I Shall Do What I Did: Stoic Views on Action

1. A Stoic Example

The Cautious Umbrella Carrier is a little obsessed when it comes to her appearance and health.[1] She is worried about arriving at work with her hair soaked from rain, worried about catching a cold, and so on. At the same time, she is prone to lose umbrellas. On a given morning, she glances out of the window, having already checked a couple of weather forecasts. The chance of precipitation is 30% according to one and 20% according to another. A website that says "30% chance of precipitation" displays a little umbrella symbol. The sky is greyish. While she is getting ready to leave for work, she ponders whether she should take her umbrella. Among other things, she has perceptual impressions of the weather outside. She recalls how upset she gets when she loses an umbrella. The little umbrella symbol from the website lingers in her mind. This annoys her, because she is aware of the disproportionate pull it exerts on her. And she expects that, given how overly cautious she is, she shall end up taking her umbrella anyway, even if she thinks that it is rather unlikely that she will get caught in the rain.

Add to this that her overall state of mind is not simply one of being a cautious umbrella carrier. She has attitudes and affective reactions to all kinds of matters, holds various things to be true and false, perceives the world around her, has studied certain subjects, and so on. As long as she does not have a perfect state of mind, that is, as long as she is

[1] I am grateful to Jens Haas for discussion of my example.

not someone who possesses systematic knowledge and the attitudes corresponding to that knowledge, the Stoics call her a 'fool.' Though almost everyone is going to be placed in this category, everyone's mind is in a particular condition, unique to herself. Accordingly, one might think that if one person is in a given situation – with given perceptions, given input by others, etc. – she will inevitably do just one particular thing. In Stoic terms, assent (the central mental act in agency) is caused by the present mental state of an agent as acted upon by her occurrent thoughts.

Accordingly, the thought *I shall do what I shall do* may cross the mind of the Cautious Umbrella Carrier. Also, being a somewhat reflective person, she is aware of her patterns of action. At times she engages in empirical predictions of her own behavior: she's been through this before. And thus, she thinks *I shall do what I did*, recalling the numerous days when she carried an umbrella without really needing it. The moment when she is opening the apartment door, she shall grab the umbrella – or not. She can almost wait and see what she will be doing. But only *almost*: she cannot *not* think about what she should do. And at the moment when she opens the door, one particular thought – either "take it" or "leave it" – shall have to be assented to, otherwise the umbrella won't get into her hand, *or* she won't get out of the door without the umbrella. Moreover, the Stoics argue that the world goes through cycles. At the end of each cycle, it burns and then, after

conflagration, the next cycle begins.[2] Suppose the Cautious Umbrella Carrier has heard of this theory. The idea that the same events happen in eternal recurrence might suggest to her that she shall do anyway what is, as it were, an unalterable component of the history of the world. She may think *I shall do what I did*, now referring not to earlier occasions, but to previous cycles of the world.

To sum up, the Cautious Umbrella Carrier might think the following thoughts:
PRESENT: I shall do what I shall do [given my state of mind plus occurrent thoughts].
PAST: I shall (more or less) do what I did [on earlier similar occasions].
PREVIOUS: I shall (strictly) do what I did [during previous world cycles].

It is worth asking why the thoughts I call PRESENT, PAST, and PREVIOUS are dispiriting for the Cautious Umbrella Carrier, or anyone who is not perfect. They are dispiriting, I think, because one would like to be able to act according to one's own *occurrent* reasoning. This proposal departs from two influential ways of problematizing the causality of agency. As I suggest, the agent feels trapped, but not by causes outside of

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[2] For recent reconstructions of the theory of conflagration, cf. John Cooper's ("Chrysippus on Physical Elements") and Ricardo Salles' ("Chrysippus on Conflagration and the Indestructibility of the Cosmos") papers in R. Salles (ed.), *God and Cosmos in Stoicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 93-117 and 118-134. – The world's biography (and it is a biography, for the world is thought to be a large animal) recurs in precisely the same way. The Stoics envisage strict identity between entities and their activities for each world cycle. Accordingly, it is not the case that AgentWorld-2 (at a given moment) shall do what AgentWorld-1 (at that respective moment) did. Instead, AgentWorld-n does what AgentWorld-n does: everyone is one agent who recurs, with all her properties, activities, and so on, in every world cycle. The questions of how such identity can be conceived, and why anyone would want to claim that the world goes through such cycles, go beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, it won't be necessary to examine differences between the views held by individual Stoics. I take it that the strongest view (strict identity between worlds and everything in them) is the initial and orthodox view.

her, alien to her thoughts, and not because she would wish to have real alternatives. Instead, she feels trapped by the way her earlier reasoning and acting configured her mind. She has allowed herself to become overly cautious, in a way that is not immediately responsive to occurrent thoughts, and instead responsive to patterns of worrying and behaving accordingly. Note that my example aims to capture a case that falls below the threshold of behavioral or psychiatric disorders. It aims to describe a banal situation. Whatever it is for a given agent, such tendencies are rather widespread: whenever A walks by a certain bakery, A is likely to buy a croissant; whenever B's mother calls, B gets unnerved; whenever there's the slightest chance of rain, C ends up grumpily carrying her umbrella. Such imperfect patterns are the bread and butter of ordinary agency. The agent is well aware that her present actions are related to her earlier actions and the ways in which her earlier actions have shaped her state of mind. Much about her mind might have been acquired before she was fully rational, say, genetically, or in the earliest part of her childhood. Other aspects of her mind were acquired through the particular life she lived up to now. Given who she is, *there is precisely one assent to one impression that is, at this moment, hers* – and given that she is not perfect, this feels like a trap.

