

Are Ancient Ethics and Modern Morality Part of the Same Endeavor?

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Abstract - Introduction

Five years prior to Michael Frede's 1997-98 Sather lecture series on free will in ancient thought, Julia Annas published "Ancient Ethics and Modern Morality".¹ In that paper she defends against philosophers who deny that ancient ethics is also ancient morality. Her defense avoids use of the term 'free will'; however, 'free choice' is present and central. In light of Frede's Sather lecture claim – that free will is a technical notion invented in late Stoicism – we might wonder whether his arguments impact Annas' defense. In this article I reexamine Annas' arguments in light of Frede's Sather lectures which remained unpublished until 2011. In addition to the lectures, I make use of some of Frede's post-Sather work on the Stoic notion of the good. My goal is to see whether a sympathetic view of Frede's work undermines Annas' defense against the criticisms of ancient ethics. Ultimately I conclude that Frede's work does, in fact, undermine Annas in at least three areas; yet that result does not decisively negate her conclusion that ancient ethics and modern morality are part of the same endeavor.

(Keywords: free will, ancient ethics, modern morality, Frede, Annas, Sather lectures)

¹ Julia Annas, "Ancient Ethics and Modern Morality" *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 6, Ethics (1992), pp. 119-

Frede's Free Will Project

Frede's Sather lectures were published posthumously under the title *A Free Will, Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*.² The main thesis of his series holds free will is not an ordinary notion that one has in virtue of being human. It is not like the notions of, for example, fear, joy, light, dark, etc. – notions that all people of all times have had. Instead, free will is a technical notion invented in antiquity.³

Frede was not the first to claim that free will is an invented concept, nor the first to place its origin with Greek philosophers. After describing Homer's tragedies as '*festivals* for the gods', Friedrich Nietzsche writes in 1887:

“It was no different when later Greek moral philosophers thought that the eyes of the gods still look down on moral struggles, ... unwitnessed virtue was something inconceivable for this nation of actors. Might it not be the case that that extremely foolhardy and fateful philosophical invention, first devised for Europe, of the ‘free will’, of man’s absolute freedom [*Spontaneität*] to do good or evil, was chiefly thought up to

² Michael Frede, *A Free Will, Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011)

³ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

justify the idea that the interest of the gods in man, in man's virtue, *could never be exhausted?*"⁴ (Emphasis in original)

Frede's less-bombastic account of free will also places its origin in Greek philosophy, but eschews any notion of entertaining the gods or play acting. On Frede's account, free will occurred for the first time to Epictetus during late Stoicism.⁵ Yet the notion stemmed from a long history of philosophical exploration into: reason, willings, wantings, voluntariness, choice and responsibility. That exploration began with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and spanned hundreds of years of ancient thought including centuries of Stoicism.

Frede provides a highly nuanced account of ancient thought with an eye toward distinguishing free will from related concepts of voluntariness, choice and responsibility. He further distinguishes 'will' from 'free will'; because, on his account, the notion of a will does not necessitate its being free.⁶ A will, to Frede, is an ability to make choices regarding action whereby those choices crucially stem from a mental act. Therefore, will is a mental ability.⁷

Frede's notion of freedom in regard to the will involves rough analogy to the political notion of freedom, whereby a man who is unfree experiences constraints that "...systematically prevent him from doing what he could reasonably want to do in pursuit of his own good..."⁸ As it turns

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 1887, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, translated by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, revised edition 2007), 45.

⁵ Frede, *A Free Will ...*, 76-77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8 and also 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

out, the possessor of genuinely *free* will is a rarity according to the Stoic inventor of the concept. For only the Stoic wise man – having not formed a single false belief and commanding perfect rationality – has free will. All others are enslaved by inappropriate attractions to ‘indifferents’ that they mistake as goods.⁹

My goal is not to perform a critical analysis of Frede’s view. Instead, I seek to explore the implications his view has for the debate over whether ancient ethics is also ancient morality. The ‘ancient ethics vs. modern morality’ question is, as Annas hints, dauntingly complex. I don’t expect to settle or even move it. However, I do hope to shine the light of Frede’s work on Annas’ attempt to move the argument. My strategy is to take a sympathetic stance toward Frede’s conclusions regarding the nature and origin of free will, and apply his account to the specific defenses that Annas offers in favor of ancient ethics.

