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Free Will, Determinism, and Stoic Counsel

Abstract

Stoic philosophy has been charged with an inconsistency insofar as its deterministic worldview appears to conflict with its advocacy of various methods of self-discipline aiming at self-improvement. It is, some claim, self-contradictory to hold persons responsible for adhering to counsel regarding their behavior and attitude if forces beyond their control ultimately determine that their behavior and attitude will not conform to counsel. In this paper, I argue that this complaint is misguided. Though several Stoic philosophers attempted to reconcile their determinism with some conception of free will, I contend that the Stoics should have (or at least *could* have) rejected the doctrine of free will while defending Stoic counsel and its efficacy for producing a well-ordered mind, virtuous character, and a life of harmony with Nature.

'But our souls are. . . joined to God, as being indeed members and distinct portions of his essence'—Epictetus, *Discourses*, Book I, 14

[1] Determinism often meets the charge that, if true, it would render all purposive deliberation and effort futile. If all that occurs is necessitated by laws of nature, antecedent conditions, the will of God, the gods, Fate, or any other form of cosmic governance, then it seems that the course of one's life, as it is but a tiny stream of events in confluence with all other streams in the deterministic universe, must *a fortiori* be fixed by whatever forces guide the course and flow of *all* events. So, if all events in the universe are determined, and one's life is a series of events within the universe, then one's life will unfold as necessitated by the irresistible powers that be, and attempts to master one's own fate are futile or even perverse. As determinists, the ancient Stoics were familiar with this complaint, and Susanne Bobzien notes that Origen, in *Against Celsus*, mentions the following 'Idle Argument' as an alleged sophism with which determinists were frequently confronted:

1. If it is fated that you will recover from this illness, then, regardless of whether you consult a doctor or you do not consult ›a doctor‹ you will recover.
2. But also: if it is fated that you won't recover from this illness, then, regardless of whether you consult a doctor or you do not consult ›a doctor‹ you won't recover.
3. But either it is fated that you will recover from this illness or it is fated that you will not recover ›from this illness‹.

4. Therefore it is futile to consult a doctor. [1998; p. 182]

^[2] The objection is, of course, intended to generalize to all decisions, deliberations, efforts and exertions. Bobzien again nicely draws out this generalized intent of the indeterminist stratagem:

The ancients seem usually not to have bothered with universalization or with extracting a scheme, but to have standardly used a paradigmatic argument as representative for a class of arguments. It becomes clear from Cicero *Fat.* 30 that the Idle Argument was understood in this way. There Cicero talks of different cases of a genus of sophism of which the presented argument is one. . . Still, we can extract a general scheme, and the following one may do:

P1 If it is fated that A, then, whether or not you Φ , A.

P2 If it is fated that not-A, then, whether or not you Φ , not A.

P3 Either it is fated that A or it is fated that not-A.

P4 Therefore (with regard to A) it is futile (for you) to Φ . [pp. 183–4]

^[3] So, Stoic philosophy was charged with an incompatibility between its deterministic worldview and its advocacy of various methods of self-discipline aiming at self-improvement:

In their ethical theory the Stoics demand that people perform certain actions in a certain way in order to realize certain objectives. . . and thereby to strive at reaching a certain end (e.g. conformity with Nature). The same action would thus be described as both futile and morally commanded or commended. [p. 191]

^[4] So, one may be commanded to do that which cannot be done or that which can be done, but only futilely so, as its aim is contrary to Fate or the will of Zeus.

1 Determinism and Stoic Counsel

^[5] In the opening entry of the *Enchiridion*, we find Epictetus admonishing his students to be careful to distinguish between those things that are within their power and those things that are not:

Now, the things within our power are by nature free, unrestricted, unhindered; but those beyond our power are weak, dependent, restricted, alien. Remember, then, that if you attribute freedom to things by nature dependent, and take what belongs to others for your own, you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will find fault both with gods and men. But if you take for your own only that which is your own, and view what belongs to others just as it really is, then no one will ever compel you, no one will restrict you, you will find fault with no one, you will accuse no one, you will do nothing against your will; no one will hurt you, you will not have an enemy, nor will you suffer any harm. [*Enchiridion*, 1]

^[6] So, the wise never fail to see their desires satisfied and never experience anything to which they are averse, because the wise only desire goods that lie within their power and are only averse to evils which it is within their power to avoid. Students are then advised to concern themselves only with that which is 'up to them,' or within their power, and to remain blissfully indifferent to all 'externals'. The only rational concern for the wise man is that which is subject to his will and controlled by its dictates. It is foolish, wasteful, and unhealthy to trouble oneself over events that lie beyond one's sphere of direct control. So, Epictetus advises his philosophers in training.