The Cautious Umbrella Carrier is a Stoic example. It is phrased in ways that reflect commitments of Stoic philosophy. Most importantly, it is based on the Stoic claim that "[t]he soul has three movements (*kinêmata*) – impression, impulse, and assent".[3] Human

[3] Plutarch, Col. 1122a (= LS 69A, tr. LS).

minds are in three kinds of motion: thoughts, that is, the impressions that figure in an agent's mind; assent to particular impressions, some of which are hormetic (*hormetikê*) and tell the agent to perform a certain action; and finally the impulse (*hormê*) to perform a given action, which, if there is no external impediment, leads to the action.

Moreover, the Cautious Umbrella Carrier is a Stoic example by virtue of what it is not: it is neither a case in which desire battles with reason, nor is it a case in which we care about what is 'up to' the agent because morally weighty matters are at stake. Let me explain. First, the example is not theorized in the Platonic-Aristotelian paradigm of desire versus reason. The Stoics are well-known for being psychological monists, rather than adopting a Platonic or Aristotelian distinction between reason and desire. The components of the Cautious Umbrella Carrier's tumultuous state of mind as sketched above are all represented as thoughts. That is, the idea is not that the Cautious Umbrella Carrier *desires* the security of having her umbrella handy, while she *reasons* that she should not take it. Instead, the Cautious Umbrella Carrier has various competing thoughts, thoughts that have different affective coloring.

Second, the example is not theorized in the modern paradigm that attributes a particular quality and importance to 'moral' questions. Rain-and-umbrella examples are rather widespread in contemporary philosophy. The question of whether it will rain is a much-used example in epistemology. For example, it is asked in which cases I ought to defer to the expert's weather forecast, or how I should respond when you and I come up with

different weather forecasts.[4] These are normative questions, but they do not extend to questions about motivation and agency. For a rain-and-umbrella case to be conflicted, it appears in contemporary discussions, moral issues must be involved. Say, there might be an agent who is tempted to steal someone else's umbrella because of heavy rain outside, and the question is why she shouldn't.[5] The Cautious Umbrella Carrier is a Stoic example because a banal, everyday action is viewed as motivationally conflicted. No other agents are involved, what the agent does is not a question of justice, and so on. Instead, the action is conflicted insofar as the agent aims to be a rational person. She aims to be able to do what she thinks is best. In other words, she aims to assent to that practical ('hormetic') thought in which she tells herself to do what, all things considered, she judges to be best – and *this* is a difficult and conflicted matter.

As will turn out, the core question that the Stoic Up-To-Us theorist addresses is how agents can adhere to *norms of assent*. To make the case for this view, I shall discuss those aspects of Stoic theory that help explain what it means to say, as the Stoics do, that the Cautious Umbrella Carrier's assent is *up to her*: how agents are genuine sources of causality (section 2); how impressions and assent move the mind (section 3); and finally, how it is within one's power to become a better assenter (section 4).

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[4] On these kinds of questions, cf. Adam Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement," *Nous* (2007): 478-502 and Thomas Kelly, "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence," Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111-174.

[5] This is Thomas Nagel's example in *What Does It All Mean?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 64.

2. Agents as Causes

Consider first the causality of agency. In choosing this formulation – the causality of agency – I refrain from saying that we are here dealing with the problem of free will and determinism. As many have noted, it is a difficult question when ancient philosophers started to conceive of a will. According to almost all scholars, the early Stoics do not conceive of a will, let alone a free will; I shall proceed on the assumption that this is a plausible view to hold. What has received less attention is the question of whether one should speak of determinism, and what is implied or suggested by this term.[6] For the purposes of analyzing early Stoic philosophy, I suggest we should do without it. To see why, it is helpful to state which problems *do not* arise for the Stoics.

(i) Determinism is often associated with a conception of science as physics. Physics, in a modern sense, is not concerned with psychological items such as thoughts. Stoic *phusikê* studies corporeals, causality, etc., which for us might count as 'physics.' And yet it studies these questions against the background of the assumption that the world is a large living being; this kind of cosmology might actually be 'biology.' Moreover, the world is moved through its reasoning faculty and the soul/reasoning faculties of its parts, which leads to the study of entities such as thoughts, assents, impulses – entities we might consider the subject-matter of neuroscience and psychology.

