

Philosophical Parody in Lucian's *Sale of Lives*

Lucian's relationship to philosophy is a vexed question. Scholars have inconclusively debated Lucian's philosophical allegiances, if any (Robinson [1979]), his philosophical modes of discourse (Bosman [2012], Schlapbach [2010]), and his knowledge of contemporary philosophies (Jones [1986]). Indeed, gauging Lucian's philosophical knowledge is tricky. Any autobiographical hints – e.g. *The Double Indictment* (32) – require a grain of salt. Moreover, scholars' favorite criterion, Lucian's use of technical, philosophical terminology, leads to opposite conclusions (cf. Tackaberry [1930] and Hall [1981]). Focusing on Stoicism, this paper will claim that Lucian's humor reveals real understanding, for his parody of both Stoicism and its adherents grows sharper the more one knows its target. Its satire reflects back an unflattering image that a Stoic audience cannot easily dismiss.

As a small case study, the opening exchange between Hermes, a potential buyer, and a Stoic in the *Sale of Lives* (20.4-21.19) is illustrative. At first, Lucian exploits correct Stoic theory, satirizing Stoicism itself and establishing that the Stoic's later ignorance is not the author's. For example, Hermes begins with “I sell virtue itself [ἀυτήν], the most perfect of lifestyles [τῶν βίῳν τὸν τελειότατον]” and asks who wants to know everything. To this the buyer expresses confusion, prompting Hermes' response of the standard list of qualities/roles only the sage can embody: bravery, kingship, orator, etc. (20.4-8). The lampoon works on a surface level, as these Stoic claims are paradoxical, a fact made more humorous by the buyer's following remarks that the sage is then also the only cook, currier, and builder (20.9-10).

But there are additional layers of meaning for one versed in Stoicism. Stoic virtue is a certain sort of soul (L&S 61A). Thus, in a way, the virtuous sage is coextensive with virtue; he *is* virtue. Lucian capitalizes on this, constructing a *reductio ad absurdum*, for Stoic theory leads to the paradoxical situation that Hermes is not just selling the means to virtue but “virtue itself”. The continued exchange expands on this double meaning. On one level, in responding to the buyer’s confusion, Hermes seems to clarify his final question, albeit in an indirect way. But if we take it to address his first two claims, Hermes’ answer is direct. In listing the sage’s roles, Hermes puns on τὸν τελειότατον τῶν βίῳν meaning also “the [man] most capable of fulfilling livelihoods” (LSJ II), referring to the Stoic. And if we naturally take “virtue itself” in apposition with this phrase, then “virtue itself” refers again to the Stoic, a fact Hermes’ answer clarifies in its listing of the sage’s virtues. This subtlety might have been lost on some of the audience, but it would have highlighted the claims’ paradoxicality precisely for those who would want to dismiss it – those learned in Stoicism.

Later, Lucian’s command of Stoic thought is also evident in the mistakes his Stoic makes with key Stoic terms. At 21.15-19, the Stoic “explains” the terms σύμβαμα and παρασύμβαμα: the former is a “misfortune” and the latter an “additional misfortune”. The Stoic’s account of how a lame foot is a σύμβαμα and a cut to this foot is a παρασύμβαμα would be superficially amusing in its over-literal inanity. For a Stoic audience, the philosopher conflates these two linguistic terms (L&S 33q), with the closely related physical term συμβεβηκός (“consequence” [L&S 55A]; whose cognate is used earlier at 21.4), a term that Stoic treatises commonly explained with the very example of cutting one’s flesh. Lucian highlights this close-but-no-cigar flubbing with words such as

ὀνόματα (21.15) and προσπαίσας (21.17) that double as or hint at linguistic terms. This error is more biting than its superficial counterpart, for while a Stoic audience could disassociate from a “Stoic” know-nothing, this learned stumbling implicitly questions any attempt at philosophical exposition.

We have, then, good reason to think that Lucian knew his Stoicism. And, if Lucian intended anyone to get these deeper jokes, those who knew Stoicism well were a part of his intended audience. Lucian’s multilayered approach shows that his comedy is not just broad, accessible caricature, but also focused, erudite parody. The passages above highlight the paradoxical and (seemingly) pedantic nature of Stoicism most for those versed in it. Lucian’s deeper parody implicates those who get it and, hence, the parody acts as a discomfiting mirror.

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