^[7] At the end of the *Enchiridion*, however, we find Epictetus advising his students to keep at the ready maxims such as this one from the 'Hymn of Cleanthes':

Conduct me, Zeus, and thou, O Destiny,
Wherever *your decrees have fixed my lot.*
I follow cheerfully; and, did I not,
Wicked and wretched, I must follow still. [Enchiridion, 52 – emphasis added]

This maxim extends Chrysippus' contention, as related in Cicero's *On Fate*, that 'whatever happens, happens by fate.' Similarly, the oft-quoted remark about the dog and the cart, generally attributed to either Zeno or Chrysippus, asserts the same thoroughgoing determinism (if not fatalism). Marcus Aurelius, in his *Meditations* insists that:

Providence is the source from which all things flow; and allied with it is Necessity, and the welfare of the universe. You yourself are a part of that universe; and for any one of nature's parts, that which is assigned to it by the World-Nature or helps to keep it in being is good. [Book Two, 3]

^[8] Zeus, World-Nature, Fate, the *Logos* – by any name, the intelligence or force directing the universe – determines the unfolding and pattern of all events. The sage recognizes this and achieves peace and equanimity by 'yielding to Fate' and embracing the world as it is. But, of course, the sage is part of the world and embedded within its guided evolution. So, the *Handbook* opens with a bit of advice that appears to conflict with its closing, apparently fatalistic, maxims. We are advised to focus on that which we can directly control, but are also reminded that all events are fixed by Fate. The sphere of one's direct control would, therefore, seem to contract to the vanishing point.

^[9] If the unfolding evolution of the entire universe and, *ipso facto*, the course of each individual's life within the universe is ultimately determined by forces that lie beyond the individual's control, then it is, at best, pointless (and, at worst incoherent and/or perverse) to recommend any particular course of behavior or method of self-discipline—as each of us is fated to be as Fate (or Zeus) will have him be. It is, moreover, self-contradictory to hold persons responsible for adhering to counsel regarding their behavior and attitude if forces beyond their control ultimately determine that their behavior and attitude will not conform to counsel. One does not, after all, counsel a river in hopes of changing its course.

[10] Many of Stoicism's detractors (as well as those who object to any form of determinism), past and present, have fastened on this putative inconsistency and presented it as an insoluble difficulty for the Stoic worldview. Stoicism, these critics claim, must either give up the doctrine of causal determinism or, in retaining determinism, must admit that its counsels regarding self-rectification are impotent (as impotence is commonly implicated in failures of rectification). So goes the complaint.

[11] It has often been (and still often is) assumed that attempts at self-improvement presuppose and require the existence of a free will, an 'open' future, and choices unconstrained (or, at least, uncompelled) by antecedent conditions and natural law (or God's laws as embodied in natural regularities). It is sometimes assumed, that is, that counsel and training are pointless without free will. This assumption invites scrutiny.

[12] Why must the Stoic embrace the existence of free will in order to consistently offer or employ counsel concerning the conduct and course of a good life in accordance with reason and nature? While many Stoic philosophers apparently attempted to carve out some sphere of freedom of the will that could co-exist with an otherwise universal determinism, I argue that nothing about Stoic counsel and its supposed efficacy for producing equanimity and happiness requires the existence of free will or a rejection of universal determinism. In short, I argue that the Stoics should have (or at least *could* have) rejected freedom of the will while defending Stoicism's efficacy for producing a well-ordered mind, virtuous character, and a life of harmony with Nature.

2 Rectification and Freedom

[13] It is important to note that the purported benefits of Stoic counsel are putatively derived from a proper alignment of the agent's desires, expectations, and attitudes—but not necessarily from a freely and 'openly' chosen alignment. The ideal Stoic sage has learned to distinguish between those things that are subject to his will and those things that are not. His desire and aversion attach only to that which is directly within his control, and all else is embraced as in conformity with the perfect rational direction of the *Logos* (or the regularities of Nature as the manifestation of Zeus' will). The sage controls what he can and remains serenely detached from all that does not directly conform to his will. He is thereby liberated from psychological and emotional distress. This liberation does not require freedom of the will or the absence of determinants antecedent to any act of will. Stoic counsel's efficacy requires only that attitudes, desires, and aversions may be altered by the power of argument, reason, and techniques of behavioral conditioning. If the student's attitudes, and behavior can be modified by dint of dialogue, study, practice, etc., then Stoic counsel can improve that student's self-control, mental rectitude, and ultimately the student's overall well being. These alterations to character, behavioral dispositions, desires, and aversions need not be voluntarily or freely adopted in order that they effect positive change. If, for example, a modern Stoic neurosurgeon could render his

patient perfectly rational by virtue of a comprehensive surgical ‘rewiring’ of the brain and its connections to the sensory periphery, then a sage (or, at least, a functional equivalent thereof) would emerge from a process that no one would be inclined to regard as issuing from that new sage’s *free* will. His sagacity would be causally determined by the neurosurgery that produced it. He would not, for that reason, be any less wise, rational, or healthy.

[14] The relevant adjustments in the patient’s beliefs and attitudes can, according to Stoic philosophers, eventuate without opening the skull and slicing into the brain, by virtue of training in logical analysis and the application thereof to the fundamental nature of the external world and of its relationship to the self. In his *Discourses*, Epictetus points out that this training is intended to improve the student’s capacity for self-rectification:

It is not understood by most persons that the proper use of arguments by inference and hypothesis and interrogations, and logical forms generally, has any relation to the duties of life. In every matter the question is, how a wise and good man may go honestly and consistently through with it. [Book I, 7]

[15] It is the proper *alignment* of the will and the intellect that liberates the agent from needless suffering and enables him to live ‘honestly and consistently’. Whether this alignment is attained freely or via external compulsion is simply beside the point—just as a patient need not consent in order that the surgeon’s scalpel extract a tumor or rectify an impediment to blood flow. Similarly, free consent is not a necessary condition for the extirpation of unhealthy mental tendencies.

