

Hellenistic Philosophy, ed. K. Bodouris

Author: Internationism Society for

Greek Philosophy and Culture,

MICHAEL FREDE

1993-4

THE STOIC CONCEPTION OF REASON

According to the Stoics, animals, unlike plants, have an irrational soul. This irrational soul consists of various parts. There are, e.g., parts which correspond to each of the different senses, sight, touch, hearing etc. The most important among these parts, though, is the so-called leading part, the hegemonikon. Indeed, sometimes the hegemonikon by itself is called the soul. In virtue of the hegemonikon animals have impressions (phantasiai), impressions of themselves and impressions of the things in the world around them. And in virtue of the hegemonikon they also have impulses, feelings of aversion or attraction. These impulses themselves, in the case of animals, are conceived of as but a specific kind of impressions. If, for instance, an animal not only receives the impression of a dangerous enemy, but also is impressed by it as dangerous, this impression constitutes an aversion, that is to say an impulse to run away from what it feels averse to.

Now human beings, according to the Stoics, are born with this kind of irrational soul, devoid of reason. In their case, too, when they are very young, their behaviour is a direct instinctive reaction to their impressions. When they receive the impression of something attractive or repulsive, and when they are impressed by it as attractive or repulsive, this sort of impression already by itself constitutes an impulse and makes them run after, or run away from, what they are attracted or repelled by.

In the case of human beings, it is only when reason emerges that this immediate link between the impression and the impulse on the one hand, and the corresponding behaviour, on the other, gets broken, that a human being stops merely reacting impulsively.

As human beings develop and reason emerges, they come to have a critical

THE STOIC CONCEPTION OF REASON

distance from their impressions. They come to realise that impressions might be false, that what appears to be a wild animal, about to devour them, in fact is a friendly beast, that what appears to be attractive upon reflection, on balance, rather seems indifferent or even detrimental. And once human beings have gained this critical distance, a mere impression no longer suffices to constitute an impulse and thus to trigger the corresponding behaviour. Once human beings have become rationally critical, impressions only are operative, that is to say cause an action, if reason has accepted them, has given its assent to them. Thus the emergence of reason crucially involves the emergence of a new ability, the ability to give, or to withhold assent.

Now, when the Stoics say that reason only emerges in the course of the natural development of a human being, one might think that what they have in mind is this: when we are born, we have an irrational soul with its hegemonikon in virtue of which we have impressions of things and in virtue of which we have impulses or desires; but, as we grow up, we acquire, in addition to the hegemonikon of this irrational soul, a further part of the soul, namely reason, in virtue of which we can judge our impressions and, accordingly, give, or refuse to give, assent to them. But this is not the Stoic view. The Stoic view is not that we acquire reason in addition to something we already have at birth, but rather that something we already have at birth, namely the hegemonikon of the irrational soul, is transformed into something else, namely reason. Relying on the narrower sense of "soul" referred to above, this can also be expressed by saying that the irrational soul of the infant as a whole turns into reason and that thus the soul of a mature human being does not have an irrational and a rational part. There is no more to the soul of a mature human being than reason, reason is all it consists in.

Thus, to understand reason as the Stoics conceive of it, we not only have to understand it as only emerging over time, we also have to understand it as emerging as a result of the transformation of the hegemonikon, or of the irrational soul, into reason. Now to understand this transformation it is helpful to see what it is that is supposed to emerge as reason develops. Iamblichus (ap. Stob. Ecl. I, p. 317, 22. = SVF I, 149) tells us "The Stoics claim that we are not immediately born with reason, but that reason is gathered together (synathroizesthai) from perceptions and impressions at about the age of 14". What Iamblichus has in mind is shown by two further testimonies. According to Ps. Plutarch's Placita (IV, 11, 4 = SVF I, 149), the Stoics say that "reason in the sense in which we are said to be rational is constituted by natural notions (prolepsis) within the first seven years". And Galen (De Hipp. et Plat. dogm. V, 3, 1 = SVF II, 841) quotes Chrysippus himself as saying in his treatise "On Reason" that "reason is a collection (athroisma) of concepts and natural notions". Thus the Stoic view seems to be that to have reason, to be rational, consists in having an appropriate set of concepts and more specifically of certain natural notions. Correspondingly they seem to assume that the emergence of reason consists in our

39E
53V
②

acquisition of concepts and in particular of natural notions. And these concepts and natural notions are thought to arise in us from our perception and impressions. It is in this sense that Iamblichus, in the passage referred to above, can attribute to the Stoics the view that we are not born with reason, but that reason develops from, or out of, our perceptions and impressions.