Overview of the Annas Project

Annas’ thesis is straight forward. In regard to the contrast between ancient ethics and modern morality she asserts that, “Of course there are important differences, but they do not compel us to deny that ancient ethics is also ancient morality.”¹⁰ In pursuing this project, Annas is sensitive to the blurry semantic distinction between ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’. For example, Simon Blackburn calls attention to the ethics/morality distinction by way of noting the ambiguous usage of the term ‘morality’ and pointing to the very issue that Annas seeks to explore.

⁹ Ibid., 75-76.

¹⁰ Annas, 120.

"Although the morality of people and their ethics amount to the same thing, there is a usage that restricts morality to systems such as that of Kant, based on notions such as duty, obligation, and principles of conduct, reserving ethics for the more Aristotelian approach to practical reasoning based on the notion of virtue..."¹¹

From the outset, Annas makes clear she is not out to argue semantic nuance by starting with a definition of 'morality' and comparing it to ancient theories – an argument she feels is 'guaranteed to make no progress'.¹² Instead, she examines five features of morality that some philosophers allege to be missing from ancient ethical theories with a mind toward determining whether those features are, in fact, missing. I will refer to these as the *five criticisms*. From the outset, we should note that Annas is including Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans and the Stoics under the umbrella of ancient ethics. Her goal is not to show that each of the targeted five features of morality were present in every one of those ancient schools of thought. Instead, she considers her argument satisfied if one or more of the competing ancient schools claims the feature – or something like it – as prominent in their ethical theory. As it turns out, the bulk of her defense against the five criticisms relies very heavily on Aristotelian and Stoic thought.

Below I list the five criticisms along with a crude encapsulation of Annas' defense. At this point my goal is merely to sketch the landscape over which the arguments range with a mind toward identifying which arguments might intersect Frede's work on free will and ancient ethics.

Annas' work is far more complete and nuanced than I portray in this encapsulation.

¹¹ Simon Blackburn. *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 241.

¹² Annas, 120.

1. *Distinct Kind Criticism*:¹³ The ancients' practical reason is not equivalent to modern moral reason, because they did not view reason regarding right action as a special kind.

Annas reply: Stoic virtue *was* a distinct kind distinguished as the *only* good.

Though Aristotle allowed for many goods, even he viewed certain human virtues so distinct as to be chosen for their own sake – even in the face of death.

2. *Moral Responsibility Criticism*:¹⁴ Ancients believed in moral luck as opposed to voluntariness in moral choice. Also, their notion of virtue was merely an excellence.

Annas reply: Ancient ethics argues *against* moral luck. Aristotle explicates voluntariness in Nicomachean Ethics. The special human virtues for Aristotle were the *reasoned* excellences. Stoic virtue also involved reason and choice.

3. *Scope of Application Criticism*:¹⁵ Aristotle's virtue ethics ranges over every detail of life, including areas having nothing whatsoever to do with morality.

Annas reply: One's state of moral development may well influence every aspect of life – ancient or modern. In fact, modern philosophers have made this claim.

4. *Agents vs. Actions Criticism*:¹⁶ Ancient ethics consists in theories for developing right character in agents; whereas, modern morality consists in theories of right action.

¹³ Annas, 120-123.

¹⁴ Ibid., 124-126.

¹⁵ Ibid., 126-127.

¹⁶ Ibid., 128-130.

Annas reply: Account of agency requires account of action, and vice versa. No theory is exclusively agent or act oriented. Rules guiding right action guide agent development.

5. *Self vs. Other Regarding Criticism*:¹⁷ Ancient ethics is concerned with developing self in pursuit of a good life; whereas, moral theory is concerned with the good of others.

Annas reply: Some Aristotelian virtues (e.g. justice) *are* aimed at doing right by others. In addition, the Stoic concern for rationality overrides concern for self.

Of the five criticisms, two are not of particular interest to my project, namely: *Scope of Application* (no. 3.) and *Agents vs. Actions* (no. 4.). The defense against *Scope of Application* centers on judgments about morality's impact on the details of modern life. As such, contrasting the interpretations of Annas and Frede regarding ancient thought provides little opportunity to determine whether Frede's view undermines Annas' defense against this particular criticism. Similarly, the defense against the *Agents vs. Actions* criticism offers little interpretive contrast opportunity regarding the ancients since Annas' defense centers on the necessary structure of moral theory *in general* – whether ancient or modern.

