FATE, FATALISM, AND AGENCY IN STOICISM

By Susan Sauvé Meyer

I. INTRODUCTION

A perennial subject of dispute in the Western philosophical tradition is whether human agents can be responsible for their actions even if determinism is true. By determinism, I mean the view that everything that happens (human actions, choices, and deliberations included) is completely determined by antecedent causes. One of the least impressive objections to determinism is that it seems to trivialize the significance of our actions. However, this is the view that everything is determined to happen independently of human choices, efforts, and deliberations. It is a common fallacy, among students contemplating the implications of determinism, to argue: “But if everything is determined in advance, then it doesn’t matter what we decide to do; what is determined to happen will happen no matter what.” This argument fallaciously infers fatalism from determinism.

The Greek and Roman Stoics were the first self-conscious and unabashed determinists. These were the philosophers who adhered to the sect (hairesis) established by Zeno of Citium (334-262 B.C.E.)—notably including Cleanthe (331-232 B.C.E.) and Chrysippus (280-206 B.C.E.) in the “early” period; Panaetius (185-110 B.C.E.) and Posidonius (135-50 B.C.E.) in the “middle” period; and Seneca (1-65 C.E.), Epictetus (55-135 C.E.), and Marcus Aurelius (second century C.E.) in the “Roman” period. (In antiquity, they were called “the Stoic,” with reference to their original gathering place, a painted colonnade [staos poikile] in the Athenian marketplace.)

The Stoics also get credit for being the first to diagnose the fallacy of inferring fatalism from determinism. However, their name for their brand of determinism is εἰμικρύπτης (heirates, literally, what is allotted or apportioned), a term whose Latin translation, fatum (literally, what is decreed), is the root of our terms “fate” and “fatalism.” This is not simply a confusing accident of nomenclature. In the Greek literary tradition pre-dating the Stoics, fate (νεκρύπτης, or more usually its cognate μοταρ) is generally depicted as ensuring outcomes that are immune to human efforts to prevent them. For example, in the story immortalized by Sophocles in the tragedy Oedipus Rex, Oedipus is destined to kill his father and marry his mother, and ends up doing both these things despite both his and his

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parents’ best efforts to the contrary. And at least one Stoic, Posidonius, is reported to have invoked other such “fatalistic” stories in support of the Stoic doctrine of heirates.1

We therefore need to consider carefully the question of whether the Stoics were, after all, fatalists of a sort. This is what I propose to investigate in this essay. After surveying the evidence, I will argue that the Stoic thesis of fate is not, after all, a thesis of fatalism. To arrive at this conclusion, however, we will need to appreciate how different the Stoic brand of determinism is from more familiar, modern varieties. At the root of the difference is the Stoic conception of causation, which differs from modern philosophical accounts that typically take causes to be events. The Stoic notion of cause, I will suggest, better captures many of our pre-philosophical intuitions about causation, and has distinct advantages for thinking clearly about the implications of determinism for human agency and responsibility.

My discussion will focus on views of the early Stoics, especially Chrysippus. Since virtually all of the writings of the Stoics are lost, we must reconstruct their views by relying on the testimony of later writers—for example, philosophers such as Sextus Empiricus (second century C.E.) and Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 200 C.E.); biographers such as Plutarch (first to second centuries C.E.) and Diogenes Laertius (third century C.E.); anthropologists and doxographers such as Aetius and the second century C.E.), Hippolytus of Rome (second to third centuries C.E.), and Eusebius (260-340 C.E.). Another important source is the Roman statesman Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.), who wrote extensive accounts of Stoic, Epicurean, and Academic philosophy in the two or three years before his death. Many of these sources are hostile to the Stoics and have polemical intentions that may distort the accuracy of their reports. For example, Cicero, on whose treatise De Fato (Cic., Fat.) I shall be drawing frequently, takes the stance of the so-called New Academy (skeptical heirs of Plato’s original school) in criticism of the Stoics; and Alexander of Aphrodisias, in his De Fato (Alex., Fat.), the other major text I shall rely on, carries on an Aristotelian polemic against the Stoic doctrine of fate.2

1 Daphnis is fated to perish by falling from a horse and so avoids all horses, but dies in the end by falling off a rock known as “the horse”; a man who is fated to die by water given up his career as a sailor, only to drown by falling into a stream (Cicero, De Fato, 5).

The Stoics state their determinist thesis by claiming that everything happens by “fate.” Everything that happens in the universe is fully determined, down to the last detail, by Zeus, who is none other than fate. This is not, however, the Zeus of legend and superstition, who intervenes in the natural world as a causal power distinct from it. Rather, Zeus is seen as the “seminal principles” (σπερματικοὶ λογίς) in the world, whose unfolding constitutes the course of the universe from its beginning to its ultimate conflagration. Clearly the details of Stoic cosmology would be unpalatable to most modern readers, even to determinists. But the crucial feature of the Stoic view, which entitles it to the label “determinist,” is captured in the report of Alexander of Aphrodisias:

In setting out the differences which exist among causes they [the Stoics] list a swarm of causes . . . but, given this plurality of causes, they say that it is equally true with regard to all of them that it is impossible, where all the same circumstances obtain with respect to the cause and that to which it is the cause, that a result which does not ensue on one occasion should ensue on another. For if this happened, there would be uncanny motion. . . . (Alex., Fat. 192.17–25 [LS 55N3], transl. Long and Sedley, emphasis mine)

Alexander, a hostile critic of the Stoic thesis of fate, claims that, on the Stoic view, the alternatives to fatal outcomes are “impossible.” The Stoics, however, traditionally objected to the use of this modal terminology in characterization of their position. Chrysippus, for instance, goes to some lengths to reject the claim that what is fatal is thereby necessary, or that its alternative is impossible (Cic., Fat. 12–16). We can make sense of this denial by noting that according to the Stoic definitions of “necessary” and “impossible,” which have to do with ability and impediment rather than the sufficiency of causes to determine their effects, the conditions Alexander describes (in effect: same cause, same effect) do not entail that the effect is necessary or its alternative impossible. There are, however, many different notions of necessity, one of which arguably captures or corresponds to the sort of causal determination Alexander here describes.