There are various details which need clarification before we can proceed. To begin with, something needs to be said about what the Stoics mean by "prolepsis" or "natural notions". I take it that the Stoics assume, as Aristotle and Epicurus did before them, that there is a whole set of concepts which we naturally come to have in the course of a normal development in normal surroundings. Our soul is constructed in such a way that we naturally come to have the notions of, e.g., the different colours, the notions of a tree, of an animal, of a human being, of rain, of health, etc. We do not deliberately set out to acquire these concepts, we just naturally come to have them. And the Stoics even think that in the course of our natural development we come to have the notion of the good (D.L. VII, 52 = SVF II, 87; Cic. De Fin. III, 72) and, it seems, the notion of god. On the Stoic view these notions or concepts have a special status. Because they arise naturally, without our doing anything to arrive at them such that we could make a mistake in the way we arrive at them, moreover, because we are meant by nature to have these concepts to be able to adequately orient ourselves in this world, and thus by nature are constructed in such a way as to acquire these concepts, we know that these natural notions are correct concepts. In the sense that they adequately reflect what we conceive of by their means. At times the Stoics even say that natural notions constitute a criterion of truth (cf. Chrysippus, De ratione I, op. D.L. VII, 64 = SVF II, 105).

But, of course, not all notions we normally form, are natural notions, notions all human beings naturally form. Given our culture and its traditions, we have the notion of a unicorn or the notion of a car, but these, clearly, are not notions all human beings naturally have. And there also are notions, like the notion of a real number or of a first indemonstrable syllogism, which we only have in virtue of some special expertise in some particular field of knowledge. Again, these are notions which one does not have naturally. They rather are notions of art and in this sense artificial. Many of these artificial or technical notions are articulations of natural notions. Thus we all have a natural notion of a human being. This is an adequate notion as far as it goes and suffices for ordinary life. But the biologist and, more generally, the philosopher, has a technical notion of a human being which can be regarded as the artful articulation of the natural notion we all have. In this sense, then, human reason primarily consists in a sufficiently rich set of natural notions, but also of other concepts, some of them technical.

Second, there is the question of how these notions and concepts arise or are formed. This is a complex matter, and I will restrict myself to a few remarks. The passage in the *Placita* referred to above, according to which reason is consti-

tuted by notions, is preceded by a text in which we are told how concepts, including natural notions, are formed (cf. also Galen *Hist. phil.* 92). The Stoics, we are told, assume that at birth the hegemonikon is like a *tabula rasa*. Notice that it is not claimed that the mind or reason is like a *tabula rasa*; it is the irrational hegemonikon which is compared to a *tabula rasa*. On this *tabula rasa* perception produces a mark, an imprint, an inscription or impression, e.g. of something white. Memory allows us to retain this impression, and if we have many memories of the same kind, that is to say of something white, they constitute experience (*empeiria*) of something white. At this point in the account the text goes on to say that some notions arise naturally. Thus the text fails to instruct us on a crucial question, namely the precise relation between the experience of, or with, something and the concept of something. Does having the experience of something white already in itself constitute having the concept "white", or does having the concept involve something more than the mere experience? Presumably the Stoic view is the latter, namely that a sufficiently rich experience does not already in itself constitute, but naturally makes us go on to form the concept.

However this may be, it is striking how similar this account is to Aristotle's in the *Posterior Analytics*, B19, in its explanation of how our concepts arise out of perception via memory and experience. It is also strikingly similar to Aristotle's account in that this process of forming concepts beginning from perception is supposed to constitute the emergence of reason. (We should remember that Aristotle explicitly says, 100a 2-3: "hence some animals [i.e. human beings] come to have reason in virtue of the retention of what they have perceived, whereas the others do not".)