This leaves criticism numbers 1, 2 and 5 – i.e. *Distinct Kind*, *Moral Responsibility*, and *Self vs. Other Regarding*. The Annas defense against each of these three criticisms relies on interpretive accounts of ancient ethical theory. More importantly, they do so in ways that might conflict with Frede's account. In what follows, I will expand my explication of Annas' defense against each

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130-132.

of these three criticisms, and follow each expansion with a discussion of selected Frede text that potentially undermines the Annas defense.

Evaluating the Distinct Kind Defense

*Distinct in Kind Criticism:*¹⁸ The ancients' focus on practical reason is not equivalent to our modern focus on moral reason. That is, the ancients did not see reasons regarding right action as a special *kind* of reason. In our modern context, moral reason is the kind of reason that *silences* others instead of merely outweighing them.

Annas Defense: The ancients *do* treat right action reasoning as special in kind. For example, the Stoics set aside virtue as a special kind of good. "Only virtue, they say, is good; other things we desire should be called not good but 'indifferent'."¹⁹ Annas describes the Stoic concept of indifferents as being selected; while virtue is, instead chosen as the only good, "The point of all this is to stress the special role of virtue in our reasoning."²⁰ She acknowledges that the distinction between virtue and all of the indifferents is 'less familiar' to us moderns than the distinction between moral and non-moral reasons. "Nonetheless, we could easily reformulate the ancient point as a point about the kinds of reason that the virtues give rise to." The Stoics are "... emphasizing a feature of our practical deliberation, the fact that one kind of consideration, if rightly understood, cannot simply be weighed up against the other

¹⁸ Ibid., 120-121.

¹⁹ Ibid., 121.

²⁰ Ibid., 121.

kinds, but knocks them out of the running.”²¹ Thus Stoic virtue trumps all other considerations in the same way that modern moral reasons silence non-moral reasons.

Does Frede’s account of Stoic ethics coincide with that of Annas? Not entirely. In regard to Stoic theory, it is unclear how we can – as Annas suggests – reformulate the ancient’s point as being about the kinds of reason that the virtues give rise to. For, on Frede’s account, the Stoics point is not seen as stressing the *role* of virtue in reasoning, since virtue *is* perfect reasoning – i.e. it is a certain competence consisting of wisdom in the form of perfect rationality.²² The Stoics set aside this virtue/wisdom as the *only* good.²³ In this sense, it does indeed silence all other candidates for the good. However, perfect reasoning (i.e. Stoic virtue/wisdom) is not a special kind of reasoning in the same sense that modern moral reasoning is a special kind of reasoning, because perfect reasoning is the superlative form of *all kinds of reasoning* – not just some of the kinds. Even if we were to think of perfect reasoning ability as a goal and hence a reason to act, it is still special in that it is the only reason that is a good; yet this is a very different concept than the field of reasons that modern moral theory holds special as moral reasons – in contrast to non-moral reasons. In Frede’s words:

“Hence the notion of the good involved here is not the notion of the moral good, at least not as this is generally conceived of. It is rather a notion of the good which corresponds

²¹ Ibid., 122.

²² Michael Frede, "On the Stoic Conception of the Good", in *Topics in Stoic Philosophy*, ed. Katerina Ierodiakonou, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 71.

²³ Frede, *A Free Will ...*, 33.

to Aristotle's notion of intellectual virtue, or rather to a much richer conception of intellectual virtue, in so far as for the Stoics all virtue is intellectual virtue."²⁴

Thus, Frede's account undermines Annas' argument in regard to Stoic ethics, and the Stoics are her strongest (though not only) claim in defense against the distinct-in-kind criticism.

Annas also considers Aristotle's position in regard to the distinct-in-kind criticism and acknowledges that Aristotle and his later followers see virtue as one of *many* goods.

"Aristotle is thus not in as strong a position as the Stoics are to mark off the special deliberative role of virtue."²⁵ However, Annas points out that Aristotle treats virtue as special among the goods since, for example, some virtuous persons suffer injury and even death for the sake of virtue, hence "...Aristotle clearly recognizes that the virtuous person does the virtuous act for its own sake, and that is a distinctive kind of motivation."²⁶ Thus, she argues that Aristotle saw virtue as unique in a way not unlike moderns see moral reason as unique. This line of argument creates a new avenue of potential challenge one might raise against Annas' position in that Aristotle's notion of virtue is also seen as excellence extending to seemingly non-moral human concerns and even inanimate objects. We come to that challenge in criticism number two.

