**Stoic Cosmology & Epistemology**

**I. Stoic cosmology (DL 7.134, HP 132)**

"They believe that there are two principles of the universe, the active, and the passive. The passive, then, is unqualified substance, i.e., matter, whereas the active is the rational principle [logos] in it, i.e., god. For he being eternal and [penetrating all of matter, is the craftsman of all things"

**(1)** **Two Principles:** **Passive/Active**

Passive Principle is Matter—material elements.

Active Principle is is God, whom the Stoics also identify with Mind and with Fate and Zeus (DL 7. 135 HP 133).

**(2) Corporeality**

Passive Material Elements and Active Principles: Both of these are corporeal. What does that mean? Both the active and passive principles are extended in three-dimensions and are causally efficacious. When the Stoics speak of the logos, reason, they're speaking of a corporeal principle, a body of a certain sort. Both of these principles "occupy space" and are "physically there". Thoroughly blended together.

**II. Stoic Epistemology**

1. **The Stoics are Empiricists about the Contents of our Ideas**

John Locke: "*Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has pained on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience. In that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself*".

Locke says that the mind at birth is like a blank sheet of paper, a tabula rasa. The Stoics had the idea much earlier:

“The Stoics say: when man is born, the leading part of this soul is like a sheet of paper in good condition for being written on. On this he inscribes each and every one of his conceptions (ennoai).” HP 128 (Aetius)

So a newborn lacks any conceptions of things, and it is only sense-perception which allows the baby to acquire a stock of ideas.

**Epistemological Uphot:** According to the Stoics, there is nothing in the mind that's not first in sense perception. This is a form of empiricism—the view that the contents of our ideas are entirely derived from sense perception.

Sense-perceptions are the product of an interaction between the human soul and physical objects. Zeno called the result of this interaction an "impression" (or “presentation”) which translates the Greek *hê phantasia.* An impression is some sort of stamping of the object on the soul (which, for the Stoics, is itself physical).

**(2) Two Classes of Impressions**: (Cicero 1.40-2) HP 124-5

(i) Graspable [kataleptic] and (ii) Non-graspable.

Graspable presentations are supposed to guarantee reliable access to the world.

Three criteria for a graspable impression:

(a) impression comes from an existing object

(b) impression is stamped in accordance with the object

(c)the impression must be an impression such as *could not* come from a non-existing object

Graspable impressions are the sort of impressions that you cannot be mistaken about; when you assent to them, you will automatically be right.

Cf. Descartes: If you're familiar with Modern philosophy, you should hear parallels here with Descartes' notion of clear and distinct ideas, which are supposed to get him out of the Cartesian circle.

**(3) Stoic Account of Knowledge**

The possibility of knowledge depends on the possibility of a kataleptic impression. Kataleptic impressions form the basis for knowledge, which is itself a kind of unshakeable interlocking set of beliefs.

Famous Stoic image:

"[Zeno] said that not all presentations are reliable, but only those which have a

distinctive kind of clear statement to make about the objects of presentation; when this presentation is discerned all on its own, then it is 'graspable' . . . But when it had been received and approved then he said it was 'grasping ' -- like those things gripped by one's hand . . . What had been grasped by sense perception, he called this itself a sense-perception, and if it was grasped in such a way that it could not be shaken by argument he called it knowledge; if not, he called it 'ignorance, which is also the source of opinion that is weak and a state shared with what is false and unknown." (Cicero Academica 1.41 HP 124)

**Stoic Ethics**

**I. Background Assumptions**

1. Nature as a rational, providential craftsman

“The cosmos is administered by mind and providence, since mind penetrates every part of it just as soul does us. But it penetrates some things more than others. For it penetrates some as a condition, for examples, bones and sinews, and others as mind, for example, the leading part of the soul.” (DL 7.138-139)

1. Eudaimonism

**II. Stoic Account of Happiness: Virtue is necessary *and sufficient* for happiness.**

1. Necessary: (Plato and Aristotle won’t complain about this.)

“Happiness lies in virtue.” (DL 7.89)

What is good or beneficial is good by participating in virtue. E.g., a good action is good because it is in accordance with virtue; a good man is good because he participates in virtue. (DL 7.94)

“To benefit is to change or maintain something in accordance with virtue” (DL 7.104).

