

Control, Determinism and Providence according to Stoic rationale

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Every Stoic brings a piece of their own nature to their interpretation of the beliefs and principles of Stoicism, as is expected of a Stoic.

'This is what Zeno said. But what of your own opinion? This is the opinion of Cleanths. But what of your own opinion? How long shall you march under another man's orders. Put forth something of your own stock.' [XXXIII. On the futility of Learning Maxims, 'Seneca Epistulae Morales' Translation by Richard M Gummere.]

However, a Stoic's rationale is always grounded in the Stoic beliefs, metaphysics and principles.

'Meanwhile, I follow the guidance of Nature – a doctrine upon which all Stoics are agreed. Not to stray from Nature and to mould ourselves according to her law and pattern – this is true wisdom.' [On the Happy Life' iii. 'Seneca Moral Essays' Translation by John W Basore.]

One arrives at a point where one agrees with this or else one does not and so do not go on to be a Stoic.

Epictetus was a Stoic through and through. What we have of Epictetus' words, as reported by Arrian, covers a limited section of what he will have presented as the curriculum at his 'School for Sick Souls'. The teachings we have will have been grounded in the belief of the oneness of matter and mind – the passive and active principles of the prime matter that is the body of the Cosmos where the active principle is the God that Epictetus so wanted to align his will with. Epictetus will not have left such teachings out. Looked at properly it is to be seen that all that we do have of his teaching are predicated on the Stoic view of the Nature we are to align with.

The Stoic teachings as presented by Epictetus clearly connects Epictetus' views on control with Epictetus' belief in God.

But what says Zeus? "Epictetus, had it been possible I should have made both this paltry body and this small estate of thine free and unhampered. But as it is let it not escape thee this body is not thine own, but only clay cunningly compounded. Yet since I could not give thee this, we have given thee a certain portion of ourself, this faculty of choice and refusal, of desire and aversion, or, in a word, the faculty which makes use of external impressions; if thou care for this and place all that thou hast therein, thou shalt never be thwarted, never hampered, shalt not groan, shalt not blame, shalt not flatter any man. What then? Are these things small in thy sight?" "Far be it from me!" "Art thou, then, content with them?" "I pray the Gods I may be." [Of the things which are under our control and not under our control' Book L i. 10 - 13 'Epictetus, The Discourses as Reported by Arrian' as translated by W A Oldfather]

Prior to this piece Arrian quotes Epictetus as telling his students:

The same holds true of the art of music with regard to melodies; but whether you are at this moment to sing and play on the lyre, or neither sing nor play, it will not tell. What art or faculty, then, will tell? That one which contemplates both itself and everything else. And what is this? The reasoning faculty; for this is the only one we have inherited which will take knowledge both of itself - what it is, and of what it is capable, and how valuable a gift it is to us - and likewise of all the other faculties. For what else is it that tells us gold is beautiful? For the gold itself does not tell us. Clearly it is the faculty which makes use of external impressions. What else judges with discernment the art of music, the art of grammar, the other arts and faculties, passing judgement upon their uses and pointing out the seasonable occasions for their use? Nothing else does. As was fitting, therefore, the gods have put under our control only the most excellent faculty of all and that which dominates the rest, namely, the power to make correct use of external impressions, but all the others they have not put under our control.

Aligned with this, in the Encheiridion we are told:

Some things are under our control, while others are not under our control. Under our control are conception, choice, desire, aversion, and, in a word, everything that is our own doing; not under our control are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything that is not our own doing. Furthermore, the things under our control are by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded; while the things not under our control are weak, servile, subject to hindrance, and not our own. Remember, therefore, that if what is naturally slavish you think to be free, and what is not your own to be your own, you will be hampered, will grieve, will be in turmoil, and will blame both, gods and men; while if you think only what is your own to be your own, and what is not your own to be, as it really is, not your own, then no one will ever be able to exert compulsion upon you, no one will hinder you, you will blame no one, will find fault with no one, will do absolutely nothing against your will, you will have no personal enemy, no one will harm you, for neither is there any harm that can touch you. [1, 1 – 3 The Encheiridion of Epictetus as translated by W A Oldfather]

There are two things to consider when looking to how Epictetus presents matters. The one is that his views and terminology are coloured by his background as a slave whereby 'control' is equated to freedom where freedom is a key aspect of his view of life. There is action that you are able to initiate yourself and follow through on, and then there is that over which others may use power or position to intervene and so take control and so force you along a path you would not initially have chosen. The story of the dog tied to the back of a horse and cart demonstrates that these two aspects can and often do overlap. Even the slave can bring to bear some influence on the outcome of many a situation.