But the Stoic account also seems to be strikingly similar to Aristotle's in its anti-Platonic tendency. When Aristotle in *An. Post.* B19 argues that reason only emerges as we come to form concepts and thus come to have knowledge of first principles on the basis of perception, he clearly means to reject the Platonic view, expressed, e.g., in the theory of recollection, that we are born with a mind which already disposes of knowledge of the forms, though we are not aware of this knowledge (cf. 99b 25-26). And this also seems to be the Stoic's intention when they claim that at birth the hegemonikon is a *tabula rasa* and that our natural concepts, and with them reason, only emerge later on the basis of experience. This certainly is how Iamblichus understood it. For having said, as we mentioned earlier, that according to the Stoics reason is not inborn, but only arises from perceptions and impressions, he immediately goes on to say (ap. Stob. *Ecl.*, p. 318, 1-4): "The followers of Plato and Pythagoras, on the other hand, claim that even the newly born have reason, but that this reason is obscured by the circumstances and not engaged in its proper activity, but idle."

What the parallel to Aristotle and the contrast with Plato, at least given the way this contrast seems to have been seen in antiquity, make clear, is that the Stoic characterization of reason as being constituted by a set of natural notions is not meant to reveal some more or less extrinsic truth about reason, but the

very nature of reason; to be rational is to have these natural notions. And what the parallels with Plato and Aristotle also make clear is the point of this conception of reason. Just as for Plato to be rational in itself already is to have at least latent knowledge of the forms, and just as for Aristotle the acquisition of the concepts whose possession constitutes rationality amounts to coming to know the first principles of things, so for the Stoics the acquisition of the natural notions amounts to the acquisition of the fundamental or basic knowledge about the world embodied in these notions.

Thus reason, in the first instance, is not conceived of as an ability to reason, to argue, to make inference from what we perceive; it rather, in the first instance, is conceived of as being a matter of having a certain basic knowledge about the world, which then can serve as the starting-point for inferences. Thus, if we have a natural notion of human beings, we know that if something is a human being it is mortal. And this puts us into a position to infer when we come across something which is immortal, that it is not a human being. Thus, to be rational is not solely, and not even primarily, a matter of being able to reason, to make inferences; it, to begin with, is a matter of having the appropriate knowledge about the world. Correspondingly, the perfection of reason does not consist primarily in one's becoming better and better in one's ability to reason correctly, to be perfectly rational rather is to be wise (cf. Cic. De leg. I, 7, 22 = SVF III, 339), and this involves, first of all, an articulate understanding of, or knowledge about, the world.

Part of the motivation for such a conception of reason clearly is the conviction that we can only come to know something if, in some sense, we already know what we are coming to know. Thus Plato in the *Meno* (80 e ff.) recurs to the doctrine of recollection in response to Meno's puzzle how we can ever find out what we do not know, if we do not already know what it is that we want to find. Aristotle, it seems, with this puzzle in mind, insists that the acquisition of knowledge presupposes some antecedent knowledge (An. post. 71a, 25-30), and introduces his account of how we, starting from perception, by forming the appropriate concepts, come to have knowledge of the first principles, which knowledge then allows us to acquire further knowledge (An. post. B, 19). And Plutarch (ap. Olympiodorus in Plat. Phaed. p. 156, 1-8 Norvin = SVF II, 104) explicitly tells us that the Stoics recurred to the doctrine of natural notions to deal with this problem of the *Meno*. But the point I am primarily concerned with here is that reason by itself is conceived of as involving certain substantive assumptions about the world. That the Stoics conceive of reason in this way seems to me to be incontrovertibly clear. What, perhaps, is less clear is how they conceive of the relation between having the appropriate concepts and this knowledge about the world: the concepts embody, on the one hand, and the ability to reason and to make inferences, on the other. What seems fairly clear is that the fully developed ability to reason is thought to presuppose the acquisition of the natural notions and the knowledge they embody. And this for two reasons or in two ways. First, reasoning is constituted by thoughts, and thought, properly speaking, involves