And the Stoics themselves would seem to concede the point in spirit, if not in word; for their various articulations of the thesis of fate are replete with metaphors for necessity. They describe fate as an inseparable (ἀπαρατότων), invincible (ἀκθίστων), and inflexible (ἀστρεπτῶν) series of causes. For these reasons it seems quite accurate to classify the Stoic thesis of fate as a thesis of causal determinism: that everything that happens is the result of antecedent sufficient and fully determining conditions. We shall see later on that this classification fails to exhaust the content of the Stoic thesis, but for our present purposes it is sufficient to note that the Stoic thesis that everything happens by fate is, among other things, a thesis of determinism.

The Stoic thesis of fate was subjected to vigorous criticism in antiquity. One of the standard charges against it was that if everything happens by fate, then nothing is up to us (ἠθικὴ ἀρετή). One way of formulating this objection was known in antiquity as the “Lazy Argument” (so named because it says the thesis of fate would license us all to be lazy):

They [the Stoics] argue as follows: “If it is fatal for you to recover from this disease, then you will recover, whether you call the doctor or not; similarly, if it is fatal for you not to recover from this disease, then you will not recover, whether you call the doctor or not. But one or the other is fatal; so there is no point in calling the doctor.” This kind of argument is rightly named lazy and idle, since by the same argument all activity will be removed from life. . . . (Cic., Fat. 28–29 [LS 55S1], transl. Sharples)

The Lazy Argument fallaciously infers that if an outcome is antecedently determined, then nothing I do is necessary in order for it to occur. This is to infer fatalism from determinism. In criticism of the Lazy Argument, Chrysippus points out that even if something is fatal, it still might require specific antecedent causes:

“For,” he [Chrysippus] says, “there are some cases that are simple, others complex. A case of what is simple is ‘Socrates will die on that day’: whether he does anything or not, there is a fixed day for his death. But if it is fatal that ‘Oedipus will be born to Laius,’ one will not be able to say ‘whether Laius has slept with a woman or not’; the

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3 Diogenes Laertius, 7.149 (SVF 2.915); Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae 7.2.15 (SVF 2.972); Cic., Fat. 21 (SVF 2.952; LS 38G); 41 (SVF 2.974; LS 62G); Alex., Fat. 164.17–20, 171.26–27, 181.8–9; cf. 200.15; Plutarch, De Stoicorum Repugnantiis (St. Rep.) 109a (SVF 2.957).

4 Diogenes Laertius, 7.135–36 (SVF 1.102; LS 46G); 7.148–49 (SVF 2.1102; LS 43A); Aristotle, in the writings of Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica (Pr. En.) 15.14.2 (SVF 1.198; LS 46G); Nemesius, 309.3–111.2 (SVF 2.452; LS 52C); Aetius, 1.7.33 (SVF 2.1027; LS 46A); Cicero, De Divinatione 1.126 (SVF 2.921; LS 55L3).


6 Aristotle, 1.284.8 (SVF 2.917; LS 55L); Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae 7.2.3 (SVF 2.1000; LS 55K); Plutarch, St. Rep. 105f (SVF 2.997; LS 59R2); Aristotle, in the writings of Eusebius, Pr. En. 15.14.2 (SVF 1.198; LS 46G).
matter is complex and “co-fated”—for that is what he calls it, because it is fated both that Latus will sleep with his wife and that he will beget Oedipus by her. Just as if someone had said “Milo will wrestle in the Olympic games” and someone else answered “So, whether he has an opponent or not, he will wrestle,” he would be wrong, for “he will wrestle” is complex. For without an opponent there is no wrestling. So all captious arguments of that sort can be refuted in the same way. “Whether you call in the doctor or not, you will get well” is captious; it is as fated to call in the doctor as it is to get well. Thence canes, as I said, Chrysippus calls “co-fated.” (Cic., Fat. 30 [LS 5952-3], trans. Sharples)

Two events are co-fated, it appears, if one of them is fated, and the other is necessary for the fated event to happen. If calling the doctor is necessary for your recovery, then if your recovery is fated, so too is your calling the doctor. It is fallacious to draw an inference from the assumption that your recovery is fated to the conclusion (the “captious premise” of the Lazy Argument) that it is fated to occur whenever you do or try to do.

So the Stoics do, in response to the Lazy Argument, make (or presuppose) a distinction between determinism and fatalism. But what sort of fatalism are they contesting? We might distinguish fatalism about outcomes, the view that outcomes (e.g., recovery from illness) are determined independently of anything we might try to do, from fatalism about actions, the view that our actions (e.g., calling the doctor) are determined to occur independently of what we decide or choose, or will. The specific example at issue in this version of the Lazy Argument addresses fatalism about outcomes. The argument questions whether, under fate, events in the world depend on our actions, not whether our actions are up to us. Although Cicero discusses the Lazy Argument in a context in which the general concern is whether, under the Stoic doctrine of fate, our actions are not up to us, it is not explicit from the response of Chrysippus that he reports here, what moral about human agency Chrysippus intends to draw—how, if at all, he thinks his response applies to the question of whether our actions, if fully determined, can be up to us.