The second thing is that Epictetus will have been well versed in the general Stoic view of the oneness of matter and mind. When looked at carefully his approach to training his students recognises this. Epictetus does not sell us a purely 'intellectual' approach regards the Stoic training methods. When Epictetus talks of *'everything that is our own doing'* he is talking of 'choice' as being 'a physical action' perpetrated by both body and mind in that the Stoic physics, back to Zeno, tells us that body and mind are at the very least comingled to form a single state, if body and mind are not in fact two characters of the one state.

The rationale of Stoicism does not set up a dichotomy or a trichotomy of control. It simply tells us what we can gain and maintain a level of control over as a result of our possessing a free-will. It looks to what we are able to do as a result of having been gifted 'a spark of God' that manifests as the quality that makes us rational and reasoning animals and to what degree of 'influence' we can bring to bear on life as a result of us being only a 'spark of God'. We are looking at the reasoning faculty that enables us to make rational conscious choices that are the choices that combine an understanding of the need for acceptance of any limitations placed on us together with the ongoing drive that is the result of the *'correct use of external impressions'* – in other words, *'the correct use of knowledge'*, which just happens to be a definition of 'wisdom'.

Within the Stoic world view such choices are physical actions. They do not just occur within our heads, but will be reflected in our internal bodily processes and our externally visible demeanour at the very least, and probably will lead to bodily actions that interact with the 'outer world'. These conscious choices/actions can, with the proper training, override our own inner programming as human animals whenever such is found to be necessary regards working towards our goals of developing a good character and of playing our part as citizens of the Cosmos.

Epictetus's teachings, as presented by Arrian, are in places a necessary simplification in that some of what he is offering is aimed at inducting young students who are at the beginning of their training into his school. Epictetus will have expected the students to eventually get to the point whereby the wider training in the Stoic rationale will have helped them to gain a better understanding of the many nuances that are to be found through a greater understanding as to how all the parts of Stoicism work together.

What is often missed today regards what we have from Epictetus is that we do not always have unhindered control over our *'reasoning faculty'*.

Epictetus sets health as being outside of our full control and Seneca tells us that we need to be *'of sound mind'* if we are to act as Stoics for it is recognised that at times the individual may lose the ability to be in control of their 'reasoning faculty' as a result of delirium or other sicknesses of the body or mind that lead to, at the very least, a temporary 'unsound mind' whereby their choices may be contrary to what they would have chosen had they been *'of sound mind'*.

Within the Stoic rationale everything is subject to the overall 'networking' will of the Cosmos and all that is within it, including our own will. There is no clear line between what is and what is not in our individual control.

Someone I have corresponded with has often claimed, as an example of 'a Stoic dichotomy of control', that he does not have control over his arm as his arm is an 'external' and so his use of his arm can be thwarted, whereas his choices are 'internal' and so cannot be thwarted.

And yet he was able to type emails using his arm in order to fulfil his choice to engage in debate with me. He was proving that he had control of his arm – at least until and unless some other aspect of the Cosmos hindered him. The reason he was able to use his arm was that he was acting 'in accord with Nature' and at the time nothing in the rest of Nature was hindering his choice to move his arm. 'To live in accord with Nature' is a call to act in accord with Nature – and Stoicism does not limit such action to only training oneself to think in accord with Nature. There is no living in accord with Nature unless one's thoughts AND actions are in accord with Nature.

So, as a result of our very nature as individuals there are matters over which, at times, we have total control within the limits of their nature, there are matters over which we can at times have partial control according to circumstance, and then there are matters over which we have next to no control whatsoever except regards how we accept such matters for what they are. These are not a dichotomy or a trichotomy in that they are not opposed to each other.

The Stoics rationale leads us to think not of dichotomies but of matters 'ranged side by side' as parts of a singular Whole.

'For all things have been ranged side by side, and together help to order one ordered Universe. [VII.9. 'The Communings with Himself of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, together with his speeches and essays' Translated by C R Haines.]

'Total control' and 'no control whatsoever' are misnomers for degrees of control are just different aspects of a range of possibilities. They are part of a single spectrum and occur according to circumstance.

None of this negates the need for the Stoic to be aware at all times as to what degree they control both their own inner state as well as to what degree they control external factors while also being aware as to how influences from external factors can control their lives – with or without their complicity. Without such awareness they will not be able to live their roles in life as they ought.

Epictetus may appear to concentrate on 'control' as being related to 'absolute freedom'. However in the Stoicism that he is teaching, the 'control' that God has given us through

gifting us a 'spark of God's own being' relates to how we aim to live our lives. And into this comes not just control, but the principle of acceptance and many other aspects that Stoicism teaches us.

