the belief that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. How to reform general opinion shapes the novel’s treatment of perspective.

Critics often remark on how Austen juxtaposes the views of two or more characters about the same event or person in order to examine the foundation of belief. In this approach, Elizabeth’s tour of Pemberley is central, because it calls attention to the way looking at something from a different vantage point can confirm or correct one’s judgment of it. While Elizabeth is able immediately to perceive Pemberley’s beauty from all directions and distances, she requires direction and distance to accurately ascertain Darcy’s and Wickham’s characters. Tony Tanner, who describes Pride and Prejudice as “a drama of recognition – re-cognition, that act by which the mind can look again at a thing and if necessary make revisions and amendments until it sees the thing as it really is.”68 Austen’s use of free indirect discourse participates in this reevaluation, in that her narrator has access both to the thoughts and feelings of her heroine and to an external, seemingly omniscient

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67 Compare Elizabeth’s query here with her declaration to Jane, who tries to justify Charlotte’s choice in marriage: “You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness” (174).

perspective. Barbara Benedict explains that “Literary sentimentalism neutralizes its own philosophical premise of the virtue of individual response through the persistent retention of stylistic and structural conventions that induce and endorse readerly detachment.” Our own interest in a character’s welfare prevents the reader from the impartiality necessary for accurate assessment. Austen’s audience must govern its feelings no less than her characters.

According to Benedict, “the sort of feeling that sentimental fiction most seeks to modify is excessive sympathy. Sympathy – identification with another – is dangerous because it violates class divisions and threatens rational self-interest, even individual integrity itself.” Consider, for instance, two exchanges Elizabeth has with Wickham, the first when she, like everyone else, thinks him “an angel of light” (310): Wickham believed “their opinion of her [Lady Catherine de Bourgh] – their opinion of every body – would always coincide” (187). Then later, when he has been paid to marry Lydia, Wickham and Elizabeth discuss her impressions of Pemberley and she indicates that he did not represent his time there as it was. When Wickham suggests that his account had not been one-sided, Elizabeth concludes, “Do not let us quarrel about the past. In future, I hope we shall be always of one mind” (340). She recognizes that Wickham is fully aware of what is, in fact, the case.

Upon reading the contents of Darcy’s letter, then, witness Elizabeth’s efforts at governing her reception: “she put down the letter, weighed every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality – deliberated on the probability of each statement – but with little success” (234). For “[o]n both sides it was only assertion” (234), and Elizabeth could attribute “no more substantial good” (235) to either Darcy or Wickham than what general opinion claimed. Not surprisingly, Elizabeth experiences this conflict of opinions as a
conflict of the passions: “such as they [the contents of the letter] were, it may be well
supposed…what a contrariety of emotion they excited” (233); she was “full of indignation;
but when she considered how unjustly she had condemned and upbraided him, her anger
was turned against herself; and his disappointed feelings became the object of compassion.
His attachment excited gratitude, his general character respect; but she could not approve
him” (241). Correcting a common conception of what is good does not refute all
impressions, but rather inserts the perspective of impartiality. That point of view, however
well informed, will always meet with opposition, since people approach the same facts
differently. Consider Darcy’s objection to Bingley marrying Jane: Darcy observes no
partiality on her part, and therefore thinks the union ill advised, whereas he proposes to
Elizabeth when she has shown him mere civility. Deresiewicz suggests, “What is achieved is
not unanimity and is not supposed to be, but a delicate interplay of conflict and agreement”
(512). Such interaction is far preferable to the society of a Mr. Collins, who is always of the
same opinion as Catherine DeBourgh, and thus fosters epistemological inertia. Arriving at
universal truths need not entail discarding all individuality, but rather learning how to
process our impressions, in all their individuality. For there is generally, as Martha Satz
notes, “a salient gap…between evidence and conclusion.” (172). 70

Darcy, for instance, learns to accurately perceive others’ sentiments and take them
into consideration. When he and Bingley were first in Hertfordshire, Darcy “perceived that
his [Bingley’s] partiality for Miss Bennet was beyond what I had ever witnessed in him,” and
that “though she [Jane] received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any
participation of sentiment.” He admits that though he may have been mistaken in his

70 “Satz, Martha G. “An Epistemological Approach to Pride and Prejudice: Humility and Objectivity” Women
assessment of Jane’s feelings, “the serenity of [her] countenance and air was such, as might have given the most acute observer, a conviction that, however amiable her temper, her heart was not likely to be easily touched” (228). But this opinion, like so many others in the novel, is based on a conflict of goods and presents the problem of impartiality: “That I was desirous of believing her indifferent is certain, - but I will venture to say that my investigations and decisions are not usually influenced by my hopes or fears. – I did not believe her to be indifferent because I wished it; - I believed it on impartial conviction” (228). Like the reader, Darcy has his own biases, his own passions, that cloud his cognition; he conducts the same inspection of Jane’s behavior toward Bingley: “I…narrowly observed her during the two visits which I had lately made her here; and I was convinced of her affection” (379). What he sees is that “she received them with tolerable ease, and with a propriety of behaviour equally free from any symptom of resentment, or any unnecessary complaisance” (345). What Darcy sees is Jane’s character, without her hopes or fears.

The final irony in Austen’s novel lies in the fact that what people fail to perceive or misconstrue or challenge are the passions, which, when “universally acknowledged” are taken to be “truth.” And so Mr. Bennet never thinks to question Elizabeth’s opinion of Darcy until Darcy asks for her hand in marriage. Only then are one’s feelings for Darcy distinguished from what one knows – one’s knowledge – of him. Suspicious that his daughter might have the same desires that motivate everyone else in an advantageous marriage, Mr. Bennet observes, “you are determined to have him. He is rich, to be sure, and you may have more fine clothes and fine carriages than Jane. But will they make you happy?” (384). Elizabeth immediately grasps her father’s meaning: “Have you any other objection…than your belief of my indifference?” In other words, general opinion considers fine clothes and fine carriages the good of marriage, which, her father expects, is all that
could prompt her acceptance – consent to general opinion – since “[w]e all know him to be a proud, unpleasant sort of man” (ibid). Like everyone else, Mr. Bennet does not know that Darcy is good, and so Elizabeth asserts her understanding, and her passion, all at once: “I love him. Indeed he has no improper pride. He is perfectly amiable. You do not know what he really is” (385). Elizabeth points out that she has not misjudged; everyone else has. Similarly, everyone will think that she, and Jane as well, are marrying for money and social status, since a single man of good fortune must be in want of a wife. They will not see the passion – Elizabeth’s or Jane’s – and will only appreciate the good of both unions if they venture out, like natural scientists, and gather their own impressions.

The way the novel charts the division and coupling of sentiments thus shows the reconciliation of general opinion with fact in the unification of cognition and volition. That this process is passional is the effect of the incorporation of Stoic thought into eighteenth-century moral writing, enabling benevolent affection and indifference to be compatible. To recognize and act in the interests of the common good does not require that one acts against one’s inclination – a conflict of the passions – but rather an understanding that appreciates what is good for others, an understanding that does not need inclination, which has reference to the self, to act. As Locke writes in his discussion of partiality, “common or uncommon are not the marks to distinguish Truth or Falshood, and therefore should not be any bias to us in our Enquiries. We should not judge of things by Mens Opinions, but of Opinions by things.”

That fellow-feeling erupts so often in Sterne’s novels when Yorick and another have the same thing or place in common should come as no surprise, or that the experience of common conditions in Rasselas reveals nothing new, or that knowledge and feeling converge in Pride and Prejudice, since they produce the same sentiments.

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Conclusion

The Stoic theory of the passions thus informed the way in which eighteenth-century portrayals of sympathy, and the man of feeling in particular, constituted the common good. This influence took its most ambitious form in positing the ideal of fellow-feeling as impartial. Only by being impartial could one recognize that the same good is good for everyone and that mutual benefit is not limited to the distribution of (material) goods. But even in more critical forms, literary reception of the Stoic doctrines shows that sympathy was regarded as the way, not necessarily to share the passions, but rather as the way to mediate conflicting interests without positing each of us with our own good. For while such empiricists as Hobbes and Locke proposed that goods are individual, in terms of perception and possession, they also aided a shift in regarding the passions as volitional to the Stoic account of the passions as cognitive. Hence alongside seventeenth- and eighteenth-century calls for the restraint and moderation of the passions emerged a model of the government of the passions based on Stoic tenets. This model involved changing one's mind, one's opinion, about what the good is and what promotes mutual benefit. The strict Stoic view demands that one recognize what is really good or bad – i.e. not wealth, health, poverty or disease. Many representations of the Stoic emphasized the impracticability of this outlook. But what made the Stoic approach acceptable was the fact that the Stoics, like eighteenth-century moral philosophers, endorsed the benevolent affections as the basis, in one’s development, of virtuous conduct. Inasmuch as these affections – this sympathy – should apply to all equally, the Stoics made the common good epistemological: everyone has the same idea of the good. This idea is not fixed in the world of objects – such as wealth, and so on – but is rather a way of life: “Every one, therefore, who has a right discernment of what
is good, will be chiefly concerned to conform to nature in all his actions and pursuits. This is the origin of moral obligation. False conceptions of good produce violent emotions and passions, which are contrary to right reason and nature. Of these the principal are, animal desires, joy, fear, and sorrow. Passions are the desires of the mind, which it is the office of reason to prevent, or cure. 72 And since experience is so widely varied, diffuse, and uncontrollable, the only way people might arrive at the same idea of anything – to appreciate perspectives of which they have no experience – was through language. Articulating a vision of the plenitude of the world, the richness and significance of our role in it, thus revealing a sense of the order that underlies it was an aesthetic goal that approached the problem of universals from the context of how we regard events. Treating others equally is, after all, connected to the objective of equanimity in the face of everything, from accidents and suffering to fame and riches. In this respect the Stoic ideal of the sage who bears everything was the brunt of criticism, but it also composed a powerful outlook on the role misfortune and evil play in this world. My focus in Chapter 4 is how literary representations of world order can reform our understanding of calamity and of the common good, through Alexander Pope’s rendition of Stoic universals.

72 Brucker, 347.
The project of theodicy – to justify God’s ways to man – has always been a fraught task. On the one hand, theodicies highlight the gap between the human and the divine and, on the other, they seek to reconcile the two. When John Milton recounts the story of the Fall in *Paradise Lost* (1667), for instance, he addresses not only the breach between mankind and God, but also how mankind approached divinity. Justifying God’s ways involves, in Milton’s account, explaining how His design became a mystery to us in the first place. It is telling, then, that the redemption Milton envisions in *Paradise Regained* (1671) is no reformation or enlightenment of mankind. Instead, he depicts how Christ, unlike Satan or Adam, manages to be godlike without challenging his Father’s authority. Milton’s Christ is divine in his fortitude, his submission, and his disregard for the various temptations that Satan offers him. He is thus quite stoical, as many of the early Church fathers described him. Milton, too, compares mankind’s savior to the Stoic sage, whose character he examines at length, after devoting a single line at most to other schools of thought. The ten-line description, comparing one godlike hero, Christ, with another, the Stoic sage, suggests that the latter’s claim to godlike reason, which prompts his proto-Christian indifference to things of this world and to the prospect of death, is a position of arrogance, whereas Christ’s selflessness demonstrates his humility, his faith in God. In contrast, Alexander Pope’s theodicy, *An Essay on Man* (1733-34), presents the endeavor to comprehend divine order as a lesson in humility that teaches us what it means to be godlike.

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1 See Clement of Alexandria II, 241.
Stoicism’s prominence in both poems reflects the degree to which, at the end of the seventeenth century, the ancient philosophy remained influential and its consistency with Christian doctrine was still contested. In Milton’s account of God’s reconciliation with mankind, Christ summarizes the Stoic sage’s principles in order to differentiate his own “mighty work” from that of a figure who – like Satan, Adam, and himself – is god-like, but who, like Christ alone, disdains worldly goods and declares himself ready to die whenever he is called upon to do so. Christ explains that the sage, however, is no Christian hero:

The Stoic last in Philosophic pride;  
By him call’d virtue; and his virtuous man,  
Wise, perfect in himself, and all possessing  
Equal to God, oft shames not to prefer,  
As fearing God nor man, contemning all  
Wealth, pleasure, pain or torment, death and life,  
Which when he lists, he leaves, or boasts he can,  
For all his tedious talk is but vain boast,  
Or subtle shifts conviction to evade. (IV. 300-309)

Milton criticizes the Stoics here (not their doctrines) for failing to live up to the ideal they espouse. The danger of such failure is particularly relevant for Christ, who is trying to figure out how to fulfill a divine ideal himself: “Musing and much revolving in his breast,/ How best the mighty work he might begin/ Of Savior to mankind” (I. 185-87). What enabled the Stoics to achieve such selflessness was reason, through which mankind might perceive the laws that composed universal order and recognize, for instance, the necessity of death whenever it should occur. But, Milton argues, the Stoics claimed too much for reason and, rather than acknowledging their humanity, they merely insisted on their divinity. Such an assessment is not without foundation: Epictetus explains that in “reason…you are not inferior to the gods, nor less than they; for the greatness of reason is not determined by length nor by height, but by the decisions of its will.”

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2 Epictetus, Discourses 1.12 (Cambridge, M.A., Harvard University Press, 1925), 95.
knowledge might be as powerful as God’s. Yet the desire to know too much was Adam and Eve’s downfall, and so Milton foregrounds Christ’s reliance on God to direct his course of action: “what concerns my knowledge God reveals” (I. 293). This knowledge, Christ maintains, is divine in its constitution, not its scope. He therefore claims to be incorruptible, instead of omniscient: “Think not but that I know these things;” Christ informs Satan, “or think/ I know them not; not therefore am I short of knowing what I ought: he who receives/ Light from above…no other doctrine needs” (IV.286-90). As Christ notes, Satan tests him as if he were a Stoic who does not know the limits of reason or pretends to greater knowledge than he has. Nevertheless Christ triumphs, despite being merely human, because his reasoning is correct. God’s Son doesn’t need to know more in order to reject Satan’s dissembling and faulty logic; he only needs to know what is right.

While Christ may not be a Stoic of the sort Milton derides, pompously declaring his divinity, nevertheless his reason, if not all-encompassing, is certainly unerring. Mankind, by contrast, is less skillful and, according to Pope, generally mistaken, for man confuses universal order with imperfection, immediate gratification with the greater good, and virtue with vice. So how does he, without the advantage of Christ’s intellect, discern what is right? The problem with Milton’s account, I propose, is that while Christ’s success confirms the incorruptibility of right reason, it does not explain how to distinguish right from wrong reason. Pope’s famous dictum, “Whatever IS, is RIGHT” (I. 294), presents a deceptively simple solution that critics have often interpreted as simply exemplifying Pope’s advocacy of Christian resignation.\(^3\) Maynard Mack notes, however, that Pope attributes the precept to

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Socrates. Indeed, Mack admits, pagan and Christian doctrines are virtually indistinguishable in *An Essay on Man* because the point of the poem, like “Stoic, neo-Platonic, and Christian theodicies,” is to affirm “a position from which theodicy has never shrunk: that in a world where all is right there is nevertheless much for man to do.” In other words, far from endorsing passive submission, Pope endeavors to direct mankind’s activity in the constitution of universal harmony. In what follows, I argue that Pope’s call to action, encapsulated in his precept “Whatever is, is RIGHT,” instructs his audience to revise their understanding of right and wrong and attain a more divine perspective – to be godlike along Stoic lines. This perspective would enable mankind to be more stoical, more indifferent to the vagaries of life, in that it would prompt mankind to cease lamenting calamity or rejoicing in prosperity. After all, to deem hardship an evil and comfort a good is to evaluate divine order and consider how one might arrange things otherwise – to seek to act like God rather than to reason like Him. With right reason, on the other hand, mankind would regard both misfortune and prosperity with equanimity, not because God ordained it so and for the best, but because man’s judgments of good and evil would be more like His. In other words, instead of evaluating one’s fate in terms of relative benefit or detriment, one would realize that the good, in God’s view, is universal and unchanging. With such a good in view, human beings, like Christ, would not err, because their reason, albeit not all-encompassing, would nevertheless be right.

I am thus refuting what has become a critical convention – that is, the interpretation of Pope’s decree as meaning “whatever is, is good.” This Christian rendition of Pope’s creed recurs to the belief that suffering in this world benefits man by purging him for the next.⁴ The poem, however, does not bear out this construction, in as much as Pope never refers,

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let alone defers, to divine justice. Indeed, *An Essay on Man* is no conventionally pious work, for when Pope inquires, “This light and darkness in our chaos join’d,/ What shall divide,” he supplies a Stoic answer: “The God within the mind” (II.203-204).⁵ And instead of emphasizing the unknowability of God, the insight he offers into universal order penetrates His domain. To be sure, it is the transcendence of Pope’s vantage point – his divine outlook – that critics have found especially troublesome in correlating another of his maxims, “The proper study of Mankind is Man” (II.2), with the poem’s subject matter. Pope’s investigation focuses so often on universal order and the plenitude of creation – what mankind would not know examining itself – that many critics have described his theodicy as paradoxical. “If we maintain,” according to A. D. Nuttall, “that man is unable to conceive anything beyond his own sphere,” then “man, so limited, would never know that he is limited.”⁶ Man would have no reason not to think himself godlike because, as James Noggle points out, any conception of reason’s limit requires a transcendent perspective. Hence, Noggle submits, “the Essay at once renounces and arrogates supernatural, godlike authority to justify the universe’s order, and its doing one seems strangely identical to its doing the other.”⁷ However, once we understand that the godlike reason Pope displays by no means impinges on divine authority – that a godlike perspective is what convinces mankind to stop questioning God’s judgment – then it becomes clear that Pope has revolutionized the genre of theodicy. He does not contemplate God or query, as Christ does on the Cross, why He has done what he has. Rather, Pope reconciles our desire to arrange things for the better

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⁵ See Walter Anderson, 572 for a contemporary comparison between man and the divine in Stoic thought. See also *The commentaries of the emperor Marcus Antoninus*, (1747), 18, 25 and *All the works of Epictetus* (1758), 13.


⁷ Noggle, 97.
with divine order, developing an aesthetics that reveals the nature of our own “mighty
work.”

**Reason’s Limits**

My analysis of how Stoic reason informed Pope’s conception of universal harmony
and our role in it examines more closely a legacy that critics have often averred without
much specification. As Nuttall observes, commentators tend to present “An Essay on Man
[a]s a rich tapestry of Stoic and Christian elements, an utterly traditional fabric in which Pope
is on excellent terms with his peers across the intervening centuries, easily echoing the
sentiments of Epictetus, Pascal and Milton” (51). Pope is then the great mediator who maps
an intellectual “middle ground” navigating “between…Stoic severity and Epicurean
indulgence, between Hobbes’s and Mandeville’s unillusioned materialism and Shaftesbury’s
and Hutcheson’s optimistic benevolence.”

Such an assessment seems apt, given the fact
that Pope aligns himself with no tradition in particular and, as the annotations in the
Twickenham edition attest, his poem cites tenets from the ancients through the Scholastics
and his contemporaries. As such, one would expect Pope to agree with some aspects of
Stoicism and disagree with others, as G. F. C. Plowden suggests: “[An Essay on Man] is Stoic,
nearly enough, in its view of God and the universe but at odds with Stoicism over the nature
of man; in fact Pope has the reduction of man’s ‘Stoic pride’ as one of his chief aims.”

Plowden’s claim that Pope adopts a Stoic outlook on God and his creation is perhaps
surprising, since the wise man’s knowledge of both is the basis of his alleged pride. Hence,
teaching mankind humility would seem to require that Pope discount the Stoic

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8 Humphreys, 68.

9 *Pope on Classic Ground*, 105.
understanding of the divine. The view that Plowden has in mind, however, is the Stoic conception of the universe as permeated by divine reason whereby, in Pope’s formulation, everything composes “one stupendous Whole,/ Whose body, Nature is, and God the soul” (I.267-68) – a model that begins to explain why the Stoics would describe mankind’s reason as godlike: since we unite the rational with the physical, then even if we cannot do everything (as God presumably can), we do conceive a part of what God must decree. Consider Epictetus’ assertion that “our Souls are…connected and intimately joined to God, as being indeed Members, and distinct Portions, of his Essence” (52). Or as Marcus Aurelius declares, we are “Partakers of that divine Particle the Mind” (18), a point that Pope echoes when he refers to “the God within the mind.” My purpose here, then, is to explain how Pope reconciles these accounts of the rational constitution of mankind and natural order with his efforts to inspire humility and thereby clarify how Pope’s reception of Stoic reason avoids the pitfall of “Stoic pride.”