2. Sufficient:

“It is possible to be happy even without these things [i.e., the merely preferred things like health and wealth].” (DL 7.104)

Cf. Aristotle, who thinks that happiness needs external goods, e.g., wealth, power, and friends to do fine actions, good birth, good children, and even good look (*EN* I.8 1199a28-1099b8).

**III. Stoic Account of Virtue**

**1. Virtue is a disposition of the soul that leads to a life in agreement.** (DL 7.89)

* **Disposition**: The Stoics think that dispositions of the soul to desire certain things or to have certain emotions rest on judgments that a person has about what is good and bad. Bad desires and passions (=bad dispositions) are based on irrational or false judgments. (DL 7.110-111) Good states of the soul are/arise from reasonable or correct judgments. (DL 7.116)
* **So, virtue (i.e., a good disposition) is a matter of having knowledge.** To be virtuous is nothing more than to make correct judgments about what is truly good and bad. “For he who has virtue has a theoretical knowledge of what is to be done also practices it.”And the four primary virtues (prudence, courage, temperance, justice) are just the applications of this knowledge in different context.(DL 7.126)
* **Virtue implies agreement with nature. This is because virtue implies living according to reason (the basis for your knowledge of what is good and bad). The Stoics identify reason with nature, and so to live according to reason is to live according to nature.**

**IV. Reconstructed argument for the threefold (reason, nature, virtue) thesis in DL 7.86-89:**

1. What is natural to a living thing’s constitution is governed by what is according to the most perfect faculty given to that living thing. That is, the most perfect faculty of a living thing is that living thing’s nature.
2. Reason is the most perfect faculty given to human.
3. What is natural to human is governed by what is according to reason, i.e., human nature is reason. [1,2]
4. (Naturalism) The goal of a living thing is to live in agreement with its nature.
5. So, the goal of human is to live according to reason. [3,4]
6. But reason, penetrating all things, is the nature of the universe, and human nature is just part of this universal nature. (Recall the active principle of the cosmos from DL 7.135.)
7. Therefore, the human goal is to live according to what is both human nature and the nature of the universe. [5,6]
8. But the perfect disposition of the soul to accord one’s life with nature *is* (human) virtue. [definition of virtue]
9. Therefore, the human goal is also to live according to virtue. [7,8]

**Epicurean Ethics**

**I. Epicurean Hedonism** (*hêdonê* = pleasure):

**(1).** Eudaimonist framework

(**2).** Happiness = *ataraxia*, freedom from disturbance: "The unwavering contemplation

of these [distinctions among desires] enables one to refer every choice and

avoidance to the health of the body and the freedom of the soul from disturbance

[*ataraxia*], since this is the goal of the blessed life".

**(3).** Pleasure:

• Static/katastematic pleasure consists in the absence of pain, want and desire,

e.g., freedom from hunger, thirst.

• Kinetic pleasures: always involve a change in one's psychic state, valuable as

a means to achieving static pleasure (e.g., quenching one's thirst).

• *ataraxia* consists in static pleasure, understood as the absence of pain (33, 60).

(**4).** Adaptive conception of happiness: *ataraxia* achieved by (1) satisfying desires, (2)

eliminating them. Thus, in order to be happy, one ought to change desires so that one only wants things that are easy to get.

**II. Further Ethical Claims:**

**(1).** Fear of Death is Irrational (p.29)

1. Nothing is good or bad for one except sense experience, i.e. feelings of pleasure and pain.
2. The dead don’t have any sense experiences.
3. Therefore nothing is good or bad for the one who is dead.
4. Therefore the state of being dead is not (good or) bad for the one who is dead.
5. If x is not bad for one when it is present, then there is no rational ground, before it is present, to fear its future presence.
6. Therefore no living person has any rational ground to fear his future state of being dead.