Evaluating the Moral Responsibility Defense

²⁴ Frede, *On the Stoic Conception of the Good*, 89.

²⁵ Annas, 123.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

Moral Responsibility Criticism:²⁷ The moral responsibility criticism has a primary and a buttressing, secondary assertion. The primary assertion holds the ancients believed in moral luck as opposed to voluntariness in moral choice. In other words, agents could be held accountable for actions over which they had no power to avoid doing. This criticism regarding responsibility is buttressed by the further assertion that the virtues (*aretē*) central to ancient ethics were thought of as excellences. These included things like health and beauty, and extended to animals and even inanimate objects. Thus ancient virtues seem ill-suited as means to appraise moral responsibility.

Annas Defense: Moral luck is a staple of Greek tragedies – *not* ancient ethical theory. In fact, ancient ethical theory was critical of moral luck while attentive to voluntariness. Annas points to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* as being clear evidence of the concept of voluntariness in regard to right action. She singles out Aristotle’s claim that, “Virtue, then, is about feelings and actions. These receive praise or blame when they are voluntary, but pardon, sometimes even pity, when they are involuntary.”²⁸ This voluntariness is, Annas asserts, the moral choice needed to hold agents responsible. Annas writes, “Further, what is true of Aristotle is true for all the ancient schools: virtue requires voluntariness, the free exercise of choice to act one way rather than another.”²⁹ And she later embellishes the claim by adding reason: “...ancient moral theory is centrally

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Aristotle Introductory Readings*, translated by Terence Irwin and Gail Fine (Indianapolis: Hackett 1996) p. 228, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b30.

²⁹ Annas, 125.

concerned with the virtues, and the virtues are, as we have seen, reasoned states presupposing freedom of choice.”³⁰ Thus ancient ethics relies on freely-chosen, reasoned states to assess responsibility rather than relying on moral luck.

In regard to the buttressing claim of the virtues being excellences that apply to non-moralistic attributes, Annas notes the ambiguous use of ‘aretē’ in ancient times. In one use it refers to mere aptitudes and natural excellences. In the other it refers to human virtues developed by accepting moral principles. The later sense refers to the reasoned states that presuppose free choice. These states evidence ancient ethics as being ancient morality.

Here we see a significant difference between Frede’s account of ancient virtue and that of Annas. While Aristotelian responsibility derives from voluntariness, it is not, as Annas suggests, a matter of reasoned states presupposing choice. The difference in accounts between Frede and Annas stems from how choice is understood within the tripartite theory of the soul. Frede points out that, according to Aristotle, reason, appetite and spirit each have desires. Thus any of the three can be the source of our actions. Yet, Frede notes, the Aristotelian notion of choice applies *only* to reason – not to appetite or spirit. So – taking Frede’s example – you may have a rational desire not to eat sweets because, presumably, they are unhealthy. You might also have an appetitive desire to eat sweets based on occurrent smell and sight. Only the reasoned desire has the status of choice. Frede asserts, “Aristotle’s view is never that, if we are confronted with such conflict... and act on a nonrational desire against reason, we do so because there is a mental event, namely, a choice

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

or a decision to act in this way.” ... “More important, Aristotle himself explicitly characterizes these cases as ones in which one acts against one’s choice (*prohairesis*), rather than as cases in which one chooses to act against reason.”³¹

The act of eating the sweet is one for which the agent is responsible since it was not involuntary; whereby – per Aristotle – “What comes about by force or because of ignorance seems to be involuntary.”³² Yet the act of eating the sweet was not a choice since ‘choice’ only applies to reason and reason chooses not to have the sweet based on reason’s belief the sweet is unhealthy. When appetite overpowers reason, the agent is acting against reason’s choice – *not*, on Frede’s account of Aristotle, choosing against reason. Lack of virtue is an explanation for the act; however, this explanation is a “long story” about having failed to train, practice, and discipline oneself.³³ It is not a story about – as Annas asserts – reasoned states presupposing freedom of choice. In Frede’s account, “The nonrational desire in and by itself suffices to motivate us, even when we are grown up. And, as we have seen, even if we act against our rational desire, this does not involve choice.”³⁴ Thus Frede’s account of moral responsibility in ancient ethics undermines that of Annas, at least in regard to her stance on Aristotle. What about the Stoics?

