

The Stoics

The Stoic school was founded by Zeno of Citium (334–262) and was developed significantly by later philosophers, most notably by Chrysippus of Soli (279–206). In logic, the Stoics offered a sophisticated propositional logic. In ethics, they argued that most emotions were the result of false beliefs and that virtue was sufficient for happiness. In physics, they proposed that everything that existed or had causal power was corporeal. Later works by Epictetus (55–135) and the emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180) give an idea of how one might put the Stoic life into practice.

Fate and Human Action

But it is admitted that all things which happen by fate occur in a certain order and sequence and have an element of logical consequence in them. . . . Anyways, they say that it [fate] is a string of causes (*εἰρμὸν γοῦν αἰτίων αὐτὴν φασιν εἶναι*).

Alexander of Aphrodisias *De Anima Mantissa* (CIAG Supp. 2.1, pp. 185.1–5) [Translation from B. Inwood & L. Gerson, *The Stoics Reader* (Hackett, 2008)]

Concerning [pairs of] contradictories (*ἀντιφάσεις*) that bear on the future, the Stoics accept the same principle as they do for other statements. For what is the case for [pairs of] contradictories concerning things present and past is also the case, they say, for future contradictories themselves and their parts (*ὥς γὰρ τὰ περὶ τῶν παρόντων καὶ παρεληλυθότων ἀντικείμενα, οὕτως καὶ τὰ μέλλοντα αὐτά τε, φασίν, καὶ τὰ μόρια αὐτῶν*). For either ‘it will be’ or ‘it will not be’ is true if they must be either true or false. For according to them, future events are determined (*ἢ γὰρ τὸ ἔσται ἀληθές ἐστιν ἢ τὸ οὐκ ἔσται, εἰ δεῖ ἥτοι ψευδῆ ἢ ἀληθῆ εἶναι (ὄρισται γὰρ κατ’ αὐτοὺς τὰ μέλλοντα)*). And if there will be a sea battle tomorrow, it is true to say that there will be. But if there will not be a sea battle, it is false to say that there will be. Either there will or there will not be a battle; therefore, each statement is either true or false.

Simplicius *Commentary on Aristotle’s Categories* 13a37 (CIAG vol. 8, pp. 406.34–407.5) [Translation from B. Inwood & L. Gerson, *The Stoics Reader* (Hackett, 2008)]

(547e) According to the opposing argument, the first and most important point would seem to be that nothing happens uncaused but according to prior causes. Second, that this cosmos, which is itself coordinated and sympathetic with itself, is administered by nature. Third, which would seem rather to be additional evidence, is the fact that divination is in good repute with all human beings because it really does exist, with divine cooperation, and second, that wise men are contented in the face of events, (547f) since all of them occur according to [divine] allotment; and third, the much discussed point, that every proposition is true or false.

Pseudo-Plutarch *On Fate* 574e–f [Translation from B. Inwood & L. Gerson, *The Stoics Reader* (Hackett, 2008)]

(1045b) Some philosophers think that they can free our impulses from being necessitated by external causes if they posit in the leading part of the soul an adventitious motion which becomes particularly evident in cases where things are indistinguishable. For when two things

are equivalent and equal in importance and it is necessary to take one of the two, there being no cause which leads us to one or the other since they do not differ from each other, this adventitious cause generates a swerve in the soul all by itself (1045c) and so cuts through the stalemate. Chrysippus argues against them, on the grounds that they are doing violence to nature by [positing] something which is uncaused, and frequently cites dice and scales and many other things which cannot fall or settle in different ways at different times without some cause or difference, either something which is entirely in the things themselves or something which occurs in the external circumstances. For he claims that the uncaused and the automatic are totally non-existent and that in these adventitious [causes] which some philosophers make up and talk about there are hidden certain non-evident causes, and they draw our impulse in one direction or another without our perceiving it [...] (1049f) But nevertheless one will have not just one or two occasions but thousands to address to Chrysippus this remark, which is now praised, “You have said the easiest thing in blaming the gods.” For first, in book 1 of his *Physics* he compares the eternity of motion to a top, which spins and agitates the various things which come to pass in various ways. Then he says, (1050a) “Since the organization of the universe proceeds thus, it is necessary for us to be such as we are, in accordance with it, whether we are ill or lame, contrary to our individual nature, or whether we have turned out to be grammarians or musicians.” And again, a bit further on, “And on this principle we will say similar things about our virtue and our vice and, in general, about our skills or lack of them, as I have said.” And a bit further on, removing all ambiguity, “For it is impossible for any of the parts, even the smallest one, to turn out differently than according to the common nature and its reason.” That the common nature and the (1050b) common reason of nature are fate and providence and Zeus, even the Antipodeans know this; for the Stoics prattle on about this everywhere and he says that Homer correctly said, “And Zeus’ plan was being fulfilled,” referring it to fate and the nature of the universe according to which everything is ordered. How, then, can it be the case at one and the same time that god is not partly responsible for anything shameful and that not even the smallest thing can occur otherwise than according to the common nature and its reason? For in everything that occurs surely there are some shameful things too. And yet, Epicurus twists this way and that and exercises his ingenuity (1050c) in his attempt to free and liberate voluntary action from the eternal motion, so as not to leave vice free of blame, whereas Chrysippus gives vice blatant freedom to say not only that it is necessary and according to fate but even that it occurs according to god’s reason and the best nature.

Plutarch *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1045b–1050c (selections) [Translation from B. Inwood & L. Gerson, *The Stoics Reader* (Hackett, 2008)]

(28) Nor, if every proposition (*enuntiatum*) is either true or false, does it for that reason follow that there are unchangeable and eternal causes which prevent anything from coming about in a different way from that in which it will in fact come about. The causes which make true those statements which will be made like ‘Cato will come into the senate’ are fortuitous, not inherent in the nature of things and the universe; nevertheless, it is as unchangeable that he will come, when it is true that he will come, as that he *has* come; and fate or necessity should not for that reason be feared. And indeed, if the following proposition, ‘Hortensius will come to his villa at Tusculum’ is not true, it will be necessary to admit that it follows that it is false. They want neither of these to apply; but that is impossible.

Nor will the so-called ‘Lazy Argument’ stop us. For a certain argument is called the ‘the Lazy Argument’ by the philosophers, and if we listened to it we would never do anything at all in life. For they argue in the following fashion: ‘if it is fated for you to recover from this illness whether you call the doctor or not, you will recover.’

(29) Similarly, if it is fated for you not to recover from this illness whether you call the doctor or not, you will not recover. But one of the two is fated; therefore, there is no point in calling the doctor'. It is right to call this kind of argument 'lazy' and 'idle' because by the same reasoning all action will be abolished from life. One can also change the argument, so that the word 'fate' is not included and still keep the same sense in this way: 'if from eternity this has been true, "you will recover from that disease whether you call a doctor or not," you will recover; similarly, if from eternity this has been false, "you will recover from that disease whether you call the doctor or not" you will not recover, etc.'

(30) Chrysippus criticizes this argument. "For," he says, "some things are simple, some conjoined (*Quaedam enim sunt, inquit, in rebus simplicia, quaedam copulata*). 'Socrates will die on that day' is simple. Whether he does anything or not, the day of death is fixed for him. But if it is fated, 'Oedipus will be born to Laius', it cannot be said 'whether Laius lies with a woman or not'. For the events are conjoined and co-fated (*copulata enim res est et confatalis*)." For that is how he refers to it since it is fated thus *both* that Laius will lie with his wife *and* that Oedipus will be produced by her. Just as, if it had been said, "Milo will wrestle at the Olympics" and someone reported, "Therefore, he will wrestle whether or not he has an opponent," he would be wrong. For 'he will wrestle' is conjoined, because there is no wrestling match without an opponent. "Therefore, all the sophistries of that type are refuted in the same way. 'Whether you call a doctor or not, you will recover' is fallacious; for calling the doctor is fated just as much as recovering." Such situations, as I said, he calls 'co-fated'.

(31) Carneades [the Academic] did not accept this entire [sort of thing] and thought that the above argument had been constructed with insufficient care. And so he approached the argument in another way, not using any fallacious reasoning. This was the result: 'If all things come about by means of antecedent causes, then all things come about through being joined and woven together by a natural connection. If this is so, then necessity causes everything. And if this is true there is nothing in our power. But there is something in our power. But if everything happens by fate, everything happens as a result of antecedent causes. Therefore, it is not the case that whatever happens, happens by fate' (*Si omnia antecedentibus causis fiunt, omnia naturali conligatione conserte contexteque fiunt; quod si ita est, omnia necessitas efficit; id si verum est, nihil est in nostra potestate; est autem aliquid in nostra potestate; at, si omnia fato fiunt, omnia causis antecedentibus fiunt; non igitur fato fiunt, quaecumque fiunt*).