the use of these concepts. Second, the natural notions and thus the knowledge they embody, are thought not to be arrived at by reasoning or by inference, but by some natural process. To assume that they are arrived at by inference, would, given the view that all acquisition of knowledge presupposes that we already know something, involve us in a regress. This point should not be obscured by the fact that the acquisition of at least some of the natural notions, like the notion of the good or the notion of god does presumably involve a certain amount of reflection (cf. Cic. De fin. III = SVF III, 72). The crucial point is that, though this reflection puts the notion of the good into our mind, the notion does not have its epistemic status, because we have correctly inferred from what we already know that there must be something in or about the world which corresponds to this notion. It rather is the case that we by nature are constructed in such a way that at some point when we reflect on our natural behaviour, we naturally come to think of our behaviour, and to understand it, as being directed towards the good conceived of in a certain way. In this sense the natural notions and the knowledge they embody do not presuppose reasoning or inference, but rather are presupposed by it.

The question, though, now is precisely how reason thus conceived of gives rise to reasoning and inference. Galen in various places attributes to reason as a basic feature the ability to recognise consequence (akolouthia) and incompatibility (mache). These notions play a prominent role in Stoic thought. And it is tempting to think that the idea that it is characteristic of reason to recognise consequence and incompatibility is of Stoic origin. If we make this assumption, the following account suggests itself. To have the notion, say, of a human being is to see that a relation of consequence or implication obtains between being a human being and being mortal; it also is to see that a relation of incompatibility obtains between being a human being and being devoid of reason. Thus the ability to recognise consequence and incompatibility is part of what it is to have natural concepts or, for that matter, any kind of concepts. But having concepts, and thus being able to recognise consequence and incompatibility, we also are in a position to reason and to make inferences. This fits the fact that four of the five basic forms of inference Stoic logic assumes are based on the relations of consequence and incompatibility, namely those based on propositions of the form "if p, then q" and "p or q", and that the Stoics define the truth-conditions for these conditionals and disjunctions in terms of consequence or implication and of incompatibility. In this way the basic knowledge we have in virtue of having the natural notions provides us with the major premises from which to derive knowledge by deduction. And having a grasp on consequence also allows us to see what follows from these premises.

If we accept an account along these lines, we can also answer the question whether the Stoics, as, e.g., Julia Annas (Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind, Berkeley 1992, p. 86f) suggests, were empiricists or, as the ancients seem to have assumed, rationalists. It is quite true that the Stoics assume that it is ultimately perception which gives rise to the natural notions and the knowledge embodied

U.S. I, 68

in them (cf. e.g., S.E., A.M. VIII, 56 = SVF II, 88). But this knowledge is not arrived at by inference from what we have perceived. Nor does it owe its epistemic status to the fact that it stands in the appropriate epistemic relation of justification or confirmation to the data of observation. It, according to the Stoics, rather owes its epistemic status to the fact that nature has constructed human beings in such a way as to arrive at these notions and the assumptions they involve. So, in this sense, the basic knowledge embodied in the natural notions is not empirical, but a priori. And correspondingly the knowledge we arrive at by reasoning from what we know by nature is a priori. So in this sense the Stoic position clearly is rationalist.

In this way, then, we can perhaps make sense of the Stoic claim that we are not born with reason, but only acquire it by acquiring the appropriate set of natural notions and other concepts. But we also have seen that according to the Stoics we do not acquire reason as something in addition to what we already have at birth. Rather, the emergence of reason is supposed to consist in the transformation of the hegemonikon with which we are born into reason. And this is what we have to understand next.

Now, as we said in the beginning, the hegemonikon with which we are born is the kind of hegemonikon which guides irrational animals. It primarily allows them to have impressions of things, and to thus perceive things in the way animals perceive them, and, moreover, to have impulses towards things. Correspondingly, the transformation of the hegemonikon into reason involves a radical transformation of the impressions into rational impressions (D.L. VII, 51 = SVF II, 187) and a transformation of the impulses into rational impulses (cf. Stob. Ecl. II, 86, 17ff. = SVF III, 169).