Recall from above that, in regard to virtue, Annas asserts what is true for Aristotle is true for the Stoics. Therefore, the question is whether Frede’s account of the Stoics holds that Stoic

³¹ Frede, *A Free Will*, 23.

³² Aristotle, *Aristotle Introductory Readings*, p. 228, *Nicomachean Ethics 1110a*.

³³ Frede, *A Free Will*, 23-24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

virtue involves ‘reasoned states presupposing freedom of choice’. In regard to the first half (i.e. virtue involving reasoned states), the answer is yes. Stoic virtue is wisdom and wisdom is the good. Frede asserts: “According to the Stoics ... the only good is wisdom or virtue, and the only evil is folly or vice.”³⁵ He views the stoics as holding a particularly strong sense of the good whereby things having it deserve to be appreciated, praised or admired. In regard to humans, “...what confers goodness on what they do and makes them, their disposition, and their behavior appropriate objects of this particular appreciation is not what they do, but the wisdom ... in short, the perfection of reason behind their behavior.”³⁶ Thus Frede, like Annas, views Stoic virtue as involving reasoned states.

As it turns out, on Frede’s account, all of our actions as adults – virtuous or not – turn out to be reasoned states on the Stoic view. We are plant-like in the womb, animal-like at birth, and fully rational beings as adults. The transformation to rational being is complete. Thus, unlike Aristotle’s tripartite theory of the soul, the Stoic adult human soul is monistic. The non-rational soul at birth is completely replaced by the rational soul in the human adult.³⁷ Thus all of our impulses – whether acted on or not – are rational impulses in that they have two components, namely: a passive impulsive impression and an active assent of reason.³⁸

Given the active involvement of reason, it is tempting to conclude that Stoic doctrine qualifies for Annas’ claim that ancient virtue involved not only reasoned states but also

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁶ Frede, "On the Stoic Conception of the Good", 89.

³⁷ Frede, *A Free Will*, 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

freedom of choice. Yet, according to Frede, this is not obviously the case until Epictetus in very late Stoicism – more than 300 years after the death of its founder, Zeno. Assuming Frede is correct, the greater body of Stoic philosophy did *not* use the concept of free choice in regard to the Stoic virtue of wisdom. To get a sense for how much of Stoicism missed freedom in regard to reasoned choice, consider the following table.

Table 1: Stoic Lineage³⁹

Stoic Philosopher	Birth	Death
Zeno of Citium	335 BC	263 BC
Cleanthes	331 BC	232 BC
Chrysippus	280 BC	207 BC
Posidonius	135 BC	51 BC
Seneca	After 4 BC	AD 65
*Epictetus	AD 55	AD 135
Marcus Aurelius	AD 121	AD 180

*First to ascribe freedom to the will.

Frede bases his claim for the origin of free will on Epictetus' *Discourses*. In that work the assent to impression does not play the central role. Instead, *choice* has the central role, and that choice amounts to choosing between the many ways to deal with impressions, including, not only giving assent, but also to: scrutinize, reflect, deflate, dissolve and dwell. This choosing between the many ways to deal with impressions is, in Frede's account, the origin of will. "But the will is called *prohairesis* [choice], rather than *boulēsis* [willing], to mark

³⁹ Dates sourced from: Simon Blackburn. *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy Second Edition*,

pgs.396,63,61,284,334,117,29 respectively by name order.

that it is an ability to make choices, of which willings are just products. This indeed is the first time that we have any notion of will.”⁴⁰ [Bracketed content added]

