
The Stoics on Determinism and Compatibilism by Ricardo Salles

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Those who find determinism unappealing are typically motivated by worries over the freedom of action and, relatedly, attributions of moral responsibility. It may be, however, that our intuitions concerning freedom and responsibility can be respected without abandoning the equally attractive assumption that all events have antecedent causes. Chrysippus and other ancient Stoics espoused a version of universal causal determinism which, they argued, has ample room for a satisfying theory of action and moral responsibility. Theirs is, then, a *compatibilist* system. Ricardo Salles' brief but carefully argued monograph scrutinizes several Stoic compatibilist claims, seeking to understand how the historically attested arguments fit together into a tight and convincing demonstration.

Two initial chapters are devoted to the foundations of Stoic determinism itself. These are, first, that all states and events, including human actions, are caused; and second, that causes necessitate their effects—if a certain thing or set of circumstances, *C*, is the cause of effect *E*, it can never be the case that *C* obtains but *E* does not. Both points, Salles argues, are deeply entrenched in Stoic physics. The first is established from the principle of bivalence as applied to future events: if it were not the case that all states and events have antecedent causes, then future-tensed propositions could not be either true or false, but in fact *all* propositions are either true or false. The second, Salles suggests, follows from the Stoic doctrine of eternal recurrence, that in cyclical time the new universe that arises after each periodic conflagration must be identical, down to the smallest detail, with the one that existed before. These recurring universes could not be truly identical if it were not the case that causes necessitate their effects—and so they do.

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Chapters 3–5 explore three theorems which are attested for the ancient Stoics—at least two, perhaps all three, for Chrysippus himself—and which play different roles in the defense of Stoic compatibilism. Following the order of logical priority established by Salles, these may be summarized as follows:

- T₁ Stoic determinism is consistent with the view that our actions are determined at least in part by internal factors.
- T₂ Stoic determinism is consistent with the view that we have the capacity to act otherwise than we do.
- T₃ It is sufficient for moral responsibility if the agent acts from a fully rational impulse. Thus, the attribution of moral responsibility does not *depend* on our having the capacity mentioned in T₂.

The emphasis falls, rightly, on T₁. The opponent of Stoicism in Cicero, *De fato* 40 holds reasonably enough that praise and blame are not justified if the causes of our actions are not internal to us. (Salles agrees with Pamela Huby [1970] that this opponent is Epicurus.) Chrysippus replies with an analogy: just as a cylinder rolls not only because it is pushed but also, and more importantly, because it is of the right shape to roll, so an action may have an external cause and yet have its principal cause in the character of the agent. To this one may of course reply that one's character might itself be the product of external factors. Salles here suggests on behalf of Chrysippus that just as the cylindrical shape cannot be imposed on the cylinder from without (it can only be imposed on the lump of wood that existed before), so the peculiar quality (*ἰδιος ποιότης*) that individuates one as an agent is temporally coextensive with that agent. Since the external factors that make me the agent I am did not act upon *me*, it does not make sense to say that I was made by them to act as I do.

T₂ concerns the capacity to act otherwise than one actually acts, a capacity which has sometimes been considered indispensable to attributions of responsibility. The extent to which T₂ belongs to discussions of moral responsibility is unclear; Salles labels it a theorem in metaphysics. Nonetheless, it is highly relevant in that it clarifies certain important modal notions. While an impulse, like any other event, has causes and is necessitated by those causes, this is a dif-

ferent sort of necessity than is involved in certain necessary truths such as ‘virtue is beneficial’ or ‘fire burns’. Even if it cannot but happen that I sit down at time t , my doing so is not necessary in the way that fire is necessarily hot. I retain the capacity to stand by virtue of the sort of being I am, for as long as I remain that sort of being, whether or not I exercise that capacity. This at least bolsters Chrysippus’ case against those indeterminists who argue that the capacity to act otherwise, which *they* consider to be required for moral responsibility, is ruled out by determinism.

However, Stoic compatibilism does not rely on the capacity to act otherwise in order to justify ascriptions of praise and blame. According to Alexander of Aphrodisias in *De fato* 13 and Nemesius of Emesa in *De natura hominis* 35, it is sufficient for moral responsibility if the agent acts upon a fully rational impulse. This is T₃. Salles accepts Nemesius’ attribution of this theorem to Chrysippus himself, and explicates ‘fully rational impulse’ as an impulse arising from reflection on the all-things-considered appropriateness of the contemplated course of action. At this point, he draws an interesting comparison to a modern compatibilist argument by Harry Frankfurt. For Frankfurt, a person who makes a choice after careful consideration of options is responsible for that choice even if (by thought experiment) an electrode secretly implanted in his brain would have prevented him from behaving differently. Similarly for Chrysippus the fact that an action proceeds from a rational impulse is sufficient for responsibility; responsibility does not depend on alternative possibilities.

Salles recognizes that actions arising from this sort of reflection are only a subset of what we do. In his final chapter, he considers how Stoics can justify ascriptions of responsibility for unreflective or precipitate actions. At this point, he departs from Chrysippus to take up the perspective of the later Stoic Epictetus: even when we do not reflect on the all-things-considered appropriateness of what we are about to do, we are still responsible for that precipitate action because we both can and should deliberate fully before acting. Because the capacity for reflection belongs to our nature as rational beings, we are ethically required to use it. We are, like Aristotle’s drunkards, liable to blame for what we do in thoughtless moments that we might have guarded against. To be sure, not everyone has access to the kinds of therapeutic exercises Epictetus recommends to develop reflectiveness to its fullest potential. Still, it seems, some

sufficient moral teaching is available to nearly everyone, and our rational nature ought to motivate us to seek it out.