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[6] Susanne Bobzien uses the term "determinism" (*Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). In doing so, Bobzien takes it to be relevant that the Stoics do not phrase their theory immediately in terms of *fate*; that they take pains to argue that there can be no *spontaneity* (nothing uncaused); and that the Stoic proposal is one about *causality* (Chapter 1). I agree with all these points.

(ii) Arguably, questions about determinism are tied to the idea that nature is regulated by laws. The Stoics, however, explore *the causality of entities*, not *causal laws*.[7] The Stoics explain human agency in the context of a *scala naturae* that focuses on movement.[8] All entities in the world are pervaded by, and individuated by, a divine power, "breath" (*pneuma*). The lowest kind of entity, say, logs and stones, can only be moved from the outside. Plants and animals are not just individuated by divine *pneuma*, they also have "natures/souls," which enable them to move. Plants move *out of* themselves (movement of growth). Animals move *by* themselves. Rational beings are pervaded by breath in the highest sense. They have reason, and they move through the activities of reason. Taken together, these kinds of entities are the parts or components of the world. The world is itself a living being, and it moves through the movements of its parts. Their activity constitutes the world's activity. Causality, then, is thought to reside in the particular ways in which parts of the world are causes of movement.

(iii) Natural laws, as we think of them today, might be thought to regulate the *connections* between causes and effects. Stoic physics differs significantly from this picture. The

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[7] Michael Frede makes a similar point about ancient philosophy in general in the "Introduction" of his *Sather Lectures*: "Perhaps the most crucial difference is that nobody in antiquity had the notion of laws of nature, meaning a body of laws which govern and explain the behavior of all objects, irrespective of their kind. For the most part, at least, philosophers believed [...] that the most important factor for one's understanding of the way things behave is the nature of an object." *A Free Will. Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, ed. by A.A. Long, foreword by David Sedley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 15.

[8] Origen, *On principles* 3.1.2-3 (= SVF 2.988 = LS 53A).

Stoics do not think in terms of cause-effect sequences. Instead, they explain the movements of the world as the activities of its parts. The corporeal world contains only causes, no effects.[9] Stoic physics is thus concerned with a different kind of connectedness: the inter-relations between organic parts of nature, which together constitute its movements. Cicero speaks of a "connection of cause to cause," which is easy to misread as if he were speaking about a causal nexus in a modern sense.[10] More plausibly, however, he is speaking about entities that are causes and that together make up all the causality there is.

(iv) Another intuition, perhaps most prominent in early thought about determinism (say, in Augustine), is that *God is the law* that determines everything. It is easy to read this idea into Stoic philosophy: for the Stoics, all causes are derivative to one cause, god.[11] But the Stoic proposal, though inspiring for later theological thinkers, is different. For the Stoics, a corporeal god is the active principle. He (or it) permeates the world as its reason and is, strictly speaking, the only cause. In each human being, reason is a *portion* of divine

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[9] According to a widespread notion of cause and effect, both are natural or physical. A cause has an effect and the effect turns into the next cause. That is, one and the same natural occurrence counts as an effect and as a cause, depending on the perspective that is taken. The Stoics do not share this view. Susan Sauvé Meyer discusses this as a deep difference between the Stoic and other views of causation ("Chain of Causes: What is Stoic Fate?" in Ricardo Salles (ed.) (2009), 71-92).

[10] "By 'fate', I mean what the Greeks call *heimarmenê* – an ordering and sequence of causes, since it is the connexion of cause to cause which out of itself produces anything. … Consequently nothing has happened which was not going to be, and likewise nothing is going to be of which nature does not contain causes working to bring that very thing about. This makes it intelligible that fate should be, not the 'fate' of superstition, but that of physics, an everlasting cause of things – why past things happened, why present things are now happening, and why future things will be." Cicero, *On divination* 1.125–6 (LS 55L, tr. LS).

[11] Cf. Vogt, "Sons of the Earth: Are the Stoics Metaphysical Brutes?" *Phronesis* 54 (2009): 136-154.

reason. When a human being sets herself in motion through her reasoning, then this causality is a portion of the causality in the world.[12] It is part of the *activity* in the world. That is, human activity is genuine activity. There is no all-pervading causality over and above the causality of the active parts of the world.[13] This account provides the background of a 'slogan' one might ascribe to Epictetus: "not even Zeus!" Not even Zeus can conquer, as he puts it, an agent's decision-making and faculty of choice.[14]

(v) Finally, physical determinism is often thought to be problematic because it does not afford room for 'mental' causation. For the Stoics, however, 'minds' and their movements are corporeal. But thoughts have incorporeal linguistic counterparts, *lekta* ('sayables'). Is the role of *lekta* such that, after all, the Stoics face the kind of problem that is later

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[12] In the terms of an example by Chrysippus, calling the doctor when you are sick is not something you can do or not do, assuming that whether you shall recover is "fated." Instead, your action of calling the doctor is one of the causes within the causal chain leading to your recovery "[The argument, i.e, the so-called Lazy Argument goes] as follows: 'If it is your fate to recover from this illness, you will recover, regardless of whether or not you call the doctor. Likewise, if it is your fate not to recover from this illness, you will not recover, regardless of whether or not you call the doctor. And one or the other is your fate. Therefore it is pointless to call the doctor.'" (Cicero, *On fate* 28 = LS 55S, tr. LS). In response, Chrysippus insists that your action of calling the doctor is one of the causes that precede your recovery.