For whatever reason, as we have been gifted a freewill, we are free to choose to 'live in accord with Nature' or not. However if we are to live as Stoics and are to 'live in accord with Nature' we have to choose to surrender much of our personal 'freedom' and instead live for the common good.

Following the Stoic rationale regards 'control', it is to be seen that most people 'choose' through ignorance to be enslaved to what they incorrectly see as being of value in that they have not sought to be aware of the nature of the Cosmos and our relationship to it. Much of Epictetus' trainings that has survived to today relates to methods that are aimed at breaking this enslavement in order to help people regain 'a sound mind' together with sound judgements regards the 'value' of things – both regards us developing a good character and also as to what is of use for our fulfilling our roles in life. This training covers both the self-improvement and service to society aspects of the Stoic life. Once the Stoic has freed their mind, their aim is to enter into service to the Cosmos by bringing their will into line with 'the will of God' - so living 'in accord with Nature'.

The Stoic seeks to free the control of their lives from 'the externals' that enslave them through ill perceived selfishness. And in parallel to this the Stoic surrenders their freedom to the selfless service of the Cosmos and society according to their circumstance, ability and nature.

And how does the Stoic know what it is to serve the Cosmos? By, as Epictetus tells us, making the '*correct use of external impressions*'. Here we are back to the practical wisdom to be gained through observing the existence we are faced with. However such 'living in accord with Nature' also involves us in attempting to align our actions with the Determinism and Providence that are properties attributed to God.

Through our link to God we partake in the Determinism and Providence of God in that we can, with training and good health, have control over things that '*are of our doing*'. And part '*of our doing*' is to wisely contribute to fulfilling our part in determining how the flow of change will evolve for the betterment of all – that is, through acting with wise forethought.

Epictetus tells us:

'... not under our control are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything that is not our own doing.'

Yet, to varying degrees of success or otherwise, in these matters we are able to have some influence. How much influence we have is dependent on other influences that affect our

lives. Such things can be taken away from us by the course of Nature or they can be damaged by 'external' forces such as the actions of others etcetera.

It is the sudden loss of such matters, or the failure to achieve what we have aimed for where we only have the partial influence/control that Epictetus trains us to come to terms with. However, the societal side of the Stoic teachings would be groundless unless we choose to aim for what is good for society and that means that we must try to bring our influence to bear as is appropriate to our circumstance, ability and roles in life - even if we do not have 'total control'.

Just as the archer tries to control matters whereby their arrow will hopefully fly true, so we also try to control matters, even where we know we may not be able to keep total control over the situation. We direct our choices to initiate actions with the aim of seeing our chosen actions through to fruition, while being ready to have to accept any situation whereby the combination of what we have tried to influence together with the influence of any other outside force may lead to something we had not been aiming for.

Of course life does not work as simply. Often debate about this area of Stoic teachings looks to individual events in isolation, whereas life is a flow whereby we are having to make a continuous stream of choices that are always adjusting to the flow of change.

So regardless of what control we have over events, our choices can influence the flow of life - be it that we have full control for a period of time over a small aspect of the Cosmos or only limited influence as to what happens regards our input. We are partaking in determining the forward flow of change in partnership with God and other individualities that have use of a 'spark' of the 'active principal'. We are part of God, the God that is the Cause that moves the flow of change within the experiential moment. As such we partake in the Determinism attributed to God. Our very being influences what happens in the flow of change that is Existence, so it as well that we try to direct such influence by rational awareness and well thought out intentions. Which brings us on to Providence.

Stoicism also presents God as being Providential and providence is from the Latin 'providere' meaning to 'foresee' or 'to apply forethought' as to what is likely to be the outcome of any choice/physical action. And of course according to the Stoic rationale the whole of Existence evolves as a result of the 'active principle' (God) determining the flow of change through choice/rational actions in the experiential moment - be it individuals or the Cosmos as a whole that is doing the determining.

Which brings us to one of the aims of the Stoic whereby we are guided to ensure that as many of our choices in life as are possible are thought out (providential) and are not left to the vagaries of the unexamined mind. We are guided to partake in the Providence that is associated with God, by ensuring that we also apply what control/influence we have with forethought - forethought that is guided by our Stoic training to 'live in accord with Nature'. We try, to the best of our individual nature, abilities and circumstance to partake in providently determining the flow of life for the better.

And in the best of Stoic traditions, the emphasis is on physically and mentally 'trying' and not on 'success', in that what turns out to actually be 'success' is not within our control. That is always the prerogative of 'the bigger picture'.