(32) This argument cannot be made tighter. For if someone wished to turn the argument around and say, 'If every future event is true from eternity so that whatever should happen would certainly happen, then everything happens within a closely knit web of natural connections', he would be speaking nonsense. For there is a great difference between a natural cause making future events true from eternity and future events which might be understood to be true, without natural [cause] from eternity. Thus Carneades said that not even Apollo is able to pronounce on any future events unless it were those the causes of which are already contained in nature so that they would happen necessarily.

(33) On what basis could even a god say that Marcellus, who was three times a consul, would die at sea? This was indeed true from eternity, but it did not have efficient causes. Thus he [Carneades] thought that if not even past events of which no trace existed would be known to Apollo, how much less would he know future events; for only if the efficient causes of anything were known would it then be possible to know what would happen in the future. Therefore, Apollo could not predict anything regarding Oedipus, there not being the requisite causes in nature owing to which it was necessary that he would kill his father or anything of this sort

[...] (39) Since there were two opinions of the older philosophers—one belonging to those who believed that everything occurred by fate in such a way that the fate in question brought to bear the force of necessity (this was the view of Democritus, Heraclitus, Empedocles, and

Aristotle), the other of those who held that there were voluntary motions of the mind without fate—Chrysippus, it seems to me, wanted to strike a middle path, like an informal arbitrator, but attached himself more to the group which wanted the motions of the mind to be free of necessity. But while employing his own terms, he slipped into such difficulties that he wound up unwillingly confirming the necessity of fate.

(40) Let us, if you like, see how this occurs in the case of assentings (*adsensiones*), which we discussed at the start of our discourse. The older philosophers, who held that everything occurred by fate, said that it occurred by force and necessity. Those who disagreed with them freed assent from fate and denied that if fate applied to assent it could be free of necessity, and so they argued thus, 'If everything happens by fate, everything occurs by an antecedent cause, and if impulse (*adpetitus*) [is caused], then also what follows from impulse [is caused]; therefore, assent too. But if the cause of impulse is not in us then impulse itself is not in our own power; and if this is so, not even what is produced by impulse is in our power; therefore, neither assent nor action is in our power. From which it follows that neither praise nor blame nor honours nor punishments are fair'. Since this is wrong, they think that it is a plausible conclusion that it is not the case that whatever happens, happens by fate.

(41) Chrysippus, however, since he both rejected necessity and wanted that nothing should occur without prior causes, distinguished among the kinds of causes in order both to escape from necessity and to retain fate. "For," he said, "some causes are perfect and principal (*perfectae et principales*), whereas others are auxiliary and proximate (*adiuvantes et proximae*). Therefore, when we say that all things occur by fate by antecedent causes, we do not want the following to be understood, namely, that they occur by perfect and principal causes; but we mean this: that they occur by auxiliary and proximate causes." And so his response to the argument which I just made is this: 'If everything occurs by fate it does indeed follow that everything occurs by antecedent causes, but not by principal and perfect causes. And if these are not themselves in our power, it does not follow that not even impulse is in our power. But this would follow if we were saying that everything occurred by perfect and principal causes with the result that, since these causes are not in our power, neither would impulse be.

(42) Therefore, those who introduce fate in such a way that they connect necessity to it have to accept that conclusion; but those who will not say that antecedent causes are perfect and principal will not be subject to the argument at all. As to the claim that assents occur by antecedent causes, he says that he can easily explain the meaning of this. For although assent cannot occur unless it is stimulated by a presentation, nevertheless since it has that presentation as its proximate cause and not as its principal cause, it can be explained in the way that we have been discussing for some time now, just as Chrysippus wishes. It is not the case that the assent could occur if it were not stimulated by a force from outside (for it is necessary that an assent should be stimulated by a presentation); but Chrysippus falls back on his cylinder and cone. These cannot begin to move unless they are struck; but when that happens, he thinks that it is by their own natures that the cylinder rolls and the cone turns.

(43) "Therefore," he says, "just as he who pushed the cylinder gave it the beginning of its motion (*principium motionis*), he did not, however, give it its 'rollability' (*volubilitas*), so a presentation which strikes will certainly impress its object and, as it were, stamp its form on the mind, but our assent will be in our own power and the assent, just as was said in the case of the cylinder, when struck from without will henceforth be moved by its own force and nature. But if something were produced without an antecedent cause, then it would be false that everything occurs by fate. But if it is probable that a cause precedes all things that occur, what could block the conclusion that all things occur by fate? Let it only be understood what difference and distinction there is among causes."