Certainly one might expect Pope, as a Roman Catholic, to regard any endeavor to understand God’s purpose as an instance of pride, since divine design is entirely inaccessible and human reason irredeemably fallen. Yet inasmuch as the natural world manifests His plan, Pope argues, we know nothing else. That is to say, Pope is careful to point out that what we don’t know is the way things aren’t – what other worlds might exist and what is beyond the compass of history. Because the world as it is constitutes our knowledge, the aesthetics Pope establishes is not one that mystifies or sanctifies the mundane. He presents, instead, a way of perceiving and interpreting the world that disabuses events – the unfolding of order – of what we might construe as their moral import. In other words, he does not regard daily, let alone extraordinary, occurrences as signs of divine judgment, as Protestants

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10 Cf. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Sect. IV; Cicero, *On ends* (1747): “Zeno, and the Stoics in general, held the Æther to be the supreme God; to be endowed with Intelligence, and to be the Ruler of the Universe” (418).
might. With godlike reason, one does not aspire to know or attempt to explain more than what is apparently the case, for neither does God, whose knowledge is self-evident. He does not attempt to rationalize the way things aren’t because that would be contradictory: the foundation of disorder. As such, Pope’s theodicy is no explanation of the inexplicable, no attempt to discern what is beyond the limits of our reason.

We therefore blunder not in seeking to know too much, Pope argues, but rather by entertaining false opinions. He criticizes natural philosophers, then, for misrepresenting the world and seeking useless facts, not for their curiosity: “First strip off all her [Science’s] equipage of Pride,/ Deduct what is but Vanity, or Dress/ Or Learning’s Luxury, or Idleness;/ Or tricks to shew the stretch of human brain” (II. 44-47). Attaining a more godlike perspective requires that we acknowledge what is, in fact, the case and reject such misconstructions of reality as those Milton’s Satan promulgates, which present good and evil as changeful and relative. For that we need no greater vision – to acquire the visual acuity, say, of a fly or a lynx. The corrections Pope suggests discern nothing more than what any man can see. He simply identifies what is and always will be valid, regardless of time or place. It is in this respect that his insight is transcendental, for only such knowledge is godlike – that is, unconstrained by temporality or geography – and yet describes what everyone can perceive. Critics ever since Samuel Johnson have noted as much: the truths Pope identifies, Johnson remarks, are “truths we all know.”\footnote{Johnson, \textit{Life of Pope.}} Pope’s point, however, is that if we look beyond the particularities of a given time and place, we can recognize the order that appears disorderly when viewed up close, as to a fly, or fleetingly, as to a lynx. The universal harmony he points to does not simply account for contingency, the seemingly
arbitrary and inconsistent in the world. It reforms our understanding of humanity’s place in the universe as well.

This position – in the middle of things rather than above them – acknowledges our situation vis-à-vis history: we are privy to those truths that transcend the march of time although we are also subject to temporality. Our middle state thus enables us to see more than if we were at one ‘end’ temporally or hierarchically, as it were, of creation. It is then no denigration of humankind to suggest that we are not the culmination of creation, which is why Pope decries those who claim a higher station for mankind and condemns our pride, as so many critics have noted. Yet he reassesses way we stand in relation to other species as well. That is to say, Pope portrays the great chain of being as a hierarchy of species that ranges from lowest to highest while challenging what lower and higher signify. This binary indicates the perfection of one’s faculties and locates one’s perspective – mites are low and hawks are high – but height does not indicate the degree to which one is blessed or fortunate. In fact, offering an overview of natural order from the middle, Pope makes the distance between these positions – high and low – equal. That is to say, whereas one might perceive the rest of creation as inferior from the summit, Pope depicts the array of life as uniformly distant from the middle state. So while the fly has a more microscopic eye than we have and the lynx has greater speed than we do, we can reason far better. Inferiority and superiority balance out and the differences between species are set in harmony, rather than in competition: “Each seeming want compensated of course,/ Here with degrees of swiftness, there of force” (I.181-82). Ordering creation in this way establishes the extent to which we may share God’s perspective, for “To him no high, no low, no great, no small;/

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He fills, he bounds, connects, and equals all” (I.279-80). Nevertheless we do not occupy
God’s position, which is no middle state, but an everywhere.

The limitations on our sight, speed, and other abilities, which keep us in the middle
lead Pope to consider what advantage it is to have godlike reason. Commentators following
Arthur O. Lovejoy have argued that Pope regards humankind’s rational ambitions with
scorn, an assessment that confirms the characterization of Pope as anti-Stoic: “the
conception of the Chain of Being – and of man as its ‘middle link’,” Lovejoy suggests,
“resulted in a species of rationalistic anti-intellectualism. But it also – when made the basis
of an ethics – led to a disparagement of all the more pretentious and exacting moral ideals –
for example, that of Stoicism.”13 The reason that Pope recommends, however, does not
pretend to comprehend everything; it rather aims at the kind of knowledge that Christ had in
Milton’s account, which is infallible in what it grasps and renders one invulnerable to the
temptations of vice and fancy. The natural philosophers Pope mocks are those who
endeavor to make reason do more than comprehend the natural order that the world
manifests, to find something unknown that will explain the purpose of our existence above
and beyond what we do every day. For Pope, the benefit of having godlike reason is not
that we can apprehend everything – indeed we don’t need to if every part observes the order
of the whole – but rather that we can comprehend the physical as a manifestation of the
rational. In other words, we can recognize events as instantiations of universal principle.

This universal principle, according to the Stoics, is God, whom they described as the
rational element governing the universe. Plowden explains that Pope adopted the Stoic view
from Thomas Creech’s overview of the ancient philosophy: the latter reports that “the
Stoicks Principles were in short these: They say there is one Infinite, Eternal, Almighty

Mind, which being diffus’d thro’ the whole Universe of well order’d and regularly dispos’d Matter, actuates every part of it, and is as it were, the Soul of this vast Body.”

While Plowden reads this legacy as a classical precursor to the mechanistic science of Pope’s day, I propose that the Stoic model saves Pope from the Deist position that God organized creation and left it to run, like a wound clock, on its own, and from the extremities of the Roman Catholic notion of divine activity in this world as miraculous – what appears to be the exception to the rule. In addition, the Stoic model obviates the question of why God, in his perfection, concerns himself at all with imperfect creatures, since we instantiate the perfection of His plan. When Pope declares, then, that “Heav’n breaths thro’ ev’ry member of the whole/ One common blessing, as one common soul” (IV.61-62), he highlights the correspondence between the world that we see and divine order. Accordingly, the methodology with which he proposes to study man establishes the correlation between human and divine activity: in the preface to the poem, Pope contends that “to prove any moral duty, to enforce any moral precept, or to examine the perfection or imperfection of any creature whatsoever, it is necessary first to know what condition and relation it is placed in, and what is the proper end and purpose of its being” (501-502). Juxtaposed with his subsequent disparagement of those who believe that mankind could “Describe or fix one movement of his Mind” or “Explain his own beginning, or his end” (II.36, 38), Pope’s formulation of his own poetic enterprise might seem self-ironic. Yet Pope succeeds where these other inquiries fail because he makes the actual condition of mankind the constitution of his moral precepts, rather than referring to the orbit of a comet or the promise of everlasting bliss. The degree to which reason can ascertain “the proper end and purpose” of humanity depends, in his account, on the manifestation of design, the realization of order. My reading of Pope’s

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poem argues that the reach of human reason grasps everything we need to know to act as
God does – that is, according to universal laws. In what follows, I examine the trajectory of
this fulfillment from a problem of knowledge to one of action to one of evil. My analysis
works through the epistles for the most part in sequence, but my intention is not to suggest
that *An Essay on Man* takes up and solves ‘the problem(s)’ that Stoic reason presents so much
as to explore the ways in which the ideal of godlike reason troubled and shaped Pope’s
enterprise.

**Pope’s divine perspective**

Pope is interested in how reason can be infallible because contemporary
philosophers presented numerous, often incompatible, explanations for the human
condition and natural order. To refute all these was not Pope’s aim; he meant only to “steer
betwixt the extremes of doctrines seemingly opposite” and produce “a temperate yet not
inconsistent…system of Ethics.” In so doing, Pope does not put forth a relativist doctrine.
Indeed he cannot, since “The merchant’s toil, the sage’s indolence,/ The monk’s humility,
the hero’s pride,/ All, all alike, find Reason on their side” (II.172-74). This conflict in
rationale shows what commonly limits our reason, for when we only take our own point of
view into consideration, we disagree on what actions constitute universal order. Such
contradictions make human reason seem limited because they identify discord in, instead of
recognizing the harmony of, divine design. A greater perspective is then what Pope intends
to provide. Hence, he begins his overview of “Man in the abstract” (501) by examining the
apparent conflicts in our positions, and therein our conceptions of the foundation and
nature of universal order. Pope contrasts this ‘higher’ view (in the sense of above

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15 Pope, 502.
disagreement) with the “low ambition, and the pride of Kings” (1.2) who in claiming to be God’s representatives on earth vie with him for authority. Since kings direct the natural order of things no more than the “poor Indian,” who “sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind” (I.100). To be high or low in social standing – and therefore, the role one plays in the human world – does not make one’s reason right and another’s wrong. Nor does the altitude or depth of one’s vantage point: when Pope compares “all who blindly creep” with those who “sightless soar” (I.12), neither is in a better position to comprehend the universal order. The real difference in our views lies in what we make of that order: while one might call the world “A Wild, where weeds and flow’rs promiscuous shoot” (1.7), another might perceive a “Garden” (1.8).

Such contradictions, however, are purely aesthetic, because the harmony in the universe does not depend on what our reason makes of it. As such, disorder is innocuous. So although Pope appears at first to collapse all the distinctions that we normally recognize as constitutive of order – social, natural, and even historical – he highlights the degree to which they are, and are not, rooted in misconstructions of divine providence. He begins, therefore, with a catalog of perspectives that places him quite literally in medias res, having invoked his muse, as it were, and joined the elevated with the humble. To yoke pagan epic with Christian theodicy while overturning a host of other distinctions does not make Pope an anarchist or a heretic, because the poem is merely “Try[ing] what the open, what the covert yield;/ The latent tracts, [and] the giddy heights” (1.10-11) reveal – exactly what every segment of society (high or low) and period in history (pagan or Christian) has done to understand natural order and our role in it. An Essay on Man thus reflects the scope and activity of our reason, for Pope’s concern is not to explore the specific points on which various perspectives disagree but to establish the grounds on which they come together.
Hence he “consider[s] Man in the abstract” (501) and endeavors to compose a logic that doesn’t “break the chain of reasoning” (502) connecting everything. In other words, Pope does not hypothesize on why the sun rises and sets every day, which David Hume famously declared inexplicable. Pope asserts the general fact that it does so constitutes the basis of everyone’s understanding of world order and our place in it, no matter what else one might think about dawn or dusk.

Pope’s rhetorical query, “What can we reason, but from what we know?” (I.18), identifies the intersection of our diverse perspectives as methodological. This seemingly obvious statement identifies the limits of what we can reason, both rightly and wrongly, since – accurate or not – our reason is defined by the parameters of what exists. That is to say, when we imagine how the world might be better organized, our vision is still based on the way things are. As such, the limits of our reason are set by what we know, not by the unknown: “Of Man what see we, but his station here,/ From which to reason, or to which refer?” (I.19-20). Were we able to “See worlds on worlds compose one universe,/ …/ What other planets circle other suns,/ What vary’d being peoples ev’ry star” (I.24-27), Pope wonders, how would we understand our own condition any better? Would more extensive knowledge give us greater abilities? No, he maintains; our reason, although godlike, does not make us more than human. Hence, “If nature thunder’d in [our] op’ning ears,/ And stunn’d [us] with the music of the spheres,” we would not know any more than we can already discern. Indeed, we might well “wish that Heav’n had left [us] still/ The whisp’ring Zephyr, and the purling till” (I.201-204). Nevertheless mankind’s ambition is irrational: we wish we had “the pow’rs of all” (1.178) – to be like God in ability, not in wisdom alone.

It is we, then, not Pope, who are determined to collapse all distinction. We desire to be godlike in the construction, not the apprehension, of universal order, and while
discerning His plan does not challenge God’s authority, revising it composes anarchy.

Pope’s aesthetic revolution thus unfolds not through the defense of divine providence, but rather by revealing the nature and consequences of the disorder we invent when we imagine how everything should be. Pope therefore shows that we do not pretend to greater knowledge than God. Instead, we think our judgment better – a folly that is the work of pride: “In Pride, in reas’ning Pride, our error lies” (1.123). Rather than trying to approach God in reason, we endeavor to act like Him, securing what we regard as good (fame, fortune, and so on). Such activity, because it results from the desire to alter universal harmony, concocts evil, whereas the careful consideration of our “mighty work” reveals the good we might do. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who translated Epictetus from the Latin in 1710, shared Pope’s sense of our failure to recognize the improvements we might make when she wrote him, “Humane Nature [is] not rational” in perpetrating social ills. The improvement we have in mind, by contrast, regards mankind as the exception to the rule, rather than one of its manifestations: “Ask for what end the heav’ly bodies shine,/ Earth for whose use? Pride answers, “Tis for mine”” (I.131-32). To thus distinguish our own end from that of others does not make us like God, but like Satan, for “who but wishes to invert the laws/ Of ORDER, sins against th’ Eternal Cause” (I.129-30). The chaos that ensues, therefore, reflects the transformation from a prelapsarian to a postlapsarian world – from beholding a garden to surveying a wilderness – for “one step broken, the great scale’s destroy’d,” (I.244) and not “That system only, but the whole must fall” (I.250). Our reason is not at fault; our failure to observe God’s decree is.


17 Here Pope puns on two of the meanings of ‘scale’ – a ladder and a balance – that were current at the time. By endeavoring to climb the ladder, we upset the balance, or by disregarding the ‘weight’ of divine decree, we fall.
What the first epistle makes clear, then, is that Pope does not begrudge mankind the full extent of his reason. It is our attempts to improve on creation – this pretense to being godlike – that Pope criticizes and critics have mistaken for anti-Stoicism. Yet Pope tries to inspire a Stoic outlook in his readers, I argue, because if we were able to regard events with indifference instead of wishing that things were otherwise, then we wouldn’t challenge God’s authority. Hence Pope inveighs against those who are “pleas’d with nothing, if not bless’d with all” (I.188) and wish to be exempt from the calamities – disease, death, and so on – that every part of creation endures. By contrast, he who “understands the Administration of the World,” Epictetus explains, “has learned that the greatest, and most principal, and comprehensive, of all Things, is this System” and therefore need not “fear any thing that happens among Men” (33). He is godlike in that he is neither anxious about misfortune nor desirous for what will not happen. Such indifference does not mean, however, that he is apathetic and simply submits to whatever happens. The wise man realizes that while God’s business is to maintain order, “the playing of the Part assigned to [him], commendably, depends upon [him]self. This is [his] business.”

The proper purpose of our reason in *An Essay on Man*, I propose, is to determine this business. In Pope’s delineation of our “mighty work,” the recognition that “Whatever IS, is RIGHT” does not mean that one need do nothing because God takes care of everything. Pope’s reader is not enjoined to demonstrate Christian resignation so much as to reconceive his agency in the world. In other words, our recognition of natural order should enable us to act rationally – to determine for ourselves what we should do – rather than to identify how everything else should be governed.

This shift constitutes a development in the construction of rational order that Charles Taylor has identified in the seventeenth-century’s reception of Stoicism. According

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18 Stanhope’s translation of the *Encheiridion*, ch. 17 (4th ed., 1721), 123.
to Taylor, with the advent of Descartes’ method, rationality is “no longer defined substantively…but rather procedurally,” and order “ceases to be something we find and becomes something we build.”19 As such, reason becomes self-justifying, as in Descartes’ maxims, “never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth” and then “to direct my thoughts in an orderly manner, by beginning with the simplest and most easily known objects in order to ascend little by little, step by step, to knowledge of the most complex.”20 What limits Descartes’ knowledge is therefore its own consistency – the degree to which his knowledge progresses by confirming the validity of prior beliefs – rather than its grasp of the order of things. Pope’s endeavors to reform his readers’ thinking, I suggest, aim at such consistency at the same time as he attempts to overcome the limitations of Descartes’ method, for without reference to the external world, his thinking is a closed circuit that does not direct one’s activity in the world. The godlike quality of his rationale depends on its lack of contradiction, rather than on any manifestation of principle, and therefore does not demonstrate the correspondence that makes God’s reason perfect: that what He thinks determines what happens. This divine correspondence, I suggest, constitutes Pope’s ideal, since only then does our reason approach God’s and only then does our conception of world order give us something to do.

Pope doesn’t simply adopt the rationalism Descartes derives from the Stoics because it permits one to be inactive, much like the sage Milton derides for his “vain boast” and “subtle shifts.” Taylor explains that Descartes is not concerned that his ideas coincide with the external world because “the cosmos is no longer seen as the embodiment of meaningful

“order,” a “move [that] is brought about by our coming to grasp this world as mechanism”, “a domain of possible means” (148-49). For Pope, the world is no less mechanistic, demonstrating the array of principles that constitutes order as well as the various ways in which one might put principle into action. So although, according to Taylor, the Cartesian development of Stoic reason establishes “the hegemony of reason…in terms of a directing agency subordinating a functional domain,” instead of “as a dominant vision” (149), Pope unites the two so that we act on what we know, whereby reason’s hegemony directs us in our selection of means, rather than dominating them. In other words, reason prompts us to decide how to act wisely, not how to reorganize the world for our ends. The kind of control over the order of the world we exercise is therefore limited not by the extent of our reason, which might know anything, but by what we do. Such a limitation is deliberate, because otherwise we would be able to change the laws that maintain universal harmony. Pope’s treatment of human agency is thus designed to save it from being limited to a state of mind while not presenting our abilities as godlike.

Rational Activity

The correspondence of thought and action is, for Pope, essential to human nature because mankind is the only creature that unites the sensual with the intellectual. Exactly how this correspondence is constructed within the framework of natural order was the question he faced, the prevalence of which at the time is perhaps most famously depicted in the fate of the astronomer in Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*. After pursuing rational discovery to its limits, Johnson’s astronomer becomes convinced that he directs weather patterns and is therefore responsible for maintaining natural order: “I have possessed for five years the regulation of weather and the distribution of the seasons: the sun has listened to my dictates,
and passed from tropic to tropic by my direction; the clouds, at my call, have poured their waters, and the Nile has overflowed at my command" (138). Yet, the astronomer admits, “I cannot prove it by any external evidence; and I know too well the laws of demonstration to think that my own conviction ought to influence another who cannot, like me, be conscious of its force” (139-40). No one else can perceive his control over the natural world because order is preserved. Somewhat ironically, the astronomer is thus quite reasonable in his course of action; rather than altering natural law at will, the astronomer instructs Imlac to consider the effect his adjustments will have: “Do not…in thy administration of the year, indulge thy pride by innovation” (140). He recommends that Imlac contemplate his actions from a divine standpoint in order to recognize the proper scope of our efforts. As such, even if one were presumptuous enough to think oneself godlike, one might well realize that to act like God does not mean that one does whatever one wants – that would disregard, not take into consideration, everyone’s circumstances.

One of the questions Johnson’s astronomer thus highlights is that if man has godlike reason and our thoughts direct our actions, then to what extent is our activity divine? His portrayal might well derive from Pope’s mockery of our attempts at godlike activity: “Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides:/ Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,/ Correct old Time, and regulate the Sun” (II.20-22). This farcical enterprise, with which Pope begins the second epistle, looks back to the disorder he created in the first, which culminates with a revision, if you will, of Genesis: instead of “Let there be light,” Pope pronounces, “Let earth unbalanc’d from her orbit fly” (I.251) and “Let ruling Angels from their spheres be hurl’d” (I.253). Pope’s attempt at performative language at the end of the first epistle highlights the insufficiency here of determining to go measure the earth and state the tides. Our knowledge might well extend so far, and we might even comprehend what action is
called for in more mundane situations, yet Pope observes, “when [our] own great work is but
begun,/ What Reason weaves, by Passion is undone” (II. 39-42). The difficulty is not that
we regularly attempt that which is entirely beyond our abilities, but that we often fail to act
from principle. In other words, because we fail in terms of reason, we also fail in terms of
performance; for whereas God invariably carries out his doctrines, we don’t.

