The Idle Argument in Cicero’s De Fato

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Abstract

Throughout the course of this paper I examine Cicero’s analysis of the Idle Argument for fatalism and the two possible refutations of the argument that he mentions in his work entitled De Fato. Between the two refutations, one of which was originally given by the Stoic Chrysippus and the other by the Academic Skeptic Carneades, Cicero clearly expresses preference for the one given by Carneades. Cicero claims to prefer Carneades’s refutation for two reasons: because it is simpler than Chrysippus’s refutation and because it allows for praise and blame to be justly applied while Chrysippus’s refutation does not. I argue that this was a mistake, due to the fact that both refutations are equally complicated and they both allow for praise and blame to be justly applied. Upon showing that both of Cicero’s reasons for preferring Carneades’s refutation were false, I conclude that Cicero had no good reason for preferring one refutation over the other and that he therefore made a mistake when he claimed that Carneades’s refutation was better than the one given by Chrysippus.

Are we as human beings in control of our own lives, and if so to what extent? This is one of the most frequently asked questions in the history of Western philosophy, and many philosophers have tried to answer it from their own unique philosophical perspective. One of the most interesting treatments of this issue was written by the philosopher and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero back in the first century BC. His treatise entitled De Fato, or On Fate, was one of the first works from antiquity to explicitly deal with the Idle Argument for fatalism while trying to answer this question. In this paper I will provide a brief summary of the discussion of the Idle Argument made in De Fato, and argue that Chrysippus’s position, as expressed by Cicero, can easily overcome Cicero’s objection to it and

1. Susanne Bobzien, Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 180. The other works from antiquity that discus the Idle Argument are Origen’s Against Celsus and Plotinus’s Fate.
that Cicero was therefore wrong when he sided with Carneades over Chrysippus. I will start off by explaining who Cicero was and what school of thought he belonged to.

Even though Cicero was an influential philosopher, he is probably best remembered for being one of the greatest orators and statesmen in the Roman Republic. Living from the year 106 to 43 BC, Cicero was a lawyer by trade and, even though he was not born into a wealthy or powerful family, he became a member of the Roman Senate and held various offices in the Republic, including that of consul. Before he was eventually murdered on the orders of Mark Antony, Cicero was several times forbidden from participating in politics giving him free time to do such things as write philosophy.  

As a philosopher Cicero considered himself a member of the New Academy, a Skeptical school operating out of the very same Academy once founded by Plato. According to an article by Margaret Y. Henry, as a member of the New Academy “his normal attitude was that of moderate skepticism toward all problems of purely theoretical interest;” however, he was dogmatic in support of his ethical beliefs.  

This strong belief in his moral principles led him to reject any doctrine he believed would make morality impossible, including doctrines which deny free will. As I will show later, this commitment to free will greatly influences how he evaluates Chrysippus’s response to the Idle Argument.

Cicero states the Idle Argument in sections 28-29 of De Fato as follows: “If it is fated for you to recover from this illness, you will recover whether you call in a doctor or do not; similarly, if it is fated for you not to recover from this illness, you will not recover whether you call in a doctor or do not; and either your recovery or your non-recovery is fated; therefore there is no point in calling in a doctor.” If the conclusion of this argument were to be accepted and universally applied to all possible actions we could take, as it seems we could easily do if it was
true, one would be forced into a paralyzing form of fatalism. In order to avoid this, Cicero provides refutations of the argument written by both Chrysippus and Carneades and evaluates them to see which one is best.

Chrysippus argues against the Idle Argument by first making the distinction between what he calls simple and complex facts. For Chrysippus a simple fact is a fact, which if true, will be the case no matter what a person does. Chrysippus explained it by using the example; “Socrates will die at a given date.” As a simple fact “whether he does some action or does not do it, the day of his death has been determined.” On the other hand a complex fact will be the case only if other facts are also true. An example of a complex fact is “I will play in a tennis match tomorrow.” This is a complex fact because my ability to play tennis tomorrow is contingent on other facts, such as me having someone to play tennis with tomorrow.