[13] Epictetus makes these ideas particularly explicit. He imagines Zeus talking to him: "[...] I have given you a portion of myself, this faculty of positive and negative impulse and of desire and aversion – the faculty, in short, of using mental impressions." (*Discourses* 1.1.12, tr. Long (2002), 63); "For if God, in taking from himself his very own part, which he has given us, had constructed it to be impeded or constrained by himself or by something else, he would no longer be God or caring for us as he should." (*Discourses* 1.17.27, tr. Long (2002), 210).

[14] Margaret Graver picks up this 'slogan' in "Not Even Zeus. A Discussion of A.A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 25 (2003): 345-361. Epictetus' term here is *prohairesis*, which does not figure (or not in comparably prominent ways) in earlier Stoic thought. As Graver points out, *prohairesis* tends to refer to the agent's decision-making faculty rather than particular decisions. This is in agreement with matters discussed in this paper, as they apply to earlier Stoic theories: in discussing the question of what is up to an agent, the Stoics are interested in how it is up to the agent to be in a given state of mind.

discussed in terms of mental causation? The answer to this question is 'no'. *Lekta* are effects, not causes.[15] As effects, they are incorporeal, and outside of causal inter-relations. Recall that the Stoics do not think in terms of cause-effect sequences, in which an effect becomes the cause of the next effect. Instead they propose that the world's parts are inter-related causes that co-effect everything that can be truly thought or said about the world.[16]

To sum up, the question of how Stoic assent, and therefore agency, is *up to us* is not well described as the question of free will and determinism; both notions are in danger of invoking anachronistic associations. The Stoic study of nature considers human beings as genuine *agents*. The kinds of problems that later philosophers envisage, as if mental acts needed to insert themselves into closed causal chains, or as if they needed to spontaneously start novel causal chains, do not arise for the Stoics. Applied to our example, this means that the Cautious Umbrella Carrier need not worry about causes alien to her mental activity determining her actions. It is *she who acts*.

[15] For the Stoics, a causal relationship is a three-place relation: a corporeal acts on another corporeal, and the effect is a predicate. SE M 9.211; SE PH 3.14; Clement *Strom*. 8 9, 26. For example, a knife acts on a piece of paper (both knife and paper being bodies), the effect of which is that the paper is 'being cut' (a predicate). It is in the context of classifying this predicate that Cleanthes introduces the term *lekton* (Clement, *Strom*. VIII, 9, 26; Cf. M. Frede, 'The Original Notion of Cause,' in id., *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 125-150 at 137. – Indeed, as scholars have observed, the Stoic conception of a *lekton* was not introduced in the theory of language or in logic; it was introduced in the theory of causality. The Stoics consider it a premise that only corporeals can act and thereby be causes.

[16] Cf. Wolfhart Totschnig, "Bodies and Their Effects," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* (forthcoming).

What, then, is the problem that the Up-To-Us-Theorist must address? As I see it, the problem is how *norms* of assent fit into the picture so far described. Norms of assent are crucially important to the Stoics: one should only assent to cognitive impressions; one should never assent rashly, but always in a calm and considerate manner; and so on.[17] How can the Stoics account for this "should", given that, apparently, the agent's assent immediately reflects her state of mind? What enables the agent to adhere to norms of assent, aiming to become a better assenter? The rest of this paper shall be spent addressing this question.

3. The Movement of Impression

Consider how the Stoics describe the movements of impression. For present purposes, we need two distinctions, between cognitive and non-cognitive impressions and between convincing and non-convincing impressions.[18] Cognitive impressions are a subset of true impressions. Both fools and wise people have cognitive impressions. Cognitive

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[17] These injunctions are a frequent part of Stoic texts, starting in early Stoicism and extending to Seneca. Some particularly relevant passages about the attitudes characteristic of the wise person on the one hand (no precipitate assent, no weak assent, no *doxa*, etc.) and the non-wise person on the other hand are collected in Chapter 41 "Knowledge and Opinion" in A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic philosophers*, two volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987). These passages are not always explicitly formulated as norms such as "one should not assent rashly"; instead, the formulations often correspond to "the wise person never assents rashly." This kind of claim, however, must be read in conjunction with the general norm that one ought to strive for the attitudes and mental states of the wise person. That is, such claims translate into the norm that one should never assent in precipitate fashion.