A natural way of applying Chrysippus’s doctrine of co-fatales to the case of agency is to take him to be saying that human decisions or willings [in Stoic terminology, “assent” (suntatathesis)] are necessary for our actions.7

Just as your recovery is co-fated along with your calling the doctor, your calling the doctor is co-fated along with your decision to call the doctor. Since, on this view, our actions depend on our choices or assents, and cannot occur without them, it is fallacious for the critic of Stoic fate to draw an inference from the premise that our actions are fated to the conclusion that we are fated to perform them independently of what we choose or will.11

Independent support for this interpretation comes from Calcudius (fourth century c.e.) and from Alexander of Aphrodisias. Calcudius, although a hostile critic, confirms that for the Stoics “the movements of our minds”—presumably assent, choice, and the like—are necessary for our fated actions:

The movements of our minds are nothing more than instruments for carrying out fated decrees, since it is necessary that they be performed through us, by the agency of fate. Thus men play the role of necessary condition, just as place is a necessary condition for motion and rest. (Calcudius, In Tim. CLX-CLXI [SVF 2.943], trans. Long, “Freedom and Determinism,” 177)

If these “movements of our minds” are necessary for our actions, then presumably they would be co-fated along with the actions. Alexander, in relating the Stoic account of what makes our actions up to us, confirms that the crucial fact, in the Stoic view, is that our actions happen through our assent:

[Since] fate [brings] about movements and activities in the world, some through earth, if it so happens, some through air, some through fire, some through something else, and some also through living creatures (and such are the movements in accordance with impulse), they [the Stoics] say that those brought about by fate through the living creatures are “up to” the living creatures. . . . (Alex., Fat. 182.8-13, trans. Sharples, slightly altered)

(A few lines later [182.16], Alexander makes it clear that the “impulse” he refers to here involves “assent.”)

We have reason to suppose, then, that Chrysippus and the Stoics held that our actions, although fated, are up to us, because they depend on our assenting to or willing the action. To hold this view is to disavow fatalism about actions. Of course, the obvious next move for the critic of determinism to make (particularly one who is concerned with human respon-

7 A similar report of Chrysippus’s response to the Lazy Argument is in Diogenianus, in the writings of Eusebius, Pr. En. 6.8.25-29 (SVF 2.998; LS 627).

8 Alexander of Aphrodisias explicitly inter alia fatalism about actions from Stoic determinism (Alex., Fat. 179.8-20).

9 I thank Satoshi Oghara for emphasizing the importance of this point.

10 For a detailed treatment of the Stoic account of the psychology of human action, see Brad Inwood, Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
sibility) is to concede that our choice, will, and assent do make a difference to our actions, but to complain that under the Stoic thesis of fate, these choices, willings, and assents would be fully determined by antecedent causes, and hence not up to us. This is a very different objection from that of the Lazy Argument, and we will consider Chrysippus’s response presently (in Section IV). For the moment, however, I want to consider evidence that calls into doubt whether the Stoics maintained that our choices, willings, or assents really are necessary for our fated actions. Might they not be fatalists about actions after all?

For the first piece of disturbing evidence, we need turn no further than the text in which Cicero presents Chrysippus’s response to the Lazy Argument, quoted above. As an example of a “simple” fated outcome (i.e., one not co-fated along with a necessary antecedent), Chrysippus gives the day of Socrates’s death: “whether he does anything or not, there is a fixed day for his death” (Cic., Fat. 30). Given that Socrates died by drinking hemlock in prison, and that, in the tradition known to Chrysippus, he had the opportunity to escape and avoid the outcome, the claim that there was nothing he could have done to alter the day of his death has a decidedly fatalistic ring to it.12 Although this example has direct implications only for fatalism about outcomes rather than about actions, the characteristically “fatalistic” aspect of the claim Chrysippus seems willing to endorse in this example raises the possibility that he thinks at least some of our fated actions are similarly overdetermined—i.e., that we are determined to perform them independently of whether we assent to them or not.

Indeed, there are at least two texts that seem to attribute just this view to the Stoics. First of all, the Christian bishop Hippolytus (second to third centuries c.e.), in his polemic The Refutation of All Heresies (Ref. Her.), writes:

Zeno and Chrysippus affirmed that everything is fated with the following model: when a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous acts (to autexousia) coincide with necessity. But if it does not want to follow, it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too, even if they do not want to, they will be compelled in any case to follow what is destined (to peprémonon). (Hip., Ref. Her. 1.21 [SVF 2.975; LS 62A], trans. Long and Sedley)

The metaphor of the dog tied to the cart, attributed here both to the founder of Stoicism (Zeno) and to the intellectual giant of Stoicism’s early period (Chrysippus), is easily interpreted as asserting fatalism about ac-

12 Plato (Crat. 44b-47a) portrays Crito as offering to help Socrates escape from prison before his death sentence is carried out. Socrates, who has just claimed that his death has been prophesied in a dream (44a-β), refuses.
that since our assents and willings are themselves determined by antecedent causes, neither they nor our actions are up to us:

The [critics of Chrysippus] argued as follows: "If all things come about by fate, all things come about by an antecedent cause; and if impulses do, so too do those things which follow on impulse; and therefore so too do assentings. But if the cause of impulse is not located in us, impulse itself too is not in our power; and if this is so, neither do those things which are brought about by impulse depend on us. So neither assentings nor actions are in our power." (Cic., Fat. 40 [LS 62C4], trans. Sharples)

The objector who makes an argument of this sort relies on the principle:

(P) If the cause of X is not in our power (in nobis), then neither is X in our power.

Chrysippus’s response is to distinguish between two sorts of causes, and to concede that principle (P) applies to only one of them (Cic., Fat. 41–43). He distinguishes between “auxiliary and proximate” causes, on the one hand, and “perfect and primary causes,” on the other (Cic., Fat. 41), a distinction which seems to correspond to one elsewhere attributed to the Stoics, between preliminary (prokatartikia) causes and sustaining (sunektika, contentia) causes.13 Here Chrysippus illustrates the distinction by pointing to the difference between the push that starts the cylinder rolling (the auxiliary and proximate cause), and the cylinder’s “own force and nature” (suasum vi et natura, Cic., Fat. 43), which is the perfect and principal cause of the rolling. Chrysippus, according to Cicero, says that the “auxiliary and proximate” cause is merely necessary for the effect, whereas the “perfect and principal” cause produces the effect “by its own power and nature” (Cic., Fat. 43). Thus, the Stoic distinction seems to map onto one that Cicero himself makes between antecedent causes that are merely necessary conditions and those that are genuine causes (Cic., Fat. 34–38).