And since rational impressions in themselves, unlike the irrational impressions in animals or in children, do not suffice to produce an impulse and thus a piece of behaviour, there now emerges a third ability which is characteristic of reason, namely the ability to give, or to refuse to give, assent to impressions. For action in human beings does not just require the appropriate kind of impression, but also acceptance of, or assent to, the impression. In human beings, the Stoics think, only assent to the appropriate kind of impression produces an impulse and thus leads to action.

But let us first consider the transformation of impressions into rational impressions. The Stoics assume that all impressions of rational beings are rational impressions (D.L. VII, 51 = SVF II, 61). A rational impression is characterized as one in virtue of which one is able to say what it is that one has an impression of, say of a man, walking down the street (S.E. A.M. VIII, 70 = SVF II, 187). That is to say, one has the kind of impression one could put into words by saying 'I have the impression that a man is walking down the street.' This characterization makes it clear that the Stoic view is not that as nature-human beings we continue to have the same impressions we had as children, except that we now have learnt to articulate and express what we experience, to say what

kind of impression we have. The impression itself has changed. From being the inarticulate representation of some object it has turned into a representation with an internal articulation which allows it to present to us something as being true or false of something. The same holds for a specific kind of impressions, namely perceptual impressions, impressions which come about by means of the senses. When a child or an animal sees something, on this view, it has an inarticulate impression of the object. If a rational being sees something, it has an impression which presents something as being the case, e.g. it presents an object as being red.

The Stoics define human perception as assent to a perceptual impression. Thus even perception in mature human beings is radically different from perception in animals or in infants, not just in that it involves assent, but also in the kind of impression we have when we perceive something. Indeed, on the Stoic view, perception becomes a certain kind of thought, distinguished from other thoughts by its causal history.

The question is how this transformation comes about and what it has to do with the acquisition of reason by acquiring the appropriate concepts. Now, we do know that the Stoics assume that all rational impressions are thoughts (D.L. VII, 51 = SVF II, 61). Thus even the impressions we receive when we perceive something are thoughts. This suggests an account along the following lines. As our hegemonikon comes to have concepts, it begins to represent things in terms of these concepts, that is to say it begins to represent things by thoughts with a propositional structure, rather than, say, by images or pictures. We no longer, e.g., just see a man or a tiger, but something as a man or a tiger. I am afraid that this account is much too sketchy to be of real help, but it does at least give us some reassurance that the idea that reason is constituted by natural notions and concepts is central to the Stoic conception of reason, and can help to explain the transformation of irrational impressions into rational impressions with a propositional structure. Having concepts we begin to represent things, and even to see them, in terms of these concepts.

When we, next, consider the transformation of animal impulses into rational impulses, we turn to an aspect of Stoic philosophy which has long been misunderstood. Plato, Aristotle, and many later philosophers have assumed that reason has its own needs and desires, that reason in itself can motivate us to act so as to satisfy reason's demands and desires. But Plato and Aristotle also assumed that most of our impulses or desires have their origin in an irrational part of the soul. It should be clear already, just on the basis of what has been said, that this cannot be the Stoic view. Since impulses originate in the hegemonikon with which we are born, and since reason is the result of the transformation of this hegemonikon, the Stoics also have to assume that all human impulses and desires have their origin in reason. That is to say, the Stoics must deny that there are any human impulses, desires, emotions, which have their origin outside reason. According to the Stoics only reason can motivate us.

But let us begin with the question how the irrational impulses of the hege-

monikon are transformed into the rational impulses of reason. Here we have to take note of the Stoic assumption that a rational impulse had to be analysed into a certain kind of impression, namely a so-called impulsive impression and the assent to it, (Stob. Ecl. II, 86, 18 = SVF, III, 169; Stob. Ecl. II, 88, 1-6 = SVF III, 171). In the animal or the child all that is needed for action, it would seem, is an impulsive impression. The animal receives the impression of something it finds appetising and this by itself constitutes an impulse to go after it. It is already clear from just this that the transformation involves at least the following two elements: (i) The impulsive impression of the animal or the child had, to be transformed into a rational representation, and (ii) this impulsive rational representation requires the assent of the agent to constitute, and to be operative as, an impulse.