To be sure, if we regard “quitting sense [as] imitating God” (II.26), then it comes as
no surprise that we fail to perform our “own great work.” Pope informs us, however, that
being godlike in reason does not require that we elevate our position on the great chain of
being and leave the physical behind. Pope’s correction thus avoids the pitfalls of skepticism,
which denies any evidence we might have that our knowledge corresponds to God’s:
mankind has “too much knowledge for the Sceptic side” (II.5). What’s more, we have “too
much weakness for the Stoic’s pride,” because our activity – pursuing wealth, health and so
on – belies what our reason might easily ascertain: that everyone experiences prosperity and
misfortune no matter what s/he does. Since we do not act on principle, man is perpetually
“in doubt to act, or rest,/ In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;/ In doubt his Mind or
Body to prefer” (II.7-9), an indecision that is no more effective than our attempts to alter
His plan. The choice that we have, then, is neither between mind and body nor between
God’s order and ours. Instead, we must determine how to act given the relationship
between the mental and the physical that we instantiate – that belongs to us as humans. If
we do, then we realize that our reasons for acting are our own more than God’s and thus
that we make known to ourselves why things happen the way they do, rather than question
Him. We need not look to God for justification.

Our role in the constitution of divine order, therefore, is not to act unthinkingly.
Instead, our consciousness of what we can do makes the prospect of not being able to do
anything very different for us than for a lamb, which faces its slaughter with indifference because it is unaware of what is in store. While we may feel that divine order leaves us with no choice – that we have been “Born but to die, and reas’ning but to err;/…/ Whether he thinks too little, or too much” (II.10-12) – we have in fact free will in determining how to carry out our “great work.” Unlike Christ, we are not simply called upon to die. On the contrary, we live to apprehend the various actions we might perform and, rejecting the vicious, implement the virtuous. Pope thus calls our attention to another lamb – not Christ, but rather the lamb we sacrifice for our pleasure: “The lamb thy riot dooms to bleed to-day,/ Had he thy Reason, would he skip and play?/ Pleas’d to the last, he crops the flow’ry food,/ And licks the hand just rais’d to shed his blood” (I.81-84). Without reason, the lamb does not revolt and so fulfills, willy nilly, its part of universal order, whereas we are able to act with our mortality and the passage of time in mind and thus choose universal good over immediate gratification. Our slaying of the lamb stands in contrast, then, to Christ, whose sacrifice was for mankind’s salvation rather than his enjoyment, and to the pagans, who sacrificed lambs to honor and appease the gods. Caught up in the present, we often fail to consider our own end – salvation – or the lessons of the past.

Divine vision, on the other hand, is timeless, encompassing the past, present, and future. As such, the indifference providence seems to evince stems not from God’s lack of concern for his creation, but rather from the universal applicability of His principles. That is to say, His precepts do not determine progress within history, so that the fulfillment of His plan is ever increasingly and more perfectly the case. His design is always manifest, for divine decrees apply at all times and to all creatures, which is why, Pope declares, to be subject to reason is the same for the lamb as for human beings. The same laws that govern the one direct the other, so only when animals like “the proud steed…know why Man
restrain” them and “the dull Ox, why now he breaks the clod,” then too will mankind “comprehend/ His actions’, passions’, being’s, use and end;/ Why doing, suff’ring, check’d, impell’d, and why/ This hour a slave, the next a deity” (I.65-68). In other words, mankind will recognize the principles that delimit his role in the universe once he realizes that reason functions no differently for him than for the rest of creation; he is like the ox, “now a victim, and now Ægypt’s God” (I.64). Pope’s point is not simply that God does not play favorites, but also that His indifference is not just a matter of appreciating the greater good. Whereas we might aspire to “see with equal eye, as God of all,/ A hero perish, or a sparrow fall,/ Atoms or systems into ruin hurl’d,/ And now a bubble burst, and now a world” (1.87-90), the transcendent realization that comes with a timeless perspective is that destruction – of great or small, high or low – is the physical manifestation of temporal definitude. The repetition of “or” and “now” syntactically constructs a chain that disregards the order of the great chain of being (since clearly on that hierarchy heroes are higher than sparrows) without destroying it, as human ambition might. Pope’s chain is one of reasoning that connects creation temporally within the poem, showing us that it is time that renders all equal.

It is the passage of time, after all, that reconciles the vicious with the virtuous through the formers atonement. Indeed the knowledge of our temporal end – our mortality – does not render our actions futile, but rather makes us consider how the span of our lives constitutes universal order. Hence, Pope instructs us to “Account for moral as for nat’ral things” and asks, “Why charge we Heav’n in those, in these acquit?” because “In both, to reason right is to submit” (1.161-64). That is to say, what is right for one domain is valid for the rest, whereby the physical world is not the antithesis of the moral, as the difference between “now” and hereafter might imply, but rather a continuum in which the material integrates all ends (physical, moral, temporal, and so on). Hence, Pope calls on his reader to
acknowledge the force of the same principles in this world as in the next, for chaos in the
one is not divided and set right in the other, a recreation of genesis as it were. Instead, Pope
insists on the consistency of all time. Our failure to perceive it is the result of the mistaken
divisions we make in ordering the universe. Whereas for us, “All Nature is but Art,
unknown to thee;/ All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;/ All Discord,
Harmony, not understood;/ All partial Evil, universal Good” (1.289-92), for God these
divisions do not exist. By attending to the temporal constitution of our knowledge and the
fundamental distinction we make between this world and the next, which divides the
physical from the spiritual, Pope identifies the basis of mankind’s misjudgments about, and
dissatisfaction with, our position on the great chain. The ‘progress’ of time, however, is not
a development from the most primitive and ignorant to the most advanced and wise – “The
blest today is as completely so,/ As who began a thousand years ago” (I.75-76) – but rather
the framework through which we perceive the correspondence of thought and action.

For us, this correspondence will never be a-temporal, as it is for God. Yet the timely
materialization of thought into action also saves us from attempting a thousand futile or
harmful actions. In other words, the temporal delay enables us to consider, more carefully
than we might otherwise, what we ought to do. Indeed, Pope is far more concerned that we
do not govern our thoughts and actions enough than that we might endeavor to know too
much. I therefore read his declaration that “The bliss of Man…/ Is not to act or think
beyond mankind” (I.189-90) as highlighting the difference between trying to alter God’s
design and recognizing what is best to do: while the former leads to frustration and
disappointment, the latter is more readily accomplished and consequently pleasing. So
although we have godlike reason and can contemplate more what we are capable of, we will
only be happy if we think and act within the scope of our nature. Nevertheless because the
process of considering what to do – rejecting the futile and/or harmless – can be lengthy, relying on reason to dictate our actions involves, at first, not acting at all. This condition was characteristic of the stereotypical Stoic, who in following reason is completely passive, and this is the crux of Milton’s attack on the sage.

The problem, Pope explains, is that reason is not unremitting in its guidance, even when it is right. We may perceive universal truths, but these do not always specify what we should do, a difficulty that casuists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had made prominent. Pope’s solution is to show that our desire for happiness – which is unfailing – does not allow us to be apathetic. He explains that “While still too wide or short is human Wit,/ Sure by quick Nature happiness to gain,/ Which heavier Reason labours at in vain./ This too serves always, Reason never long;/ One must go right, the other may go wrong” (III.90-94). Where reason falls short, our desire for happiness ensures that we will act in view of some good. We are thus safe, in Pope’s account, from the passivity that the Stoics were accused of, which Pope explains is rooted in pride: “In lazy Apathy let Stoics boast/ Their Virtue fix’d; ‘tis fix’d as in a frost,/ Contracted all, retiring to the breast;/ But strength of mind is Exercise, not Rest” (II.101-104). The ‘rest’ that the Stoics strove for was not, however, a life of inactivity. It was the indifference to life’s vicissitudes that our godlike reason enables us to achieve, and Pope advocated, whereas the passivity the Stoics were reported to commend was regarded as a consequence of their commitment to a life regulated by reason. The standard complaint against the insensitivity the Stoic ideal was construed as promoting was that without passion one would not be moved to act; as one early eighteenth-century critic of “Modern Stoicks” put it, “the passions are as much the organs of the soul,
as the senses of the body; and they are the hints and motives to action; without them we should be little more than vegetables.”

Certainly his claim that “The rising tempest puts in act the soul” (II.105) suggests that we do not carry out our principles in tranquility. Yet in delineating the role of the passions in the constitution of universal order, Pope neither abandons nor qualifies his affirmation of Stoic reason. Instead, his treatment of the passions at once solves what Stoicism’s critics saw as the problem with the sage’s rationalism and its impracticality, for Pope presents the passions as applying rational principle to the material world. That is, they enable us to translate universal decree into particular deeds. He thus distinguishes the principle of action from those of reason, a move that explains why divine power does not accompany our godlike reason: if the nature of our knowledge differs from that of our actions, then the two might not be coextensive and their correspondence a work in progress. With this distinction, Pope departs from the Stoics, who conceived of reason as an active principle (which they viewed as operating on the passive principle of undifferentiated matter) and the passions as “vicious and intemperate reasoning.” He does so, I suggest, in order to account for why we don’t always do what we know is right. In other words, while the Stoics held that the wise man always does what he should, Pope clarifies why we often don’t, even if we know better. His explanation also addresses the question of why we sometimes act as we ought without doing so from principle. In this departure from Stoic rationalism, Pope thus compensates for human fallibility and presents a view of action that does not differentiate human activity, which is rational, from what the rest of creation does. His purpose, I suggest, is to show how uniform, how orderly, the manifestation of divine design is, no matter what we think.

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21 Gentlemen’s Magazine (1732), 16.
Self-love, in Pope’s analysis, is the universal motivating force that puts one’s reason into action: “Self-love, to urge, and Reason, to restrain;/ Nor this a good, nor that a bad we call,/ Each works its end, to move or govern all” (II.54-56). With this account Pope shows how human nature is constituted to establish its own harmony, one that reflects the order that the universe itself manifests. As such, reason and self-love work together to redefine what is good, and bad, for humanity: “And to their proper operation still,/ Ascribe all Good; to their improper, Ill” (II 54-58). This mechanical representation is remarkable in its conception of good and bad without reference to pleasure or pain – its insensibility – a perspective Pope adopts because self-love, like reason, can function correctly or incorrectly, and put forward or challenge, God’s decrees.\(^{22}\) Hence, Pope maintains, “Pleasure, or wrong or rightly understood,/ Our greatest evil, or our greatest good” (II.91-92). Pleasure might well function as the Stoics suggested, as “vicious and intemperate reasoning.” The passions, or “Modes of Self-love” (II.93), thus pose the same threat as our misjudgments – both can promote the pursuit of a false or fleeting good. But there is an important difference: whereas reason’s principles are universal and constant, the passions are relative and inconstant. What’s more, passions get spent, and so our activity differs from God’s not only in its consistency but also in its duration, for He “Lives thro’ all life, extends thro’ all extent,/ Spreads undivided, operates unspent” (I.273-74). His coherence is no less physical than it is rational.

So whereas there is no difference between the general and the particular in God’s constitution of universal order, because our application of general precept is motivated by specific passions, whenever we act we are partial, choosing this means as opposed to another

and responding to x instead of to y. Hence the second epistle complements Pope’s earlier assertion of the universality of divine mediation – “the first Almighty Cause/ Acts not by partial, but by gen’ral laws” (I.144-45) – by specifying the particularity of human endeavor. His portrayal of our activity is indeed the opposite of God’s order, which knows “no high, no low, no great, no small” (I.279), for we operate between extremes: “Self-love still stronger, as its objects nigh;/ Reason’s at distance, and in prospect lie:/ That sees immediate good by present sense;/ Reason, the future and the consequence” (II.71-74). Strength and weakness, far and near, now and then – all the measurements by which we overturned order in the opening of the poem are here the means by which we achieve a balance, not only between reason and self-love but also with the rest of creation. The balance is one of specification: “Man, but for that [Self-love], no action could attend,/ And, but for this [Reason], were active to no end” (II. 61-62). In order to act in a particular instance and to know how to act, self-love and reason must work in concert, just as humankind must live in accord with everything else.

The aggregate of events throughout history, therefore, demonstrates the innumerable ways in which the diverse principles that maintain order can be applied, so that each instantiation of God’s will is evidence of what is possible. Such a rendition allows for the difference between God’s timeless perspective and our timely experience of events while establishing the principles that connect the two. What’s more, the intersection of our view with God’s – in determining what is possible – makes our actions not a question of obedience or disobedience, but rather one of lesser or greater wisdom. To do what is best constitutes the latter, while doing what is merely possible demonstrates the thoughtlessness that we are free to exercise. This freedom, and the range of possibilities it entails, applies to non-rational creatures as well, and so Pope maintains, “If plagues or earthquakes break not
Heav’n’s design,/ Why then a Borgia, or a Cataline?” (1.155). His point is to correct our arrogance in judging such events as evils, as I have noted, but also to emphasize the freedom we have in acting as we will: God does not force us to be good. By the time Pope repeats his dictum at the beginning of the third epistle – “Here then we rest: ‘The Universal Cause/ Acts to one end, but acts by various laws” (III.1-2) – it is clear that he is explaining both the complexity of God’s design and the range of possible actions his principles permit. We need not obey, but rather choose.

Since obedience is in Pope’s theodicy no longer the test of our goodness, nature only gives us knowledge of divine order – what is right – not the motivation to follow through. Pope thus laments, “Ah! if she [Nature] lend not arms, as well as rules,/ What can she more than tell us we are fools?” (II.151-52). Our foolishness is not in mistaking what the rules are. Instead, we err in not acting on what we know. In Pope’s analysis, this is a failure of passion, not reason, in as much as we often do not want what we know is best and we fail to spurn what is seductive. The solution, Pope contends, is to capitalize on our weaknesses and idiosyncrasies, channeling them to good ends: “Th’Eternal Art educing good from ill,/ Grafts on this Passion our best principle:/ ‘Tis thus the Mercury of Man is fix’d,/ Strong grows the Virtue with his nature mix’d” (II.175-78). As such, even the negative passions can provoke right action:

The surest Virtues thus from Passions shoot,
    Wild Nature’s vigor working at the root.
    What crops of wit and honesty appear
    From spleen, from obstinacy, hate, or fear!
        See anger, zeal and fortitude supply;
    Ev’n av’rice, prudence; sloth, philosophy;
        Lust, thro’ some certain strainers well refin’d,
    Is gentle love, and charms all womankind. (II.183-190)

This list of passions constructs another chain that is not hierarchical yet culminates in the good. To thus produce the good from the bad is of course no great feat for a theodicist, and
Pope is hardly original in his trajectory, but his move is conspicuous because it is human, not divine, effort that engineers the good and the process is entirely cognitive. In so doing, Pope does not claim that we need only reassess misfortune and realize its spiritual benefit or recognize the good in everything (the glass is half full). Instead, we must direct our biases so that we operate on them in the right time and the right place – a 'strainer' that makes the most of those temporal and geographical constraints that naturally delimit our activity (as opposed to God's). Good can therefore come of ill not because we are all-powerful but because “Reason the byass turns to good from ill” (II.197) and “Virtue's ends from Vanity can raise” (II.245) – a reformation of pride. Pope's chain orders our internal motions to improve our external.

His aim, to “build on wants, and on defects of mind,/ The joy, the peace, the glory of Mankind” (II. 247-248), thus demonstrates how “Extremes in Nature equal ends produce” (II.205), for love and hate, physical and rational, high and low, the human and the divine – all converge in his representation of natural order. As such, Pope's own work in generating the poem is quintessentially different from God's as depicted in Genesis: while the former endeavors to be inclusive, the latter differentiates and categorizes, separating the light from the dark and so on. In amalgamating such diverse elements, the poet might seem to undermine natural order just as the reader did in the first epistle. But his alignment of such disparate perspectives is innocuous, for while God's order is substantial, Pope shows the intersection of these contraries to be aesthetic: “Tho' each [extreme] by turns the other's bound invade,/ As, in some well-wrought picture, light and shade,/ And oft so mix, the difference is too nice/ Where ends the Virtue, or begins the Vice” (II. 207-210). Pope does not “whitewash Mandeville” here by formulating a version of “private vices, public
Instead, he points out how difficult it is to distinguish virtue from vice when one’s principles can be applied in so many ways and given the fact that divine order does not rule out vice. His language focuses on the problem appearance presents because the universal application of divine laws would seem to suggest that if something happens, then it must be right, and what seems to be wrong, like earthquakes and the Cataline conspiracy, are not. So how do we distinguish what is right? Must we, like Milton’s Christ, depend on divine revelation?

In as much as Pope depicts the workings of universal order as regulated without such interventions as revelation or miracles, critics often characterize his theodicy as Deist. To be sure, his mechanistic portrayal of our – and God’s – designs along with his emphasis on the complex harmony that God ordained supports such an interpretation. Helen Deutsch, for example, argues that the “transparent order in nature’s apparent chaos” Pope sees is inherently Deist, and Nuttall proposes that “The Deist intuition that God’s goodness must be demonstrable in general terms of universal application seems to have commanded enough of Pope’s assent to make him think it proper to vindicate the ways of God to man with little overt reference to the Fall of Man and his Redemption” (99). Pope does not refer to the sins of the past or the promise of the future – the beginning or the end of time – because the timeless vision he ascribes to God and the eternal realization of His plan he delineates paints an a-historical view of order itself. Even our involvement – to the degree that we realize God’s decrees neither less nor more now than we ever have or ever will – is transhistorical. Yet Pope’s lack of recourse to the implications of Original Sin or to the prospect of salvation does not indicate, as Nuttall argues, “that everything is really perfect.”

Nor does the futility of our attempts to improve upon God’s design. The point of

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examining the junction of diverse perspectives is to show that our appreciation of perfection is relative – it depends on our frame of reference – whereas God’s scope is all encompassing and takes everything quite literally into consideration. So by showing how “various human frailties always tend to produce happy results within the natural order” (99), Pope offers us a glimpse of how our weaknesses obstruct the fulfillment of divine providence – which accounts for everything – no more than a turtle’s speed or a mole’s sight. That said, Nuttall is right to note that if history instantiates the perfection and complexity of God’s design, as Pope suggests, then the theodicist’s traditional problem of accounting for evil would be a non-issue here, since all “partial evil is universal good.”

The nature of conflict

Given the fullness of order that Pope enumerates, it comes as no surprise that evil takes the form of conflict. But where does conflict enter a picture in which light and shadow, virtue and vice, good and evil, so nearly mingle? After all, Pope’s use of a scale to figure forth universal harmony makes balance, not discord, discernible. The third epistle documents how conflict emerges within the institution of human government, which for instance decrees at one time that regicide is lawful and at another that it is treasonous. Since history begins after the Fall, Pope retells the story of “man’s first disobedience” not as a justification of our fallen nature or an explanation for the external conditions of our existence – a harsh reality rather than a utopian garden – but as a misconception of what constitutes social harmony. Pope suggests that the laws that govern social interaction are no longer versions of natural law, and thus no longer extend the principles that organize the rest

24 Compare this claim with Leibniz’s “best of all possible worlds.”
of creation to mankind. As such, his vision of a prelapsarian time composes a social utopia, rather than a more perfect relationship between man and God:

Heav’n forming each on other to depend,  
A master, or a servant, or a friend,  
Bids each on other for assistance call,  
’Till one Man’s weakness grows the strength of all.  
Wants, frailties, passions, closer still ally  
The common int’rest, or endear the tie. (II.249-254)

Pope contrasts this model of communal benefit with the logic of the misguided man, who in his pride and conceit thinks that God “work’d solely for thy good,/ Thy joy, thy pastime, thy attire, thy food” (III.27-28). Such individualism precludes harmonious interaction with others, and if human laws are designed to protect individual goods, rather than promote social welfare, then conflict is inevitable. Hence, Pope describes a different fall: “And just as short of Reason he must fall,/ Who thinks all made for one, not one for all” (III.47-48).

