

PHIL 321

Lecture 23: Stoics on Freedom

11/14/2013

History of Stoicism: Zeno of Citium (in Cyprus) came to Athens and founded the school (d. 262 bcd); then Cleanthes then Chrysippus; not complete works of Stoics until imperial times (Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius) and these focus on ethics, and consist mainly in exhortations, rather than in depth discussions of theoretical bases

Motivating concern for the Stoics

The Stoics 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])

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

Some Stoic psychology

Stoics conceive of the soul as wholly rational (i.e. more like the conception in the *Protagoras* than in the *Republic* or *Aristotle*)

Desire/impulse for *X* = belief that *X* is good or ought to be done; 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 actions (so, the Stoics don't want to reject [P3] above)

Virtuous person has knowledge of what is good and bad; non-virtuous person has an inconsistent belief-set about what is good and bad

Stoic view vs. a Libertarian view

Differing notions of *free action*:

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 and desires

On the Stoic view, the paradigm of free action is an action which stems from one's character. A perfectly free action is one which is consistent with every belief and desire the agent has—an action which stems from the "whole" person. Hence only the virtuous person is *unconditionally* free, since only the virtuous person has a consistent set of value-related beliefs [and so of desires, which are kinds of beliefs for the Stoics]

Determinism and Freedom

The Stoics become worried about human freedom in a way that just did not seem to be on Plato and Aristotle's radar

According to Chrysippus: "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" (II-89)

Ask about differences between Stoic and Aristotelian notion

The Stoics attempt to reconcile determinism with human freedom by distinguishing two kinds of causes of events:

[A] Auxiliary and proximate (e.g. shoving the cylinder; an impression)

[B] Perfect and Principal (e.g. the rollability of the cylinder)

There are different kinds of causal mechanisms

Thing-like mechanisms [cylinder model]

External world + nature of thing → effect

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 → 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

Objection to Stoics and response

Either [A] our acts of assent are causally determined by our characters or [B] they are not

If [B], then determinism is false

If [A], there is no human freedom (only a more complex kind of determination)

Support: the necessitarian or libertarian opponent can cite the Stoic model of animal action [stimulus-response model]:

External world + perceptual nature of animal → has impression of thing

Impression of thing + appetitive nature of animal → effect

So, main question for Stoics: why does addition of step [3] make human actions free?

Stoic response is that we *are* our characters