So we may read Cicero’s own examples for further illustration: the rich dress of the traveler may be the auxiliary and proximate cause of the highwayman’s robbery, but—adding in the example preserved in Aulus Gellius (130–180 C.E.)—the robbery itself is the perfect and primary cause.14 A reasonable approximation to an understanding of this distinction is that


14 Aulus Gellius, Nector Atticæ 7.2.6–13 (SVF 2.1000; LS 62D).
when it is overcome by others that rise up against it; but fate he
declares to be a cause that is unconquerable (akineton) and cannot
be hindered (akropol) or turned aside (areption), himself calling it
Atropos, Adrasteia, Necessity, and Peperomene, since it imposes a limit
(pente) for all things. (Plutarch, De Stoicorum Repugnatatis [St. Rep.] 47,
1056b [SVF 2.997; LS 55R], trans. Sharples)

While Plutarch doubts that Chrysippus could consistently have main-
tained such a thesis of fate (a problem to which we will return shortly), he
does here show that it was a prevalent understanding of the Stoic doc-
trine. Indeed, Cicero himself, in another work, represents the Stoic thesis
of fate as concerning only preliminary (or at any rate non-necessitating)
causes:

Of this kind of cause, without which something is not brought about,
some are inactive . . . others, however, provide a certain beginning for
bringing about the effect, and contribute certain things that in them-
soever assist, even if they do not necessitate, as “meeting had pro-
vided the cause of love, love of disgrace.” It is from this kind of causes,
linked together from eternity (ex veteri pendentium) that fate is bound

fate by the Stoics. (Cic., Topica 59, trans. Sharples, emphasis mine)

And Aulus Gellius, in reporting what appears to be the same source used
by Cicero’s account of Chrysippus’s causal distinction (Cic., Fat. 41-43),
explicitly identifies Chrysippus’s thesis of fate as something that assails
us (specifically, our minds) from the outside (omenem illam vim quae de facto
estrinsecus ingruit).

To view fate as consisting entirely of external causes certainly seems to fit
a natural reading of Chrysippus’s metaphor of the dog and cart: ex-
ternal causes determine our actions regardless of our (internal) choices
and assents. But this appearance may be misleading. For, as Plutarch
points out, the sorts of causes that are within the scope of this restricted
thesis of fate (the preliminary or merely necessary causes) do not have, on
the Stoic account, the sort of causal efficacy that would yield the ines-
capability or determination that makes the Stoic thesis of fate determinist
in the first place. Moreover, if fate consists of causes that are merely
necessary for fated outcomes, but do not in themselves the power to
bring about the fated outcomes, then it would also be incapable of the
sort of fatalistic overdetermination invoked in the natural

dog-and-cart image.

15 Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticæ 7.2.6-13 (SVF 2.1000; LS 62D). Modern scholars who
accept this interpretation include Frede, “The Original Notion of Cause,” 239-41; Long,
“Freedom and Determinism,” 178; and Harold Cherniss, ad loc., in Plutarch’s Moralia, vol. 13,
Part 2 (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1976); for additional references, see Sarabji,
Necessity, Cause, and Blame, 82 n. 56.
16 Clementi, Stratonice 8.9.33 (SVF 2.35); LS 55).

Indeed, if the Stoic thesis of fate were simply the thesis that everything
that happens is preceded by external causes necessary for its occurrence,
then there seems little left for critics of the Stoics to disagree with. This is,
in fact, what Cicero says, in his discussion of Chrysippus’s application of
the causal distinction to the thesis of fate:

Since this is how Chrysippus explains these things . . . see whether
Chrysippus’s opponents are not saying the same thing. For Chry-
sippus too concedes that the proximate and contiguous cause of the
assenting is located in the cause-in-effect, but not that this is a
necessitating cause of assenting; and so he will not concede that, if all
things come about by fate, all things come about as a result of ne-
cessitating antecedent causes. And again, those who disagree with
him do assert that assentings do not come about without sense
impressions preceding them [and so they] will say that, if all things come
about by fate of such a sort that nothing comes about except by a cause
having preceded, then it must be admitted that all things come about by fate.
From this it is easy to understand that, since both sides, when their
opinion is explained and set forth, come to the same result, they
disagree about words and not about the facts. (Cic., Fat. 44, trans. Sharples, emphasis mine)

Our puzzle seems to amount to this. Only if the thesis of fate ranges over
both sorts of causes (perfect and principal or sustaining, on the one hand,
and preliminary or auxiliary and proximate, on the other hand) does it seem
to be genuinely deterministic. The Stoics clearly took their thesis of
fate to be a determinist thesis. So why does Chrysippus restrict the thesis
to apply only to auxiliary and proximate causes? Anthony Long and
David Sedley, in The Hellenistic Philosophers, have proposed that Chry-
sippus’s remarks in this context simply recommend a point of view from
which questions of moral responsibility are best considered, rather than
stating a substantive thesis of Stoic physical or causal theory. While they
are no doubt right about the relevance of the remarks to concerns in Stoic
moral theory (which I discuss below, in Section VI), I would like to argue
that Chrysippus’s position here is also deeply rooted in Stoic physical
theory. And once we understand this aspect of the Stoic thesis of fate, we
will be in a position to understand how the relevant features of Stoic
ethics, no less than the metaphor of the dog tied to the cart, are rooted in
the Stoics’ physical theory.