However, even the notion of an ability to choose in relation to reason’s assent to impulse only gets us part way to Annas’ claim that the virtues of ancient ethics are reasoned states presupposing freedom of choice. *Reasoned states* and *choice* have been accounted for, but *freedom* has not. Frede continues developing of his account of Stoic free will by asserting that the will – as an ability to choose among ways to deal with impressions – is *not* a notion of free will until it is applied to a Stoic wise man – i.e. one with perfect reason. Those who are not wise possess false beliefs derived from inappropriate attachments to ‘indifferent’ things that they confuse for the good. They become enslaved by these false beliefs and their will is not free. Therefore, under Frede’s account of Epictetus, only the very rare, perfectly reasoning Stoic wise man has freedom in regard to choosing how to deal with impressions – i.e. ‘free will’. Frede writes, “So here we have our first actual notion of a free will. It is a notion of a will such that there is no power or force in the world which could prevent it from making the choices one needs to make to live a good life. But it is a notion such that not all human beings in fact have a free will.”⁴¹

Given the above, Annas’ claim that Stoic virtue involves reasoned states presupposing freedom of choice is only partially undermined by Frede’s account in that these reasoned states involving freedom of choice were not central to Stoic ethics until the late Stoic period exemplified by Epictetus. Even then, they were not truly ‘free’ states for anyone except the

⁴⁰ Frede, *A Free Will*, 46. [bracketed content added for clarity]

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

very rare Stoic wise man. In sum, Annas' defense against the *Moral Responsibility Criticism* is undermined by Frede's account with respect to Aristotelian ethics and only partially undermined with respect to Stoicism.

Evaluating the Self vs. Other-Regarding Criticism

*Self vs. Other-Regarding Criticism:*⁴² Ancient ethics is concerned with developing self in pursuit of achieving a good life; whereas, today we take "...non-derivative concern for others to be definitive of morality..."⁴³ The preoccupation of ancient ethics with what constitutes our own individual final good makes it an egoistic pursuit of self-interest. In contrast, concern for others defines modern morality. Thus the two are not the same endeavor.

Annas Defense: Aristotelian ethics demands development of virtues. These are not mere self-centered concerns. They all involve developing a disposition to do the right thing – as opposed to doing the most self-interested thing. Additionally, some of these virtues such as justice and courage are aimed exclusively at doing right *by others*. The fact that these virtues serve your own good does not undermine the concern for others. "The good of others does not matter to me because it is part of my own good; it matters to me because it is the good of others."⁴⁴ The Stoic view, in particular, displays the attribute of promoting impartiality toward self by treating self as only one among many worthy moral

⁴² Annas, 130-132.

⁴³ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 131.

agents. Consider Cicero's example of a shipwreck leaving two men and one plank adrift at sea (*de Officiis* bk. III, xxiii). "The Stoics think that a rational person will naturally be led to extend her rational concern to all other people (rational people at least) until she is impartial between her own interests and those of 'the remotest Mysian'..."⁴⁵ Therefore, a stranded Stoic sailor is required to consider his moral worth impartially in respect to the other sailor, and that consideration might well rule in favor of his letting go of the plank. Thus ancient ethics recognizes that morality requires impartial concern for others.

Frede's account of Stoic virtue places a somewhat different emphasis on the motivation behind reason overriding concern for self. In "On the Stoic Conception of the Good", he points back to the founder, Zeno: "After all, the basic Stoic formula for the end of human life since Zeno is 'to follow nature'."⁴⁶ This observation launches a discussion by Frede regarding what reason we have to do what nature means us to do. In Cicero's view the answer distills to the conclusion that appropriate action motivated by desire to accord with nature is what constitutes the good.⁴⁷ That appropriate action turns out to be consistency within reason – which, for the Stoics, is the mark of perfect rationality.⁴⁸

This conclusion leads Frede to explore an important distinction bearing critically on how we view the Stoic's admonishment to let reason override self concern. Is virtue seen as aiming

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁶ Michael Frede, "On the Stoic Conception of the Good", 81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

at perfectly rational behavior or is virtue seen as perfectly rational behavior aiming at perfect rationality? In other words, do we become virtuous as a result of trying to achieve rational behavior? Or, instead, do we become virtuous by adopting perfectly rational behavior for the purpose of rationality in the world. The answer colors our view of self regarding behavior and Cicero's shipwreck story. Frede comes down on the side of aiming at perfect rationality in the world.