There are considerable difficulties in deciding what these impulsive rational representations actually look like, more specifically, which precise form their propositional content takes. I will not try here to deal with these difficulties. I am more concerned with the fact that all impulses are considered as impulses of reason, that reason is conceived of in such a way that it not only has impulses, but is the source of all of our impulses. One clear sense in which all our impulses have their source in reason is that a human impulse requires for its constitution the assent of reason. Furthermore it requires the assent to an impulsive rational representation, and this representation or impression is an impression which reason has and which, in one important sense, reason itself produces. Not surprisingly, the Stoics often talk as if it were objects which leave a certain impression on us. But this way of talking should not obscure the fact that the kind of impression objects leave on us, also is a function of the hegemonikon. It is precisely because our hegemonikon is a reason that the impressions we have, unlike the impressions animals have, are rational impressions. And what kind of rational impression we have will depend on how we think about things, on how we value things. So it will also depend fairly straightforwardly on the particular, individual reason which forms an impression, and not just on the external object, what kind of impression it forms.

This should also be clear from the fact that not all impressions or thoughts we have are directly produced by external objects; some are induced, e.g. by other impressions. Thus the impression of a statue of Socrates may induce in us an impression of Socrates.

That the impression is not simply a function of the character of an external object which impresses us in this way, furthermore, should be clear from the following consideration which may shed some light on the old question how "phantasia" comes to have the meaning of imagination. In Aristotle perception gives rise to impressions or phantasai which, when retained by memory, come to form experience, which in turn gives rise to concepts. But one may wonder how the large variety of concepts we have is supposed to derive from perception, given that nothing in perception directly corresponds to a large number of ordinary concepts, like say "chimaera", "value", "equation", "void". Now the Sto-

ics have an elaborate account of how by various operations we, on the basis of our notions of things we are familiar with from perception, can form other notions, e.g. by diminution the notion of a pygmy, by enlargement the notion of a giant, etc (cf. D.L. VII, 53 = SVF, II, 87). Now I take it that the Stoic view is not that we form such notions necessarily deliberately, that we set out to form them. After all, even our natural notions are arrived at by one or more of these operations. So the Stoics seem to assume that the ability to form impressions, without our conscious effort, by itself, relying on these various operations of diminution, enlargement, etc. produces impressions of things we never have perceived and often could not possibly ever perceive, because they do not exist or are not perceptible. And this power to, as it were spontaneously, produce an infinite variety of new impressions in addition to the ones we get in perception, does seem to me to come fairly close to what we call imagination. However this may be, this ability to produce impressions clearly also is a function of reason.

Hence, to return to the impulse, the impulse being assent to an impulsive impression, will also be a matter of reason in the sense that the impulsive impression is formed by reason and that its character will depend very much on the particular character of the particular mind which forms it. Indeed, given that an impulse is an assent to an impulsive rational impression, an impulse, on the Stoic view, just turns out to be a certain kind of belief. For the Stoics do define belief quite generally as assent to a rational impression.

Now, that the Stoics actually do believe that all impulses, all emotions, are just beliefs of a certain kind is well-attested. The problem is just to understand how the Stoics can believe this. And the difficulty here first of all is that the view that emotions are beliefs does seem not to take into account the apparently irrational emotional character of emotions which, we think, must have its origin outside reason. If we tend to think so, this in part seems due to our tendency to draw a contrast between reason and desire and to deny, almost on conceptual grounds, that reason can have any desires. But this seems to me to be questionable. For it does seem to me, if one is willing to attribute desires to the soul or a part of the soul in the first place, that it is entirely plausible to attribute the desire for clarity, understanding, consistency, simplicity and the like to reason. Secondly, the Stoics do try to capture the emotional character of emotions in the following way. Suppose that I am told that I am going to die next year. Also suppose that I think of death and in particular of my own death as something bad. In this case, the mere thought, the mere impression, whether I actually believe it to be true or not, will have something disquieting, disturbing about it. This feature is a feature of the impression which distinguishes this sort of impression from the impression, say, that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that Berlin has less than four million inhabitants. In fact it is this distinctive feature which characterizes this sort of impression as an impulsive impression. But just having this sort of impression does not yet mean that I am afraid that I am going to die next year. Upon reflection I may after all decide not to give assent to the impression, since I have come to the conclusion that the doctor who told me so just meant to scare

