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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 112, No. 3 (July 2003)

Suzanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1998. Pp. xii, 441.

The ancient Stoics insisted that everything happens by fate, and repeatedly defended themselves against objections from their Academic, Epicurean, and Peripatetic opponents to the effect that this thesis would entail that our actions are not “up to us” (*eph’ hēmin*). In both their determinism and their compatibilism, the Stoics strike readers today as extremely modern in their philosophical orientation, and their concerns seem continuous with those expressed in modern debates about the compatibility of free will and determinism.

Bobzien’s project is to resist this tendency. There are, she argues, important historically conditioned differences between Stoic and modern forms of determinism, and the modern issue of the compatibility of free will with determinism arises neither for the Stoics nor for their ancient critics. There are, moreover, she insists, important differences between individual Stoics, as well as developments of doctrine over the six centuries during which the Stoa was an active philosophical school. In explicit contrast with a tendency among interpreters to homogenize these differences into a single “Stoic” position, Bobzien structures her study as an inquiry into the views of two Stoic philosophers: the intellectual giant of early Stoicism, Chrysippus (c.280–206 BCE), who is the primary object of her study, and, in a final chapter, the unnamed Stoic who is the target of criticism in the *De Fato* of Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 200 CE).

No one with a specialist’s interest in Stoic conceptions of causality, fate, modality, or responsibility can afford to ignore this book, which is the most philosophically rigorous and philologically sophisticated treatment of this body of texts to date. Bobzien’s discussion abounds with acute observation and attractive solutions to longstanding textual and interpretative problems. The book is as impressive in its details as in its main lines of argument. Since it is impossible in a review of this scope to do justice to the former, I shall concentrate instead on Bobzien’s main claims about the differences between Stoic and modern determinism and compatibilism.

To be a determinist, according to Bobzien, is to be committed to the view that what happens at any given time is completely determined by antecedent events. The Stoic thesis of fate entails that there is such a relation of inexorable succession between events. Thus, the Stoics are determinists. In contrast with the modern understanding of determinism, however, the Stoics do not count events as causes. Active bodies, not determining events, are causes on the Stoic view. This is why Bobzien claims that Stoic determinism is “causal” in our terms, but not their own (43).

This point is not mere terminological hair-splitting, for it exposes a misunderstanding at the heart of a very common modern interpretation of the Stoic thesis of Fate. Fate (*heimarmenē*), which the Stoics define as a “string (*heirmos*) of causes,”¹ is usually taken by modern readers to be a determinist sequence of events. This assumes falsely that the “causes” in the Stoic string are events, and has the effect of reducing the Stoic thesis, “Everything happens by Fate,” to a simple statement of causal determinism. Bobzien points out correctly that the “causes” in the Stoic “string” are bodies in relations of complex causal interaction. Thus, the Stoic thesis that everything happens by fate is not simply a determinist thesis, but an affirmation of the complex causal interdependence of the bodies that are active in the cosmos.²

Although Bobzien does not develop this alternative picture of fate in detail, the insight behind it is important for her main point about Stoic compatibilism. The characteristic difference between Stoic and modern varieties of compatibilism, on her view, is that while the modern issue turns on whether the *event* antecedent to a person’s decision or action determines that decision or action, the problem faced by the Stoics concerns which *body* involved in the causal nexus is responsible for the action. The relevant bodies of concern to Stoic compatibilism are the agent’s mind (which is a body according to the Stoics) and the external cause of an “impression.” For example, an untended pile of money might prompt the person who chances upon it to think, “Shall I take it?” This thought is what the Stoics call an impression, to which the person’s mind either assents or declines—with action ensuing accordingly. The problem of compatibility that the Stoics face is whether the causal influence of the external body, in prompting the impression, undermines the putative status of the person’s mind as the cause of assent and action.