17 Long and Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers, 1.393. Duhem (La Conception, 168, 185)
suggests that the distinction is entirely ad hoc for the moral question, and has no implica-
tions for the general Stoic theory of causality or of fate.
18 The Stoics claim that physics has a foundational relationship to ethics: they liken
physics, which they call the soul of philosophy, to the fertile field from which the fruits of
ethics (surrounded by a wall of logic) grow (Diogenes Laertius, 7.40 [LS 2683]).
V. FATE AS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CAUSES

We can understand why Chrysippus restricts the thesis of fate to invoke only external, precipitating causes once we properly appreciate the Stoic notion of a causal chain. One of the most common Stoic definitions of fate is that it is a string (ἐνεργός) or chain (ἄρχον) of causes. In Latin this gets translated as a series of causes (series causuarum). For example:19

They say [fate] is a string of causes (ἐπιστήμων γоνὶς αἰρετικών). (Alex., Manita 185.5 [SVF 2.920])

[Fate] is an order and series of causes (ordinem seriemque causarum), since the connection (nexa) of cause to cause generates things from itself. (Cic., De Divinatione [Dict.] 1.125 [LS 35L; SVF 2.921])

As Alexander notes, the notion of causes being connected to each other "in the manner of a chain" (ἀντίκενα καὶ νεῖκαι) is what the Stoics consider the essence of their doctrine of fate (Alex., Fat. 193.4-8).

How are we to understand this notion of a causal chain? It is natural, when thinking about modern varieties of determinism, to think of the causal chain as a temporal succession of events, each one caused (indeed determined) by the preceding event in the chain, and each the cause of the succeeding event. This cannot be how the Stoics understood the chain, however; for they do not understand causation as a relation between successive events, but as an interaction between bodies:

The Stoics say that every cause is a body which becomes the cause to a body of something incorporeal. For instance, the scalpel, a body, becomes the cause to the flesh, a body, of the incorporeal predicate "being cut." And again the fire, a body, becomes the cause to the wood, a body, of the incorporeal predicate, "being burnt" (Sextus, Adv. Math. 2.211 [SVF 2.341; LS 55B], trans. Long and Sedley; emphasis mine)

On this analysis, causation is an interaction between two bodies—one of them the cause, the other the body affected (agent and patient, if you will)—that yields a result. Thus, although the Stoics are determinists, what they identify as the cause of a result is not a sufficient condition for it (since both the knife and the flesh are part of that sufficient condition for cutting, yet the Stoics call only the knife, not the flesh, the cause). This conception of causation as interaction rather than temporal succession is preserved even in Alexander's articulation of the precisely deterministic aspect of the Stoic theory: the same result occurs whenever all the cir-

19 See also Cic., Fat. 19-20; Alex., Fat. 192.1, 193.6-7, 194.4-5, 195.14-15, 195.19, 196.2 (SVF 2.252, 2.914, 2.915, 2.917, 2.918, 2.933, 2.989); and Diogenes Laertius, 7.149 (SVF 2.915).
series) applies nonmetaphorically to a string of beads in a necklace, and the notion of a chain applies directly to the links in a chain. The beads and the links are all bodies, and thus are candidates for being causes, on the Stoic view. And Clement himself names a causal relation that can obtain between them: they can be causes to each other (i.e., can have effects on each other). The beads in a necklace, like the stones in the arch specifically mentioned by Clement, stand in relations of mutual influence on each other. Each stone, bead, or link, has an effect on the others. Clement here mentions other examples of causes that have effects on one another: the fever and the disorder of the spleen, the merchant and the retailer, the teacher and the pupil.

I propose that this relation of mutual influence between causes is what links the causes in the Stoic causal chain. Support for this interpretation comes from the frequent explanation of the Stoic causal chain as involving connections between causes:

[Fate] is an order and series of causes, since the connection (nexus) of cause to cause generates things from itself. (Cic., Div. 1.125 [LS 55L; SVF 2.921])

[Fate is] a reciprocal connection of things reaching through eternity (connexio rerum per aeternitatem se invicem tenens). (Cic., Fat. fragment 2)

Everything comes to be from a natural binding together and uniting (omnia naturale coniugatione conserte contractaque fiant). (Cic., Fat. 31)

The Stoics thus stress the interconnections of causes in their doctrine of fate. So it is not surprising that they often describe fate as an 

έπιστολή (epistole)—an “interweaving” or “web” of causes:

These things are interwoven with each other (έπερεκτατὰ ἄλλαξις) in the manner of a chain (δαίμων δίκης). (Alex., Fat. 195.14–15)

Must we call the continuous interweaving (συνολοκυτή) [of causes] “fate” . . . ? (Plotinus, Ennead 3.1.4 [SVF 2.934]; cf. 3.1.2, 3.1.7)

The interweaving (έπιστολή) and following of these [causes] is fate . . . (Aristotle, in the writings of Eusebius. Pr. Ev. XV.816f [SVF 1 98; LS 46G2])

Indeed, even in the traditional metaphor of fate as an unwinding rope, the notion of interconnection is near the surface:

All things happen by fate . . . The passage of time is like the unwinding of a rope; bringing about nothing new and unrolling each stage in turn. (Cic., Div. 1.127 [SVF 2.944; LS 550], trans. Long and Sedley)

Here the explicit message is of predetermination; but the metaphor is also of interconnection; for a rope consists of many individual fibers twisted together to form a unity. A rope is a ἐνθρός (heirnus, string) of fibers. (Recall the archaic metaphor for fate/destiny as captured in the image of the spinning wheel—Homer, Odyssey 7.197.)