“But the answer that seems more satisfactory is that this self-regarding concern entirely disappears, since it is no longer needed, and in some cases would be inappropriate. Being motivated to act optimally rationally, we, in doing so, will as a consequence still optimally preserve our rationality and take care of ourselves to the extent that this is what an optimal order of the world requires. ... Given this answer we can explain how the Stoics, against Carneades, can believe that human beings naturally would develop in such a way that it might come to them naturally to let go of the plank in a shipwreck, if they see that in this way they would contribute to an optimal order of the world.”⁴⁹

Frede's conclusion about Stoic virtue and the dissolution of self-regarding behavior is starkly contrasted with that of Annas. Annas sees Stoic virtue as moving the agent from self-regarding to other-regarding. In this way, Stoic virtue would appear to be an endeavor similar to modern morality. Frede's account sees Stoic virtue as moving the agent from self-regarding behavior to regard for the nature's optimal order in the world. Thus other-regarding behavior is sometimes instrumental – depending on the circumstances – to the more profound concern for nature's optimal order. Presumably, there may be circumstances

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

when neither self-regarding nor other-regarding behavior is seen by the perfectly rational agent as being in service of optimal order in the world. Since most of our modern moral theories aim at other-regarding concerns like utilitarian happiness or non-violation of rights, etc., Frede's account of Stoic virtue is not as harmonious with modern morality as is that of Annas. Thus – at least in regard to the Stoics – Frede's account undermines Annas' defense against the *Self vs. Other Regarding Criticism*.

Summary

Let me summarize my results thus far. Julia Annas sought to defend 'ancient ethics' as deserving the title 'ancient morality'. She did so by considering five criticisms often leveled against ancient ethics, namely the arguments from: 1) Distinct Kind, 2) Moral Responsibility, 3) Scope of Application, 4) Agents vs. Actions, and 5) Self vs. Other Regarding. I have reexamined Annas' defense of 1, 2 and 5. My reexamination compared her accounts of ancient ethics to those of Michael Frede in attempt to determine whether Frede's view undermines Annas. It does in some places.

In regard to the *Distinct Kinds Criticism*, Frede's account does not view the Stoics as stressing the *role* of virtue in reasoning, since virtue *is* perfect reasoning. To be sure, Annas is correct to assert the Stoics set aside virtue as special in that it is the only good. Yet, unlike modern moral reasoning, Stoic virtue is not a special kind of reasoning; it is the superlative form of all kinds of reasoning. Thus, as Frede notes, the Stoics are not dealing with a notion of moral good as much as a notion of intellectual virtue.

In regard to the *Moral Responsibility Criticism*, Annas' defense rests on an assertion that both Aristotle and the Stoics viewed virtue as reasoned states presupposing choice. While it

is true that Aristotelian responsibility derives from voluntariness, not everything voluntary presupposes choice. Frede asserts that, for Aristotle, choice applied only to reason's desire and not the desires of appetite or spirit. Thus, when, for example, the desire of appetite motivates an action despite reason's desire against that action, one is acting against one's own choice of reason. This undermines Annas' account of Aristotle. In regard to the Stoics, Frede's account only partially undermines Annas in that reasoned states presupposing freedom of choice were not part of Stoic ethics until Epictetus near the very end of Stoicism, and even then they were free only for the rare Stoic wise man.

Finally, with respect to the *Self vs. Other Regarding Criticism*, Annas appeals to Cicero's shipwreck story as exemplary of Stoic virtue exhorting us to move from self-regarding to other-regarding behavior – analogous to modern morality. In contrast, Frede's account sees Stoic virtue as moving the agent from self-regarding behavior to regard for nature's optimal order. Thus, other-regarding behavior is only sometimes instrumental to the more profound concern for nature's optimal order, and that optimal order could (presumably) overrule even other-regarding concerns under the right circumstance.

Conclusion

Given the above, I conclude that Frede's work on free will in ancient thought as well as his work on the Stoic conception of the good undermines Annas' defense against three of the five criticisms of ancient ethical theory regarding its status as moral theory. Nonetheless, I do *not* think we should judge that Annas is incorrect to defend ancient ethics as ancient morality. The debate is complex and spans millennia of thought. We can only look back from the perspective of our modern psychology and hope that our assumptions about the

mental environment portrayed by the ancients' texts are reasonable. Consider also that Annas takes the road of defending against criticisms aimed at prominent differences between ancient ethics and modern morality, instead of enumerating and explicating the many similarities. An alternate method might be to explore similarities between modern morality and ancient ethics to determine whether those similarities are sufficient to qualify ancient ethics as engaging in the same effort as modern morality. I will not attempt such a large and complex task here; however, I will close with only a couple of examples that suggest striking similarity between then and now in regard to some of the polemics surrounding right action.