[18] I won't go into the details of how to explain cognitive impressions; see chapter 7 "Why Beliefs are Never True: A Reconstruction of Stoic Epistemology," in my forthcoming book *Belief and Truth: A Skeptic Reading of Plato* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2012).

impressions make it clear through themselves that they present things as they are. They all but seize us by the hair, pulling us to assent.[19]

Convincing impressions create an even (*leios*) movement (*kinêma*) in the soul.[20] Roughly speaking, this means they appeal to us and make us inclined to assent. The Stoics distinguish between convincing (*pithanon*) impressions, non-convincing impressions, both convincing and non-convincing impressions, and impressions that are neither convincing nor non-convincing. An example of a convincing impression is the impression that it is day (assuming it is day), or that one is talking while in fact one is talking. Convincing impressions are said to be 'conspicuous'.[21] This conspicuousness (*periphaneia*), however, could be mere appearance.

The notion of simultaneously convincing and unconvincing impressions addresses a specific kind of psychological conflict. For example, when I consider a logical puzzle, I am torn: I know that I need to dismiss one premise; not all premises can be true. But when I look at them individually, each premise is convincing. The impression of the argument as a whole is convincing and unconvincing. Neither convincing nor unconvincing are impressions such as "The number of stars is even"; we are neither inclined to assent nor moved to reject this impression.

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[19] SE M 7.253-60.

[20] SE M 7.242-6 (= LS 39G).

[21] SE M 7.242-6 (= LS 39G).

It might seem that, in the case of cognitive impressions, the agent is *compelled* to assent.[22] Scholars have taken this issue to be of crucial relevance to what they see as the problem of determinism in Stoic philosophy. I have already argued that it is misleading to think in these terms. Adding to this, we can see that the question of how cognitive impressions move us – whether and in what sense they "compel" assent – should not be studied in the hopes that they do not *fully* or *strictly* compel us, leaving as it were a tiny bit of space for 'freedom.' The point is not that impressions move us only so far, and then comes an independent motion, assent, which we perform at will. I share Michael Frede's view that this kind of 'spontaneity' would be rather strange. The proposal is that, if impressions affect a mind *in a given state*, then the assent that follows is the assent *of the cognizer whose mind is in this state*.[23]

Now, suppose there are cognitive hormetic impressions. To my knowledge, none of the sources describe an hormetic impression of the form "I should do X" as cognitive, and yet the wise person only assents to cognitive impressions, so presumably her hormetic

[22] The phrase "all but seizes us by the hair" has received multiple interpretations. John Rist takes the "all but" to refer to a limit on the power of cognitive impressions to move the cognizer to assent: they move the cognizer to assent, but only almost. A cognitive impression pulls me by the hair up to the very brink of assent, and then I get the chance to say "yes" or "no" (*Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 144). However, this misleadingly suggests something like doxastic voluntarism.

[23] In Chrysippus' famous example of a cylinder being kicked and rolling downhill, assent is *not* associated with the act of kicking. It is associated with the disposition of an agent's mind. Cicero, *On fate* 42–3 (= LS 62C 8–9); Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 7.2.11 (= LS 62D 4). Cf. Susanne Bobzien, "Chrysippus' Theory of Causes," in K. Ierodiakonou, *Topics in Stoic Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 196-242; and Bobzien (1998), 261-5.

impressions must be cognitive. But what about the hormetic impressions of the rest of us? Generally speaking, fools can have cognitive impressions. For example, I can have the cognitive impression that it is raining. However, the hormetic impression that I should take the umbrella is far less likely to be cognitive. Why? In short, the Stoic intuition is that practical questions resemble complicated theoretical questions, not simple perceptual impressions.[24]

Consider an example. For me to be able to, say, think the thought "water is H_2O" *as* a cognitive impression, I must have done some chemistry; I must *understand* what it means. Now assume that I haven't studied any chemistry. I have heard others say "water is H_2O." Though the acronym doesn't really mean anything to me, I have heard it so often and from such competent people that I assume it is true. For someone like me, "water is H_2O" is *not* a cognitive impression. It is somewhat blurry, because "H_2O" isn't a term that is ultimately clear to me. For the person with training in chemistry, however, "water is H_2O" is such that, when she thinks it, she must accept it. The impression "pulls her by the hair" and compels her to assent. This does not mean that assent is not up to

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[24] A case in which an ordinary, non-wise agent has a cognitive hormetic impression would have to be genuinely simple, not involving any value judgments. It is hard to come up with such cases, perhaps because one might be inclined to think that actions of a sufficiently simple kind do not even fully qualify as 'actions'. Consider "walk *this* way" (assuming that the non-wise person has a cognitive impression of what is the right way to her destination). Is this a cognitive hormetic impression? In all cases in which one can plausibly ask whether one should really go where one plans to go, it is not; there will be background questions that involve value judgments. A genuinely simple case would have to be imagined, such as leaving a room at the end of an event. Perhaps "leave the room now" and "walk *this* way [through the door]" are hormetic cognitive impressions of the non-wise person. But one might wonder whether such matters are indeed theorized as assents to hormetic impressions, leading up to action, or whether much of it would be accounted for differently, say, as monitoring one's surroundings. Unfortunately, we do not know what Stoic theory says about such cases.