[16] The Stoic’s art is really the art of instruction, training, and discipline. The sage effectively disciplines his mind and conditions his will so as to respond to the vicissitudes of daily life with reason and equanimity. The Stoic teacher instructs the student in the theory, practice, and methodology of this form of rational self-control. Neither the instructor nor the student needs to possess a free will in order to produce the desired outcome. The will need not be free in order for it to be brought into concordance with Nature or with the *Logos*, or the will of Zeus. There is nothing incoherent about a sage who is determined to develop self-control *through the exertion of mental effort*. His reason is the proximal director of his behavior and his will, though Zeus is the ultimate, distal director of all events—including those constituting the creation and evolution of the sage. Keith Seddon points out the intimate relation in Stoic theology between the will of Zeus and the guiding reason within each person:

The Stoics identified *logos* (reason), fate and god, regarding them as different aspects of the one principle which creates and sustains the world. . . God, through acting on passive unqualified substance, makes it what it is. But since god is considered to be a *body*, and is co-extensive with the world and is ‘in’ everything, god must also be in *us*. The Stoics believed that the governing part of each human soul, the *hegemonikon*, is a fragment of the divine *logos*. [2004; p. 7]

^[17] So, the individual human's *hegemonikon* directs his behavior, attitudes, etc., but only wisely and healthily so insofar as his 'governing part' is in harmony with the will of the all-directing God. It is God's will that individual persons shall govern themselves. Each 'governing part' is a fragment of the *divine* governance.

^[18] An analogy with animal training may be instructive here. A dog's master can, for example, condition his pet to 'do its business' outside—and not on the shag carpet in the living room. Various methods might successfully effect this change in the dog's behavior, and none of them require that the dog freely adopt a change of heart regarding the sanctity of shag carpet or the propriety of relieving itself outdoors. External pressures are applied in the form of punishments and/or rewards until the dog's natural inclinations have been brought into conformity with her master's desires. The dog's behavior is 'rectified' through an external imposition of conditions that generate an internal alteration of inclinations and proclivities—and, *voilà*, good dog! Nor is it necessary that the dog's master freely engage in the project of training the pet. A master that has been given a post-hypnotic instruction and manipulated by the hypnotist can, in principle, effect the same change in the dog's behavior as can any other master. The hypnotist may, in turn, be subject to deterministic control by another external force, with further iterations *ad infinitum*. Nowhere would such a chain of decisions and modifications of behavior be 'open,' un-compelled, or 'free' in any robust sense—yet dog and master are both better off.

3 Determinism and Self-Control

^[19] Determinists do not, after all, hold that a particular event is determined to occur irrespective of antecedents, but rather that a particular event occurs precisely because of the complex interplay between a chain (or web) of antecedents, consequents, and the laws, principles, or other mechanisms governing the interrelations among them. The Stoics do not claim that the will of Zeus is brought to fruition through scattershot, isolated moments of divine intervention in an otherwise chaotic universe. The Stoic God is not a cosmic pointillist leaving suggestive gaps of indeterminacy between occasional ordered atoms of time and space. The world, according to the Stoics, unfolds as a smooth, harmonious confluence of perfectly ordered streams of events. *All* events are directed by the will of Zeus, and are fated to occur because their antecedents and concomitants appear precisely as they do. The instructor encounters the student at the time and place of Zeus' choosing. The student is thereby improved, or not, as necessitated by the divine, all-encompassing master plan—a plan that includes the exertion of effort by various performers in the production.

^[20] Every event in any agent's life is an antecedent condition for all subsequent events. If antecedent conditions and laws of nature, as ordained by Zeus, determine the course of all events, then encounters with Stoic counsel are part of the complex web of causal antecedents determining the student's future behavior, mental states, interaction with environmental stimuli, etc. Advice, instruction, and other techniques of conditioning all have some role to play in the unfolding

of the Master's grand production—in which each of us is but a player assigned some role of the Designer's choosing. The buffoon's beliefs, attitudes, desires, and aversions may be altered, if Zeus decrees that it be so, *by* his encounters with the wise and their instruction, and *by* his efforts thereafter. Stoic counsel plays the educational role that it does because Zeus requires teachers and students to appear as they do, and when they do, so that His overarching design may come to fruition. The efforts of the learned and the still learning, far from being futile, idle, or pointless, are requisite elements of the grand design. The will of Zeus flows through all of his creation, and each evolving human character is carried along in its current. The sage does not need a *free* will, but only a will directed by right reason in accordance with God's nature. A sage may be born and, more often, a sage may be made, but a sage is a sage nonetheless, and God makes it so through His will as manifest in His guided creation—of which we are part and in which we all live.

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