Bobzien decisively refutes, on textual grounds, those who suppose that Chrysippus responds to this problem by conceding that the mind’s assent is undetermined or otherwise not within the scope of fate. Rather than exempting the mind from the causal influence of externals, Chrysippus’s strategy in the famous analogy of the cone and the cylinder³ is to affirm:

The Different Person Principle. A different person, faced with the same external cause, will choose/act differently. (269–70)

Just as a cone and a cylinder will move very differently as a result of the same push, agents with different minds will respond very differently to the impression made on them by the same external object. To the impression, “Shall I take it?” the dishonest person will assent, while the honest person will not. Since the character of the agent’s mind makes the crucial difference, responsibility still lies with the agent’s mind, and not with the external body.

Modern readers tend to be unimpressed by Chrysippus’s argument. They may concede that the agent’s mind or character determines whether she assents to the impression, but still object that given this mind and those external circumstances, the agent is no more in control of whether she assents to the

impression than the cone is of whether it rolls when pushed. Such a characteristically modern response takes the issue of compatibilism to turn on what Bobzien calls:

The Same Person Principle. The same person, in exactly the same circumstances, could decide/act differently. (255, 270)

According to Bobzien, preoccupation with the Same Person Principle amounts to a concern with whether the person was free to do (or choose) otherwise. For simplicity, I shall refer to this as “Freedom to do Otherwise.” The main burden of her argument in chapters 6, 7, and 8 is that freedom to do otherwise is not at issue in Stoic compatibilism, and is only beginning to emerge as an issue during the time of Alexander of Aphrodisias (some four centuries after Chrysippus).

Bobzien, unfortunately, fails to distinguish clearly between two different versions of this conclusion. She typically states her claim as:

(I) The issue in Stoic compatibilism is not whether Freedom to do Otherwise is compatible with Causal Determinism. (279, 388, 397)

But in fact what she establishes, and what her considered view must be, is instead:

(II) The issue in Stoic compatibilism is not whether agents have Freedom to do Otherwise. (299)

Thesis (I) cannot be Bobzien’s considered view because she takes Freedom to do Otherwise to be essentially and transparently a denial that actions are causally determined (277). On such a construal, (I) is trivially true, and fails to distinguish Stoic from modern compatibilism. There is no philosophical problem about the compatibility with determinism of indeterminist freedom. It is only when the parties to a dispute disagree about whether Freedom to do Otherwise must be understood in indeterminist terms that they face a *problem* about the compatibility of such freedom with determinism.

While it is possible to quibble with Bobzien’s assumption that Freedom to do Otherwise is such a patently indeterminist notion, we should not let this distract us from the significance of what she does establish. The evidence Bobzien adduces in these chapters establishes conclusively that before the time of Alexander of Aphrodisias, no one in the debate over Stoic compatibilism denies that our actions are causally determined by the antecedent circumstances. Nor, according to Bobzien, does anyone affirm it—not even the Stoics! She insists that although the early Stoics are committed to the view that everything that happens is completely determined by antecedent conditions, it is not until the second-century Stoic criticized by Alexander of Aphrodisias in his work *On Fate* (dubbed “Philopator” by Bobzien, and the subject of her chapter 8) that they articulate anything like such a thesis.

Philopator's principle may be paraphrased: "if all the antecedent circumstances are the same, only one result can ensue."⁴ Bobzien allows that Chrysippus, four centuries earlier, affirms the contrapositive of this principle.⁵ Indeed, this is her reason for classifying Chrysippus as a determinist in the first place. Nonetheless, she points out, neither Chrysippus's nor Philopator's version of the principle plays any role in Stoic debates about the compatibility of responsibility with the thesis of fate. While Philopator's principle is a consequence of the Stoic thesis of Fate, we are not entitled to assume without evidence that it, or its contrapositive, generates any specific worries about responsibility for action. Bobzien argues quite convincingly that there is no such evidence.

The main methodological moral here for historians of philosophy is that we need to be more scrupulous in distinguishing between what a particular philosopher is committed to and what he or she affirms. Even though the ancient Stoics, from Chrysippus onward, were committed, by other things they affirmed, to the truth of what we call causal determinism, the issues they explicitly faced in reconciling their thesis of fate with responsibility for action have very little to do with these specific commitments.