me. And if I do not believe that I am going to die next year, that is to say, if I do not give my assent to the impression, or thought, that I am going to die next year I cannot be said to be afraid that I am going to die next year. But if, conversely, I do give assent to the thought and believe that I am going to die, then I am going to be afraid. And this is exactly what my fear that I am going to die next year consists in: in my assent to the disquieting or disturbing thought that I am going to die next year which turns into real fear once I come to believe that this is going to happen. And what is true of this case of fear is true of fear in general. Indeed of all emotion.

So the emotional character of the emotion has its source in the distinctive feature of impulsive impressions of being disturbing or being tempting, as opposed to other impressions, as the case may be. But this is a genuine integral feature of rational impressions, that is to say of impressions produced by reason. And this feature, in turn, has its source in certain beliefs of reason. If I did not believe that death was a bad thing, or money a good thing, the mere thought that I was going to die next year would not be disturbing, and the mere thought that I might have a lot of money if I just robbed a bank would not be tempting. So in this way emotions are not just thought to involve, and in fact depend on, beliefs, but to themselves be beliefs of a certain kind. And so the emergence of reason in part consists in the transformation of irrational impulses into beliefs of a certain kind. That these, being beliefs of reason, are rational in one sense, does not preclude their being unreasonable or irrational in another sense, namely in the sense in which it is utterly unreasonable and unwarranted to have certain beliefs. It was in this sense that the Stoics thought that all passions are irrational and that the wise man is apathes.

In the case of this transformation of irrational impulses into rational desires we should ask ourselves, as we did in the case of the transformation of irrational impressions into rational representations, in which way this change is connected with the acquisition of natural notions and concepts. This is a complex matter, but one important connection is easy to see immediately. Children naturally are inclined to behave in such a way as to go for what maintains their life and to avoid what is detrimental to it. As we grow up we learn that it is reasonable and fitting to behave in this way. But we also acquire the notion of the good. And we almost invariably make the mistake to rationalise our natural inclinations in such a way as to assume that health and life are goods and illness and death evils, when in fact they are entirely indifferent, though it is reasonable to go for them as to avoid them. But thinking of them as goods and evils, respectively, we have feelings, indeed passionate feelings, about them, and about what we see as conducive or detrimental to them, feelings which in their strength are entirely inappropriate and unreasonable. And so quite generally our passions presuppose the emergence and the misapplication of the notions of "good" and "bad". We are no longer merely naturally inclined to go after food when we are hungry, we now become anxious to eat, or crave for food, because we mistakenly think that it is a good thing to nourish oneself and a terrible thing to starve. What we, in

fact, should think is that it is, other things beings equal, a natural and reasonable thing, not a good thing, to eat when hungry.

In this way, then, the impressions and the impulses of the hegemonikon get transformed into rational impressions and into rational impulses, as the hegemonikon gets transformed into reason. But, as it gets transformed into reason, there also, as we said earlier, emerges a further ability constitutive of reason, the ability to give, or to refuse, assent. Indeed, given the crucial role assent plays in the constitution both of beliefs in general and of rational impulses or desires, this ability seems to be what is most distinctive of, and important about, reason.

In a way the role of this crucial function and the reason for its emergence are fairly clear. Human beings by nature are meant to be rational beings. They are meant not to react instinctively to their situation, but to act for reasons. Thus, if they are to turn into rational beings, a gap has to develop between impulsive impressions and impulses; impulsive impressions have to lose their decisive force over them. But this means that once the gap has arisen, it again has to be bridged by something else to allow human beings to act, to respond to this situation. And what is supposed to close the gap is the ability to give assent. For now assent to an impulsive impression, rather than the impulsive impression by itself, constitutes an impulse and results in action. But the question is how reason comes to have this ability to give assent and, in particular, how the emergence of this ability is related to the acquisition of natural notions and concepts.