her; it is. The impression causes her to assent, but due to some prior achievement of hers, namely due to the fact that she has studied chemistry and understands what "water is H_2O" precisely means (unlike me, she is able to think in terms of 'molecules', and so on, actually understanding what she says when she says "water is H_2O"). For me, "water is H_2O" might be almost like "the number of stars is odd": it doesn't greatly move me. I assume it is true, just as I might be inclined to believe some famous physicists if they told me what the number of stars is. But I am not in a position to think such thoughts as cognitive thoughts of my own. If I were to assent, I would not acquire a cognition. My assent is up to me in the sense that it isn't anyone's fault but mine that I don't understand "water is H_2O" properly and thus acquire merely a blurry assumption by accepting it.

Compare this to the practical case. The wise person and the non-wise person can both think "water is H_2O" or "I should take the umbrella"; but their thoughts do not have the same quality. For "take the umbrella" to be a cognitive impression, on a day where it is not (yet) raining, the agent would have to have a proper understanding of the relative values of health, wealth (as involved in buying and losing things), appearance, and so on. But hardly anyone does, or so the Stoics think – this would involve being able to correctly understand what is really good for human beings, and what is merely of value. Recall that, for the Stoics, things like health and wealth are preferred indifferents, and sickness and poverty are dispreffered indifferents. Such things have value and disvalue without thereby counting as good. What then is good? Virtue (or knowledge or wisdom) is good, and that means, roughly speaking, that it is good to deliberate perfectly with

respect to things of value and disvalue.[25] This is evidently a highly demanding task. It involves understanding that such things as wealth and health are reasonably preferred without thereby being good – and that is a rather complicated thought. It is difficult as a piece of ethical theory *and* it is difficult to fully appreciate, such that one's affective attitudes come to reflect it. Suppose one studies Stoic arguments for this position and suppose that, while one one thinks through them, one is inclined to think that the Stoic views are right. And yet, at a given occasion, one might find oneself unable to react accordingly, for example, getting genuinely upset about a lost umbrella or seriously worried about catching a cold. Such emotions, reflective of an incomplete appreciation of the point that wealth and health are not actually good, are hard to shake off. Accordingly, to see clearly what one should be doing – acknowledging the value of things like health and wealth without mistaking it for goodness – is difficult. For ordinary agents, I suggest, hormetic impressions tend to be non-cognitive; we tend not to see clearly what we should be doing. Pulled in different directions, we keep changing our minds, or, too strongly attached to something of mere value, we do not change our minds when we should.

4. Norms of Assent

[25] Cf. for example DL 7.101-2 (= LS 58A); DL 7.104 (= LS 58B); SE M 11.22-6 (= LS 60G); SE M 11.59; Stobaeus 2.82,20-1 and 2.83,10-85,11 (= LS 58C, D, F); Stobaeus 5,906,18-907,5 (= LS 59I); Cicero, *De finibus* 3.20-2 and 5.20. These are much-debated matters. For detailed engagement with the literature, cf. Vogt, "Die frühe stoische Theorie des Werts," in Ch. Schröer and F.-J. Bormann (eds.), *Abwägende Vernunft* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), 61-77; and Chapter 4 in Vogt, *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City: Political Philosophy in the Early Stoa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Characteristically, the non-wise person has a certain amount of chaos in her mind. She goes back and forth between different ways of seeing things. This, I propose, though generally a bad thing, is her reason for hope. Given that some of her thoughts are along the right lines, she can make an effort to, as it were, 'jump on them': to make them the basis of her actions, and to integrate them into improved patterns. To see how this works, turn to the question of how an agent can have *several thoughts* in her mind.

Zeno explains impressions as imprints of the mind.[26] The notion of an imprint (*tupôsis*) suggests something static: an impression is a mark in the physiological soul. Suppose we take the idea of a physiological imprint seriously. How many imprints can be made next to each other or, assuming that there is only so-and-so much 'space,' on top of each other, and still have something 'legible'? Perhaps quite a few, but that is far from enough. A person thinks very many thoughts, some of them sensory, others non-sensory; often she stores them as memories, sometimes easily accessible, sometimes as a fainter recollection; and so on. Chrysippus seems to have taken issue with the notion of an imprint because it allows too little flexibility in how one envisages these matters. To improve upon Zeno's notion, he describes an impression as an alteration (*alloiôsis*) (DL 7.50). This notion may go a long way towards accommodating different ways in which impressions can figure in a person's mind, as occurrent thoughts or latently, as vague or precise, as standing in particular relations, as more or less prominent, and so on.

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[26] DL 7.50.