Understanding the thesis of fate as consisting on an interconnection or mutual influence of causes gives us some insight into the Stoics’ identification of fate as the totality of the “seminal principles” (σπερματικοὶ λόγοι) in the world.22 These “seminal principles” are the individual natures of particular things unfolding according to their own proper causal powers, which the Stoics classify as either “tenor” (στειρος), “nature” (φύσις), or “soul” (ψυχή), depending on whether they are inanimate (e.g., stones), living (e.g., plants), or ensouled (e.g., animals).23 It is because fate, on the Stoic view, consists of the sum total of these individual causal powers that Cicero describes it as “the fate of physics” as opposed to that of superstition (Cic., Div. 1.126 [LS 55L.3]). As Alexander explains the Stoic view:

They say that the very fate, nature, and rationale (logon) in accordance with which the all is governed is god. It is present in all things which exist and happen, and in this way uses the proper nature of all existing things for the government of the all. (Alex., Fat. 192.25–28 [SVF 2.945; LS 55N4], trans. Long and Sedley)

There are conceivably two ways in which fate could operate through all the particular natures of existing things. One way, the “Leibnizian” alternative, would have, as it were, wound up inside each substance fully and determinately all of the changes it would undergo and be involved in the course of its history.24 There would be no causal interaction in such a world. The “Newtonian” alternative is to suppose that there is interaction among existing things. What happens to each thing may sometimes be simply the result of its unfolding nature (whether soul, or tenor, or “nature” in the strict sense)—for example, that it should die at some time (if a living thing) or be held together (if physical). But a good deal of what befalls it is due, at least in part, to the causal interaction between it and other bodies.

The Stoics’ emphasis on the interconnectedness of causes shows that they are concerned to articulate the second of these alternatives.25 And their motivation is clear: this is what gives unity to the universe. Just as

22 See references in note 4.
23 For texts and discussion of this Stoic distinction, which cuts across the Aristotelian notions of nature and soul, see Long and Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers, section 47.
24 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) proposed that the basic substances in the world (“monads”) did not interact with each other, but rather unfolded their individual natures in a pattern of “pre-established harmony.” Leibniz had well-known disputes on this and other questions with followers of Sir Isaac Newton.
25 By contrast, Duhem, La Cntreception, 187, denies that such “secondary” causes (secondary to the “sustaining” [ménôtan] causal role of Zeus) have any real causal efficacy, and explicitly suggests that the Leibnizian alternative captures the Stoic view.
its "tenor" holds together the physical parts of a simple body such as a stone, the Stoics hold that in general there must be a cause responsible for the holding together of anything composed of parts. Zeus, as the sustaining cause (οὐσιοποιόν αὐτον) of the universe, binds together into a unity by mutual causal influence the various bodies that are its parts.  

Just as a woven fabric is a unity, and not simply a collection of independent fibers that happen to be located in one place, so, on the Stoic view, the "web of fate" makes the individual parts of the world into a unity. As Alexander explains, one of the Stoic arguments for the thesis of fate is the argument for the unity of the universe:

For nothing in the world exists or happens causelessly (αναπτυκόν), because none of the things in it is independent of, and insulated from, everything that has gone before. For the world would be wrenched apart and divided, and no longer remain a unity, forever governed in accordance with a single ordering and management, if an uncaused motion were introduced. . . . (Alex., Fat. 192.8–13 [SVF 2.945; LS 55N2], trans. Long and Sedley)

This is a surprising twist on the notion of "no motion without a cause." A barely determinist thesis, which posits sufficient antecedent conditions for every world state or event, would not imply the sort of unity of conditions that warrant calling it an order (taxis, κοσμος). And note how prevalent are the terms for order in the Stoic discussions of fate, and their close alternation with terms for interconnection.  

The Stoic view of the universe as an ordered unity with each part playing its role in relation to the whole, no doubt relates to their view of the universe as a living creature with a soul that gives it both life and unity. Indeed, one of the primary functions of the global cause, variously identified as the world soul, the seminal principle, Zeus, or fate, is, like that of all causes (in contrast with the passive bodies from which they are distinguished), to hold together, or make a unity of, the body to which it is a cause.  

Given the stress on reciprocal connection in the doctrine of fate, it is not surprising that the topic of reciprocal causation should have been of serious interest to the Stoics and their critics, and thus it is not an accident that a discussion of this topic survives in Clement. For mere determinists,  

interest in this topic would be surprising. Indeed, it seems clear from the dialectical structure of Cicero’s De Fato, that Carneades (mid second century B.C.E.), the Academic critic of Chrysippos to whom Cicero is here sympathetic, contrasts the Stoic view that our minds are subject to fate, with the view that our minds unfold according to their own causal natures without being impinged upon by anything external:

[Reporting Carneades’ position] Just so, when we say that the mind is moved without a cause, we are saying that it is moved without an antecedent and external cause, not without any cause. Of the atom itself it can be said, when it is moved through the void by heaviness and weight, that it is moved without a cause, because no cause comes to it from outside. . . . Similarly in the case of the voluntary movements of the mind an external cause is not to be looked for; for voluntary movement has this nature in itself, that it is in our power and is obedient to us. And this is not without a cause, for the nature of that thing itself is the cause of that thing. (Cic., Fat. 24–25, trans. Sharples)

That is, Carneades proposes that the mind is like a Leibnizian monad, outside the interconnected causal fabric of the rest of the world. Once we appreciate that the main point of the Stoic thesis of fate is to insist on the connections of causes in the world, and to deny that any cause acts in isolation from the rest of the causal nexus, then it should not be surprising that Chrysippos should articulate the thesis of fate by appeal simply to auxiliary and proximate causes (Cic., Fat. 41). To claim that everything that happens has an antecedent, external, precipitating cause is simply to insist that no cause operates in isolation from the rest of the causal nexus. For every perfect and principal cause, there is also an external, precipitating cause that affects it.

Chrysippos’s claim initially struck us as a puzzling "restriction" on the thesis of fate, but that impression depended on the assumption that the causes cited in the thesis of fate must be total determining sufficient conditions for their effects. However, we have seen that the Stoics do not conceive of causes as sufficient conditions. The claim might also appear to be a "restriction" if we suppose that the thesis of fate is supposed to supply explanations of particular phenomena; in that case, it would indeed be strange for the perfect and principal cause of the outcome to be left out of the explanation. But there is no reason to suppose that the Stoics intended to use the thesis of fate in this way. To claim that something was fate to happen is not to offer an explanation of why it happened, an explanation that would be in competition with the local explanation citing the perfect and principal cause.  

