

The golden trio

Piotr Stankiewicz



The dichotomy paradox

Stoicism is famous for its paradoxes. The tradition of intellectual provocation goes way back, and it's quite well embedded in the Stoic *modus operandi*. One of the most seminal examples of it is a discussion of the dichotomy of control.

The question is simple: what exactly is under our control? The regression that follows is just as simple. Is weather under our control? No, proverbially no. Maybe global affairs and international politics? No way. Something more private then, like our income and career? Nope. Here too, 2020 taught us quite a lesson. What about our bodily dispositions, then? Is it under our control how fit we are and whether we stay healthy? Alas, a myriad of factors may take their toll here, all of them completely beyond our power.

We swiftly arrive at the first conclusion here: stoically speaking, nothing outside our mind is under our control.

The buck doesn't stop there, however, since the regression steps inward. The cultural context ingrained in us and how we were socialized to think and behave — are they under our control? No, because we had no say in where and when we were born and brought

up. Last-ditch then: what about basic impulses, e.g., what the sweetness of chocolate or a sudden bolt of pain do to our brain? Sadly, this biological hardwiring is not in our power to change.

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This line of reasoning suggests to some that nothing is under our control, and therefore Stoicism is void (or at least it's deeply flawed). Yet, that is not the case. Here comes what I call the Golden Trio, i.e., a critical subset of our mental states and processes that we entertain full control over. It consists of three items essentially. Under our control are:

1. *the values we cherish and intend to uphold;*
2. *the goals we shoot at in our life; and*
3. *the overall direction in which we want to shape our character.*

Social and cultural influences

A few points might be raised here. First off, our social and cultural background are beyond our control while they clearly impact the values we believe in. How does it work then? Suppose I'm raised in an Epicurean family and I have zero contact whatsoever with Stoicism. In that case,

it will never occur to me that conversion into Stoicism is a possibility. However, if I learn about it and make up my mind (as I should!) that Stoicism is the way to go — there is no stopping me. And the other way about. One can put a gun to my head, but no one can put a gun inside my head, forcing me to change my values against my will. The last call always rests with me.

The dichotomy of control works cleanly on number two, i.e., the goals I aim at in life. It's not up to me whether I achieve the goals, but it's up to me to choose them. That's Stoicism 101.

Genetic factors

Finally, even if our character is — as some say — determined chiefly by our genes, we always have some room for improvement (or deterioration). It might be that it's beyond my reach to become truly magnanimous, patient or virtuous, but it is my discretion to choose the direction in which I want to evolve. The responsibility for this choice — just as it holds for values and goals — is mine.

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