**(2).** Relation of Virtue and Happiness:

• Virtue is not an intrinsic good and is no part of happiness

• Virtue and prudence are *always* the best *means* of securing happiness

**(3).** Justice is by Convention (*nomos*), not Nature (*phusis*): "Justice was not a thing in

Its own right, but exists in mutual dealings in whatever places there is a pact about neither harming one another nor being harmed" (35).

**Causation and Free Will in Stoic and Epicurean Philosophy**

**I. Terminology**

Causal Determinism: Every event is completely caused.

Causal Indeterminism: Not every event is completely caused; at least one event is not completely caused.

Compatiblism: Free will and determinism are compatible.

Incompatibilism: Free will and determinism are incompatible.

Libertarianism: Incompatibilism + we have free will (so determinism is false).

Hard determinism: Incompatibilism + we do not have free will (determinism is true).

Fate: The Stoics use this term for causal determinism. This is different from 'fatalism', when the latter is used for the view that human action has no influence on future events.

* The Stoics are causal determinists and compatibilists; they offer a compatibilist account of free will
* Epicurus is a causal indeterminist and an incompatibilist.

**II. The Lazy Argument against Stoic Fate (as formulated on p. 182):**

1. If it is fated that you will recover whether or not you call the doctor, then you will recover.

2. If it is fated that you will not recover whether or not you call the doctor, then you will not recover.

3. It is fated either that you will recover whether or not you call the doctor, or that you will not recover whether or not you call the doctor.

4. Therefore there is no point in calling the doctor - a given outcome is already predetermined, independently of what you will do.

Initial Stoic reply to the Lazy argument: the Stoics appeal to their doctrine of co-fated or conjoined events, confatalia (see pp. 182, 190). My calling the doctor is just as much fated as my recovering. It is fated that I’ll recover because I called the doctor.

**III. Carneades' alternative response to the Lazy Argument (pp. 182-3):**

1. If there are antecedent causes for everything that happens, then everything happens within a closely knit web of natural connections.

2. If so, necessity causes everything.

3. If so, nothing is in our power.

4. But some things are in our power.

5. If everything happens by fate, everything happens as a result of antecedent causes.

6. So, not everything happens by fate.

This alternative Stoic reply involves distinguishing (a) perfect and principal causes from (b) auxiliary and proximate causes (see, e.g., p. 187). While auxiliary and proximate causes are not up to us, principal causes are up to us insofar as they are in some sense internal to us. This secures (4) above.

**IV. Principal vs. Auxiliary Causes**

1. Principal/Perfect: salient explanatory factor: what makes a difference in the circumstances. My assenting to the impression that it would be good to light the forest on fire.

2. Auxiliary/Approximate: necessary conditions (background standing conditions) wind, trees in fire case. The impression that it would be good to set the forest on fire.

Cylindrical Shape (“Rollability”)= principal cause of cylinder’s rolling.

Rolling Cylinder: I push the cylinder= approximate cause of the cylinder’s rolling

Stoics: I freely cause the forest fire just in case my decision to light the match is the principal/perfect cause of the forest fire; I freely do something just in case the causal chain goes through me in the right way—b/c of my decision, b/c of my character.

**V. Epicurus on Free Will**

Incompatibilist; rejects determinism. Epicurus: free will requires that we reject determinism (p. 65, 251).

**(1). Background: Atomism** (*atomos* = unable to be cut, indivisible)**:**

The universe contains an infinite number of atoms, falling in a fixed direction.

• According to Epicurus, the "swerve" of atoms provides a basis for human freedom and responsibility, in addition to allowing for compound objects.

**(2). The "Swerve"**: Two possible interpretations

**(i)** A *single occurrence* of the swerve in the brain's causal is history sufficient for

moral responsibility, since it ensures that voluntary action originates in the agent alone.

**(ii)** Every instance of willing an action or deciding on an action implies an instance of the swerve.

Problem: it seems that my being responsible and free requires non-randomness; I don’t want it to be the case that my decision just happens. Is my decision uncaused?

**Skepticism**

**Problem of Conflicting Appearances**

1. x appears F to A, not F to B
2. the appearances are (or seem to be) equipollent
3. suspension of judgment follows
4. freedom from disturbance results