

Report on Vladimír Mikeš, 'Le paradoxe stoïcien: liberté de l'action déterminée'

The primary 'paradox' addressed in this thesis is one that concerns the Stoic theory of action: the well-known tension between the thesis of universal causal determination on the one hand and the kinds of responsibility and even autonomy attributed to human agents on the other. Vladimír Mikeš (henceforth 'M.')

defends a version of the compatibilist reading, using a frequently original set of approaches. The main Stoic concepts re-evaluated in the course of his investigation are those of rationality, assent, virtue and freedom. The aim, and the upshot, are an improved understanding of the Stoic system in its own terms, and not an externally imposed philosophical evaluation. The paradox is not eliminated, but is to a considerable extent disarmed.

The primary method followed is that of adjudicating, and seeking to advance beyond, the modern interpretative debate, with reference to the views of a small but well-selected set of scholars, above all Susanne Bobzien and Tad Brennan. One of M.'s many virtues is that his independence does not make him insensitive to the merits of others' work. He regularly seeks to retain what is right in the interpretations he criticises, sometimes even in a pair of directly opposed interpretations. A tactic which he puts to excellent use is to resolve such conflicts by highlighting legitimate alternative perspectives, between which a final choice is not required.

The Greek and Latin evidence is always borne in mind, and seems to be very well known to M., but in the discussion it is more often presupposed than systematically catalogued and analysed. The main discussion of evidence centres around a modest-sized group of source passages, in particular two from Cicero, and even these are not very closely analysed. The great bulk of the thesis is taken up, rather, with an extremely subtle sequence of conceptual analyses. Whether readers end up agreeing or disagreeing with his conclusions, there is much to be learnt from M.'s arguments. I consider the thesis an exceptionally intelligent and professional piece of work, fully deserving to find its way into print.

I am not able to judge the quality of M.'s French, but I found the exposition very lucid, even when the actual ideas expressed proved demanding. The typing appears to me to be accurate – I noticed just around 15 apparent typographical errors – other than in the bibliography, which contains surprisingly many minor mistakes of transcription.

Part I sets up the problem and surveys a variety of proposed solutions. M. defends, in debate with Bobzien in particular, a reading of the sources according to which assent is an integral link in a causal chain that results in action, and not the outcome of it. This is very skilfully done. The chief conclusion is that just one thing marks off this kind of causal chain from others, namely its inclusion of assent. M. also places an important question mark over the widespread assumption that the 'internal' cause is the agent's character.

There are further questions that this part raises in my mind. What does M. think are the meaning and relevance of the technical division of causes reported by Cicero (*De fato* 39-44)? What in the texts justifies M. (as others) in speaking, not precisely in terms of the causes listed by Cicero, but of 'internal' and 'external' causes? Finally, how does his interpretation of the causal sequence, here and in the remainder of the thesis, fit with Chrysippus' attested attempt to show that no *necessitation* is involved in the fated causation of human actions?

Part II, taking its lead from the key role assigned to rational assent in the theory of action, turns to investigate the Stoic concept of reason itself. M. offers and compares three possible Stoic hallmarks of reason: (1) a set of notions (the formally reported definition), (2) the use of language, and (3) the highest ranking in the fourfold Stoic *scala naturae*, particularly with regard to human movement. All of these criteria receive a good deal of intelligent discussion. In his characteristic fashion, he emphasises that each has its own role to play, depending on context and perspective, and all play an important part in his eventual account. As I understand him, however, his most important aim is to give due weight to the linguistic aspect. This assigns a role to *lekta*, which, because incorporeal, cannot be factors in the causal sequence leading from impression to action. This is argued in particular by a well-reasoned response to M. Frede on the question whether impressions and *lekta* map fully onto each other (64-6). And it is thus that, at the end of this second part, the thesis opens up a space for a 'reflexivity' in the act of assent which will prove to distinguish human action from animal behaviour and inanimate process. Assent is the part of the process that links it to *us* in the right way, namely as an expression of our own outlook.

The evidence is complex, and he has to deal in particular with the implications of a key fragment of Iamblichus. He handles it well, although I am doubtful whether he is right to accept it as evidence that the Stoics themselves called reason and assent *dunameis* (esp. 68ff.). Talking of psychic 'faculties' or 'capacities' is not typically

Stoic. Might Iamblichus not be using his own term here? One would want to see other Stoic evidence cited before his testimony is accepted. (In Cicero *De fato* 43, assent has a *dunamis* – assuming that *vis* = *dunamis* – which would be odd if it itself is one.) The presence of this term encourages M. to worry to an unnecessary degree that the Stoic texts may be speaking of a human capacity for choosing between a pair of opposite actions (70ff.). I think he is, at all events, successful in eliminating such an interpretation of Stoic action theory, and in implicitly recognising that *hexis* rather than *dunamis* is the important term, even if he relies more than he ideally should on the evidence of *SE M* 7.257, where postulation of automatic assent to cataleptic impressions is attributed only to certain ‘younger Stoics’. (He also, here and elsewhere, e.g. p. 89, takes too little account of cases where people act on *non-cataleptic* impressions.)