Rather, it is to point
VI. AGENCY, EXTERNALITY, AND MORALITY

The Stoic and the modern determinist can agree on the thesis of determinism: given the totality of the causal conditions in the world at a particular time, what happens subsequently is completely determined. However, we have seen that the Stoic and the modern determinist have very different ways of employing causal notions to articulate this view. The modern determinist tends to construe causes as events, which are linked together in an asymmetrical, temporarily ordered sequence of cause and effect marching inexorably from the past to the future. The Stoic, on the other hand, views causes as bodies with active causal powers, and views the unfolding of the universe as due, inexorably, to the activity of these causal powers and their interaction with each other. Are there any advantages to having the Stoic rather than the modern view? I would like to point out several advantages to having the Stoic conception of causality in mind when thinking about questions related to agency and moral responsibility.

First of all, in much of our pre-philosophical thinking about causality, especially as it applies to our own agency and responsibility, we do tend, like the Stoics, to think of ourselves as causes. We think that the person who is fairly held responsible for an action or outcome must have caused it. To think this is to suppose that a person (who is, of course, not an event) is a cause. This perfectly ordinary way of thinking about causality is not easy, in practice, to integrate with the view of causality as a sequence of events, and the worry becomes particularly acute when the sequence of events is supposed to be deterministic. One may be tempted to fall into an error characteristic of many worries about determinism—to "look back over your shoulder" at the inexorable sequence of events that the modern determinist thesis postulates, and to conclude with a sense of powerlessness: you fear these events will "wash over" and engulf you like waves overcoming a struggling swimmer. The error here is to overlook the fact that you are yourself an ingredient in the events determining the outcome. The inexorable sequence of events is not a set of external factors that bear down on you and fully determine your choices from the outside. This error, in fact, amounts to the fallacy of inferring fatalism from determinism.

One might also be tempted, by the divergence between our intuitive understanding of ourselves as causes, on the one hand, and the philosophical view that causes are events, on the other hand, to postulate a sui generis kind of causation exercised by agents alone, in order to mark out the causal status we seem, from the first-person perspective, to have; that is, we might think we are capable of "agent-causation" as opposed to the garden variety of event-causation that operates in the rest of the natural world. This is to adopt a view of agency as radically discontinuous with the causal processes in the rest of the natural world, which is metaphysically a very extravagant assumption. While we have seen that the Stoics distinguish many different types of causes (for example, perfect and principal, on the one hand, and auxiliary and proximate, on the other), they do not attribute to agents causal powers of a sort not at work in the rest of the natural world. Agents, no less than fire, knives, and other bodies, can be perfect and principal causes, as well as auxiliary and proximate causes.

But, one might object, only agents (unlike fire, knives, or other bodies) are morally responsible for their actions, and thus it is reasonable to suppose that they must exercise a distinctive type of causality. In response, the Stoics would likely reply that all bodies have distinctive causal powers (only fire burns, for example, and only acorns grow into oak trees), and the distinctive causal power of agents is virtue or vice. But, the objector will continue, if our virtuous or vicious activity is precipitated by external circumstances (as the thesis of fate affirms), then how can it truly be up to us? The thought of external causation naturally leads one to think of coercion or compulsion or hindrance, all of which are instances of external causal influence. But Chrysippus’s distinction between causes is intended to address this objection. He points out that it makes a difference whether the external cause is a perfect and principal cause, as opposed to a mere triggering cause. Not all external causes are of the hindering or compelling sort. For example, the flesh neither hinders nor compels the knife’s causation of the cutting. Thus, the mere fact that

external causes precipitate our particular virtuous and vicious actions is not enough to establish that they compel us in a way that undermines our responsibility. The Stoic view of morality presupposes that the proper way of evaluating oneself or another in moral terms can be captured in the vocabulary of inner and external causes. Unlike their opponents, who take the salient feature about external factors to be whether they are part of antecedent fully determining conditions, the Stoics insist that what is morally significant about external factors (or "externals") is how one responds to them. One’s response to externals (e.g., whether one uses the traveler or shares the road with him) displays whether one is virtuous or vicious.

Virtue, for the Stoics, concerns the correct use of and attitude toward externals. Specifically, it concerns one’s orientation toward the so-called “external goods” (health, wealth, pleasure, family, reputation, etc.). The virtuous person’s pursuit of these things (which the Stoics prefer to call “indifferents” rather than “goods”) differs from that of the nonvirtuous person in two respects. First of all, the virtuous person makes the correct choice or selection of which of these external objectives to pursue. A vicious person may err in being too greedy—for example, in pursuing more wealth or power than he should. Thus, he would differ from the virtuous person in how he responds to an external “triggering” cause (for example, an opportunity to gain additional wealth at the expense of proper care for his children).

A second way in which an agent’s relation to externals is relevant to her virtue or vice concerns the attitude she takes toward the success or failure of her selected objectives. As the Stoics stress, the achievement of what we elect to pursue is not up to us; the external world, which we do not control, must cooperate if we are to succeed. For example, we may decide, properly, to devote significant energy to raising children, with the hope of making them good people who lead successful lives. But such efforts can be frustrated by disease, death, and other misfortunes. This vulnerability of human endeavors to fortune gives rise to the additional dimension in which the virtuous person differs from the nonvirtuous. The virtuous person, while she will aim at the right sorts of external objectives, will care only about choosing or deciding correctly; therefore, she will not be distressed or grieved when external misfortune prevents her from achieving what she has decided to pursue. The person who is

less than virtuous, by contrast, may care not only about choosing well, but also about achieving what she aims at. So she will be distressed or suffer grief if, for example, her children die or other plans of hers do not succeed. In such circumstances, the difference between the virtuous and the nonvirtuous person lies in how the virtuous person responds to the external causal factors to which, according to Chrysippus, we are inexorably linked in the fabric of fate.