Consider the Sisyphus fragment (DK 88B.25) from a play by Euripides produced in 415 BCE – i.e. during Socrates' lifetime.⁵⁰ The fragment portrays the play character Sisyphus delivering a monologue cynically recounting the origin of culture and morality. Sisyphus claims that man initially adopted law punishing wrongdoers in order to overcome beastly disorder in the pre-cultured world. The wicked responded by performing their wrong deeds in secret instead of in public. Then a clever man invented a false tale about omniscient, immortal gods who could detect and punish wrongdoings. This – according to Sisyphus – is how we became surrounded by fear of gods, and how humans also thwarted lawless behaviors.

My crude summary of the Sisyphus fragment distills a translation by Charles H. Kahn.⁵¹ In the accompanying paper, Kahn – in agreement with Albrecht Dihle – suggests that Euripides

⁵⁰ Charles H. Kahn, "Greek Religion and Philosophy in the in the Sisyphus Fragment", *Phronesis* XLII/3 (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1997), 247-262.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 247-248.

means to portray Sisyphus as an arch-trickster who, in the end, gets his due from the gods. In exploring the fragment, Kahn's goal is "... to situate this text within the larger framework of the interaction between religion and early Greek natural philosophy."⁵² He asserts that the Sisyphus fragment is an expression of moral cynicism spawned by atomism and natural philosophy, and he notes that philosophers like Plato and Aristotle are, at least in part, reacting to these historic developments with their ethical theories.

Arguments that portray theistic-inspired morality in a light similar to the ancient Sisyphus fragment endure in modern times. For example, Sigmund Freud referred to god and religion as a store of created ideas and claimed:

"It can clearly be seen that the possession of these ideas protects him [i.e. mankind in general] in two directions – against the dangers of nature and Fate, and against the injuries that threaten him from human society itself."⁵³ [Bracket content added to provide context.]

The Sisyphus fragment and Freud's musings point to a similarity between a goal of ancient ethics and one of modern morality. In a naturalistic, atomistic world trending toward atheism, moral agents are pressured toward cynicism regarding reasons for right action in the absence of coercion. Both ancient and modern scholars explore candidate reasons. Even today, legal scholars use Cicero's shipwreck story to explore the boundaries of our right to

⁵² Ibid., 248.

⁵³ Sigmund Freud, "The Future of an Illusion", excerpted in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, Second Edition, edited by Kelly James Clark, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2008), 273-276.

seek self preservation under dire circumstances.⁵⁴ We may argue as to how closely the methods offered by the ancients resemble the methods employed by modern moral scholars. Yet the endeavor seems the same.

Finally, though I have used Frede's account of ancient ethics to critique some of the arguments made by Annas, there is an important way in which Frede's ultimate conclusions support Annas' overall goal. Those conclusions stem from Frede's comparative accounts of ancient ethics and early Christian thought. His scholarly examination of works by early Christian philosophers like Origen and Augustine lead him to a conclusion that some Christians might find unsettling. Having exposed the influence of ancient Greek thought on Christian notions of free will, and while similarly explicating the contributions of that same 'pagan' thought to Christian claims about the metaphysical nature of God, Frede writes:

“I dwell on this point because it is becoming increasingly clear that there is very little to the so-called Judaeo-Christian way of thinking about things which is specifically Judaeo-Christian. What primarily springs to mind is the Pharisaean-Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Not surprisingly, given that Christianity is a historical phenomenon, *there are pagan parallels for almost everything else.*”⁵⁵ [Emphasis added]

Thus, if we assign Frede's scholastic prowess the credence it deserves and we also allow that Christianity is representative of at least one (albeit controversial) version of modern morality,

⁵⁴ Claire Oakes Finkelstein, “Two Men and a Plank” *Legal Theory* Vol. 7 (Cambridge University Press: 2001)

279-306. Finkelstein notes that the stoic Hecaton was first to use the shipwreck story and Cicero the second.

⁵⁵ Frede, *A Free Will*, 151. [emphasis added]

we are compelled to agree with Julia Annas in her assertion that ancient ethics and modern morality are the same endeavor – even though we find dissonance between her account of the ancients and that of Frede.

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