I found particularly interesting section 3.3 (c), in which he develops his interpretation of the causal sequence of action by arguing against there being anything like the modern notion of character, innate or acquired, at work in Stoic psychology. Even if I am not yet convinced, on balance I think his argument is surprisingly successful. For completeness he might have considered (and dismissed) the *idiōs poiōs* as a possible candidate for this role. His most challenging idea (80-1) is, if I have understood, that individual innate traits, such as irascibility, exist, but are replaced in the rational adult by states of judgement, which are not causal factors operating independently of or additionally to the rational self. I would like to hear this idea a little further explained. For example, are not these judgemental states accompanied by states of pneumatic tension which help to cause individuals’ habitual responses to stimuli (e.g. *SVF* III 473)? In particular, I found in the thesis no grounds for accepting M.’s suggestion (84) that the reason that determines our assent is nothing more than our set of generic ‘notions’ (= ‘reason’ in sense (1)). Is it likely, for example, that even passions are reducible to sets of ‘notions’, and that the rational cause of our assent does not include beliefs?

The third and final main part concerns virtue, with some attention to the special Stoic notion of freedom. The aim here, I take it, is to corroborate the earlier interpretation of assent as an essentially reflexive function of reason, by showing that it is also required by the correct understanding of virtue and freedom, namely as involving a self-conscious recognition of one’s own place in a fully determined world.

I found this the most demanding part of the thesis, and am not sure I have always grasped M.'s intentions accurately, but it is also exceptionally rewarding.

The tension which this time drives the discussion is that between virtue as rooted in nature and virtue as pure rationality. The nature of the rational advance that brings virtue with it is investigated above all through a passage of Cicero (*Fin.* 3.20-1), to which a number of pertinent questions are addressed. I am a little confused as to M.'s general take on this text. He considers seriously (108-9) the possibility that the discovery of the notion of good as described there comes at the moment of acquiring rationality, i.e. at age 7 or 14. Yet he also at times (e.g. 113, 150, 152, although with qualifications elsewhere, e.g. 110) seems to understand this passage as if it were describing the transition to virtue itself. Neither extreme seems credible, since what it overtly claims to be doing is to describe the point at which a person first acquires the sophisticated notion of the good as a certain kind of concord. This could hardly be said to come naturally to all, or it would be called a *prolepsis*, not a mere *ennoia*, and would not entail as it does a conception of good that is virtually unique to Stoicism. It thus takes us far beyond first rationality, but on the other hand nowhere near to becoming a sage. I suggest that it tells us, roughly, what it is to become a Stoic. M.'s main aim in exploiting this passage is, I think, to stress the natural continuity that takes moral progress either towards, or in a very rare case to, the state of virtue, and to show what in either case the cognitive content must be. To this extent I think his use of it is largely successful, and indeed his demonstration that virtue must have a precise scientific content and truth-determining power is one of the best aspects of the thesis. But it would be further helped by a getting clearer about just what stage of moral development is being described by the Ciceronian passage.

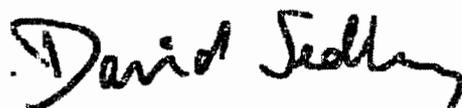
This same part of the thesis contains a wealth of novel approaches, especially in M.'s explication of the Stoics' subtle dual-end system; of how the notion of reflexivity already developed in Part II comes into play again in the operation of that system; and of how it can be usefully contrasted with the Aristotelian *poiēsis-praxis* distinction.

Towards the end of this part M. returns to the concept of fate, and in particular to some much-discussed lines of Cleanthes, along with Zeno's and Chrysippus' celebrated comparison of fate to the plight of a dog tied to a cart which it must inevitably follow, willingly or unwillingly. I did not find this the most persuasive part of the thesis. He takes the image to represent simply a contrast between the sage, who

follows nature without conflict, and the non-sage, who *de facto* follows the natural course of events but often feels frustrated because he lacks the correct sense of concord. The problem is why, thus read, it should be thought to illustrate a point about *fate* (it would not even be obviously deterministic), rather than for example about the ideal of living in agreement with nature. I am as M. knows a partisan of a different reading, which, whether right or wrong, is not adequately refuted here. This view takes the 'fate' in question to be typified by the predestination of landmark events such as the date of one's death. M. argues that Chrysippus' Stoic world cannot possibly be set up in such a way that, for example, wherever in the world you happen to be at the appropriate moment, there will be *something* waiting there to ensure your death (155-6). In maintaining this, he fails to deal with Chrysippus' assertion that the date of Socrates' death was not one of the *confatalia* but was 'simply' determined, in that, whatever Socrates did or do not do, he was fated to die on that day anyway (*De fato* 30). Early in the thesis (12 n. 12), M. set this item of evidence aside as irrelevant to his argument there, but I think it deserved to re-enter the discussion here, whatever conclusion he may draw about it.

The final pages of this third main part are devoted to explicating the Stoic notion of the sage's 'freedom' in the light of M.'s findings. His interpretation is subtly and impressively different from that of Bobzien, thanks to his preceding conclusions about the reflexivity of the act of assent.

I have some other, relatively minor comments to pass on privately, but the above are my main reactions. Altogether, I consider this thesis to be one of great sophistication and considerable historical sensitivity. Because he is often steering a circuitous course between competing perspectives and interpretations, the direction of M.'s argument is not always easy to follow, and I am sure that some of the above remarks reflect my own misunderstandings. But it has been a pleasure to see such an acute intelligence at work on this demanding and philosophically rich material. I unhesitatingly recommend the award of the PhD degree.



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