Now, one crucial factor here certainly is that impressions, as they become rational impressions, also become true or false, depending on their propositional content. And thus impressions become subject to criticism and evaluation as true or false, reasonable or unreasonable. They also become subject to criticism in another way. If I am afraid that I am going to die next year, my impression may not be subject to criticism as far as the truth of its propositional content is concerned, but it may be open to criticism as to the way I think this proposition. I think of it anxiously, because I think of my death as something bad. Now having natural notions and the knowledge they embody, and having the knowledge which can be derived from this knowledge, reason is in a position to subject our impressions to criticism. An impression we have may not square with this knowledge. Seen from a distance in certain circumstances a man with a stick might very much look like a man with three legs. But given our natural notion of a human being we know better and will not accept and rely on our first impression that there is a man with three legs. And having made this experience, that our first impressions may be mistaken, once, twice, any number of times we will acquire a critical distance to our impressions, but also additional motivation to acquire the critical knowledge we need to judge our impression. And thus, e.g., having acquired the natural notion of the good, we are in a position to reject the disturbing thought that we are going to die next year, though we may accept its propositional content as true. For our natural notion of the good, and correspondingly that of evil, is such that we should not think of our death as an evil.

Now, the knowledge which constitutes reason, especially incipient reason,

but even perfect reason, is not sufficient to conclusively judge any impression we might have. So, to avoid error, we have to restrict ourselves to giving assent to those impressions which we, given our limited knowledge, are able to judge. This limitation does not significantly interfere with our life. There are many impressions whose truth or falsehood is of no relevance to our life, but having the natural notions guarantees that in general, we have sufficient knowledge to judge enough of those impressions whose truth or falsehood is relevant to our life, to be able to lead a reasonable life. And as reason grows, our ability to judge impressions grows.

What happens, though, is that human beings irresponsibly give assent to impressions when, given their knowledge, assent is not justified. In fact, all mistakes human beings make, including all their moral failures, in the end consist in nothing else but the unwarranted, because irrational, assent to an impression. In this sense there is just one sin, unwarranted assent, and this is the same sin whether we carelessly give assent to an impression, so as to believe that in Classical Greek one does not have a perfect future tense, or whether we give assent to a temptation or tempting thought so as to be impelled, or carried away, e.g. to murder somebody.

13
But what brings it about that we give unwarranted assent? The answer is: weakness of the mind or reason. When we nowadays think about giving assent to temptation, of giving in to temptation, we talk of weakness of the will. For the Stoics there is no distinction. Weakness of the will is weakness of reason and produces failures of reason, the failure to oppose, to refuse to give assent to, an impression which, for one reason or another, we find difficult to resist, e.g. because it seems so eminently plausible, or because we are subject to an optical illusion we are not familiar with, or because we are deluded or confused in some other way. But such failure is not merely an intellectual failure in our sense; it is in the end not a matter of lack of intelligence or lack of knowledge, but of real weakness, of failure to give assent only in those cases in which one responsibly can.

Hence the weakness of reason in question always also involves what we might call weakness of will. In fact, it has long been suggested that the Stoic doctrine of assent is one of the origins of the traditional doctrine of the will. But how this might be so, we will have to leave to another inquiry.

What matters here is that the Stoics have a conception of reason according to which it is reason, and reason alone, which motivates us, which makes us want or desire things. What it makes us want or desire, if it functions rationally, is a matter of the knowledge which we naturally have. It is part of the very conception of reason that to be rational is to have a certain basic knowledge about the world, namely, minimally, the knowledge embodied in the natural notions. And since our desires are determined by our beliefs, it also is part of the very conception of reason that to be rational is to have certain basic desires.

Thus the Stoic notion of reason, substantially differs from the instrumental, formal notion of reason and rationality we often find in modern times, in partic-

ular in the empiricist tradition. I think there is much to be said in favour of the Stoic conception, but my purpose here was to first of all reconstruct the Stoic conception, a task made difficult by the ease with which we tend to project our own notions of reason and rationality onto the Ancients.

MICHAEL FREDE
PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD