

Philosophy 102: Hellenistic Philosophy
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Lecture on 19 April 2007: Stoic Virtue Theory
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The stoics have an absolutist view of morality: to them nothing is considered good besides virtue, and nothing bad except vice. Focusing on anything other than virtue ultimately destroys morality. Unlike the Epicureans, the consequences and pleasure or pain do not matter for the Stoics, as virtue is to be considered good in itself. The Epicureans, by contrast, see morality as a means to an end, namely pleasure, and do not have an independent system of morality besides the acts that get them pleasurable results; to them virtue is good only if it leads to pleasure.

To the Stoics, the Epicureans fail to understand what good means, and do not have a system a morality, only a rationale for the pursuit of pleasure. The Epicureans will have to accept murder as being good if it ultimately brings one pleasure in the end. This is not so for the Stoic, who sees pleasure and pain as a byproduct of action, not a moral motivation or goal. Being a moral person should bring pleasure and happiness.

If Epicureans and Stoics disagree on the end, they do agree on the means to find morality. They focus on what creatures pursue and avoid by nature. But where Epicureans see the avoidance of pain and the achievement of pleasure as the primary natural impulse, the Stoics see survival and self-mastery, reason, and socialization.

The Stoics concept of morality can be complex. For example Zeno, the school founder argued that sex with one's siblings or parents is acceptable, as long as it does not conduce to vice, as is eating human flesh. Unless it is implicated in vice, incest and cannibalism are not moral issues. A wise person, meaning a virtuous person, can be perfectly happy even while being tortured. But would a wise person torture someone? The common view here is that a wise person would not torture someone, but the Stoics would hold that it depends upon circumstances. What if you had to torture someone to save the universe? If it were done in accordance with natural law and virtue, then it would be reasonable. On the other hand torturing someone, in order to get codes to a safe and steal their money, is morally condemnable since it is in pursuit of vice. To the Stoics the main way to judge one's moral action is to understand their justifications for doing so and the appropriate actions that follow. Justice, prudence, courage and so on, are all qualities that are associated with virtue.

What if one committed evil actions without intent and without choice, such as in 1940's Germany, when Nazi underlings had to guard concentration camps? This is a difficult moral situation, as the act is arguably carried out without virtue or vice, or knowledge of consequences. The question would have to be asked whether they could have known the outcome. Part of being virtuous is to use reason to know the results of one's action, as opposed to being ignorant. One has a social responsibility to be informed about the probable outcome of one's actions.

The stoics following the cynics were cosmopolitans. The word cosmopolitan means “citizen of the cosmos”. Diogenes of Sinope pointed at the sky when asked where he was from. The idea is that all humans form a naturally united community, and that these bonds are more important than the conventional boundaries of one’s country or city. Since all humans are bound to act in accordance with natural law, duty to one’s country is easily trumped.

Physics should be pursued in order to know what is in accordance with nature. If one gets the physics wrong, or true physics was not considered, then it is still the responsibility of the individual for following a wrong moral code. It makes no difference if you falsely believe something is in accordance with nature, because if it is not, then you are wrong, and must be held accountable for your ignorance and viciousness. One must take responsibility even for simple errors that lead one to formulate the wrong ideas about nature. Only true ignorance can be an excuse, but for the most part “I didn’t know” is not an acceptable answer.

The stress in this system is placed on intention, not action. Only God knows what the right choice would be in the sense of knowing all the various consequences, implications, and outcomes of an action. If you had the right intention but disasters results, then the burden becomes working out the system properly so as to find the correct course of action, not figuring out justifications for one’s disastrous ends. The moral system is a complete picture, if you remove one letter, then the whole thing becomes illegible (Cicero, On Moral Ends iii 74). How can you act in accordance with reason if there is error? If you haven’t worked out the system to the extent that you need to, to figure out what you should do in any given situation, then you should not give assent to anything.

Stoic physics is thoroughly deterministic. The Stoics reject the Epicure swerve as asinine. If objects swerving at random created the entire universe, how can we preserve responsibility? On the other hand, how can one have any moral action if everything is fully determined? ? Even if I do evil actions, I do it because of causes beyond my control. The stoics ask us to consider a case of a dog following a cart. If the dog strains against the cart then he will be dragged behind, and unhappy, but if the dog goes along with the cart the ride will be much smoother, and the dog can be happy. The stoic morality of choice asserts that you cannot control what happens, only your assent to it. If you assent to the right thing in accordance with good, or to the bad in accordance with vice, then there is still a moral aspect. The one iota of power one holds is intention.

There are certain circumstances in which a person’s power of assent is taken from them, such as in brain washing. In these cases the person cannot be held responsible for their physical actions, but this is not the case for most people, most of the time. Most people have the capacity of assent and should be held accountable as such. It would quite impossible to actively choose every physical action one commits, for example every step, or every movement of your hand. But certainly one does have control over one’s character.

Questions:

1. What if one has the right intentions, but does not think rationally and his actions turn out wrong? How can a stoic judge his actions? Clearly he is not a virtuous person, but he does not seem to be vicious either.
2. The Stoics say that one should strive to become virtuous, but if it is so difficult to achieve, why should we not pursue an easier moral system like Epicureanism?