Salles' book is carefully researched and clearly presented, with a pleasing economy of style. His well-structured arguments move swiftly to the heart of the matter and will be appreciated by those who desire a speedier introduction to the subject than Susanne Bobzien's *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* [1998]. Bobzien's more comprehensive work remains indispensable, however, for those who are concerned to understand these Stoic arguments in depth or to trace their historical development. For instance, one should suspend judgment on Salles' attribution of the doctrine in Nemesius, *De natura hominis* 35, to Chrysippus until one has studied Bobzien's extensive arguments for much later authorship in her chapter 8. (It may still be the case that Chrysippus insisted on the sufficiency of impulse for responsibility, which is the feature of T_3 that is of greatest philosophical significance for Salles' discussion; further on this below.)

Only two portions of Salles' analysis seem to me to require specific comment here. The first of these concerns the relation between Chrysippus' principle of causal regularity (like causes produce like effects) and the cosmogonical doctrine of eternal recurrence. Attempting to derive the former from the latter, Salles is driven to some lengths to provide a Stoic-style argument that can in turn ground recurrence. Following Jaap Mansfeld [1979], he finds that grounding in the beneficent nature of the creator god, which guarantees that he must already have created the best possible world and so will do so again. But identity in goodness might not imply complete indiscernibility down to the most minute events, and so Salles pursues a complicated line of reasoning meant to support the derivation of complete indiscernibility from Zeus' rational beneficence. The depth of the water here must be indicative of something. He would have done better to conclude that eternal recurrence is not the argumentative basis for causal regularity, but rather a consequence of it. Given that Zeus himself persists (as technical fire, as seminal principles) after every conflagration—indeed in a real sense he *is* the conflagration—the recurrence of an identical universe follows by causal regularity. But causal regularity itself does not need to be derived from any sort of cosmogonical argument; it is just part of what Stoics mean by the word 'cause', a matter of definition rather than a theorem requiring justification.

A second and (for this work) more fundamental difficulty becomes evident at the point where Salles turns from Chrysippus' theory, put forward in the course of the third century BC, to that of Epictetus some four centuries later. The combination of Chrysippus' T_1 , T_2 , and T_3 establishes that generating a rational impulse to act is a sufficient condition for moral responsibility. But Salles' interpretation of the phrase 'rational impulse' is quite narrow: it covers only those actions that are preceded by full-scale deliberation on whether the action in question is in accordance with providence. One actually has to ask oneself, 'Given the present circumstances, is the action choiceworthy? Should I assent to the impression?' All other actions, including emotion-driven actions and surely a large proportion of all our misdeeds, fall into the category of precipitate actions. For these, it seems, Chrysippus had no argument to justify any ascription of responsibility, since it is the 'distinctive contribution' of Epictetus to supply one [91]. Medea is a case in point. Although her infanticide does proceed from practical reasoning (she regards infanticide as a means to revenge on Jason, and revenge as more advantageous to her than the life of her children), it does not meet the criterion of *all-things-considered* reflection and so it is only Epictetus' argument concerning precipitancy that renders her responsible.

Something is amiss. We surely cannot think that Chrysippus, who is known to have studied the example of Medea, had nothing to say about how considerations of responsibility apply in her case. More generally, we cannot think that he and many subsequent generations of Stoic thinkers employed a criterion for moral responsibility which failed to cover most of the domain of human action. Salles' understanding of rational impulse must therefore be a great deal too restrictive. We should instead believe that in Chrysippian compatibilism, it is sufficient for moral responsibility if an action is performed in the way that the actions of adult human beings characteristically are performed; that is, through assent to impulsive impressions, assent being determined by the prior contents and internal dynamics of one's belief-set. That is, the kind of practical reasoning we engage in all the time, as long as we are of age and neither sleepwalking nor insane, suffices to make our actions an expression of our moral character. This too is rationality, though the impulses so generated will not always be rational in the fullest (normative) sense of the word.

One further observation I make purely in the interests of ease of reading. Salles' manner of exposition is in general extraordinarily lucid, making it easy to comprehend the structure of his argument even where the material itself is difficult. He is sensitive, too, to the limited patience of readers when it comes to matters of source criticism and scholarly controversy; and so far as possible is careful to relegate the inevitably dense apparatus of primary and secondary citations to the bottom of the page, out of the way of readers grappling with his argument. One could wish, then, that he had shown similar consideration when laying out theorems T₁, T₂, and T₃. On pages xx–xxi, where the three are first presented, the order is T₁, T₃, T₂; in the recapitulation on page 69, the order is T₃, T₁, T₂; and the actual order of exposition is also T₃, T₁, T₂. Only on page 89 is the logic behind this seemingly capricious numbering system explained. At that point, all becomes clear; but it would have done no harm to offer this helpful bit of explanation much earlier, or even better to present the theses in the same *logical* order in which they are numbered.

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