Chrysippus' proposal cannot, however, require that it must be possible to have simultaneously several occurrent thoughts that, as it were, occupy the *same* mental space.

In the context of discussing *akrasia*, the Stoics suggest that the agent *oscillates* between two thoughts.[27] She goes back and forth – so quickly as to hardly be aware of the temporal sequence – between two hormetic thoughts, such as "do X" and "don't do X" (or "do Y"). She does not think these thoughts simultaneously; but she thinks them in such immediate sequence that it can almost appear to her as if both thoughts were available at the same time. This suggests a picture of what it is like to aim for the better action: one could, as it were, aim for precise *timing*. Suppose I go back and forth in my mind between taking one of two pieces of cake on a plate. One piece of cake is large and contains a lot of cream; the other is smallish and consists mostly of fruit. If the Stoic analysis of *akrasia* is plausible, then my task would be to set myself in motion through assent at the precise moment when my occurrent thought is "take this [the smallish, healthier] piece of cake."[28] According to this analysis, the agent does not struggle to overcome desires through the power of reason. Instead, the phenomenology of such situations is such that one practical thought competes with another practical thought. Given who I am at this point in time, I cannot delete either of these thoughts or make it motivationally powerless. All I can do is aim at assenting to the thought that, I believe,

[27] Plutarch, *On moral virtue* 446F-447A (= SVF 3.459, part = LS 65G).

[28] Given that, for the Stoics, health is not good, one might be misled into thinking that this is not a Stoic example. However, the fact that health is not good does not mean that it does not have value; indeed, it does. It is a preferred indifferent, and decision-making is concerned with the value and disvalue of indifferents (DL 7.104-5).

moves me toward the better action. Having been successful in this, I shall be better positioned to succeed again next time.

To explore this further, consider a case of Sorites. (It is helpful to include such cases, because they bring home that the Stoics do not distinguish in Aristotelian fashion between practical and theoretical reasoning, and that the way in which assent is up to the agent is the same, whether we consider action or theoretical thought.) Someone asks me "two is few; is three also few?", "three is few, is four also few?", and so on. In the early stages, I have cognitive impressions: "yes, two is few", and so on. Suppose I begin to hesitate at five or six. Given the setup – someone questions me, and I feel under pressure to come up with answers – I shall continue to say "yes", until at some point the conclusion is reached that, if two is few, then ten is few.[29] This conclusion seems unacceptable, but now it is too late. The imperfect cognizer will be unhappy with her responses: she feels trapped by her own assents, which were given too quickly. The wise person, according to the Stoics, becomes silent at some point during the Sorites-questions, and only after a pause switches from "yes" to "no."

According to the Stoics, fools assent weakly, that is, in changeable ways: they might hit the mark and assent to the thought that steers them in the right direction, but they might also misfire and assent where they shouldn't. The Stoics define *doxa* – the kind of truth-claim that non-wise cognizers make – generally as weak assent. Changeability is a core

[29] DL 7.82.

component of the state of mind of an imperfect agent.[30] Notably, this is not the (presumably laudable) changeability of correcting one's views when confronted with good arguments, or of thinking one's way through different hypotheses, aware that one has not yet figured out how to see a certain matter. It also does not mean that imperfect cognizers are only weakly attached to their views, as if they generally adopted a hypothetical stance. On the contrary, imperfect cognizers are thought to be tempted to make unqualified truth-claims; working with hypotheses, mere supposition, and so on, is already a sign of progress, for it reflects awareness that one might not have the answer to a given question. Changeability as a mark of an imperfect state of mind, then, refers to quite different phenomena: quick changes of mind; assents that do not fit together, so that the tension between them makes each assent unstable; and, generally, a lack of integration between individual assents, such that the logical relations between an agent's views are messy. Oscillation between two judgments, as it occurs in cases that other philosophers describe in terms of 'weak will,' is rooted in precisely this weakness.[31]

If someone's state of mind is stable, there can be only one outcome. This applies to the case of the wise person. Her inability to assent and act otherwise is by no means a limitation: it is her achievement to be in the stable condition of wisdom. For all imperfect cognizers, however, the very instability of their minds affords flexibility, though not, in a strict sense, alternatives. At any given moment, there is only one causal story: *this* state of

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[30] For detailed discussion of the weakness of *doxa*, see Chapter 7 in Vogt (2012, forthcoming).

[31] Plutarch, *On moral virtue* 446F-447A (= SVF 3.459, part = LS 65G).

mind plus *this* occurrent thought leads to *this* assent and thus *this* impulse for action. But there is instantaneous change between occurrent thoughts, and the agent can improve her manner of assent, for example, by aiming to put such thoughts as "don't let anyone pressure me into a quick response" into the forefront of her mind, thus attending to versions of the Stoic norm "don't assent rashly." Similarly, she can try to become better at 'aiming' at the occurrent thought that is the better thought to act on. States of mind vary quickly, and if one succeeds in holding back just a little bit – not assenting rashly – another course of action becomes available.