Armed with this distinction, Chrysippus says the Idle Argument fails because it treats the claim “you will recover from your illness” as a simple fact even though it is a complex fact contingent on if the claim “you call in a doctor” is true. For this reason, Chrysippus says if “you will recover from your illness” is fated then “calling in a doctor is just as much fated as recovering” along with all the other facts that must be true for you to recover from your illness. In refuting the Idle Argument, Chrysippus then committed himself to an even stronger conception of fate than the Idle Argument required.

I would like to point out that I do not think simple facts, as Chrysippus describes them, actually exist, however, I believe his argument can still work without them. I do not think simple facts exist because it seems that all claims about the world are contingent on other facts, which would make them complex facts, not simple facts. This can be demonstrated by taking the example of a simple fact given by Chrysippus, which was “Socrates will die at a given date.” If we really think about this statement there are clearly lots of other facts that must be true in order for this to come about. Some obvious examples would be, “Socrates’ was not decapitated a week before the day of his death” and “Socrates will not go to the market the morning after the day of his death.” Realizing what Chrysippus thought was a simple fact is in reality a complex fact, it becomes clear

6. Ibid., section 30.
7. Ibid.
8. I am only dealing with “claims about the world” because this kind of claim is what Chrysippus is concerned with in his argument and because I fear a discussion of how analytic statements relate to this issue would take this paper dangerously off topic.
that no matter what the claim about the world is it will be contingent on other facts about the world.

Thankfully, for the sake of Chrysippus’s argument, having to throw away the concept of simple facts is not a problem. This is because the point of his argument was that the Idle Argument made a mistake by treating “recovering from an illness” as a simple fact when in reality it was complex. Therefore, if we think of all claims about the world as complex facts then all claims about the world would be co-fated with some other claims just as much as “seeing a doctor” and “recovering from an illness” are to each other. This seems to make Chrysippus’s argument even stronger because if every statement about the world is co-fated with some other facts, then there is no fact about the world that could come about no matter what other facts are true, like the Idle Argument tried to say is the case with “recovering from an illness”. Cicero, however, did not want to admit this, due to his strong belief in human free will. In response to Chrysippus, Cicero then mentions Carneades’s response to the Idle Argument, which he is more sympathetic towards.

According to Carneades, the problem with the Idle Argument is not that it does not have enough things fated, but that it claims things which involve humans are fated. Cicero presents Carneades’s argument against everything being fated as follows:

If everything takes place with antecedent causes, all events take place in a closely knit web of natural interconnexion; if this is so, all things are caused by necessity; if this is true, nothing is in our power. But something is in our power. Yet if all events take place by fate, there are antecedent causes of all events. Therefore it is not the case that whatever events take place take place by fate.⁹

If fate does not control everything and instead only controls, as he says later, things “whose causes were so held together by nature that they must necessarily happen,” then the first premise of the Idle Argument is not true because it assumes recovering from a disease is fated even though it can actually be within a person’s power, and the argument fails right from the start.¹⁰ While discussing these refutations of the Idle Argument, Cicero clearly expresses

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10. Ibid., section 32.
preference for the argument of his fellow Academic Skeptic Carneades over that of the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus. When reciting Carneades’s argument against everything being fated, Cicero said he “did not employ any trickery” and that “this line of argument cannot be made more rigidly conclusive.”\textsuperscript{11} However, after he recited Chrysippus’s argument, he goes right into Carneades’s argument as if it was somehow an improvement on Chrysippus’s argument. Cicero believes it is an improvement because “Carneades refused to accept this class of things [simple and complex facts] entirely,” and his argument is therefore simpler.\textsuperscript{12} The second reason he appears to approve of Carneades’s argument more is because instead of increasing fate to refute the Idle Argument, like Chrysippus does, he removes fate from things within our power. Cicero likes this because he thinks “fate is not present in the case of matters which are in our power,” and that if they were we could not justly apply praise or blame to things.\textsuperscript{13} I, however, believe both of Cicero’s reasons for supporting Carneades’s argument over Chrysippus’s are wrong and that he should therefore not have supported that argument over Chrysippus’s.