This ‘fallen’ man’s orientation sees to it that one man’s weakness is not compensated for by another’s strength, but rather provides the grounds of tyranny.

This kind of government is diametrically opposed to God’s, from whose authority kings may derive their right, yet not justify oppression. For “Heav’n’s attribute was Universal Care,/ And Man’s prerogative to rule, but spare” (III.159-60). So even if, as Pope recognizes, “the pow’rful still the weak controll, / Be Man the Wit and Tyrant of the whole:/ Nature that Tyrant checks; he only knows,/ And helps, another creature’s wants and woes” (III.49-52). In other words, mankind’s godlike reason is not intended to make him attempt to act like an absolute god; his reason enables him to take others into consideration and assist them accordingly. What’s more, this activity is a version of acting like God – one that ensures coexistence rather than subjugation. Nature, then, is a source of rational as well as material resources: “Here too all forms of social union find,/ And hence let Reason, late, instruct Mankind:/ Here subterranean works and cities see;/ There towns aerial on the
waving tree” (III.179-82). The laws of nature these societies reveal do not explicate the food chain or the benefits of natural disasters; they show that mankind’s reason does not dictate the organization of other creatures, who do not take our good into consideration anyway (they aren’t rational), so that our harmonious interaction is our charge. If we were to base our laws on nature’s paradigm, Pope suggests, our government would not depend on its administrators for its greatness, and our laws would transcend the wars and alliances of the moment: “Mark what unvary’d laws preserve each state,/ Laws wise as Nature, and as fix’d as Fate” (III.189-90). Pope is not challenging the regent here, but rather suggesting how Britain’s sovereign might be more properly godlike in his command. His point is that God’s representatives are everywhere – not just on the British throne – and that shows just how valid His government is.

The poet focuses on the figure of the king because he makes the strongest claim to being godlike and he is most responsible, according to Pope’s Tory outlook, for social harmony. Pope’s examination of ‘fallen’ civil society is therefore a response to the political upheaval of the last century. Supporting a stronger king that could create harmony from parliamentary discord, Pope is nevertheless wary of those who would aspire to rule alone and suggests the rhetoric of absolutism is only justified when the sovereign, like God, uses his power to maintain the wellbeing of the state, not as a means of subjugation. The guilty party in his rendition of original sin is then those

Who first taught souls enslav’d, and realms undone,
Th’ enormous faith of many made for one;
That proud exception to all Nature’s laws,
T’invert the world, and counter-work its Cause?
Force first made Conquest, and that conquest, Law. (III.241-45)

The syntax and order of the lines themselves illustrates the faulty reasoning of such a view, for “souls enslav’d” and “realms undone” already constitute the “exception to all Nature’s
laws,” which organize harmonious states throughout the natural world. As such, their subjects – enslaved and undone – have already learned the lesson of “many made for one” – to treat their conqueror like a god, not one who legislates just laws that apply to everyone, but one who is above the law, “the proud exception to all Nature’s laws.” Causality is thus inverted, as the very next line declares, since a ruler cannot legitimate his position after conquering his people. In this respect, the tyrant’s cause undoes the foundation of order and institutes arbitrary government. Tyrants, after all, are “Gods partial, changeful, passionate, unjust,/ Whose attributes [a]re Rage, Revenge, or Lust” (III.257-58). By contrast, the ‘first cause’ – appropriately appearing at the end of the line – establishes lasting principles of order, the impact of which is omnipotent without being oppressive or arbitrary: “All serv’d, all serving! nothing stands alone;/ The chain holds on, and where it ends, unknown” (III.25-27). The king is no less in the middle (serving and served) than anyone else; his power is to construct a lasting order through the legislation of just laws and through his succession. Pope, therefore, does not argue that kings cannot be like God. Indeed, the chain of royal descent is consonant with the chain of effects God brings about.

In reconstructing the genealogical chain that composes the divine right of kings, Pope shows how the weakness that most limits our powers, mortality, can be a source of strength in the stable perpetuation of the laws that preserve social harmony, a continuity that we (not God) quite literally compose: mankind, “looking up from sire to sire, explor’d/ One great first father, and that first ador’d./ Or plain tradition that this All begun,/ Convey’d unbroken faith from sire to son” (III.225-228). This ancestral chain links the prelapsarian with the postlapsarian, countermanding individualism with the prospect of, and solution to, its end. In so doing, the restoration of the royal line does more than offer a version of immortality; it can also unify the realm, in which “jarring int’rests of themselves create/
Th’according music of a well-mix’d State./ Such is the World’s great harmony, that springs/
From Order, Union, full Consent of things!” (III.293-96).²⁵ Pope turns to the king, in
particular, to orchestrate such accord because his reign does more than individual
parliaments or ministers to establish a lasting order. Moreover, if he is just, then the king’s
godliness is not another version of the proud stoic’s, more pronouncement than fact.
Indeed the king’s claim to divinity – in power or pedigree – does not render him superior to
everyday concerns. Being God’s representative on earth, Pope observes, need not mean that
one literally acts like God, surely an expectation that is no longer sustainable in the wake of
reignicide. Whereas before, “On him [the king], their second Providence, they [the people]
hung,/ Their law his eye, their oracle his tongue./ He from the wond’ring furrow call’d the
food,/ Taught to command the fire, controul the flood” (III.217-20), afterward, his
godliness was no longer in question, and the people “began/ Whom they rever’d as God to
mourn as Man” (III.223-24). Yet, Pope contends, the king, like Christ, can work to save his
people even if he is only human. After all, everything is not perfect, but we can do
something about it. Once we know what is right, we must act.

The pursuit of happiness

Pope’s concern over the nature and extent of human activity emphasizes that he is
not asking us to epitomize Christian resignation. He wants us to recognize the choices we
have in acting, to determine what we can do. And in as much as our activity can improve
our lot or make it worse we, not God, are responsible for our happiness. Yet because Pope
argues that right reason will help us regard misfortune and prosperity with indifference, it is

²⁵ The argument that the consent of the governed is hereditary and is what authorizes the sovereign is most
famously formulated in Hobbes’ Leviathan. Sir Robert Filmer is the period’s touchstone for the claim that the
king’s ancestry literally goes back to Adam.
by no means obvious what would actually constitute our happiness. In fact, we often mistake what will: “Oh blind to truth, and God’s whole scheme below,/ Who fancy Bliss to Vice, to Virtue Woe!/ Who sees and follows that great scheme the best,/ Best knows the blessing, and will most be blest” (IV.93-96). The confusion in the lines about who is who and what is best and when one is blessed reflects our predicament. More specifically, the different referents for “who” in lines 94 and 95—the first describing an erroneous perspective, the second a correct one—demonstrate how difficult it is to separate the virtuous path from the vicious. Both, after all, appear to be conducive to happiness: the former fancies himself content while the latter knows what he must do to be blessed. However, the chiasmus of bliss, vice, virtue, and woe betrays the faulty logic of the first outlook; its inversion, both in grammar and in meaning, contrasts with the sequential normativity of the latter, a progression that demonstrates its perfection in the anadiplosis of “best” and the polyptoton of “blessing.” Pope further contrasts the two in the order of the lines, whereby the vicious outlook appears above (i.e. first) and the virtuous below, a positioning that highlights the movement of the virtuous up to heaven, where they are blessed, and the descent of the vicious to hell, where they are damned. Nonetheless, despite all this juxtaposition, how either conceives of happiness remains unclear.

Certainly one would expect a Roman Catholic like Pope to distinguish between the material and the spiritual in order to teach Christ’s lesson: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matt 6:19-20). And Pope does articulate this view: “What nothing earthly gives, or can destroy,/ The Soul’s calm sun-shine, and the heart-felt joy” (IV.167-68). But his examination of our misconceptions of happiness
in the fourth epistle does not jettison the material at all. To be sure, materiality poses a problem, for we are supposed to recognize that happiness depends on nothing earthly when our activity is physical and is directed by the pursuit of happiness. It is therefore no accident that Pope’s declaration at the beginning of the fourth epistle does not limit the fulfillment of happiness to this world or to the next, the physical or the spiritual: “Oh Happiness! our being’s end and aim!/ Good, Pleasure, Ease, Content! whate’er thy name” (IV.1-2). Our mistake is not in thinking that we might be happy in this world, but that things would make us so. Hence he expostulates, “Weak, foolish man! will Heav’n reward us there/ With the same trash mortals wish for here?” (IV.173-74). Our deeds, not our possessions, are what secure happiness, no less in this world than in the next. And so “Fix’d to no spot is Happiness sincere,/ ‘Tis no where to be found, or ev’ry where” (IV.15-16).

When Pope instructs us, then, in how to proceed, he does not ask us to renounce this world or suggest that the import of what we do here below will only matter in the hereafter. Instead, he examines the effect of our conduct within the framework of social harmony, because that identifies a good that everyone can strive for and benefit from. His instructions are consequently general, rather than particular: “Take Nature’s path, and mad Opinion’s leave,/ All states can reach it, and all heads conceive;/ Obvious her goods, in no extreme they dwell,/ There needs but thinking right, and meaning well” (IV.29-32). The recommendation to take nature’s path is neither empty rhetoric nor pious platitude. Pope has spent three epistles outlining what is involved, since it encapsulates his own project in the poem, which began by exploring “latent tracts” and “giddy heights” and “eye[ing] Nature’s walks” (I.11,13). To follow nature’s path is not a scientific protocol that uncovers the secrets of creation, nor does it end with the cognition of universal law. It also prompts the activity that is most conducive to collective harmony. For further specification, one
must turn to the individual: “God, in the nature of each being, founds/ Its proper bliss, and
sets its proper bounds:/ But as he fram’d a Whole, the Whole to bless,/ On mutual Wants
built mutual Happiness” (III.109-112). Note that Pope does not suggest mutual wants are
necessary to compose the plenum of creation.\textsuperscript{26} Instead, the fact that we all lack different
things which other creatures supply shows how contrariety establishes principles of order.\textsuperscript{27}

With this approach to the mechanisms of harmony Pope does not proceed with the
proud confidence of the ambitious scientist he ridicules in the first epistle. Such an
investigator does not recognize the conditions of cooperation because he is focused on
those of advancement. That is to say, when he “Ask[s] of thy mother earth, why oaks are
made/ Taller or stronger than the weeds they shade?/ Or ask[s] of yonder argent fields
above,/ Why Jove’s Satellites are less than Jove?” (I.39-42), he seeks the foundation not of
order, but of elevation along the great chain of being.\textsuperscript{28} For Pope to return to such questions
in the fourth epistle does not recapitulate this error because he has shown that attempting to
fix God’s work will not improve our situation. Those then who ask “Why is not Man a
God, and Earth a Heav’n?” are unhappy because they can “scarce conceive/ God gives
enough, while he has more to give” (IV.162-64). To improve our lot in this world, however,
does not require divine intervention any more than it does greater strength or speed. Our
happiness depends on turning potential adversity into an opportunity for goodness; we must
make our needs and weaknesses occasion aid instead of distress, for man, not God, has more
to give. In contrast with the scientist who attempts to overcome our deficiencies in pride

\textsuperscript{26} In my reading, Pope’s poem does not confirm “the fundamental and characteristic premise of the usual proof of optimism,” as Lovejoy argues, “the proposition that the perfection of the whole depends upon, indeed consists in, the existence of every possible imperfection in the parts” (211).


\textsuperscript{28} Consider his answer: “That wisdom infinite must form the best” (I.43).
and fancy, the poet turns them into a unifying force, whereby our happiness depends on others: “what Happiness we justly call,/ Subsist[s] not in the good of one, but all” (IV.37-38).

Accordingly, in readdressing the problem of evil in the final epistle, Pope reforms evil as the basis of improvement:

What makes all physical or moral ill?
There deviates Nature, and here wanders Will.
God sends not ill; if rightly understood,
Or partial Ill is universal Good,
Or Change admits, or Nature lets it fall,
Short and but rare, till Man improv’d it all. (IV.111-16)

He concretizes the possible forms of evil – physical and moral – as we normally conceive of them, i.e. natural disasters and the corruption of the will, and then explains how we render the two impossible: first by grasping the universal principle that “God sends not ill” and then by applying this precept to our experience. Doing so reforms our understanding of physical evil so that we no longer regard natural disasters as such. We also recognize our agency in the constitution of moral evil and can reform accordingly, for if we don’t commit vicious deeds, then evil remains a possibility, not an actuality, and man’s weakness in action – that he does not always act on what he knows – becomes a strength. This choice – to undertake what we conceive to be evil or not to – is embodied in the ambivalence of “improv’d,” which can be “rightly” or wrongly “understood”: according to the OED the word meant “to prove to be wrong” or “to turn to good account” and “to increase or augment (what is evil).” Pope’s point is not that evil, or the good for that matter, is simply a matter of interpretation, but that since we must have an idea of something before we act, we can avert evil. After all, evil is a wrong idea before an unjust act, and so the key to good ideas, and therefore to good actions, is to know what is right: “Know then this truth (enough for Man to know)/ ‘Virtue alone is Happiness below’” (IV.309-10). Again, Pope offers no
pious cliché based on the notion that the physical world is transient and fallen; virtuous conduct is the only source of happiness below because everything else fosters conflict, perpetrating evil.

The wise man therefore realizes that although reason can be infallibly right, our weaknesses often limit what we are willing to do, rather than prompting mutual activity. In this respect, our godlike reason doesn’t make us godly in our own actions any more than it enables us to direct others. Pope thus informs Bolingbroke that if he would “Tell (for You can) what is it to be wise?” knowing full well “’Tis but to know how little can be known;/ To see all others faults, and feel our own” (IV.259-61), not much would improve. For even if one is godlike in reason and knows the principles by which we should all live, one cannot dictate these to others: “Truths would you teach, or save a sinking land?/ All fear, none aid you, and few understand./ Painful preheminence! yourself to view/ Above life’s weakness, and its comforts too” (IV.262-65). In other words, right reason alone is not a unifying force. As such, he who knows best appears stoical because he, unlike his fellow men, is “above life’s weakness, and its comforts too.” Yet while the rational ideal that Pope figures forth in Bolingbroke is admirable, and the Stoic paradigm of godlike reason is to be sought, the ideal that eludes Pope is more one of communal effort in ensuring social harmony. That, not omniscience, is Pope’s aim: “But still this world (so fitted for the knave)/ Contents us not. A better shall we have?/ A kingdom of the Just then let it be” (IV.131-33). He acknowledges the problem that ensues: “But first consider how those Just agree” (IV.134). While mankind does not agree on right reason, we are unanimous about the goodness of virtue, for “Bliss is the same in subject or in king” (IV.58) and “Honour and shame from no Condition rise” (IV.193). He thus enjoins, “Act well your part, there all the honour lies’ (IV.194). Such an admonition overturns no order and instigates no revolution in its reformation of society.
Indeed, like the sovereign and the scientist, the poet seeks the advancement of civilization. But whereas the legislator claims to decree what is right and the natural philosopher to discover what is right, the poet shows in his art what is wrong, in order to reform his audience. By depicting how we would destroy, rather than amend, universal order, Pope reflects our misjudgment, our misrepresentation of what constitutes the good in this world. *An Essay on Man* therefore demonstrates that “Whatever *is*, *is* right” without practicing what it preaches, for it is the anti-examples he offers that bring to light the evil of what we contemplate. He recognizes that doing what one declares is right – accomplishing what the Stoics are accused of failing to do – will not bring people to realize the error in their ways; depicting the wrong will. This twist on criticizing the Stoic’s shortcomings makes the maxims with which Pope concludes the poem sound like a lesson learned, rather than the pontifications of a hypocrite:

Wit’s false mirror held up Nature’s light;  
Shew’d erring Pride, WHATEVER *is*, *is* right;  
That REASON, PASSION, answer one great aim;  
That true SELF-LOVE and SOCIAL are the same;  
That VIRTUE only makes our Bliss below;  
And all our knowledge is, OURSELVES TO KNOW. (IV.393-98)

Here, as before, Pope constructs a chain that emphasizes the convergence of these precepts, so that each becomes comprehensible as a component of the others, which does more to establish their strength in our minds than the apparent contradiction in some of us epitomizing virtue while others fail entirely, circumstances that would lead anyone to question the reality of universal harmony. The purpose, then, of depicting what is not the case is to show where we go wrong in requiring justification for God’s ways. The problem is not whether, but how God is consistent. Hence our mistakes, not His, compose the best defense of the principles Pope enumerates.
Final reckonings

In describing Milton’s innovation in *Paradise Lost*, Mack suggests that “the prohibition of the apple is no longer an adventitious command beset with mysteries as it is in Genesis, but a rationalized symbol of obedience or disobedience, its meaning thus internal. And the consequences of eating it are again rationalized and internalized in the rebellion of the passions, symbolized explicitly in Eve’s and Adam’s immediate act of lust.” Milton in effect internalizes the Fall, according to Mack, so that conflict takes the form of an inner discord. Pope follows suit to the degree that he, too, focuses on discord as the defining characteristic of the postlapsarian world. His attempt to reform our notion of happiness reflects this sense of internal loss, but in so doing, Pope seeks not to mend relations between God and mankind, but rather to constitute a heaven on earth. This is not to say that Pope diminishes the significance of the next world. He insists, rather, that this world can be consistent with the next – indeed it only makes sense that it would be, since God’s laws are universal and we are arrogant to think that with a single act we would manage to change everything, to alter the world as if we were God. My reading of Pope’s theodicy thus takes quite literally Mack’s remark that, “Beginning with a reminder of a paradise man has lost, the poem ends with a paradise he can regain.”

To be sure, Pope makes the continued correspondence between heaven and earth after the Fall manifest, and without reference to God’s forgiveness: “Take ev’ry creature in, of ev’ry kind;/ Earth smiles around, with boundless bounty blest,/ And Heav’n beholds its image in his breast” (IV.370-72). This vision is appropriately the culmination of the process by which the “human soul/ Must rise

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30 Mack, Introduction to the Twickenham edition, lx
from Individual to the Whole” (IV.361-62) – a rising that demonstrates the celestial balance that was not destroyed in the Fall or will be destroyed by our ambition to rise too far.

The potential of human activity – how we make and remake our world – is by no means limited to cognitive effort. It is hardly satisfactory to simply reconceive what one confronts every day from a different perspective, or in different terms, without a substantial improvement. Realizing the good that is possible in this world is a more meaningful project, as Laurence Sterne portrays it, because language does more than reflect what is already there. In my reading of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Sterne demonstrates how through language and naming we can be just as constructive as God is with his utterances.
The Untold Story

Perhaps the most profound disappointment for Sterne’s hero is his misfortunes in naming. Tristram Shandy’s father, Walter, is determined to give his son a great name, and settles upon Hermes Trismegistus, invoking a tradition of hermeticism and philology, when through a series of accidents, his son comes to bear the name he detests more than any other, Tristram. This mishap in nomenclature is significant, for it changes not only the hero’s life and opinions, but also the name of Sterne’s work. The account of Hermes Trismegistus, it would appear, is never told, and yet eight years prior to the publication of the first volume of The Life and Opinions (1759), Hermes, a philosophical inquiry concerning universal grammar (1751), appeared. James Harris, the author, was a politician and grammarian who was well known to Johnson’s circle, maintained a close friendship with the Burney family, corresponded with Lord Monboddo, and was nephew to the great Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, whom John Locke had instructed as a boy. In Sterne’s letters, he acknowledges having read Harris’ tome, which one Mr Cradock, an amateur actor and dramatist at Drury Lane, had lent him. When asked what he thought of Hermes, Sterne records, “he thought that all those imitations of Tristram Shandy fell far short of the original.” Sterne’s humor here is typical, for Hermes came first and represents, as it were, the narrative that Walter Shandy’s son never writes. Harris produced no account of anyone’s life or opinions, but rather an account of all accounts: a universal grammar that explains how words are organized and concomitantly how ideas are generated and communicated.
I begin this chapter by gesturing at *Hermes* because it is an often overlooked piece in the jigsaw puzzle of Sterne’s sources, even more so than the epigraph from Epictetus. Both point to Sterne’s reception of Stoicism, an issue that few critics have addressed, in part because Sterne’s work is gargantuan in its incorporation of literary and philosophical history and partly because Locke stands out as such a prominent interlocutor. Yet Harris is a family connection, in a distant and roundabout – Shandian – way, and *Hermes*, I argue, presents an alternative and antidote to the problematic relationship between word, idea, and thing that Locke sets up in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), a fraught relationship that fascinated Sterne.

