

# Ancient Philosophy

## Stoics on Freedom

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### Motivating concern for the Stoics

The Stoics become worried about human freedom in a way that just did not seem to be on Plato and Aristotle's radar. They were very concerned with the following argument:

[P1] For an action to be "in our power," i.e. for it to be a free action, we must be able to do its opposite

[P2] Praise and blame (and other responses) are bestowed *only* on free actions

[P3] In any situation, the virtuous person cannot act otherwise than she actually does

[P4] In any situation, the virtuous person's action is not free (from [P1] and [P3])

[C] The virtuous person's actions are not praiseworthy (from [P2] and [C1])

The argument for [P3:] "Fate is a sempiternal and unchangeable series and chain of things, rolling and unravelling itself through eternal sequences of cause and effect, of which it is composed and compounded" (Chrysippus, II-89). Our actions are no different.

This argument is meant to be a *reductio*—[C] is supposed to be obviously false—thus, an actions' being free cannot require that the agent be able to do otherwise ("in our power" is not like that").

### Stoic Solution

The Stoics attempts to reconcile determinism with human freedom by distinguishing different notions of free-will.

**Libertarian:** An action is free only if it is possible for X to have chosen not to do it **even though** everything relevant to X's choice to do A **except** his "will" remains the same—e.g. his beliefs, his character, the external world.

**Stoic:** An action is free only if it is caused by the agent's beliefs.

Stoics believe our actions are always caused by our beliefs.

Desire/impulse for X = belief that X is good; fear of X = belief that X is harmful; and so on

Beliefs arise in the following way:

External object impresses itself upon the soul, which generates an "impression" or "presentation" that something is the case

The soul either assents (i.e. accepts the content of the impression) and a belief is formed, or withholds (i.e. does not accept) and a belief is not formed

Virtue, for the Stoics, is a state of the soul which is causally responsible for ensuring we act on our beliefs (so,

the Stoics don't want to reject [P3] above)

Rational mechanisms [agency model]

- [1] External world + perceptual nature of person → have impression
- [2] Have impression + assent to impression → believe content of impression
- [3] Belief + character (virtue) → effect

## Human freedom

- Humans differ from things: our individual beliefs and characters are part of the causal process
- The impressions which we have are causally determined by the state of the external world
- Our acceptance or rejection of impressions is not causally determined by the external world
- Free action = action not causally determined by the external world
- Hence, human action is free