



**THE STOIC
PHILOSOPHER**

Layman Determinism And Freedom Of One's Prohairesis

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“Prohairesis: ‘moral character’; the capacity that rational beings have for making choices and intending the outcomes of their actions, sometimes translated as will, volition, intention, choice, moral choice, moral purpose. This faculty is understood by Stoics to be essentially rational. It is the faculty we use to ‘attend to impressions’ and to give (or withhold) assent to impressions. Those things which are outside the scope of one’s prohairesis are the aprohairesis, which are aprohairesis and ‘external’ (ektos), and ‘not in our power’ (ouk eph’ hēmin)” (Seddon, 2005, p.228)

While navigating the sometimes confusing and contradicting waters of teaching Stoic compatibilism (aka belief in both determinism and freedom of one’s prohairesis), I found that often what works best for me is to set the academia aside and just (to use an old pro-wrestling term) “cut a promo” to the student. I glance at the notes from when I took Stoic physics and attempt to explain the topic as clearly and plainly as I can. Recently, a Physics student of mine “popped” (another old pro- “wrasslin” term for bursting with excitement) and stated that he wished he would have heard my summary earlier in the term and could I please write it down! Always trying to improve my internalizing of Stoic concepts, I thought this would be a good opportunity to lay out my layman thoughts on the subject and for the readers and students... “cut a promo.”

Stoics believe that most things that happen to us are due to a causal chain of events stemming from the conscious, rational universe, which we call “soft determinism.” In other words, *most* things are not “up to us” as Epictetus teaches. To be a Stoic though, one *must* also believe in freedom of one’s prohairesis (belief in “hard determinism” leaves no room for freedom of one’s prohairesis) by accepting and being aware of what is “up to us” which is our desires and aversions, judgements and impulse to act (aka *prohairesis*).



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A simple way to illustrate this is to liken it to you purchasing a single share of a world conglomerate stock. The macrocosm (universe / external cause) of the company and how it behaves in the stock market you have little to zero control over, but your microcosm (you / internal cause) of a share you do have you do have some control over how you deal with it.

It is fine to have a goal: starting up a new business venture, art project, fitness challenge, invest in the stock market (like mentioned above) etc. as long as one remembers that the end result is an “indifferent” and often is not “up to us.” But whatever the end results, your noble character should *not* be compromised.

Example: John, Paul, George and Ringo of the iconic 1960’s rock n’ roll band, “The Beatles”, would have had no way to project or plan how popular they would become and/or how influential their albums would be while navigating their careers as young men in Liverpool. Now consider the millions of other musical groups who may have spent an equal or more amount of time and preparation in their musical endeavors and due to location, finances, musical ability, connection with audience, looks, etc. the pinnacle of their career is performing at a small-town fair. (Not that there’s anything wrong with that!) Some things just happen to people. In the case of “The Beatles”, their trajectory seemed almost providential (mind-like intent behind it). That is fate.

There are two types of people in the world. Those that are the “end justifies the means” in other words, will seemingly do almost *anything* to get what they want no matter what the moral implications. Then there are the “aim not the target” people. Stoics *are* “aim not the target” people (as demonstrated in the classic Cicero’s archer metaphor.) Take aim, but when the arrow leaves your hand, no longer your business. Find joy, satisfaction and completion within the act itself (whatever it may be), not its end result. If attempting to be a musician and end up like “The Beatles” or a small-town fair band, *either way*, find joy and purpose in the virtuous effort of the performance. The rest is indifferent. Stoicism is a philosophy that is designed to help us handle when the world doesn’t behave how we would like it.

“Take the case of one whose task it is to shoot a spear or arrow straight at some target. One’s ultimate aim is to do all in one’s power to shoot straight, and the same applies with our ultimate goal. In this kind of example, it is to shoot straight that one must do all one can; none the less, it is to do all one can to accomplish the task that is really the ultimate aim. It is just the same with what we call the supreme good in life. To actually hit the target is, as we say, to be selected but not sought.” (Cicero, 45 BC)

Another Stoic lesson that demonstrates this is Zeno’s dog tied to an ox cart analogy. The ox cart (determinism / external cause) goes where it wants. The poor dog (freedom of one’s



prohairesis / internal cause) has essentially no say in the matter. BUT the dog can find *eudaimonia* (good daimon or smooth flow in life) while making the most of its situation while accepting the direction the oxcart is going. Again, no reason not to have a goal as mentioned above (new business venture, art project, fitness goal, invest in the stock market, etc. whatever!) but as we are a microcosm of the macrocosm of the infinite, rational and conscious universe, the end result of our efforts is obviously “not up to us” but like the dog, we *can* strive to find *eudaimonia* making our best efforts along the path.

"They too [Zeno and Chrysippus] affirmed that everything is fated, with the following model. When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity, but if it does not want to follow it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too: even if they do not want to, they will be compelled in any case to follow what is destined." (Hippolytus)

If the oxcart/dog quote is a bit harsh for you, one can also think of it as Erik Weigardt, founder of College of Stoic Philosophers (and from whom I've likely paraphrased much of this essay from the lessons he taught me!) did as “go with the flow” and picture it like a riding a kayak down a river. River (determinism / external cause) and kayak (freedom of the prohairesis / internal cause). You have zero control where that river takes you, but you can make some decisions along the way to make things more pleasant for yourself and others than fighting and smashing against the rocks!

Once internalizing the lessons of Stoic philosophy and whatever symbolic vehicle you choose to picture (oxcart, kayak, whatever!) when obstacles arise that previously would have sent you and your decision making sideways, one should (as current college scholar, Chris Fisher, emphasizes on his podcast “Stoicism on Fire”) stop the impression (of said obstacle), remove value judgement and view it from a cosmic viewpoint. When you return from this pause of contemplation, in a way you are a slightly different person than before having applied this Stoic lesson and now have the ability to make the proper / rational decision and, in a sense, start a new causal chain possibly improving things for you and others.

I hope that this layman attempt at explaining traditional Stoics views of compatibilism the reader finds somewhat beneficial. If it does or doesn't, do a deep dive of your own and have *fun* “wrasslin” with this fascinating subject!

“Not a dancer but a wrestler: waiting, poised and dug in, for sudden assaults.” (Marcus Aurelius, 2002, p.95)



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