We might well be repelled by the Stoic doctrine of indifferents—the view that external goods are not truly good, and thus provide no grounds for grief or disappointment if we fail to obtain them. However, understanding the doctrine provides the key to interpreting the metaphor of the dog tied to the cart. Aulus Gellius’s version of Chrysippus’s distinction between causes highlights how the vicious person’s attitude toward external conditions (displayed in her emotions or passions) parallels the dog’s position with respect to the cart. The salient difference between the scenario in which the dog follows the cart smoothly and willingly, and the scenario in which it follows with distress and resistance, is not that in the one case the dog’s actions are caused by its assent, while in the other its assent is irrelevant. Rather, the salient difference between the scenarios is whether the journey is rough (full of distress and regret) or smooth (without regret or other passion):

If our minds’ initial makeup is a healthy and beneficial one, all that external force exerted upon them as a result of fate slides over them fairly smoothly and without obstruction. But if they are coarse, ignorant, inept, and unsupported by education, then even if they are under little or no pressure from fate’s disadvantages, they still, through their own ineptitude and voluntary impulse, plunge themselves into continual wrongdoings and transgressions. (Aulus Gellius, 7.2. LS 62D; SVF 2.1000, trans. Long and Sedley)

It is not the external factors, but the qualities of the person’s own mind, that determine whether the agent’s course through life achieves the “good flow of life” (τὸ σόμα τοῦ ὀρθοτητοῦ τῆς ἀγαθῆς ζωῆς), which the Stoics identify as the goal of life, and which they claim is the only virtuous person achieves:

Zeno in his book On the Nature of Man was the first to say that living in agreement with nature (ὁμολογομένῳ τῷ φύσει ζήν) is the end, which is living in accordance with virtue. . . . So too Cleanthes in his book On Meaning, and Posidonius and Hecato in their books On Ends [say the same thing]. . . . Therefore, living in agreement with nature

32 I offer a fuller discussion and defense of Chrysippus on this point in “Moral Responsibility: Aristotle and After”; see also Long, “Freedom and Determinism.”

33 Cicero, De Divinis 3.20-22 (LS 890), 3.32 (LS 891); Cicero, Tusculanae Disputationes 5.40-41 (LS 631); Epictetus, Discourses 3.17-18 (LS 62K); Galen, De Placitis Hippocraticis et Platonis 4.521-28 (SVF 3.468); Alci., De Anima 2.164.3-9 (LS 68); Seneca, Epistulae Morales 92.11-13 (LS 84); Stoics, 92.11-13 (LS 84); Stoics, 2.96.18-297.5 (LS 89M).

34 The interpretation I offer here agrees with that sketched by Long in “Freedom and Determinism,” 191-92.
comes to be the end, which is in accordance with the nature of oneself and that of the whole, engaging in no activity wont to be forbidden by the universal law, which is the right reason pervading everything and identical to Zeus, who is this director of the administration of existing things. And the virtue of the happy man and his good flow of life (εὐπορία βίου) are just this: always doing everything on the basis of the concordance of each man’s guardian spirit with the will of the administrator of the whole. . . . (Diogenes Laertius, 7.87-88 [LS 63C], trans. Long and Sedley)

The vicious person experiences a rough and uncomfortable passage through life, even an unwilling passage, due to her pursuit of inappropriate objects, or to her inappropriate concern for attaining these objects. By contrast, the virtuous person “does nothing which he could regret, nothing against his will, but does everything honorably, consistently, seriously, and rightly” (Cicero, Tusculane Disputationes 5.81).36 The inappropriate concern of the vicious person is expressed in emotions such as disappointment, regret, grief, and feelings of constraint and conflict. These passions have characterized philosophical portraits of vice since Plato and Aristotle.37 The Stoics’ distinctive variation on this familiar theme is to connect these portraits of virtue and vice to their physical theory, in particular their thesis of fate. We are part of the causal nexus of the world, whether we like it or not. How we navigate among the externals determines whether our course of life will be the rough ride of the wicked or the smooth and pleasant flow of life characteristic of the blessed.

VII. CONCLUSION

Despite the potentially confusing nomenclature, and other initial appearances to the contrary, the Stoic thesis of fate is not a thesis of fatalism. Quite unlike the fatalist who claims that human efforts, wills, and deliberations are irrelevant to our actions, the Stoic insists that our actions are up to us because they do depend on our agent and wills, not simply on external causal factors. The Stoic view that our actions depend on our agents is a special case of the main thesis in their doctrine of fate. While that doctrine is a determinist thesis, its main point is to insist on the mutual causal dependence or influence of all things. This relation of mutual causal influence is what the Stoics have in mind when they say that fate is a chain of causes. This view, rather than fatalism, is behind the metaphor of the dog tied to the cart. It is also at the root of Chrysippus’s apparent restriction of the thesis of fate to external causes (Cic., Fat. 41).

36 Translated by Long and Sedley (LS 63M); cf. Epictetus, Discourses 1.12.20-21 (LS 65V); and Stoaeceus, 2.155.5-17 (SVF 3.364, 3.632; LS 65W).
37 Plato, Republic, Books VIII-IX; Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book IX, ch. 4.

While Long and Sedley point out correctly that the restriction is linked to Stoic moral theory, this is only part of the story. I hope to have shown that the insistence on external causes in the doctrine of fate reflects a deep and very important aspect of Stoic thinking about the causal structure of the world: any cause’s activity is part of the interconnected causal nexus that the Stoics identify with fate. This interconnectedness is what holds the world together, in their view. To alter Hume’s phrase, it is not simply causation but fate that is the cement of the universe.38

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