But isn't the very effort of attending to epistemic norms already something that, given Stoic premises, should not be in the agent's power? Epistemic norms are, for the Stoics, thoughts like any other thoughts. That is, an agent's observations about her own tendencies to act and about ways in which she can work around her psychology have the power that other impressions have too: they move her. It is not, I propose, possible for an agent to – as it were 'spontaneously' – have greater psychological powers of resistance and not give in to appealing impressions. However, insofar as human impressions are *thoughts*, it is within the agent's power to *follow through with her thinking*.

Suppose the Cautious Umbrella Carrier thinks, "I shouldn't assent under pressure: the moment I actually go through the door is a moment of pressure, because I tend to run late and because I have to think of too many things at once. My mind is in turmoil. At such moments, I end up assenting to the thought that happens to come first, or that happens to

be more vivid." This might lead the Cautious Umbrella Carrier to position her umbrella in her bedroom, so that the relevant decision is not made at the very moment of departing for work. And this might enable her, at the moment when she decides whether she takes the umbrella, to attend calmly to her thoughts on the matter, rather than rashly.

Now it might seem that, in treating herself this way, the agent is not really seeing herself as an agent: she manipulates herself, rather than put trust in her powers of reasoning and her ability to do as she thinks she should. Insofar as this is an objection to the Stoic proposal, I think it is misguided. True, the agent does not assume that, if only she can figure out what is best, then she shall perform that action. Instead, she takes an empirical perspective towards her agential and cognitive powers, and she has good reason to do so. Sheer trust in one's ability to perform the action one considers best appears naive. It might sometimes be possible to do so, but this is not something one can rely on. If one were to statistically predict one's behavior, one would say that, more likely, one shall end up acting according to patterns and attitudes acquired over time.[32]

That is, it is of central importance that what moves agents – impressions – are *thoughts*. Thoughts have content, and though they are physiological movements, they move us

[32] This proposal addresses questions that Kantians discuss, and where Kantians tend to have rather different intuitions. For example, Christine Korsgaard argues that as agents we must see ourselves as rational, rather than take an empirical perspective on ourselves ("Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Reciprocity and Responsibility in Personal Relations," *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992): 305-332). Against this, I propose the Stoics are right in not making this kind of distinction. I think that, as agents, we see ourselves as reasoners *and* we see ourselves (and our reasoning) in an empirical light, and we do so within *one* perspective.

largely in conformity with their content. I say “largely” because, as Michael Frede has shown, ‘sayables’ (*lekta*), the linguistic counterparts of impressions, need not capture everything about the impression qua physiological movement of the mind. However, the way in which one thought leads to the next is dependent on its content. This does not mean that sequences of thought generally follow sound logic. Many sequences of thoughts might be associative, as when I think of a croissant the moment I think of a bakery that I pass by if I take a certain route to the office. But, as in this example, the content of these thoughts is by no means unrelated: I have eaten a croissant pretty much every day I chose that particular way to work. Insofar as thoughts are the relevant *movers*, the Stoic answer to the question of how it is in our power to become a better assenter must be that, well, we can think. As thinkers, we can observe patterns of behavior, study human psychology, think through the importance of epistemic norms, and so on. This is our only angle on the causes that operate in our actions. The Cautious Umbrella Carrier cannot spontaneously become a relaxed person, easy-going about the little misfortunes of life, making decisions reflective of such an attitude. She can only take small steps in the right direction, by thinking through epistemic norms combined with her own psychology, finding angles where she can put herself in a better position to assent as she should. In this manner, she can make progress, and this is how her agency is up to her.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, consider again PRESENT, PAST, and PREVIOUS. "I shall do what I shall do," "I shall do what I did (on past occasions)," and "I shall do what I did (in a previous world cycle)" are *useful* thoughts to think. They belong to a way of looking at agency that is rooted in natural science, and thus to a way of looking at agency that has a chance to come up with ways to improve one's own behaviors. They are dispiriting not because there is something wrong with the world if agents are not 'free' in a more radical way, or because it would seem to us that we are free while science suggests that we are not. They are dispiriting because they confront the agent with the fact that she is far from perfect. For the wise person, PRESENT, PAST, and PREVIOUS are perfectly happy thoughts to think: she shall do what is right, as she always does.[33] The discomfort that attaches to these thoughts for ordinary agents is that one feels trapped by one's own deficiencies, by patterns and attitudes that are hard to shake off and that lead one towards actions which, on consideration, one might rather not perform. The problem traditionally referred to as the problem of determinism, then, becomes the problem of working successfully with and around one's own psychology, so that it eventually becomes a psychology that doesn't need to be worked around or improved – the psychology of the wise person.[34]

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[33] To use an example from Susan Wolf: "I cannot tell a lie" is not felt to be dispiriting; instead, this kind of inability to go for a different option is seen as an accomplishment. *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 80.

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