Of course, this is not to say that the Stoics and their contemporaries were philosophical primitives, unable to recognize the problems raised by their commitment to determinism. Far from it. The modern problem of compatibilism arises not just from the assumption of determinism, but from the specific causal and modal notions in terms of which that thesis is understood. The Stoics, who do not consider a deterministic sequence of events to be a chain of causes and effects linked together by necessity, are spared the question of whether such necessity would deprive us of an important ability.

Bobzien's conclusions are of significant interest to a broad philosophical audience. The general philosophical reader, however, will find the book difficult to read. The subject index is only three pages long. Greek and Latin are regularly left untranslated. The main lines of argument are often submerged in detailed textual and interpretative discussion, with Bobzien arguing on many fronts at once.⁶ These challenges to the reader notwithstanding, the book rewards careful study and sets a formidable standard for all future work in the field.

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Notes

¹ Aetius, *Placita* 1.28.4 (SVF 2.917); Nemesius, *De Natura Hominis* 37.299 (SVF 2.918); Alexander, *Mantissa* 185.1–5 (SVF 2.920).

² Bobzien, 50–55, 95, 169, 219, 269. I develop a similar account in "Fate, Fatalism, and Agency in Stoicism," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999): 250–73.

³ Cicero, *De Fato* 39–45; Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 7.2.

⁴ Alexander, *De Fato* 192.22–24; cf. Nemesius, 105.18–21. Bobzien (372) rightly points out that it is a mistake to take these texts as evidence of early Stoic claims.

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⁵ Plutarch, *De Stoicorum Repugnantiis* 1045c; Bobzien, 36–44.

⁶ A significant typographical error at a crucial point in the argument (288) further complicates matters. ‘MR1’ has been interchanged with ‘MR2’.

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Voula Tsouna, *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xix, 180.

Aristippus of Cyrene was one of Socrates’ associates; he appears in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, where in 2.1.1 Socrates is said to have thought him “quite undisciplined” in matters of food, drink, and sex. Whether he himself was a philosophical hedonist or not is open to discussion; at any rate, the Cyrenaics who succeeded him are supposed to have accepted a variety of hedonism. But they are also supposed to have accepted something that looks like skepticism: we can have knowledge only of our own affects (*pathē*, which Tsouna leaves untranslated), not of what occasioned them, and it is with this that the present book is primarily concerned.

It contains, in an appendix, a translation of the evidence bearing on Cyrenaic epistemology: if the Cyrenaics are not familiar to you, this book provides a good introduction to half of what little we know about them, and registers some views about the other half (hedonism) as well.

One of the things it does not go into is of some importance: the question of chronology, for which Tsouna refers us to her unpublished doctoral thesis (Paris, 1988).¹ Plato’s *Phaedo* (59c) mentions Aristippus as in Aegina on the day of Socrates’ death; so he outlived Socrates. But an examination of the evidence reveals no connection between Cyrenaic epistemology and this Aristippus. It is customary to associate the Cyrenaics’ distinctive skeptical epistemology with Aristippus’ grandson, also unfortunately named Aristippus. But we have little else to go on when it comes to the younger Aristippus’s dates.

The reason this is important (although Tsouna assures us on page 5 that it is not) is that Tsouna speaks, in the opening paragraph of her preface, of

the close philosophical relations linking the Cyrenaic epistemological views with the two main varieties of skepticism encountered in Greek philosophy, the one reaching back to Pyrrho of Elis in the fourth century B.C. and the other associated with a particular phase in the history of Plato’s Academy. (ix)

After a paragraph she goes on to say:

My main aim in this book is to reconstruct Cyrenaic epistemology in all its interrelated aspects, to locate it precisely in the context of ancient philosophical debate, and to explore its philosophical connections with modern and contemporary philosophical positions.