I believe Cicero’s first reason for preferring Carneades’s argument, because it is simpler than Chrysippus’s argument, is incorrect because both philosophers had to bring in an additional metaphysical concept to refute the Idle Argument, making them both equally complicated. While Chrysippus may have come up with the concept of simple and complex facts to make his argument, Carneades also had to bring his own metaphysical concept to the table. Carneades’s metaphysical concept was that there are “voluntary movement[s] of the mind,” which are not brought about completely by antecedent causes.\textsuperscript{14} He does this in order to support his claim that there are some things in our power which are not controlled by fate, which to him means to be brought about by antecedent causes. At least from my perspective, adding an entirely new type of cause into the equation clearly makes Carneades’s argument just as complicated as, if not more so than, Chrysippus’s. Therefore, Cicero’s first reason for preferring Carneades’s argument is false.

With regards to Cicero’s second reason for why Carneades’s argument is superior, because it allows things to be in our power and therefore praise and

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., section 31-32.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., section 31.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., section 45.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., section 23.
blame to be justly applied and Chrysippus’s argument does not, I think it is also incorrect. I think it is incorrect because Chrysippus’s system does allow things to be in our power, and as a result praise and blame could justly be applied in his system. Even though Chrysippus believes in fate and does not believe in Carneades’s “voluntary movement of the mind,” he says some things are “in our power,” by defining “in our power” in a different way than Carneades. For Chrysippus, in order for something to be within a person’s power it must be brought about due to the person’s character. To illustrate this point Chrysippus uses the analogy of a rolling cylinder. Even though an outside force had to push the cylinder in order to initiate its roll, the push did not give the cylinder “the capacity to roll,” something which must be present for the cylinder to roll.\(^\text{14}\) In a similar way we are in control of our actions even though our perceptions initiate our behavior by giving us information, because without our character being how it is we would not behave the way we do. Since in Chrysippus’s system certain things are “in our power” it would seem that we could hold people responsible for their actions and justly apply praise and blame, just like in Carneades’s system. Therefore, Cicero’s second reason for why Carneades’ argument is superior is also false.

On this last point, Cicero may have objected that praise and blame can only be justly applied if the person could have chosen differently, however, I believe this would be a mistake. It would be a mistake because this objection would take away the possibility for morality in both Chrysippus’s and Carneades’s system and therefore make the objection useless because Cicero wishes to support Carneades’s system over Chrysippus’s. This argument would take away the possibility of morality in Carneades’s system because even if we accept Carneades’s claim that a “voluntary movement of the mind” does not occur because of antecedent causes, it still has its own reasons for why it voluntarily moves the way it does. If this is true and the will does what it does for particular reasons, then I do not see how its movements, based on these reasons, could have occurred any other way. This would then leave Carneades in the same boat as Chrysippus, something Cicero would not wish to do.\(^\text{15}\) For this reason the objection fails.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., Section 43.

\(^{15}\) For a more in-depth explanation of a position quite similar to this one, given in a more theological context, please see Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of Will*, ed. P. Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1754/1957).
As a classic philosophical problem, the issue of whether or not we have control over our own lives has elicited many responses from a wide variety of philosophers. One of the most interesting responses to come from antiquity was given by Marcus Tullius Cicero, who tried to refute the Idle Argument for fatalism, which would have forced him to conclude that we are in no way in control of our own lives. Throughout the course of this paper I believe I have sufficiently demonstrated that Cicero was wrong when he chose Carneades’s refutation of the Idle Argument over Chrysippus’s refutation and that he therefore had no good reason to prefer one solution over the other.

Bibliography