*Hermes* is a careful disquisition on language, including parts of speech, tenses, modes, and so on. I am not suggesting that Sterne was obsessed with a grammar book or the intricacies of ancient logic, but it is significant that the “hero,” if you will, of Harris book is Priscian, a Stoic logician, and he devotes most of the six hundred pages to outlining Stoic theories of language. Upon differentiating the various tenses, Harris attributes the doctrine to “the Stoics, whose authority we esteem greater than all the rest, not only from the more early age when they lived, but from their superior skill in Philosophy, and their peculiar attachment to Dialectic, which naturally led them to great accuracy in these Grammatical Speculations.”¹ Harris extols the Stoics, as well, for their invention in the realm of modes (surpassing other schools), wherein they distinguished the indicative or declarative, the potential, the interrogative, and the requisite (including the imperative and precative). With this apparatus, the ancient philologians sought to represent the relationship between what exists, what is said, and what is thought: “all these several Modes have their foundation in nature, so have… been introduced into languages, that we may be enabled by our

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¹ James Harris, *Hermes or a philosophical inquiry concerning universal grammar* (London, 1765), 130.
discourse to signify them, one to another. And hence those various \textit{Modes} or \textit{Moods}…are in fact no more than so many literal forms, intended to express these natural Distinctions” (145-46). As a result, each mode functions as attire, if you will, for the body of action – the infinitive – in that they “superadd certain Affections, which respect Persons and Circumstances” (165). This analysis of language is distinctive because it doesn’t divide language up into parts (like ideas in Locke) whereby we eventually arrive at the point where we have meaninglessness (or idealessness). Instead, the Stoics are most concerned with how we put things together, how we join elements and bridge gaps (the imperative is used with inferiors and the precative with superiors).

Central to this enterprise is the preposition, which is “formed as to unite two words that are significant, and that refuse to coalesce or unite of themselves” (261). Harris explains that “some things coalesce and unite of themselves; others refuse to do so without help, and as it were compulsion. Thus in \textit{Works of Art}, the Mortar and the Stone coalesce of themselves; but the Wainscot and the Wall not without Nails and Pins.” In other words, the Stoics are quickly describing things, at the same time they are describing words. The analogue is immediately apparent: “In Nature this is more conspicuous. For example; all Quantities, and Qualities coalesce immediately with their Substances. Thus ‘tis we say, a fierce Lion, a vast Mountain; and from this Natural Concord of Subject and Accident, arises the Grammatical Concord of Substantive and Adjective. In like manner Actions coalesce with their Agents, and Passions with their Patients” (262-63). The Stoics examined instances in which prepositions may, “by way of Composition, that is, they may be prefixt to a Word, so as to become a real Part of it…commonly tranfus[ing] something of their own Meaning into the Word, with which thy are compounded” (271), as well as instances in which “Prepositions totally lose their connective Nature, being converted into adverbs” (272).
Language transforms and displays not its parts but its constructions. Abstraction doesn’t take away substance, but rather adds and augments.

Sterne’s access to the fundamentals of Stoic thought, and on language in particular, was by no means limited to Harris’s works. In addition to contemporary translations of Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, Diogenes Laertius, Plutarch, and Marcus Aurelius, there were several overviews of Stoicism available, including Pierre Bayle’s *Philosophical Dictionary*, Thomas Stanley’s *History of Philosophy*, and Johann Jakob Brucker’s *The history of philosophy, from the earliest times to the beginning of the present century* (Latin 1740, translated by William Enfield in 1791). Walter Anderson’s *The philosophy of ancient Greece investigated, in its origin and progress* offers a detailed discussion of Stoic physics, enumerating how according to the Stoics, “the world was to be accounted an animal, or had the apparatus of an intellectual soul,” resulting in the logical stance that “every thing which acted, or suffered, was body; and, in consequence of their holding causes to be corporeal, because they were spirits, or aerial intentions affecting the parts of all things generated with form, called the human passions and other qualities of the soul, bodies existing in it; and itself a body, as it was the cause of life.” Such an outlook believes in the power of words to organize and reform the world, in a way that is most certainly divine, since they have an effect no matter what is said. As a result, the relationship between what is articulated and its consequence becomes central to understanding any event, whereby all events are, as it were, life changing. The Stoics thus regarded dialectic as “the instrument of knowledge, as it enables a man to distinguish truth from error, and certainty from bare probability. This art considers things as expressions by words, and words themselves.”

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2 Walter Anderson, 548-49. See also Diogenes Laertius, *The lives of the eminent philosophers*: “Whatever affects a Body, must it self be Corporeal: so that all Accidents are Bodies separate from their Subjects” (292).
This power of language was also maintained by other proponents of Stoic logic at the time, including John Collard, whose *The essentials of logic: being a second edition of Dralloys’ Epitome, improved, comprising an universal system of practical reasoning* (London, 1796) examines extensive passages in contemporary literature using a Stoic form of syllogism. Time and again Collard performs a rather Shandean maneuver of “inserting the minor term, and inverting the order of the middle term” (155), whereby, he argues, we may “perceive where the language is elliptical, discover the cause of many anomalies, learn to shape our own language and to detect in others fallacy and error” (156). That it becomes difficult to tell whether these authors are referring to things or to words is telling. They do not assert the distinction, but rather operate from the premise that although the correlation between things and words may be arbitrary and abstract, it is by no means unaccountable or imperceptible. That is why every word in *Tristram Shandy* counts.

**Calling a spade a spade**

On the penultimate page of Sterne’s novel – right when the hero’s life, it would seem, is over – his father, Walter, contemplates the process by which man is created. He does so in response to the Widow Wadman’s fear that Uncle Toby might not be able to perform a husband’s conjugal duties. Walter conceives of the problem in terms of words – how does one propose the matter without proposing more – whereas the widow approaches it in terms of things, endeavoring to establish the precise nature of the wound to Toby’s groin. Since her modesty prevents her from any physical overtures, the Widow’s empiricism is purely conceptual. She asks about it, which Sterne renders as

“***************************************************************************.***************************************************************************” (170), a tactic that goes

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3 Johann Jakob Brucker, 324, italics mine.
nowhere, because the limits of Toby’s experience – he is practiced in war, not in love – prevent that the captain from realizing what the Widow Wadman has in mind (hence the incomprehensibility of the asterisks). When he promises the Widow, “You shall see the very place, Madam” (170), he isn’t referring to his groin, but to his own project of clarifying the military circumstances of his wound. It doesn’t matter that they are both aiming at his crotch, because Toby literally has no idea of romantic love, and such innocence is well nigh impregnable. She appears to have reached the limits of words because no matter what she says, he will make the association with war and his ability to perform on the battlefield, rather than with love and his ability to perform in bed. Nevertheless, what we have here is not a failure of language, as one might think from Walter’s approach to the Widow’s problem, or from the asterisks, for if we did, Sterne’s examination of what words engender would assemble a compendium of linguistic functions as Hugh Blair and the Port Royal philosophers had, compose a dictionary like Samuel Johnson’s, or speculate on the origin of language in the tradition of Rousseau, Süßmilch, and Herder. Instead, the failure here is cognitive.

Toby’s cluelessness certainly confirms the Lockean epistemology that critics have identified as underlying Sterne’s work. According to Locke, we cannot know anything that is beyond our experience. Even figments of our imagination, he contends, are based on the impressions we have already had and retained. How, then, is Toby to get the right idea if he has none of those notions, only to be acquired through physical experience, that lead to wedlock or to conjugal bliss? The Widow’s plan of attack thus highlights the gap between the conceptual realm of ideas and the physical realm of the body. And yet, as Walter’s analysis reveals, one cannot conceive of reproduction, be it recreating the siege at Namur or instigating the act of love, without connecting mind with body. Indeed, Walter
acknowledges that our existence by nature joins the conceptual with the physical when he demands, “wherefore, when we go about to make and plant a man, …is it, that all the parts thereof – the congredients – the preparations – the instruments, and whatever serves thereto, are so held as to be conveyed to a cleanly mind by no language, translation, or periphrasis whatever” (196). Without the physical experience, what is said won’t convey anything, and so Toby needs to have a sense of uniting with the Widow, and what that entails, before he can understand her.

By asking him to find something that is in her eye, the Widow literally shows him what her view incorporates, whereupon he falls in love accordingly. His defenses thus fail in love as in war, and the captain is injured, just as he was at Namur, and “in the sharpest exacerbation of his wound (like that on his groin) he never dropt one fretful or discontented word” (126), accepting it for what it is. Toby’s engagement demonstrates the correspondence, not the discrepancy, between corporeal and incorporeal in as much as his injury “was not a skin-deep wound—but [one] that…had gone to his heart” (127). In a novel in which so many forms of intercourse go awry, this one succeeds because Toby and the Widow are physically brought together in the operation of his looking into her eye.

Compare this moment with Tristram’s description of his experience recounting Slawkenbergius’ Tale:

The moment I pronounced the words, I could perceive an attempt towards a vibration in the strings, about the region of the heart.—The brain made no acknowledgment.—There’s often no good understanding betwixt ‘em—I felt as if I understood it.—I had no ideas.—The movement could not be without cause,—I’m lost. I can make nothing of it—unless, may it please your worshipses, the voice, in that case being little more than a whisper, unavoidably forces the eyes to approach not only within six inches of each other—but to look into the pupils—is not that dangerous? (II.36-37)

The effect of a narrative can have nothing to do with what it’s about, and instead depend (here as in Trim’s delivery of the sermon he finds) on the position of the body or on the
sensitivity of the ear. Given such a range of potential modes of reception, success in words can very well depend on things. In her engagement with Toby, for example, the Widow’s success repairs the captain’s military failure, and one conquest undoes the other, since it unites, rather than opposes, the two sides involved. Consequently the road to n’amor (Namur) ends in amor, and the reenactment of the events that might have unmanned him, confirms his manhood instead. This reversal is exemplary of the events that make “True Shandeism…ope[n] the heart and lungs, and like all those affections which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely through its channels, makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round” (108) throughout Tristram’s narrative, for when words and things get together, all kinds of unions take place and everything imaginable pops up, both in mind and in body.

But Toby’s and the Widow Wadman’s experience represents just one way in which things and words get put together – the one acting out the other. More often than not, however, the characters in Sterne’s novel encounter epistemological gaps between words and things that are solved, and created for that matter, through utterance, a gap that is not always something that can be acted out and thus united. Take the issue of Tristram’s baptism and the question that arises as to the point when sin first becomes possible because the homunculus has been conceived, both in mind and in body. Everyone turns to the learned “commissaries, officials, advocates, proctors, registers, and…school-divines” (68) to determine the matter and the debate that Didius and Kysarcius have about the actual pronunciation of the baptism shows that the acting out of language is the determination of conception in Tristram Shandy. Nothing else will do to settle any dispute. To be sure it is the polysemic nature of language that enables so much, and so little, to be unmistakenly or entirely mistakenly conceived, and the intellectual and physical manifestations of these
accidents constitute the stuff of (our hero’s) life. His narrative is therefore replete with incidents in which these two frames of reference – mind and body – become dissociated from one another and are united in all manner of speaking.

The panoply of constructions that occur demonstrates, moreover, that this union is by no means faithful: one field of reference does not simply reproduce another. When Walter ponders “wherefore, when we go about to make and plant a man, …is it, that…whatever serves thereto, [is] so held as to be conveyed to a cleanly mind by no language, translation, or periphrasis whatever,” he notes that when we reproduce (in body or in mind), we add to the equation, we create matter. Thus, we cannot talk about sex without having a dirty conversation because we insist that body and mind unite in intercourse. The failure to reproduce faithfully, and therefore to proceed in one’s line of thinking or in one’s family line, is the result of an indeterminate connection between things themselves and the words we use, but this failure is not sterile. Sterne’s concern with language is not that words cannot say enough – more often than not we take them to mean much more. In fact, we demand that more will be made of what we say than what we might mean, even when our words are chopped off or we are interrupted, as when the abbess of Andoüillets and Margarita the novice divide the words “bouger” and “fouter” to avoid sinning, but nevertheless expect their mule to move. The power of words is no more altered or diminished by such antics as it is by the gambols and escapades of Toby’s military hobbyhorse. The arrangement, delivery, and disfiguration of words simply determines the form that linguistic power takes, marking the difference between being consequent and inconsequent as much as having the force of one body versus that of another.

After all, if we take words to mean something other than their “standard” connotation, then we introduce the inconsequential, which Sterne presents time and again
via the characters’ hobby-horses and Tristram’s digressions. By following such inconsequential matters, Sterne, however, does not reveal them to be meaningless (inconsequential indeed). Instead, he investigates the degree to which they have consequence, both in significance and in effect. The whole point of saying one word as opposed to another is to establish what one means, in reference to anything, and so no matter what we say, and no matter if we are interrupted or misheard or misunderstood, our words do have an impact. It is this significance that Sterne examines, since although words may not be accurate representations of anything in our minds or out there, they still organize our lives and relations. Our continued use and misuse of language is indicative of our sense of its success – words will do what they can, even if one hasn’t the right idea or the right thing, as Uncle Toby evinces with the Widow Wadman on the one hand and his ballistics on the other, for he will do his duty as a husband no less than he fulfills his commission as a soldier, using everything and anything at hand to achieve the objectives of each.

The problem of intercourse, according to Locke, is connecting the right things with the right ideas with the right words, but as *Tristram Shandy* demonstrates, one cannot get the “wrong” idea or even the “right” one for that matter, since the path of intercourse is one that brings these all together, rendering none more legitimate than another. Everyone gets all kinds of ideas, and the associations between word and thing and idea go every which way. As such, the failure to grasp what is at hand – to comprehend what is going on – is a perennial problem in *Tristram Shandy*, in which straightforward cognition of the sort Locke theorized is never realized. The problem is not only one of Lockean association, whereby one connects ideas “wholly according to chance or custom,” but also the easy coupling of words and ideas and things, the outcome of which can have nothing to do with what we say,
think, or experience. So when Susannah learns that Bobby is dead, she thinks of getting into her mistress’ green satin rather than of going into mourning, exemplifying the pitfalls of Lockeian association, but when Phutatorius discovers the hot chestnut in his breeches and imagines Yorick is commenting on Phutatorius’ treatise on concubines, rather than on Tristram’s baptism, the association is more complex. In Sterne’s novel the connections between ideas, words, and things are not limited to the associations experience engenders. He investigates what the connection between ideas, things, and words consists of, and what words actually reproduce, when all is said and done, since it is words that dictate our construction of what is there in mind and in body, especially when that goes beyond our experience, for otherwise we don’t know what to make of it. The novel’s consideration of what is at stake in intercourse – be it an account of one’s life or having sex – addresses the problem of the miscommunication between body and mind and, more importantly, the significance these illegitimate relations have in the world.

Sterne departs here from Locke in that for Locke, mind and body do not misunderstand one another: the ideas that furnish one’s mind are essentially perceptual copies of the material world. This theory tends to run amok, Sterne finds, because the connection between the mental and the corporeal is both systematic and wayward: we may get all our ideas from sensation, but this correlation is short-circuited and rearranged

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4 Locke’s full explanation of association: “Some of our Ideas have a natural Correspondence and Connexion one with another: It is the Office and Excellency of our Reason to trace these, and hold them together in that Union and Correspondence which is founded in their peculiar Beings. Besides this there is another Connexion of Ideas wholly owing to Chance or Custom; Ideas that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Mens Minds, that ‘tis very hard to separate them, they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it; and if they are more than two which are thus united, the whole gang always inseparable shew themselves together. This strong Combination of Ideas, not ally’d by Nature, the Mind itself makes in it self either voluntarily, or by chance…Custom settles habits of Thinking in the Understanding, as well as of Determining in the Will, and of Motions in the Body; all which seems to be but Trains of Motion in the Animal Spirits, which once set a going continue on in the same steps they have been used to, which by often treading are worn into a smooth path, and the Motion in it becomes easy and as it were Natural” (II.xxxiii.§5-6).
through association. Indeed, our ideas may not correlate with reality at all. Reproducing the siege at Namur can accomplish both ends because telling the story of their wounds, and comparing their suffering, also lead Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim to envision the alleviation of their pain, the cure for their injuries. Hence just as Toby and Trim are joined in their sorrows, so they are united in their joys: when the corporal recounts how his recovery was brought about by the ministrations of a Beguine, with whom Trim fell in love, the captain figures out that the restoration of his vigor might lie in the hands of the gentle sex. This association ensures that the map of war becomes conflated with the map of love. So while Locke focused on the way association advances and slows down the attainment of knowledge, Sterne attends to the real world effects, not just the epistemological implications, that this discrepancy entails. The real development of Tristram’s life and opinions is then not simply the progress of cognition that Locke examined so closely, from thing to idea.\(^5\)

*Tristram Shandy* maps an associationism that extends beyond connecting “unrelated” ideas; in his narrative, the relation that words bring about is one that realizes the connection between words and things, so that they exist even when they aren’t there. In what follows, I chart Sterne’s adaptation of Stoic theories of language to explain how cognition – and life – progresses apace, not because we name and define (God takes care of those), but because our intercourse produces more ingredients for both life and opinion.

**Sterne’s Sources**

\(^5\) Recall that in answer to the question, “When a Man begins to have any Ideas?” Locke responds, “When he first has any Sensation. For since there appear not to be any Ideas in the Mind, before the Senses have conveyed any in, I conceive that Ideas in the Understanding, are coeval with Sensation…. ‘Tis about these Impressions made on our Senses by outward Objects, that the Mind seems first to employ itself in such Operations as well call Perception, Remembring, Consideration, Reasoning, etc.” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II.i.§23).
In the scope of his project, Sterne may well be indebted to Rabelais and Cervantes, but the form it takes, I argue, is a response to the limitations of Locke’s epistemology with respect to language, and draws on the Stoics that Sterne name-drops so extensively, as when he notes, “My father was a man of deep reading—prompt memory—with Cato, and Seneca, and Epictetus, at his fingers ends” (128) or when he celebrates the Strasburgers’ reception of the stranger in Slawkenberius’ Tale, for “reading their lectures under the city gates to the comers & goers, with all the pomp of a Chrysippus and a Crantor in the porticos” (17), the great Stoics of a bygone age. I am certainly not the first to suggest that Sterne is working within a Lockean tradition, which holds that the misuse of words is responsible for much of the epistemological mischief in the world. Tristram’s own sense of the futility of his endeavor, since life outpaces language, seems ample justification for concluding that Sterne, like other writers of sentimental fiction, finds language inaccurate, indeed insufficient, in representing his life and opinions. One prominent instance in the novel, wherein the efficacy of language is prominently in question, occurs when the abbess of Andoüillets and the novice Margarita set out for Bourbon to heal their bodily ailments. At the base of a hill, the two find that their mules will not budge and so the latter laments that they cannot speak the two words she is assured will get the mules going. Hoping that their utterances might not suffice to count as sinful but will suffice to get the mules going, the abbess of Andoüillets and the novice Margarita seek to separate the body from the soul of language, the former claiming that there is “no sin in saying, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, a hundred times together; nor is there any turpitude in pronouncing the syllable “ger, ger, ger, ger, ger, were it from our matins to our vespers” (44). While the mules “do not understand [them],” the Abbess fears, “the Devil does” (44), and although they may go nowhere here, she knows all too well where they will go in the hereafter. Sterne’s humorous rendition of the traditional
opposition between letter and spirit highlights the way language, religious and irreligious, regulates bodies and souls (the movements of the mules and the souls of the nuns). The impact of the sisters’ words demonstrates the way body and soul interact: words are not just sounds put together and their effect, both physical and spiritual, is by no means limited to what is said. One and the same word can, in fact, have opposite effects. Hence the both the mules and the Devil recognize that the nuns are in danger of saying “bouger” and “fouter” (“the two mules acknowledged the notes by a mutual lash of their tails”), but while the mules are unmoved, the Devil is.

Central to Sterne’s investigation is thus the degree to which language is performative: the mules may not appreciate the nuns’ efforts, but Tristram, in “condemnation of an error which the bulk of the world lie under,” asserts that “talking of love, is making it” (III.182). The failure of words to perform may not be the fault of language. To be sure, from the marriage articles to the curse that Dr Slop levels at Obadiah, what exactly language does is the question Tristram Shandy explores, since it generally does so much more than what it says. Granted, words don’t do what they say in most cases, but their effect in the world is undeniable, and for a clergyman like Sterne who attends to the souls of men, which are rumpled (like a jerkin and its lining) by their bodies, an account of how language connects body and soul was worth consideration. He found, all too often, that the words of the Bible went unheard, unfelt, and unheeded in his congregation, and grieves that “the best lectures that have been read upon the vanity of the world, so seldom stop a man in the pursuit of the object of his desire, or give him half the conviction that the possession of it will, and what the experience of his own life, or a careful observation upon the life of others, do at length
generally confirm to us all.” Words are clearly no substitute for experience, or the ideas that experience conveys, so what do they do?

The predecessor Sterne identifies, in explaining the “cause of obscurity and confusion” (92) in the representation of ideas is of course Locke. The degree to which words can mediate between things and ideas had been of interest to Locke too, who argues that the advancement of knowledge depends on our ability to agree, verbally if in no other way, on our ideas of the world and its constituent parts. This is the foundation of all intercourse. Nevertheless, as Locke notes, language is as wayward as our associations, and it does not take much for our utterances to be as incomprehensible as random sounds. What’s more, one of Locke’s main complaints is that people take words for things, rather than as just what they are: representations of ideas, nothing more or less. Locke’s struggle is with determining what is significant: some sounds are, others aren’t, and ideas, not things, are what we signify. With *Tristram Shandy*, I argue, Sterne composes a world in which everything matters, because nothing, not even the trivial or arbitrary, is without substance. Every idea is significant and every digression is followed for what it is worth; only then might the stuff of one’s life and opinions in any real sense be reproduced. The notion that every thing, no matter how small and seemingly insubstantial plays a role in this world has an ontological analog in the deist conception of creation, but the linguistic and epistemological roots of Sterne’s position, lie in Stoic doctrines of *logos*. Drawing on Cicero, Epictetus, and Sextus Empiricus’ reports of Chrysippus’ views, Sterne develops a position that by virtue of their

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7 Locke proposes, “we should have a great many fewer Disputes in the World, if Words were taken for what they are, the Signs of our Ideas only, and not for Things themselves. For when we argue about Matter, or any the like Term, we truly argue only about the Idea we express by that Sound, whether that precise Idea agree to any thing really existing in Nature, or no. And if Men would tell, what Ideas they make their Words stand for, there could not be half that Obscurity or Wrangling, in the search or support of Truth, that there is” (III.x.§15).
impact, words have body, and what they say about the world reflects, not the thing or idea itself, but rather what is of the greatest consequence: the accidental state of things and ideas that composes our experience of them.

In approaching the question of linguistic composition, Sterne turns to the Stoic theory of signification, because it affords words an activity in the world more significant than the simple representation of things or ideas. It was important that words be recognized as more active not only because they compose the laws (and Commandments) by which Sterne lived, and exhorted his congregation to follow, but also because once the public sphere was established as a place to participate in inquiry and debate, and once the printing press made reading material more diverse and readily available, the power of words was a force to be reckoned with.

The power of words in the Stoic account is singular, because of the relation of words to things: Sextus Empiricus records that according to the Stoics, “That which signifies is speech (‘Dion’), what is signified is the specific state of affairs indicated by the spoken word…the object of reference is the external existent, that is, Dion himself. Of these, two are bodies, speech and the object of reference,” and only that which has a body, the Stoics held, can act or be acted upon. The position that words have body reflects the fact that their agency is by no means determined or limited by either the author or the reader, and certainly neither the reader nor the author of Sterne’s novel can claim to direct his

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8 Adv. Math. viii 11-12. Sextus Empiricus’ *Adversus Mathematicos* was available in Greek in 1621 by P. and J. Choret. It had already been translated into Latin in 1569 by one Gentian Hervetus, and was a text that heavily influenced Montaigne, Charron, Gassendi, Le Vayer, and others with whom Sterne was quite familiar. See Fred Parker, *Skepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

9 See also Sextus, Pyrrh. *Hyp.* II 104; Diog. *Laert.* VII 65. Cicero *Academica* 1.39: “Zeno also differed from the same philosophers in thinking that it was totally impossible that something incorporeal should be the agent of anything, and that only a body was capable of acting or of being acted upon” and Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* viii.263: “According to them [the Stoics] the incorporeal is not of a nature either to act or to be acted upon.”
expression: “my pen...governs me,—I govern not it” (VI.5). If words have body, generally without being performative, then what do they cause? In Locke’s account, it is okay for language to lack any reference to the material world since words are intended to communicate ideas and give one a better understanding of another’s ideas, all of which correspond, to a greater or lesser degree, to the things that compose reality. But if we attend solely to what is meant in *Tristram Shandy*, then we miss a lot of what is actually going on and fail to see how utterances relate to events and things for which their meaning is seemingly irrelevant. That nothing can be irrelevant is the logical conclusion of a worldview which holds that everything is connected, by language if by nothing else, and a language that might do everything imaginable: “they [the Stoics] began…to throw theories entirely upon abstract reasoning; and, considering all the one universe, either infinite or finite, to abide, or rather super[sic] inquiries about the different natures and qualities of things; have only one question to be resolved, whether, under the predicated, things could be reckoned to stand, or to move; or in [other] words, if real motion could obtain in the world.”

Even if any part of Sterne’s novel doesn’t mean much of anything (“what is all this story about?—A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick—And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard”), the consequence of everything that is said can be seen. Consider Walter’s theory of noses, which is based on a doctrine…laid down by Erasmus, as my father wished it, with the utmost plainness; but my father’s disappointment was, in finding nothing more from so able a pen, but the bare fact itself; without any of that speculative subtility or ambidexterity of argumentation upon it, which Heaven had bestow’d upon man on purpose to investigate truth, and fight for her on all sides. –My father…read it over and over again with great application, studying every word and every syllable of it thro’ and thro’ in its most strict & literal interpretation—he could still make nothing of it, that way. Mayhap there is more meant, than is said in it, quoth my father. […] I’ll study the mystick and the allegorick sense—here is some room to turn a man’s self in,

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10 Walter Anderson, *The philosophy of ancient Greece investigated, in its origin and progress, to the aera of its greatest celebrity* (Edinburg, 1791), 94.
brother. [...] he had got out his penknife, & was trying experiments upon the sentence, to see if he could not scratch some better sense into it.—I've got within a single letter...cried my father, scratching on...I've done it—said my father, snapping his fingers.—See, my dear brother Toby, how I have mended the sense.—But you have marr'd a word, replied my uncle Toby.—My father put on his spectacles—bit his lip—and tore out the leaf in a passion. (250-51)

Here the work itself shows that words have body, and Walter’s efforts to derive further meaning from Erasmus’ treatise do not demonstrate the futility of remedying the apparent insufficiencies of language. In order to make something more of it, beyond what its context might be, allegorical or mystical in this case, we need to see what the words engender, beyond their sense.

As Tristram’s adventures evince, the true meaning of an utterance, although at times crucial, by no means constitutes the sole significance of any utterance. An instance in which the effect of one’s words is felt quite independently of their meaning is the effect Yorick’s words have at the meeting of “commissaries, officials, advocates, proctors, registers, and of the most eminent of our school-divines” (68) – a very unLockean way of identifying everyone that matters\(^\text{11}\) – when he announces that “To preach, to shew the extent of our reading, or the subtleties of our wit—to parade in the eyes of the vulgar with the beggarly accounts of a little learning, tinsel’d over with a few words which glitter, but convey little light and less warmth—is...dishonest....For my own part,” he explains, “I had rather direct five words point-blank to the heart,” whereupon Phutatorius cries “Zounds!” (84). This sequence, it turns out, has nothing to do with Yorick’s meaning, because Phutatorius’ exclamation is a response to the hot chestnut that has fallen into his trousers. Furthermore, the meaning of Phutatorius’ “Zounds!” is irrelevant. The force of both utterances is a

\(^{11}\) If we follow Locke’s model, whereby an economy of names enables us to develop those terms, and ideas, that arrive at the truth, then the various ways there are for saying anything, like “Captain Toby” or “Trim’s master” or “Tristram’s uncle,” are superfluous and the fact that they refer to the same person is inconsequential. But one’s word choice does matter.
question determined by the chestnut. Since neither Yorick nor Phutatorius (nor anyone else in the room) knows about the chestnut, the entire event would be meaningless, in Locke’s account, for “There is no Knowledge of Things conveyed by Men’s Words, when their Ideas agree not to the Reality of Things” (III.x.§25). Nevertheless, as Tristram explains, although the significance of the words don’t correspond with the event, both have consequence in leading up to Yorick’s death.12

In many instances, accurately saying things as they are doesn’t really make sense since things are constantly changing (as are our ideas of them), and as the chestnut incident shows, there is always something we don’t know, or don’t take into consideration. That, along with all kinds of other things that appear irrelevant, we do not say. What we do say, according to Locke, only advances our knowledge when, instead of simply assigning names to our ideas of individual, particular things, we refer to the generalizations we make – to abstract ideas, which, Locke adds, do not have any substantiation in reality, since they refer to the essences of things as we construe them.13 As a result, any resemblance between words and the world out there is purely accidental, the predicament that led Sterne to examine the significance of the accidental – how our words shape things beyond what they actually say. He thus literalizes the Stoic notion that when a cause, which is a body, acts on another body, it produces an effect, which is a change in that body. This effect is not another body, but a

12 A similar instance occurs when Toby and Trim have a battle of words, and the actual meaning of the words is just as significant than what they do: “if they have the advantage of a wood, or you give them a moment’s time to intrench themselves, they are a nation which will pop and pop for ever at you.—There is no way but to march coolly up to them,—receive their fire, and fall in upon them, pell-mell—Ding dong, added Trim,— Right and left, cried my uncle Toby,—Blood an’ ounds, shouted the corporal;—the battle raged,—Yorick drew his chair a little to one side for safety” (153).

13 “General and Universal, belong not to the real existence of Things; but are the Inventions and Creatures of the Understanding” (III.iii.§11).
predicate, or ‘sayable’ and names what comes to be the case with the body acted upon. For example, it doesn’t matter what Elizabeth Shandy says when she interjects “Pray, my Dear…have you not forgot to wind up the clock?” but her words stop Walter, like a clock, in the midst of his conjugal duties, and their effect is a sayable: “”—Good G—!...—Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?” The inquiry is the cause, a body, of Walter being interrupted, the effect. That Tristram – a body – is produced has nothing to do with the significance of what is said and demonstrates that the effect, being interrupted, was a sayable: “Pray, what was your father saying?—Nothing” (2). The fun Sterne is having here insists that the significance of words can be construed verbally or corporeally, and can be derived from accident or from the essences of things.

The notion of verbal agency has long been a subject of debate for critics addressing Tristram’s avowed lack of control over the words that constitute his life and opinions. The prevailing focus on the failure and instability of language in Sterne’s novel has resulted in the persistence of an easy analogy between life and art, whereby language reproduces ideas no more straightforwardly than children are reproductions of their parents. Combating inconstancy in both is the point of Walter’s endeavors at ensuring his son has a good name, and he is not alone in this endeavor. All sorts of efforts were made during the course of the

14 Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 9.211: “The Stoics say that every cause is a body which becomes the cause to a body of something incorporeal. For instance the scalpel, a body, because the cause to the flesh, a body, of the incorporeal predicate ‘being cut’. And again, the fire, a body, becomes the cause to the wood, a body, of the incorporeal predicate ‘being burnt’.”

15 Likewise, when Toby interrupts Trim’s story of the young Beguine. When the corporal recounts the strokes of her hand and says “my passion rose to the highest pitch—I seiz’d her hand—“ Toby says “—And then thou clapped’st it to thy lips…and madest a speech.” The effect of this again a sayable, not another body: “Whether the corporal’s amour terminated precisely in the way my uncle Toby described it, is not material; it is enough that it contained in it the essence of all the love romances which ever have been wrote since the beginning of the world” (121).
eighteenth century to establish definition and order in language. Words cannot make sense of Tristram’s life and opinions, according to critical commonplace, because Tristram’s ideas or his experience keep getting ahead of what he can say. Hence, in Dennis Allen’s analysis, “Because words signify ideas rather than things, Tristram, in his attempts to reflect reality, is continually led into digression by the association of his ideas” (659), whereby, he concludes, Sterne’s “point is not simply that the association of ideas, a structure existing in language, makes it hard for a writer to stick to his record of a sequence of events, a structure existing in the world.” The problem Sterne recognizes, according to Allen, is that “reality itself is so protean and various, so filled with relations which stop nowhere, that it is virtually intractable. Language can only inadequately convey to others our conceptions of what happened, if only because it imposes a linear order on our sense of the multiple interconnections of experience. There is always more to be told” (659). But Sterne, I suggest, isn’t trying to be all encompassing or exhaustive in his narrative. He is rather attending to the connections that don’t appear to be there, but are called into being by what we say.

One’s associations, to be sure, generally do not recall insubstantial figments of the imagination, but refer to actual things or events. Ross King correctly suggests that “the signifying logic of the Shandy world…is not immediately present in a word” but “a function of a relation to another word.”17 But this does not entail that “meaning is produced not by resemblance or analogy but through systems of difference” (304), because the difference between what Walter means in any of his disquisitions and Toby’s hobby-horsical constructions does not produce meaning, but rather shows that calling anything by its right

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name is no safeguard for successful communication. Nor does the difference preclude comprehension: when Walter descants on the virtues of auxiliary verbs, Trim makes the connection to auxiliary military units, whereupon Toby remarks, “the auxiliaries, Trim, my brother is talking about,—I conceive to be different things” (181). This recognition of multiple meanings on Toby’s part emphasizes the fact that no one, and surely not Tristram, is the arbiter of meaning in Sterne’s novel, since Toby himself so often falls victim to a pun. The impossibility of arbitrating between meanings brought Sterne, according to Allen, to recognize that “the continual play of connotation and contextual suggestion render it impossible to restrict a word to a clear and determinate idea” (655) – to fulfill Locke’s linguistic objectives. But this does not constitute a linguistic failure; polysemy is significant in that it extends the ways in which language can perform. Verbal agency is not limited to the indicative.

King’s discussion of “linguistic invirility” therefore overlooks what words do in Sterne’s novel, for although language, because it has body, can suffer the same fate as bodies, it also makes more possible, by identifying what is possible within the realm of things as they are. It is true that “if the physical and linguistic are indissolubly joined, then the non-performance of language merely reproduces or reflects the non-performance of the body,” but the suggestiveness of the narrative in everything from sex to travel reflects the profusion of ideas and things, and their interaction, that Tristram incorporates in his life and opinions. As such, the inherent instability in his language that Allen finds is not an indication that “language is essentially divorced from, and important in relation to, the world of empirical reality” (656), but rather that it constantly draws our attention to the things that make up the world and how everyone arranges them. That said, the fact that Obadiah “suffers no ill effects” from Dr. Slop’s curse “and the curse’s harsh disproportion to the offense, as well as
its lack of efficacy, serve to underline the split of word and world” (657), as Allen notes, serves also to show that words, like other bodies, cannot do everything. Our language, Sterne is well aware, is not divine.

One such split between the experience of language and that of the body that is most familiar to critics of sentimental fiction is the standard discussion of the failure of words to adequately communicate feeling. Hence, Tadié argues that “exchanges, which define the circles of conversation and sociability, culminate in the dialogues that exceed words,” in contrast with “the language of the body” which “seems at times to transcend words, and express sentiments directly.”18 I agree to the extent that anyone in Sterne’s novel endeavors to communicate something about which they are passionate, like Toby’s struggles to recount the circumstances of his injury. But even then, conveying in the clearest of terms what happened is no expression of emotion: “When my uncle Toby got his map of Namur to his mind, he began immediately to apply himself, and with the utmost diligence, to the study of it; for nothing being of more importance to him than his recovery, & his recovery depending, as you have read, upon the passions and affections of his mind, it behoved him to take the nicest care to make himself so far master of his subject, as to be able to talk upon it without emotion” (94). Toby is determined to be a Stoic, and to narrative his experience in Stoic language, which exacts bodily force. He is not alone; the language with which theorists of the day described the expression of passion treats words as things. Adela Pinch observes that “Personification was figurative language par excellence, happening spontaneously and demonstrating the capacity of language itself to become animate.”19 She cites Wordsworth, who “In his most radical assertion about the relationship between affect

18 53-54.

19 Pinch, Strange Fits of Passion, 46.
and language…conceives of ‘words, not only as symbols of the passions, but as things, active and efficient, which are themselves part of the passion’ (82). Articulating what happened will not render Toby emotionless, as if it were the expression and therefore the exhaustion of the passions. His story reconstitutes the negotiations of war into those of peace.

Although critics have considered Sterne’s apparent construction of some relation between words and things, they put all the agency in things, showing how words, at best, can reflect what things do and how things fare. But since words have bodies that can act on other bodies, the consequence of any statement is not limited to the determination of its meaning. Indeed, “as one word begets another” (58), nothing can be insignificant, and every word, like every event, adds to the hero’s life and opinions. Locke’s description of the effect words have acknowledges this agency: “That they [words] being immediately the Signs of Mens Ideas; and, by that means, the Instruments whereby Men communicate their Conceptions, and express to one another those Thoughts and Imaginations, they have within their own Breasts, there comes by constant use, to be such a Connexion between certain Sounds, and the Ideas they stand for, that the Names heard, almost as readily excite certain Ideas, as if the Objects themselves, which are apt to produce them, did actually affect the Senses” (III.ii.§5, italics mine). To be sure, the activity of words in Sterne’s novel is not passive, as Locke’s model would imply, because it ignores the richness and slipperiness of language that Sterne celebrates.

Shandean Association

The associations that I want to track in Sterne’s novel are those between words and things, association we make all the time, whenever we see, or want to see, what happens because of what is said – as when Phutatorius connects the chestnut with Yorick’s words, or
when the nuns want the mules to move. In the first instance, when Phutatorious exclaims, “Zounds!”, his association of the chestnut’s heat with the words Yorick lets drop is not determined by Yorick’s meaning, for “Phutatorius knew not one word or one syllable of what was passing” (86). He was, instead, attending to what he regards as their impact, which he felt not in his heart, but within “that particular aperture of Phutatorius’s breeches, for which, to the shame and indelicacy of our language be it spoke, there is no chaste word throughout all Johnson’s dictionary—let it suffice to say—it was that particular aperture which, in all good societies, the laws of decorum do strictly require…to be universally shut up” (87). This apparent linguistic failure, whereby Yorick goes unheard, Uncle Toby is cut off before he can “say something upon projectiles” (84), and Tristram lacks a respectable word for Phutatorius’ fly, prevents neither the reader nor the scholars present from construing, one way or another, what is going on, because their interpretations are by no means simply determined by the words spoken or unspoken.

The multiplicity of constructions that follow simply reflects the various associations everyone makes, running the gambit from those “who had very nice ears” and hear only the sound, not the substance, of Phutatorius’ exclamation and therefore find themselves unable “with all their knowledge…[to] tell what in the world to make of it” (II.85). Others, who “lent their ears to the plain import of the word, imagined that Phutatorius, who was somewhat of a cholerick spirit,” made use of the expletive as an “exordium to an oration,” or “that it was no more than an involuntary respiration, casually forming itself into the shape of a twelve-penny oath—without the sin or substance of one” (85). Still others “looked upon it on the contrary as a real and substantial oath, propensely formed against Yorick, to whom he was known to bear no good liking…as my father philosophized upon it,” concluding that “the right ventricle of Phutatorius’s heart” was indeed hit, “by the stroke of
surprize which so strange a theory of preaching had excited” (II.85-86). Tristram’s lamentation, “How finely we argue upon mistaken facts!”, follows not because everyone has misunderstood the exchange, but because “not a soul busied in all these various reasonings upon the monosyllable which Phutatorius uttered…did not take this for granted…that Phutatorius’s mind was intent upon the subject of debate which was arising between Didius and Yorick” (86). He laments because everyone is fixated on what is said, and the relation between words (as Locke would recommend) rather than on the connection between what is said and the things at hand. It is, after all, the chestnuts before them, rather than the foregoing remarks, that occasion Phutatorius’ cry.

What’s more, the heat of the chestnut and the ensuing pain do not cause his outburst. When he first senses the warmth, “he deemed it most prudent, in the situation he was in present, to bear it, if possible, like a Stoick; which, with the help of some wry faces and compursions of the mouth, he had certainly accomplished,” had he not imagined the possible causes of the heat “& in the first terrifying disorder of the passion, it threw him…quite off his guard:—the effect of which was this, that he leapt incontinently up, uttering as he rose that interjection of surprise so much descanted upon, with the aposiopestic break after it, marked thus, Z—ds—which, though not strictly canonical, was still as little as any man could have said upon the occasion” (II.89-90). In other words, “Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things,” as Sterne, quoting Epictetus’ *Enchiridion*, declares in the epigraph to his novel. The thought that a newt or an asker was biting him undoes Phutatorius’ defenses, and his subsequent oath, although seemingly arbitrary, reflects the physical and spiritual harm Phutatorius suffers, as does Tristram’s own attribution of the event to divine judgment for the “obscene treatise *de Concubinis retinendit* which Phutatorius had published about twenty
years ago—and was that identical week going to give the world a second edition of” (88). To be sure, neither the event nor the oath are arbitrary, for “The neglect of...punctilio in Phutatorius...had opened a door to this accident.—Accident I call it, in compliance to a received mode of speaking—but...there was nothing of accident in the whole event” (II.87-88). What we say is no more arbitrary than what happens to us, and so the various constructions that follow from the exclamation reveal their correspondence: Phutatorius’ lack of decorum in uttering the oath reflects his lack of decorum in closing his breeches, which in turn reflects his lack of decorum in all manner of other things.

These connections are not arbitrary, even if the word Phutatorius cries is. Indeed, even when we cannot see the connection between words and things, we experience it. Consider Toby’s plight in describing the siege of Namur: “the many perplexities he was in, arose out of the almost insurmountable difficulties he found in telling his story intelligibly, and giving such clear ideas of the differences and distinctions between the scarp and the counterscarp,—the glacis and covered-way,—the half-moon and ravelin,—as to make his company fully comprehend where and what he was about” (87). If we don’t understand the sense of a word, because we have no experience of it, then we can’t feel its force. However, Toby’s predicament, which occasions the construction of the actual battlefield on his bowling green so that his words can literally take shape, is not just a problem of the random relation between word and idea. His suffering is especially acute because of the bodily force his words have: “the ground was cut & cross cut with such a multitude of dykes, drains, rivulets, and sluices, on all sides,—and he would get so sadly bewildered, and set fast amongst them, that frequently he could neither get backwards or forwards to save his life; and was oft-times obliged to give up the attack upon that very account only,” for “he could not retreat out of the ravelin without getting into the half-moon, or get out of the covered-
way without falling down the counterscarp, nor cross the dyke without danger of slipping into the ditch” (88). This robust association might seem comical, since they are, after all, only words, but the point that Toby’s experience makes is valid: on the battlefield, military commands dictate what happens no less than the actual machinery of war, and so in a real sense, lives are saved and lost by virtue of the impact of words. Tristram’s diagnosis—“’Twas not by ideas,—by Heaven; his life was put in jeopardy by words”—is meant to solicit “a tear of pity” (93), the sympathy that full-bodied sentimental association between words and things can engender, but it also enjoins using words with care.

Of course the circumspect choice of words does not ensure that one’s meaning is reproduced faithfully. Linguistic imprecision, along with the multitudinous constructions that any given context warrants, make it impossible to control how one’s words will be taken, but then their force will be felt. The question of how to control language was, on the one hand, a question of decorum, as Yorick discovers, and on the other hand, a question of systemization and regulation, as many eighteenth-century writers maintained. Toby’s experience with the precision of military jargon might lead one to think that word-choice will not provide an answer, and Yorick’s experience confirms as much. His life, too, is put in jeopardy by words, a state of affairs that Eugenius, his closest friend, reminds him of, “lectur[ing] upon discretion in words” (30) and warning that although “there is [not] the least spur from spleen or malevolence of intent” in his sallies, “fools cannot distinguish this,—and knaves will not; and…depend upon it, they will carry on the war in such a manner against thee, my dear friend, as to make thee heartily sick of it, and of thy life too” (31).

Diction and delicacy in speech can only do so much, for people won’t distinguish all kinds of things. Indeed, it is the difference between things – be they scarps and counterscarps or friend and foe – that becomes obscure, no matter what is said. While the answer that Locke
and many others gave to the question of how to control language was to define exactly what each word referred to, in *Tristram Shandy*, James Engel notes, “All language thus proceeds by a kind of relational metalepsis”\(^{20}\) – one that makes things indeterminate.

As the characters in Sterne’s novel discover, what actually separates a scarp from a counterscarp? What separates the whiskers that Tristram shaves off in volume three from those that La Fosseuse whispers about in volume two? With so much squabbling about meaning, does definition make it any clearer what the actual, essential difference is between things? “What confusion in greater THEATERS from words of little meaning, and as indeterminate a sense!” (93), Tristram bemoans. Even with a word as specific as ‘whiskers’ (in comparison with ‘power’ or ‘spirit’, the examples Tristram gives), indiscriminate use rendered it “indecent, and (after a few efforts) absolutely unfit for use” (115). Definition does not prevent “the best word, in the best language of the best world” from “suffer[ing] under such combinations,” for “have not beds and bolsters, and nightcaps and chamber-pots stood upon the brink of destruction” and “are not trouse, and placket-holes, and pump-handles—and spigots and faucets, in danger still, from the same association?” (115). It was this predicament that prompted Thomas Spratt, in chronicling the history of the Royal Society, to criticize the increasingly abstract and rhetorical use of language, advocating the “return back to the primitive purity and shortness when men delivered so many things in an equal number of words.” Similarly, the scientists at the Laputan school of languages in

\(^{20}\) “Language is purely a species of fashion...in which, by the general, but tacit consent of the people of a particular state or country, certain sounds come to be appropriated to certain things, as their signs, and certain ways of inflecting and combining those sounds come to be established, as denoting the relations which subsist among the things signified.’ Hence ‘every smatterer in philosophy will tell us, that there can be no natural connexion between the sounds of any language, and the things signified’” Campbell I, 340. See also II, 112; Blair, I, 105. Smith’s lectures, George Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), Joseph Priestley’s *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (1777, but delivered first in 1762), James Beattie’s *Essays on Poetry and Music as They Affect the Mind* (1778) and to a lesser degree Lowth’s *Posse Sacra Hebraeorum* (1753), Kames’s *Elements of Criticism* (1762), and Thomas Gibbon’s *Rhetoric* (1767). “The New Rhetoricians: Psychology, Semiotics, and Critical Theory,” James Engell, in Christopher Fox, 277-302, p. 292.
Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, endeavor to abolish words entirely: “An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on.” Sterne parodies this very effort when he celebrates the “singular stroke of eloquence” of ancient Greeks and Romans “not to mention the name of a thing, when you had the thing about you *in petto*, ready to produce, pop, in the place you want it. A scar, an axe, a sword, a pick’d doublet, a rusty helmet, a pound and a half of pot-ashes in an urn, or a three-halfpenny pickle pot—but above all, a tender infant royally accoutred” (201). This would answer, if the difference between things were clearer.

Indeed the difference between things is essentially fuzzy, as Locke himself acknowledges when he admits that words do not pick out anything real about things, but instead just their essences:

For when we say, this is a Man, that a Horse; this Justice, that Cruelty; this a Watch, that a Jack; what do we else but rank Things under different specifick Names, as agreeing to those abstract Ideas, of which we have made those Names the signs? And what are the Essences of those Species, set out and marked by Names, but those abstract Ideas in the mind; which are, as it were, the bonds between particular Things that exist and the Names they are to be ranked under? And when general Names have any connexion with particular Beings, these abstract Ideas are the Mediu, that unites them: so that the Essences of Species, as distinguished and denominated by us, neither are, nor can be any thing but those precise abstract Ideas we have in our minds. And therefore the supposed real Essences of Substances, if different from our abstract Ideas, cannot be the Essences of the Species we rank Things into. For two Species may be one, as rationally, as two different Essences be the Essence of one Species: And I demand, what are the alterations may, or may not be made in a Horse, or Lead, without making either of them to be of another Species? (III.iii.§13)

Distinction appears only to exist in language, not in things, as when, in response to Toby’s desire for two more field-pieces, Trim, with “no better resource offering,…had taken the two leaden weights from the nursery window: and as the sash pullies, when the lead was

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gone, were of no kind of use, he had taken them away also, to make a couple of wheels for one of their carriages.” This conflation of things occasions Tristram’s circumcision:

Susannah held young Tristram so he could “**** *** ** *** ******” (piss out of the window) when the sash came down, so that “nothing was left” (150-51), proving that there is no essential difference between field-pieces and window leads – the nature of things is determined by their context or how they are used, like Walter’s jack-boots, which might serve as footwear, mortars, or perpetuities, and which they do (223). 22

Our awareness of the fuzziness between objects – that they may not be that different – is what prompted Locke to distinguish between the abstract ideas to which our words refer and the particular things we experience. The name functions therefore as a knot, holding our ideas together. Jonathan Lamb rightly notes that Sterne turns Locke’s metaphor of the name as knot that ties together ideas and their arbitrary signs, by “unloos[ing] the name knot among ideas of marriage knots, umbilical knots, knots as obstacles, nautical knots and hangmen’s knots…he ensures his knot as name behaves the reverse of Locke’s name as knot. He means to show that words are subject to the same attractive forces of association as ideas and impressions” and that “they can decay, expand, wound and suffer damage because they are altered by the situations in which they appear and which they partly constitute.”23 Sterne is able to do so because he treats words as things,

22 Even defining such a simple idea as ‘green’ doesn’t help, since it never appears in the world without a context. For the limitations of definition, see Adam Smith: “It has not, that I know, hitherto been taken notice of by any Body, what Words are, and what are not capable of being defined: the want whereof is (as I am apt to think) not seldom the occasion of great wrangling, and obscurity in Men’s Discourses, whilst some demand definitions of Terms, that cannot be defined; and others think, they ought to rest satisfied, in an Explication made by a more general Word, and its Restriction…when even after such Definition made according to rule, those who hear it, have often no more a clear Conception of the meaning of the Word, than they had before” (421). “if the Terms of one Definition, were still to be defined by another, Where at last should we stop?” (421-422). “the Names of Simple Ideas, and those only, are incapable of being defined” (422). “This is to translate, and not to define, when we change two Words of the same Signification one for another” (423).

23 Locke’s knot: “it is the name which is as it were the knot that ties them fast together’ (ILii.v.10). Jonathan Lamb, Sterne’s fiction and the Double Principle. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. 70-71.
which is how they act in the world. Hence the decay, expansion, and so on that words experience characterize what happens to the things themselves. Lamb turns to Hartley’s *Observations on Man* as the basis of Sterne’s theory of sign, but the legacy goes back to the Stoics. Hartley’s claim that “Language is not only a Type of these associated Combinations, but one Part of the Thing typified’ (320) recognizes the bodily dimension of words. Cognition through language is, from this standpoint, not a process of translating from things out there to our ideas of them and connecting these ideas with arbitrary names, but rather a process of discovering what comes to be true of objects through what is said about them. Reports of Toby falling in love are made before they are true, Walter and Elizabeth Shandy are joined only in name, until they successfully pass that on through reproduction, and, finally, all that comes to distinguish the lead weight for a window sash from a ballistic is the name.

**The Universality of Abstraction**

One might think that cognition goes nowhere, in Sterne’s account, since it hardly differentiates between things, which words don’t do either, and instead of identifying, they appear to connect things. Yet cognition does take place, because words reveal what comes to be true of matter, of things. This process is one of abstraction, as Locke himself conceived, but whereas Locke theorized abstraction in determining the relationship between ideas and words, Sterne does what to the relationship between words and things? According to Locke, “the Senses are first let in particular Ideas, and furnish the yet empty Cabinet: And the Mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them” gives “Names…to them. Afterwards the Mind proceeding farther, abstracts them, and by Degrees learns the use of general Names. In this manner the Mind comes to be furnish’d with Ideas and Language”
(I.ii.§15). As such, cognition leaves all matter behind, in as much as one’s rational faculty is concerned with abstract ideas and the words for them. Language, moreover, conveys notions that have no direct bearing on the world, and Locke’s endeavor to extend our knowledge has led him to produce “a history-book…of what passes in a man’s own mind” (91), rather than increase our knowledge of anything material. 24 This is not to say that Sterne shows us that we can’t differentiate between things, which can be combined in innumerable ways, and that’s supposed to enlighten us. The point of abstraction, in his view, is to be able to make statements about things that can be evaluated as true or false, whereby the truth of the statement does not depend on the meaning of the statement (although it can inhere in it) but rather hinges on the force of the words – that they are felt in the world. It is this feeling, rather than what one interprets any particular utterance to mean, that enables one to share one’s experience with another, because one’s experience becomes theirs as well.

John Traugott is right to argue that Sterne rejects Locke because his “theory abysmally separates the individual from reality, including other individuals, and even himself should he forget his past ideas. Dr. Johnson might as well have booted the stone to rescue Locke as to refute Berkeley. It is Locke’s doctrine that isolates the mind” (10), by claiming that “the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate” (4.1.1). “Is this not the very chimera that exercised Boswell and stimulated Johnson’s foot?” Traugott demands. 25 In Locke’s discussion of knowledge, he even acknowledges that when we consider “abstract Ideas, and thereby removed in our Thoughts from particular Existence, (that being the proper

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24 It is worth noting that Locke’s history-book would tell us about a man’s reflections, because it is through reflection that we are aware of and can operate on our ideas. Hume, in particular, criticized Locke for leaving the material world behind here.

Operation of the Mind, in Abstraction, to consider an Idea under no other Existence, but what it has in the Understanding, gives us no Knowledge of real Existence at all” (IV.ix.§1).

What Sterne’s rendition of association shows is that all ideas can become general, by being ideas that many people share, as can all words, by being made the signs of several things. This approach suggests that polysemy is not the scourge of language, and the degeneration of ‘whiskers’ ruins it, not because the word ceases to mean anything, but because it acquires bawdy associations. Those words that are, or become, so loose as to signify a vast range of things (which every word has the potential to do) need only to be put in context – to have a concrete reference in reality – to establish their significance. Sterne’s linguistics, I suggest, thus turns the Lockean model around, or backwards, if you will, for words become general by being made the signs of many things, rather than of general ideas, and they become so through use, rather than being taken out of context, or abstracted, as Locke and later Adam Smith characterize it. The source of connection is not by bringing things farther apart through a Lockean abstraction (by subtracting, as it were, qualities) but rather by bringing things together, quite literally in the case of words, which can denominate the intersection of the most seemingly unrelated things. According to the Stoics, although “Abstract Natures or Essences are represented by some as the mere creatures of the human understanding, taking occasion from the apparent similitude and dissimilitude of things to form abstract notions of

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26 See John Locke, “Words become general, by being made the signs of general Ideas: and Ideas become general, by separating from them the circumstances of Time, and Place, and any other Ideas, that may determine them to this or that particular Existence. By this way of abstraction they are made capable of representing more Individuals than one; each of which, having in it a conformity to that abstract Idea” (410-411) and Adam Smith: “Language had yet a farther improvement in the use of general Terms, whereby one word was made to mark a multitude of particular existences: Which advantageous use of Sounds was obtain’d only by the difference of the Ideas they were made signs of. Those names becoming general, which are made to stand for general Ideas, and those remaining particular, where the Ideas they are used for are particular” (402). “Words become general, by being made the signs of general Ideas: and Ideas become general, by separating from them the circumstances of Time, and Place, and any other Ideas, that may determine them to this or that particular Existence. By this way of abstraction they are made capable of representing more Individuals than one; each of which, having in it a conformity to that abstract Idea, is (as we call it) of that sort” (410-411). “universal terms, which stand for any of our Ideas whatsoever” (412).
their several kinds, which no where subsist but in the understanding it self,” abstractions actually “refe[r] to the internal constitution of things, the true cause of the similitude and dissimilitude of their outward forms.”  

This revolution in abstraction enables language to extend our knowledge of the world, because when several things become connected they can produce or generate something more, as is the case with the name of Shandy, which Elizabeth acquires and then she and Walter bear more. Sterne takes care to make the more that such abstraction creates concrete, so its significance is never lost. For example, the significance of the conjunction between lead weights for window sashes and ballistics is quite manifest in Tristram’s circumcision, and the entirety of Slawkenbergius’ Tale is a quest to concretize – to establish the reality of – Diego’s nose. Or, as Lamb notes, “When Walter gives his brother an account of duration by paraphrasing Locke, and Toby puts an end to the analysis of ‘Time and Eternity’ by comparing his own mind to a smoke-jack; or when in the abstract regions of nose-theory, the conduct of the pipe is compared, in another paraphrase of Locke, to the operation of the medius terminus” (58). It is this movement that prompts Jina Politi argues that the ruling figure of the book is syllepsis, the constant play between the levels of literal and figurative meaning, and that it transcends its rhetorical function to become “the great principle of union and generation.”  

Words that the both (literal and figural) have in common, but it is not limited to this. What words make possible through union and generation in Tristram Shandy is shared experience. For if words do not have to pick out particular things, and all whom they reach feel their force in the world, then words create the basis of shared experience even when

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27 Walter Anderson, The philosophy of ancient Greece investigated, in its origin and progress, to the aeras of its greatest celebrity (Edinburgh, 1791), 79.

people have different ideas about all kinds of things. This is not to say that everyone has the
same experience in the telling of it; clearly the narrative of Slawkenbergius’ Tale does not
give us Diego’s experience, but it does enable us to feel something akin to what he felt. The
various interpolated stories in Sterne’s novel are thus not to be understood as mere
digressions following wayward associations between ideas, but rather as the verbal and
physical record of interactions between things and people, which bring even more things and
people together. In so doing, Sterne’s abstraction does not leave out of resembling things
what is peculiar to each. Indeed, there isn’t much that really is peculiar to anyone or
anything. It is the resemblance of things and experience, even diverse in nature, that
abstraction reveals – as in the resemblance between the ink of Phutatorius’ treatise and salve,
both of which can repair any damage made by the hot chestnut. This process isn’t just
accidental, although it often presents itself that way, since an occasion is all it takes for such
a similarity to be created. But the process also refers to what is universal, what transcends
the particularities, or accidents, of any given thing in any given circumstance. Where Locke
suggests that we need words to stand for more than one idea otherwise we will have endless
ideas, Sterne demonstrates that we will no matter what words we use.29

Sterne, no more than Locke, believes that we could compose a universal language
whereby the same word would stand for the same idea or set of ideas, or thing or set of
things, to everyone. His point is not to suggest that the shared experience that words make
possible, when they are felt, would somehow render it unnecessary to regulate language

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29 “The use of Words then being to stand as outward Marks of our internal Ideas, and those Ideas being taken
from particular things, if every particular Idea that we take in, should have a distinct Name, Names must be
endless. To prevent this, the Mind makes the particular Ideas, received from particular Objects, to become
general; which is done by considering them as they are in the Mind such Appearances, separate from all other
Existences, and the circumstances of real Existence, as Time, Place, or any other concomitant Ideas. This is
called ABSTRACTION, whereby Ideas taken from particular Beings, become general Representatives of all of
the same kind; and the Names general Names, applicable to whatever exists conformable to such abstract Idea”
(II.xi.§9).
because we’d all have the same experience and so our words would, in a sense, pick out the same things. He is, instead, proposing that the ability of words to connect things, rather than abstracting their material substantiation, is what extends our experience and knowledge of them. This progression in turn changes our disposition toward things (our ideas about things), so that we don’t have such singular, arbitrary views of things and are able to see how things relate to other things and to more accurately assess them and their relationship to us. Not everyone will have the same idea of things, and words, if they represent ideas, can give us other ideas of things, but this will not go far in bridging cognitive distances, whereas if words are things, then they can literally bring people (and minds) together. Furthermore, because every word can do this, there is no select group of words or level of language that constitutes universals, those ephemeral ideas that were the basis of the whole epistemological debate in the first place.

Indeed, we see the connection – the word makes it apparent/perceptible to us – although the connection is not there. That is to say, it does not exist the way a chestnut or a mule does; it is not manifest as an actual physical object. Nevertheless, the lead weight for a window sash can be both a lead weight and a ballistic, just not at once, before us. And so the abstraction does grasp the universal. Universals are, in Locke’s epistemology, the abstract ideas or words that are never instantiated per se, but that we identify when we recognize qualities that do not inhere in our notion of things that are manifest, but are, notwithstanding, present. He submits that when “the same Colour being observed to day in Chalk or Snow, which the Mind yesterday received from Milk, it considers that Appearance alone, makes it a representative of all of that kind; and having given it the name Whiteness, it by that sound signifies the same quality wheresoever to be imagin’d or met with; and thus Universals, whether Ideas or Terms, are made” (II.xi.§9). This description of universals is
intended to establish the grounds upon which we can agree upon our conception of things, for Locke was well aware that because each of us will have a different experience of any object, we will have different ideas of it, and therefore what is there to prevent us from saying that $x$, $y$, and $z$ are all whites, rather than $x$ is chalk, $y$ is snow, and $z$ is milk where $x$, $y$, and $z$ all happen to be white. His worry that given his epistemology, people will distinguish things differently is what prompted him to argue that unless we use abstract ideas to characterize things, we won’t know the difference between a horse and lead. If we agree upon universals, in his view, then it won’t really matter what we encounter in our experience.

In particular, by constructing universals this way, Locke sidesteps “the kind of relative and subjective possibilities that he is anxious to avoid,” which he would invite if he “buil[t] his epistemology around a theory of meaning,” as Helene Moglen points out.” She maintains that “the chaos which might easily result from a subjective test of validity is parodied brilliantly by Sterne,” in that “Tristram’s humorous attempts at definition serve always to underline the disparity between the explicit and the implied, the absolute and the relative.” Indeed, Moglen argues, because “Sterne seems anxious to reduce philosophical discourse to the civil level, the abstract to the practical, the academically precise to the intuitively simple,” he “take[s] a much dimmer view of the possibilities and validity of the processes of generalization and abstraction than did Locke.” Yet Sterne falls into the same trap despite his criticism of Lockean epistemology, according to Moglen, for “both resort to metaphorical language when attempting to elucidate their abstract ideas” (21, 26). In Locke’s view, such an indefinite and unregulated connection between word and ideas is bad, because “all the artificial and figurative applications of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the

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judgment” (II.iii.§10). But Moglen misses Sterne’s innovation: metaphors are not simply a version of Lockean association, connecting two ideas that are essentially unrelated. They are one way of constructing the resemblance between disparate things, and so, in my reading of Sterne’s linguistics, they do exactly what language should do, which is to increase one’s ideas, to move the passions, and thus hopefully improve one’s judgment concerning those things. Every word, moreover, is (at least potentially) a metaphor, which is why no matter what one says or how scientific or intellectual one’s vocabulary, one can always have bearing on the material world; figurative language does not make one’s words less substantive.

When Walter claims, then, that “the highest stretch of improvement a single word is capable of, is a high metaphor,” adding that “the idea is generally the worse, and not the better” (181) for it, he recognizes that the connections metaphors make do not extend beyond ideas we already have, but just combine and render them less distinct: when the mind has done that with it—there is an end,—the mind and the idea are at rest,—until a second idea enters;—and so on” (181). He is not agreeing with Locke, but suggesting that metaphors only go so far. Hence, he recommends “the use of Auxiliaries,” which “is, at once to set the soul a-going by herself upon the materials as they are brought her; and by the versatility of this great engine, round which they are twisted, to open new tracks of enquiry, and make every idea engender millions” (181). Of course no description, however figurative, is the same as doing it (although they come close, as Walter’s lament about the impossibility of explaining the reproductive process without talking dirty acknowledges). That is why Sterne wants to figure out how the force of words can be felt, even if our ideas and experiences are different and even if what the words say go beyond both. After all, he has just enumerated the glories of auxiliary verbs when Trim praises the auxiliary forces that were present at the siege of Limerick, and which, Toby notes, were “very good ones.” The
example Walter gives, which doesn’t clear things up so much as demonstrate what auxiliary verbs do, is one’s knowledge of white bears:

Didst thou ever see a white bear? cried my father, turning his head round to Trim, who stood at the back of his chair:—No, an’ please your honour, replied the corporal.—But thou couldst discourse about one, Trim, said my father, in case of need?—How is it possible, brother, quoth my uncle Toby, if the corporal never saw one?—‘Tis the fact I want; replied my father,—and the possibility of it is as follows. A white bear! Very well. Have I ever seen one? Might I ever have seen one? Am I ever to see one? Ought I ever to have seen one? Or can I ever see one? Would I had seen a white bear! (for how can I imagine it?) If I should see a white bear, what should I say? If I should never see a white bear, what then? If I never have, can, must, or shall see a white bear alive, have I ever seen the skin of one? Did I ever see one painted?—described? Have I never dreamed of one? Did my father, mother, uncle, aunt, brothers or sisters, ever see a white bear? What would they give? How would they behave? How would the white bear have behaved? Is he wild? Tame? Terrible? Rough? Smooth? —Is the white bear worth seeing? —Is there no sin in it?— Is it better than a black one? (II.182-83)

Auxiliaries establish our relationship to things and, in this example especially, show that our discourse is not limited by our ideas or experience. What we feel in response to words, irrespective of what they say, is the key, for intercourse doesn’t simply reproduce what has gone before. It can take us into new territory and enable us to make something else of our experience than what we have thus far done. After all, one of the epistemological drawbacks to Locke’s system is the fact that everything is built on everything else in a way that if one’s simple ideas are mistaken, then one will never arrive at a sound conception, for instance, of virtue, or other such abstract ideas. What is grand about “True Shandeism” is that even with the “wrong” ideas – lewd or whatever – one can sally forth into the right construction of things: “by the right use and application of these [auxiliaries]…there is no one idea can enter [one’s] brain, how barren soever, but a magazine of conceptions and conclusions may be drawn forth from it” (II.182).

Walter’s example is telling in the contrast between black and white with which he concludes. These colors, of course, connote moral attributes, and virtue and vice are among
those pesky abstract ideas that, in Locke’s model, are not instantiated – and therefore
knowable as objects – in the world. Happiness is as well, and a topic, of course, on which
Sterne sermonized. The problem with such abstract ideas is that while we might endeavor to
pursue happiness or virtue and avoid vice, we have no knowledge or apprehension of what
we should do, how the doctrines of right behavior apply to the physical world, since these
have always been a matter of interpretation. Nevertheless, concepts like virtue need to be
more than just abstract concepts – they need to be given body. The construction of
universals – that which things that are different have in common and can be abstracted from
them – is great, but when/how can a universal be said to be the case? In the Stoic account,
universals can be said to exist when they can be said to be the case. In other words, if
something instantiates a universal proposition, then the universal is manifest in the real
world. For just as our conception of man derives its significance from the objective
existence of individual men, statements about the universal man entail statements about
token men.\textsuperscript{31} The kind of correspondence here connects words and things, but also extends
farther. George Stanhope’s translation of Epictetus’ \textit{Enchiridion} with Simplicius’ commentary
explains this relationship between the universal and the particular in a way that analogizes it
with the relationship between God and his creation: “So that the First Principle and Original
Cause, must have all Absolute and Infinite Power; the Excellence of which consists…in the
Production of all things from it self,” even things “that bear no such Resemblance to it.”

Similarly

\begin{quote}
all Beings, which are distinguished from one another, by their own peculiar
Differences, and multiplied into several Species, according to the particular Forms
and Circumstances in which they differ, are yet each of them reducible to one
Principle, more properly their own….The case is the same with all manner of
Congruities, and all Truths, and all Principles….For the same relation that that first
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} See Long and Sedley’s explanation in \textit{The Hellenistic Philosophers}, vol II. 181.
Universal Principle bears to all Beings in general, the same does each of these Subordinate Principles bear to the several Species and Individuals contained under it, and partaking of the Property peculiar to it. For every Species which is distinguished from the rest by a peculiar difference of its own, must needs have a tendency to, and terminate in its proper Principle, from whence one and the same Form is reflected down upon all the particular Kinds and Creatures comprehended under it.\textsuperscript{32}

This is how one can say different words and pick out the same thing, and the same word(s) can entail diverse things. This organization of things was the Stoic response to the Sorites paradox, which holds that because it is impossible to tell how many grains of sand constitute a heap, a heap inheres in nothing. The Stoics maintained, then, that while one cannot determine the exact number of grains of sand that constitute a heap, we can say if a particular grain belongs to a heap, that being part of a heap is true of it. This argument is one that invokes the relationship between universal and definition for the Stoics, which Sextus Empiricus explains: “For the definition…differs from the universalized proposition in nothing but syntax, and is identical in meaning….For whoever says ‘Man is a rational mortal animal’ says the same thing in meaning as whoever says ‘If something is a man, that thing is a rational mortal animal’, although it is verbally different,” so although we might not be able to define the help, we can identify it as a universalized predicate. Sextus Empiricus explains that “this is…clear, because not only does the universalized proposition range over all particular cases, but the definition also extends to all the specific instances of the thing represented – that of man to all specific men, that of horse to all horses. And both the universalized proposition and the definition are vitiated by the subsumption of a single false instance.” Walter offers a version of this approach to the problem of the universal:

“Knowledge, like matter, he would affirm, was divisible in infinitum;—that the grains and scruples were as much a part of it, as the gravitation of the whole word.—In a word, he would say, error was error,—no matter where it fell,—whether in a fraction,—or a pound,—

\textsuperscript{32} George Stanhope, 119-120.
‘twas alike fatal to truth” (161). This means that everything is significant, and nothing is inconsequential, because every thing either constitutes a part of our knowledge, or represents our error. “He would often lament that it was for want of considering this properly, and of applying it skillfully to civil matters, as well as to speculative truths, that so many things in this world were out of joint” (161). Reformation is not a matter of word choice, but rather reforming our ideas of things. “You cry out, he would say, we are a ruined, undone people. Why? he would ask, making use of the sorites or syllogism of Zeno and Chrysippus, without knowing it belonged to them.—Why? why are we a ruined people?—Because we are corrupted” (161). Whereas language may say what is right – a universalized proposition instantiated in things – we may not.

**Hypocrisy**

If language could be fixed, and our usage regulated, to the degree that Locke and others including Dr. Johnson envisioned, then we would only give expression to universals and what good would that do in the world? Granted, one might think, given the correspondence between word and thing, universal and particular, I have described in Sterne’s approach to language that every word really does mean exactly what it says and will, when directed “point-blank to the heart” (84), not only move one’s listeners, but also reform the world as we know it. Indeed, this is the potential power of language, although words don’t appear, even in *Tristram Shandy*, to be so divine. The most extreme counterexample is hypocrisy, which is what prevents Walter from being a man of his word – instantiating his own beliefs. While Walter’s theory of names may not be instantiated in his son’s, that is not his fault, whereas the issue of the hinges is: “there was not a subject in the world upon which my father was so eloquent, as upon that of door-hinges. —And yet at the same time, he was
certainly one of the greatest bubbles to them, I think, that history can produce: his rhetorick and conduct were at perpetual handy-cuffs. –Never did the parlour-door open – but his philosophy or his principles fell a victim to it” (I.221). Walter is trying to have words do all the work, as in his theory of names. For his efforts to make his son great solely via dictation – solely through the power of words – fail again and again, first with Tristram’s name, which Walter dictates to Susannah and she recounts incorrectly, and then with Tristram’s education, the Tristapedia. Words cannot do everything, “For Words being Sounds, can produce in us no other simple Ideas, than of those very Sounds; nor excite any in us, but by that voluntary connexion, which is known to be between them, and those simple Ideas, which common Use has made them Signs of,” Locke explains, and “he that think otherwise, let him try if any Words can give him the taste of a Pine-Apple, and make him have the true Idea of the Relish of that celebrated delicious Fruit” (III.iv.§11).

The point, in Sterne’s account, is that there will always be discrepancies between what we see and what we know, in any number of things. Words can repair these discrepancies, because they don’t only describe things as they are. And in describing the universal, we don’t want to lose all access to reality, as Locke theorized language, but rather, we want to articulate a way (or ways) of getting there, of instantiating universals like virtue and happiness. Hence John Dussinger correctly characterizes “Sterne’s place in the mid-century intellectual revolution” as a “constant attack on the traditional mind/body dualism.”

But instead of simply rejecting the Stoics, when he scoffs in A Sentimental Journey at Cato’s “mere pomp of words,” it is words, not Stoic heroes, that Sterne turns to in formulating the relationship between universals and particulars. In addition, by making the individual, that is to say subjectivity, the access point of the universal, he does not discredit the commandments, laws, or norms, one would expect to designate anything so comprehensive,
Sterne conceives of how we make such dictates possible, how a body can have an effect that is said and comes to be true of the body acted upon.

If one would reform one’s relationship to things, and recognize that the apparent evils of the world are not really evils, talk about a wound to one’s groin without emotion, acknowledge one’s connection to all fellow men and act accordingly, then the interaction between mind and body, between our knowledge and our experience, would no longer produce friction:

A man’s body and his mind, with the utmost reverence to both I speak it, are exactly like a jerkin, and a jerkin’s lining; –rumple the one, –you rumple the other. There is one certain exception however in this case, and that is, when you are so fortunate a fellow, as to have had your jerkin made of gum-taffeta, and the body-lining to it of a sarcenet, or thin persian. Zeno, Cleanthes, Diogenes Babylonius, Dionysius, Heracleotes, Antipater, Panætius, and Possidionius amongst the Greeks; –Cato and Varro and Seneca amongst the Romans; –Pantenus, and Clemens Alexandrinus and Montaigne amongst the Christians; and a score and a half of good, honest, unthinking Shandean people as ever lived, whose names I can’t recollect, –all pretended that their jerkins were made after this fashion, –you might have rumpled and crumpled, and doubled and creased, and fretted and fridged the outside of them all to pieces; –in short, you might have played the very devil with them, and at the same time, not one of the insides of them would have been one button the worse, for all you had done to them. I believe in my conscience that mine is made up somewhat after this sort. (175-76)

Sterne liberates the correspondence between mind and body so that they can be autonomous and act according to their own volition, which, in fact, they do whenever we act against our principles or fail to understand our actions. As a result, one’s activity (in mind or in body, since both are corporeal) can have all sorts of unforeseen or seemingly unprovoked or arbitrary consequences, which of course is also the case. This is what makes learning from experience so difficult; the world, after all, simply isn’t consistent enough. The kind of constancy the Stoics upheld was not mere talk, then, for when one’s mind knows exactly what to make of everything that happens to the body, in accordance with its knowledge of

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everything, one is a sage, because “men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things.”

This outlook represents an important departure from regarding human enterprise as futile or predestined in a divinely created and regulated world, and human reason as tragically limited in what it can grasp in a postlapsarian world. In his *Discourse concerning the being and natural perfection of God* (1740), John Abernathy points out that “there is, undoubtedly, in the human mind a knowledge of things which are not the objects of sense, nay in many instances reason corrects sense, and discovers its mistakes: indeed the greatest certainty we have is in the clear perception of an agreement between our own abstract ideas; so that a concurring persuasion concerning propositions form’d of such ideas, and concerning rational deductions from them, has the best appearance of being founded on truth” (8). Abstraction holds the key to making anything humanly possible in love, war, and every other aspect of life.34

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34 It even explains how we can be made in God’s image when all we can have of Him is an abstract idea: “Some have declared themselves unable to form any idea of substance distinct from body, and therefore concluded, that as the human soul is only a subtitle kind of matter, or a particular modification of it, so God himself is corporeal; this way of thinking tho’ very gross, is plainly discovered in the writing of the celebrated Stoic philosophers mixt at the same time with noble sentiments concerning the Divine moral perfections and providence” (9).
A Stoic End

The period following the death of Charles II and culminating with the Romantics, has been called a variety of names. From Neo-Classicism to the Augustan Age to the Age of Reason, the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have long been recognized as a time that looked back to ancient Greco-Roman models and celebrated the power of our rational faculty to advance our knowledge of the world, to improve our superintendence of it, and extend our other, more limited, abilities. That Stoicism, the last pagan religion to reign before the advent of Christianity, the great ancient philosophical champion of reason, was prominent in the eighteenth century’s visions of its goals comes as no surprise. The references, name-dropping, and stereotypes that permeate the literature of the time suggest a far more complex legacy than critics have generally afforded Stoicism, because its influence was not always acknowledged outright, and because it often shaped both sides of central arguments (be it about absolute government or the passions, the function of language or the virtue of resignation), the reanimation of Stoic tenets appears both circumstantial and mere form or overly subtle and complex. Nevertheless, Stoicism did infuse the major developments of the day, no less the forest than the trees. As Carey McIntosh famously stated (and has been quoted ever since): “So widely did the ideas of classical Stoicism spread, so variously were they revived and adopted, both before and after the Revival of Learning in Europe, that by the eighteenth century they were part of the intellectual air a literate man breathed.”

35 “Johnson’s Debate with Stoicism” ELH 33.3 (Sept. 1966) 327.
ancient philosophers themselves were familiar, but also called for the reform and realization of Stoic ideals.

The period’s writers were conscious of this inheritance: William Enfield explains in his translation of Johann Jakob Brucker’s *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (1791) that “In order to conceive the true notion of the Stoics concerning their wise man, it must be clearly understood, that they framed in their imagination an image of perfection, towards which every man should continually aspire.”

In addition to representing an icon of ascetic, apathetic fortitude, the Stoic sage was also extolled for being a true citizen of the world: “He will relieve the sick, assist the shipwrecked, afford protection to the exile, or supply the hungry with food, but with an undisturbed mind, and a cheerful countenance; disdaining all sorrow arising from sympathy, as well as from personal suffering. No one is more ready than the wise man to exercise lenity and benignity, and to attend to the welfare of other individuals, and to the general interest of mankind” (350). If such a figure seems hardly recognizable as Stoic, and such a reception the exception rather than the rule, consider Adam Ferguson’s testimony: “Even in modern times, and at the distance of many ages, notwithstanding the vulgar contempt, this sect has been revered by those who were acquainted with its real spirit, Lord Shaftesbury, Montesquieu, Mr Harris, Mr Hutchison, and many others.”

Stoicism’s heirs were far more informed of its actual tenets than we have heretofore recognized, because we have attended so closely to the conventional rejection of Stoic doctrines that has found voice throughout the ages.

The richness of Stoicism’s legacy is reflected in the manifold disciplines in which it appears, from political science to moral psychology to linguistics. My endeavor here has been to shed light on the main contours of this reception and explain how it modifies our

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36 346.

37 Adam Ferguson, *Principles of moral and political science* (Edinburg, 1792), 8.
understanding of several key seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts. My intent has not been to suggest that Stoicism can do anything and everything in the poetry, drama, and novels of the period through its recommendation of diverse ideals. Rather, I have sought to delineate how writers and philosophers reworked Stoic theories in the formulation of their own programmatic views on how to realize their common goals. In pursuit of these goals – self-government, infallible virtue, common conceptions, patience, and moving words – seventeenth and eighteenth century theorists were reevaluating, augmenting, and revising the related agendas of other systems of thought, including Christianity, scientific empiricism, deism, and democracy. The main contradiction they faced was that of impractical, quixotic idealism – the fact that what they envisioned did not, in fact, correspond to reality. It was much easier to reconcile Stoic notions with Christian thought, which has recourse to the almighty and the hereafter, than it was to maintain that we conduct ourselves flawlessly under the conditions necessary for the best of all possible worlds, every day. Nevertheless, the utility and triumph of Stoicism was to be so rigorous and exacting, while accounting for the vicissitudes and problems of ordinary life without deferral or excuse. So while many texts did point out the shortcomings and impracticality of Stoic heroes, it is also clear that the eighteenth century found Stoicism heroic for upholding ideas without batting an eye, wincing, or any other reception other than grinning and bearing whatever the world has in store.
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